
GOLF DIGEST
PITCH&PUTT

A game for everyone: Foursomes young and old share the spirit of Irish pitch and putt. Real golf was never this much fun.

IRELAND'S SHORT GAME

Where pitch and putt began: Golf with a touch of Irish spin

BY DAVID OWEN
Photography by Jim Moriarty


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When I first arrived in Ireland, I was eager to play pitch and putt, but I didn't have the balls. Surlyn simply won't get the job done. You need to be able to stop a 30-yard shot on a tiny green that tilts like the deck of the Titanic. Some of the more prosperous players use balata, but nearly everyone else plays with a grayish lump of 70-compression deadweight called a Penfold Commando.

You wouldn't want to play regular golf with a Commando—unless you've always yearned to be 40 yards shorter off the tee. But a Commando is almost perfect for Irish pitch and putt, a game in which the longest holes measure less than 80 yards. It spins like a three-piece, flies like a pillow and costs about the same as a range ball. Wily players used to soak their golf balls in water for a few weeks before a competition, making them even chalkier and more comatose. But the Pitch and Putt Union of Ireland ended that practice by prohibiting the use of any ball on which the name and number are not clearly legible. (Long-term soaking lifts off the ink.)

The first pitch-and-putt hole I played in Ireland was a 40-yarder at a club in Limerick called Parteen. The hole plays steeply downhill. The green—which is less than seven yards in diameter—follows the slope of the hill and is as rounded as the top of a buried basketball. There's a shaggy, grass-covered mound directly in front. I couldn't land it on, I couldn't run it up—an impossible shot. I played left of the green, and my ball ran about five yards long. I was pleased, and figured I had a decent chance of getting up and down for my 3.

"Hard luck," my host said.

Watching a low-handicap match in a competition later that evening, I understood why my shot hadn't generated accolades. Both players not only hit the green but spun their balls back, one to within a couple of feet of the cup. Back at home, I was used to watching PGA Tour players lay up 90 or 100 yards short on long par 5s in order to have enough room to spin their wedges. Here, players were generating as much juice from less than half the distance, and they were doing it with balls that were teed up—as union rules require—and they were doing it on greens that were as treacherous, in their own way, as the ones at Augusta. I clearly had a lot to learn.

Under leaden skies the final of the 1996 Dublin Gents Strokeplay Championship at Old County attracted a sizable crowd of eager followers.


GOLF DIGEST
PITCH&PUTT
10

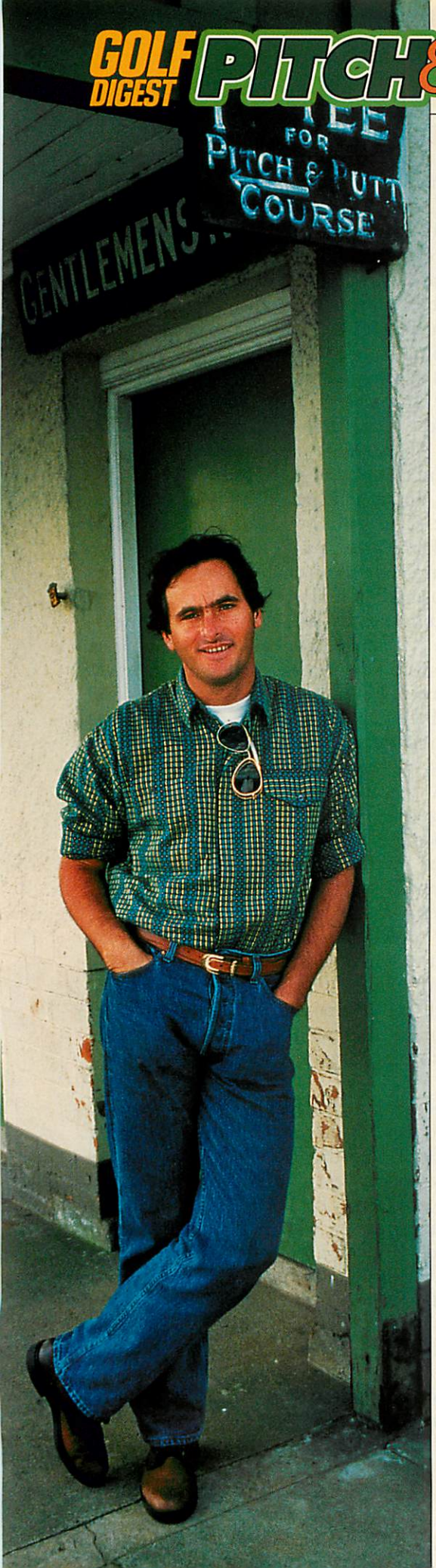
We have par-3 golf in America, but we don't have Irish pitch and putt. The short game, as it is commonly known, has its own technique, its own rules and its own governing body. It arose in Cork in the mid-'30s and caught on during World War II, when gasoline rationing and other deprivations made regular golf an impossible luxury. The earliest layouts were often extremely short. The first hole at the original course, in Fountainstown, measured just 16 feet from tee to green. (To begin a course with an easy hole is "to set the sprat to catch the mackerel," in the words of an early chronicler of the game.) Not long afterward, a similar game grew up around Dublin. There, the holes measured up to 100 yards, and the players carried three clubs (one of them a putter) instead of just two, as they did in Cork. The games evolved separately until 1960. Then representatives from the two regions settled on a compromise hybrid, and they created the Pitch and Putt Union to govern it.

