

MONSTER BITES MAN AT U.S. OPEN

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Jack Nicklaus stood under a big oak tree, talking to a half-dozen writers after his first round of the U.S. Open last week.

When one reporter asked him how he managed to knock a long iron out of the deep rough and stick it on the green, Nicklaus said, "It's not easy to do here." Then he added with a grin, "But that's why I'm on this side of the microphone, and you're on that side."

Monster, Schmonster, I thought. I was tired of hearing how impossible this course was. It's just *grass*, man. How tough can it be?

To find out, I agreed to take on the Monster under championship conditions. That meant playing from the U.S. Open tees with the fast greens, the stingy 70 par and, most importantly, the five-inch rough. And like the pros, I'd be allowed no mulligans, no gimmes, no winter rules, or hand-wedges, either.

Yo, Monster: You wanna piece of me? You got it.

Well, after suffering an injured wrist, a litany of humiliating strokes, and two blistered feet from hiking through five miles of rough, I'm not saying that anymore.

The Monster has earned my respect.

I'm no golfing die-hard, but on a good course I can usually play bogey golf. And during a few magical rounds over the years I've been so close to mediocrity, I could almost taste it.

On my quest I was accompanied by my attorney, a man known in college as "The Rhino" for his lean physique and gazelle-like speed in the 40. When I met him freshman year he was already famous for his ability to drink an entire beer simply by opening his throat and tilting the glass. That's right: he could down it at the speed of gravity, minus throat friction.

Since he joined a top law firm and became a member at Oakland Hills, those days are far behind him. He eats veggie-burgers now, and is smart

enough to keep his name out of the paper. My attorney and I were joined by two highly capable caddies, Joe Wagner and Brandon Cassar, both high school students.

Since Wagner had never seen me play he naturally assumed I was a normal person, and would therefore want to hit a driver off the first tee. But the truth is I haven't used that club since the Reagan Administration, because all kinds of evil things happen when I have it in my hands. You could have glued the cover on it ten years ago as a prank, and I never would have discovered it.

So there I was, on the first tee of one of the grandest courses in the world with a dozen people standing by the pro shop watching me while Wagner held out the one-wood. I stared at it, motionless. Would I be man enough to admit my limitations and reject the driver for a three-wood, or would I succumb to the macho pressure?

I caved in like a house of cards in an earthquake. I grabbed that one-wood like I'd been hitting it all my life, teed the ball up high and swung the mother of all swings—only to smash a worm-burner three inches high.

Problem was, the rough at the end of the tee-box was five inches high. My ball traveled 200 mph for the first ten feet, then 2 mph for the next ten, then stopped cold in the high grass. I was just thankful that I could share my next shot in full view of the people watching outside the pro shop.

And the next shot.

And the next shot.

It took my fifth shot, my "bogey chip," to finally make it to the fairway, a mere 350 yards short of the pin.

From there, I didn't have any problem at all scoring my first ten.

Sure, maybe a lot of guys could notch a ten on the Monster's first hole, but how many could follow it up with *another ten* on the second hole?

While the peanut gallery could see the Monster was killing me, I slowly learned an important lesson about the rough: *stay out of it*.

When I met Nicklaus a few days earlier I was surprised by the thickness of his wrists, but suddenly it all made sense. I tell you the stuff alongside fairways groomed for a U.S. Open isn't rough, but a tropical rain forest. A typical hack from the rough produced a high-pitched thrashing sound, two fistfuls of tall grass thrown ten feet high, and a golf ball sent airborne for twenty feet before landing—you guessed it—right back in the jungle.

I lost one ball all day. Not in the water, in the woods, or out of bounds, but a mere twenty feet off the second fairway, in the deep rough.

Even when I could find the ball, my genetically inferior wrists didn't

have a chance. I took over half of my many swings off the fairway. To get a feel for what my day was like, let your lawn grow for three weeks, then try mowing it with a three iron.

On those rare occasions I did get my ball back in the fairway, my swing was so screwed up from hacking in the tall grass that I'd rip my iron three inches too low, launching a strip of sod into the air ten yards farther than my ball.

