

23 | The Power Spots

Courses that are shaped by the land, with features created by hand, letting each golfer play his own game — this is what golf used to be, and what it's going to be again. This is the future of golf course design, right here. — IAN ANDREW, GOLF COURSE ARCHITECT

THE SCENE IN THE BAR of the Lodge at Bandon Dunes was something else. Instead of the usual crowd of golfers savoring their drinks and examining scorecards in a glow of post-round contentment, the bar was filled with people who didn't look much like golfers. Most of them were young, sporting beards or stubble, wearing scruffy jeans and talking fast. Ions of crazy energy were popping all over the place. Holding court at the bar, a good-looking guy with a gravelly voice was knocking back Guinness and building brilliant word castles in an Irish — or was it Scottish? — accent. A fellow in a white turban drifted through the room wearing a sphinxlike smile. Every now and then, a tall, elegant woman appeared and surveyed the room, wary as a heron. The dude in the red plaid blazer had a rabbit's foot in his lapel, a big, furry rabbit's foot that looked as if it had belonged to a rabbit until just a few moments earlier. A short, intense woman wearing a wool cap and carrying a clipboard darted in and out; the words MIDGET SMOOT were written on the front of her hoodie. Surveying it all from his table in the corner, obviously relishing the whole scene, an older man with his eyes full of happy mischief made occasional remarks. He said, "Another day, another dharma."

The older man was Michael Murphy, author of *Golf in the Kingdom*, and

he had come to Bandon to see how his classic book would be made into a movie.

The bar scene, admittedly, is a composite, but in late April 2009, the cast and crew of the film had pretty much taken over the resort, filling it with their own high-octane buzz. The guy knocking back the Guinness was Irish-born actor David O'Hara, who played the wild Irishman in *Braveheart* and a thug in *The Departed*. He was cast as Shivas Irons, the charismatic hero of the novel. And one of the young chaps, the one in the patchwork golf cap, was Mason Gamble, the actor who played Dennis the Menace; in *Golf in the Kingdom*, he would play the role of the young Michael Murphy. The tall, wary woman was director Susan Streitfeld, who collaborated with Murphy on the screenplay; the man in the turban was cinematographer Arturo Smith; and the Chief Smurf, the dynamo with the clipboard, was producer Mindy Affrime.

Among golf books, *Golf in the Kingdom* is surely the most revered. It has sunk its hooks into the golfing souls of its readers, and they tend to be people who read the book not once but over and over again, seeking to plumb its mystical, metaphysical depths. The novel is a celebration of golf—its joys and frustrations, its addictive appeal, its mysteries, its sharp glints of insight and fascination. Since its publication in 1972, *Golf in the Kingdom* has been translated into nineteen languages and sold over a million copies. It is the cosmic opposite of those best-selling golf books that deal with mechanics of the swing, promising to improve one's game. "Gowf is a way o' makin' a man naked," says Shivas Irons. That's not your usual swing thought.

The action of the novel is simple. The young Michael Murphy, a seeker after truth who is on his way to an Indian ashram, has an unexpectedly free day in Scotland when his flight is delayed. He decides to play a round at Burningbush, a legendary links. There he meets Shivas Irons, a golfing genius who has learned to use the game as his vehicle for understanding "true gravity," a phrase that translates loosely to the force that governs all being.

Not the usual stuff of which a movie is made, but Clint Eastwood held the film rights for years, and Sean Connery was reportedly eager to play Shivas

Irons. Their project never came to fruition, and when the rights reverted to Murphy, he teamed up with Streitfeld and Affrime to make a movie that would have the rich, haunting flavor of the book.

The setting would be crucial. The place had to have the right look and feel, the right karma. They weren't interested in filming great golf shots but in capturing, as the book does, the timeless magic of the game and the way it can transform an understanding of life. The images in the movie would have to evoke the awe and transcendence that golf can inspire.

As early as 2005, they began making trips to Bandon. They had a key ally, Howard McKee, whose relationship with Murphy dated back more than two decades. Howard wanted the movie to be shot at Bandon, and the filmmakers were more and more convinced that Bandon was the right place. Not only did the golf courses have the appearance of classic links, but the surrounding landscape, with the rolling surf of the Pacific, the high bluffs, and the fantastic shapes of the sea stacks, provided locations for nongolf scenes. The script called for a tavern scene, and that setting — since dharma was now in play — was ready and waiting. The scene could be shot only in McKee's Pub, the resort's cozy watering hole that was named after Howard.

Mike Keiser, however, didn't take immediately to the idea of the movie. Though he had always loved the book (his first golf investments were drawn on an account he named "Chivas Irons"), he feared that the filming could disrupt operations at the resort. In 2005 and 2006, the place was bursting at the seams. Where would the cast and crew stay? It wasn't until 2008, after Howard's death, that Mike gave his thumbs-up. With the economic slow-down, the resort could accommodate the movie crew in the new staff housing. Which, as it happened, was another of Howard's legacies.

These many ties and connections would have tickled Howard, who once gave a talk on serendipity to the Bandon Dunes staff. And, really, as filming started, the number of coincidences got to be ridiculous. It was almost a standing joke that "true gravity" had taken over. Even the notoriously changeable April weather in Oregon seemed to cooperate, and the most hard-core rationalist would have been shaken by the confluence of events.

For instance, Grant Rogers — the Bandon Dunes golf instructor who is often compared to Shivas Irons — used to play golf with Michael Murphy in California. When Murphy came to Bandon to scout locations, Grant was his guide. And when David O’Hara needed to get his swing ready for the camera, he went to Grant for lessons. Shivas Irons, meet Shivas Irons.

But the most powerful evidence of “true gravity” was captured on film. In one of the movie’s pivotal moments, Mason Gamble and David O’Hara — Michael Murphy and Shivas Irons — are standing near a cliff’s edge. Michael has been playing poorly and he is sulky and frustrated. Shivas says to him, “Ye think too much, Michael. Ye must let the nothingness into your shots.”

At that precise moment, a flock of gulls rises from beneath the cliff and wings its way into the sky. A viewer can’t help but feel the electricity running along his spine; it seems as though Michael’s thoughts have suddenly taken flight. “That was an amazing moment,” Gamble said, “and it just happened. We could have paid a bird wrangler thousands of dollars, and it wouldn’t have come off like that. That moment was perfect.” Reflecting for a moment, he added, “I don’t know who’s making this movie, but we’re not. Something else is making this movie.”

The excitement of the cast and crew, of course, was not an assurance that the movie would have the same magic as the book. Yet it seemed inevitable — yes, predestined — that this movie should be filmed at Bandon Dunes, and that the karma of the place should influence the shooting of the movie, and vice versa. The two would be linked forever on the silver screen, and the symbolism was hard to miss. The Kingdom had come to Bandon! The place was already known for its power to inspire, and now golfers everywhere will be able to see Bandon for themselves, at least on DVD. They might well be lifted to a “higher manifesting plane” when they see the shots of Shivas and Michael walking along over the crest of a fairway, their figures silhouetted against the horizon, looking as though they are leaving this earth and taking their golf game to heaven.