The union today has 16,000 playing members and 170 affiliated clubs. In the sports pages of some Irish newspapers, pitch-and-putt results fill many columns of agate. You can find courses behind pubs, in public parks, alongside hotels, near famous full-length courses, in retired cow pastures and on the grounds of factories. A typical round takes an hour or so and can be squeezed between pints of Guinness after work. Because the holes are short—the longest permitted by union rules is 70 meters, or just more than 77 yards—raw strength is no advantage. Men, women, children and grandparents can play together, and good players often stay competitive for decades. One of my playing partners was an accomplished septuagenarian named P.J. Coonerty, who is still ranked among the top-100 players in the country and remains a factor in big tournaments. He holds the course record at Parteen, with a 40—14 strokes under par.

I played with Coonerty not at Parteen but at a nearby course called Ardnacrusha. It was built in the 1950s on a sloping, ragged piece of land that is owned by the power authority. Coonerty wears glasses with dark frames and has a bristly white mustache. He looks like the sort of old campaigner you might see marching in a parade on Remembrance Sunday. He commutes to his matches on a motorcycle, carrying his sand wedge and putter in a slender quiver that he fashioned from an old black nylon mailbag.

Coonerty is a formidable player. A few years ago, in a

Pitch and putt is popular with Irish kids, and with men like P.J. Coonerty (inset). Coonerty might be in his 70s, but he still shoots in the 40s.



A native of Bangor, Northern Ireland, 1991 Ryder Cup player David Feherty grew up surrounded by pitch and putts.

36-hole qualifier for the Irish Stroke-play Championship, he realized on the 23rd tee that in order to win a spot in the final he needed to score at least 10 under par on the remaining 14 holes. From there in, he managed four 3s, nine 2s, and a 1, making the cut with a stroke to spare.

"There is great competition in this game," he told me with understatement during a brief period when rain had driven us indoors. We were sitting in Ardnacrusha's clubhouse, a damp, boxcar-size shed with a concrete floor. Another member, Maurice McInerney, used a battered electric kettle to make tea for the three of us. The clubhouse contained a few lockers, a few trophies, a few photographs, a few chairs. I asked McInerney, who had long reddish hair and looked about 40, what he did for a living—a loaded question in Ireland. He said he didn't do much. Hanging around at Ardnacrusha for hours on end is as about as close as he comes to being employed. "I could play pitch and putt all day long," he told me later, and he often does.

Ardnacrusha has roughly 100 members. Annual dues are the equivalent of about $55. Cars are scarce; to travel to matches with other clubs, the players usually rely on a member who works as a contractor and owns a truck. To keep costs low, the members do most of the maintenance themselves, as is true at many pitch-and-putt clubs.

Our rain-delay conversation turned inevitably to a topic that I would encounter many times during my week in Ireland: the perceived threat to pitch and putt posed by the long game. "We've lost a good many players to golf," Coonerty told me with a sigh. McInerney nodded glumly and tugged on his cigarette. "They make the jump," he said, "and they don't come back."

The problem is that the modern boom in golf-course construction has lowered the cost of regular golf, bringing it within the reach of laborers and factory workers. Pitch and putt has often been referred to—sometimes derisively, sometimes proudly—as workingman's golf. Lately, the long game has begun to claim that title for itself, and pitch and putt is in danger of becoming non-workingman's golf.

"It's a poor man's game," another player told me. "A poor man's game, and an old man's game. It gives the old men a place to go every day. It keeps the pensioners alive."

As a spectator sport, pitch and putt has it all over regular golf. There is seldom a moment when a fan has nothing to watch, many tournaments can be viewed in their entirety from a single vantage point, opportunities for rapid-fire wagering are almost limitless and the game moves so quickly that a large field can play 54 or even 72 holes in a day.

On a rainy Sunday afternoon, I attended the final of the 1996 Dublin Gents Strokeplay Championships at a course called Old County, on the south side of town. The layout is distinctively U-shaped; the course was squeezed into a narrow strip of land enclosing three sides of a public football field. Its outer boundary is defined by a high wall, which during the tournament provided preferred seating for neighborhood children.