My wrists hurt. I want to go home now.

On the bright side, I was a mere six strokes from playing pro-level golf—on hole number one. I cut the Monster's margin of victory down to five-over par on the second hole and a scant four-over on the third.

The pattern was obvious. At my current rate of improvement, I'd be firing a birdie on hole number eight and an eagle at nine. Everything was coming up roses.

My attorney felt compelled to advise me to use a long iron off the tee, and short irons from the rough. As Clint Eastwood once said, "A man's got to know his limitations." The Monster had exposed mine in the first five minutes.

On hole number seven I started off with a clean iron to the fairway, and followed it up with a solid second shot right in front of the green. My attorney, the caddies, and the photographer all dropped what they were doing to say, "Good shot!" They knew that might be the only chance they'd have to give me a compliment all day, and they didn't dare miss it.

I did have another flash of competence on number eight, a 474-yard hole that's a par 5 for members, but a par 4 for the pros—and on this day, me. I got on the green in three, ten feet from the pin, and tapped a slight right to left putt straight in the cup for par. The Monster may have been tearing me apart from limb to limb, but at least I got to poke him once in the eye.

I finished the front nine at 66, just one off the course record set by Tom Lehman, Jack Nicklaus, and others—for 18 holes. And hey, if I had just made *one* of those 20-foot triple bogey putts, I'd be right there, tied with the Bear himself.

Emboldened by these results, I was ready to attack the back nine.

As the round progressed I wizened up and settled down. Seeing this, my attorney stopped giving advice and started giving motivational pep talks, such as, "This is the hardest hole out here," "This green's impossible," and my favorite, delivered a nano-second before I started my backswing on the

twelfth tee, "Watch out for the water way down there on the right, and the pick-up truck in front of it."

Before my attorney said this, I hadn't even seen those things, let alone worried about them. But, needless to say, just two seconds later my drive careened toward the pick-up truck as if it were a powerful electromagnet and my ball was lead. Worse luck, my ball fell short of the water, landing in the rough.

Now, a better player would have gotten upset, but by hole twelve I knew that I was not one of those better players.

I recalled a line from *Caddyshack*, where the judge hits a terrible shot and gets angry, saying, "I'm no slouch!"

Chevy Chase's character politely objects, "Ah, c'mon Judge. Don't be so hard on yourself. You're a tremendous slouch."

For me, getting mad at such shots would be the height of pretense.

On the back nine I approached the game less as a competition and more like Frisbee, taking simple satisfaction in watching the ball fly far away. I couldn't worry my pretty little head over such trivialities like where it landed.

Perhaps as a result, things went better on the back nine. At one point I actually confessed to my attorney that I was "playing fairly well."

What a crock.

I wasn't "playing fairly well," I was doing things I *never* do, like getting out of every sand-trap in one shot, averaging two putts per green, and playing the final three holes well under 10 (each).

Despite hitting into green-side bunkers on all three holes, I escaped number 16 with a bogey five. On number 17, after "laying up" ten yards past the ladies' tees, I salvaged another five, then finished number 18 with a six.

I wasn't "playing fairly well." I was playing the single best round of golf of my entire life. And that realization was more humbling than my back-to-back tens.

There I was playing out of my head to give the Monster everything I had, and all I had to show for it were a bunch of triple- and quadruple-bogeys. I made more snowmen that day than an Anchorage elementary school at recess. I was so befuddled I put the lit end of my "lucky cigar" to my lips. Twice.

My final tally was a heart-wrenching, mind-numbing, pride-swallowing

That's right, folks. One hundred and twenty. Just 50 over par—for the first round. Imagine the leader board on Sunday if I had played with the pros. Steve Jones had finished at -2 , Tom Lehman and Davis Love at -1 , and—who's this?—some guy named Bacon came in at $+200$.

I had leapt as high as I could to look the Monster in the eye, only to discover I was staring at his knee-caps.

As for you, Mr. Nicklaus, I'll take your advice and go back to my side of the oak tree. And this time, I think I'll stay there, just so long as they keep the grass cut short.