The winning score for the championship—13 under par for 36 holes—might have been considered a bit high had the tournament not been conducted in swirling winds and intermittently driving rain. Also, there was a raucous football match going on, and the air was filled with screams and shouted obscenities. I kept imagining Fanny Sunesson, Nick Faldo's caddie, futilely imploring, "Quiet, please!" But the pitch-and-putt players didn't seem to mind.

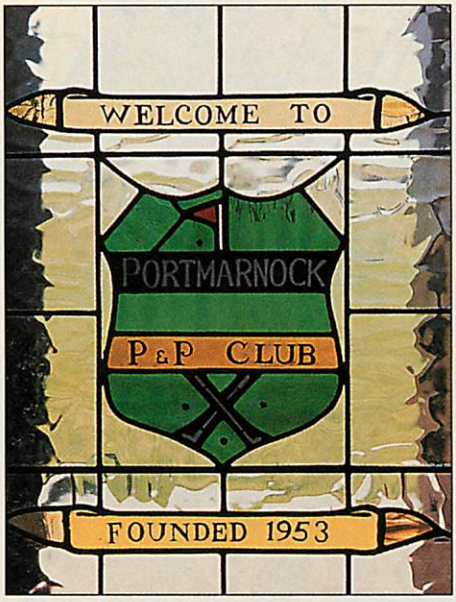
The winner at Old County was a rotund 41-year-old Dublin bus driver named Kevin Bermingham. Word

of his round began to spread through the gallery when he was six or seven holes into his second 18. At that point, he was 10 under par, and his playing partners were eight and five under. I tagged along with a union official, who knew all the best places to stand. The official and a friend once played an informal pitch-and-putt match with the Irish golfing deity Christy O'Connor and another touring pro, beating them handily. (Several players on the PGA European Tour, among them John McHenry, Ronan Rafferty and Philip Walton, played pitch and putt as youngsters. Aideen Rogers, who plays on the European women's tour, was the national girls stroke-play champion in 1985.)

The best shot I witnessed was struck not by Bermingham but by one of his playing partners, a small man in a rainsuit who had hit his tee shot into a coffin-shaped bunker in front of a green. The bunker was only four feet from back to front, and a rough-covered mound rose between it and the green. The cup, which was perhaps a dozen feet from his ball, was cut on the top of a narrow ridge that dropped away to the right and left. If Bob Rosburg had been doing the play-by-play, he would have said that the player had no chance of keeping his ball on the green, much less of getting it close. But the player, after studying his shot for perhaps 10 seconds, knifed his ball out onto the ridge, and it rolled at the speed of a Crenshaw putt directly into the center of the cup.

Despite superficial similarities between the short game and the long game, the best pitch-and-putt players employ a set of specialized skills. Those skills wouldn't get you very far in regular golf. Indeed, the ideal pitch-and-putt swing looks like an anthology of the worst habits of terrible golfers. The recommended motion for tee shots is a short, wristy reverse pivot, in which the player hits *up* on the teed ball while cutting across it from the outside. The tee is the key. Without one, you can't impart mega-spin to a 30-yard shot. With one, you can hit a high, floating lob that sticks to a small green the way a Q-Tip sticks to Velcro.

Around the greens, the skills are different, too. A typical chip shot has to travel from three feet off the green to a cup cut three feet on—a situation that doesn't arise in golf. Good pitch-and-putt chippers hood the faces of their wedges and punch low skidders



The Portmarnock Pitch & Putt Club, not far from the historic Portmarnock links, has developed a history all its own.

that stop like jets on aircraft carriers. Even the putting is different. Because the greens are often uneven, a slow, syrupy stroke doesn't lead to a lot of birdies.

There is plenty of room for variation. For a while at Old County, I followed Alan Hanlon, a wiry, dark-haired young player who, like Raymond Floyd, has a highly effective swing that you nonetheless wouldn't teach to a beginner. Hanlon is left-handed. When he took up the game, at 6, the only club he could find was a right-handed 8-iron, so he switched. The club was taller than he was. To swing it at all, he had to grip it well down the shaft and set up with the clubhead far in front of his hands. Strong suggestions of those early accommodations remain visible in his grown-up swing.

Hanlon has played in Australia, the only other country where Irish-rules pitch and putt is played on a significant scale. The game was transplanted by an Australian tourist who became captivated during a holiday in Ireland. In the earliest competition between the two countries, the Irish players won by humiliating margins, primarily because the Australian players hit their tee shots off the ground. (They have since adopted the Irish technique.) While traveling in Australia at around the same time, Hanlon competed in a local tournament in which he was the only player to finish under par. When Hanlon turned in his scorecard, the official did a double take and said, without looking up, "You must be Irish."

The weather seemed threatening one afternoon as I took a break from pitch and putt to play a round of regular golf at one of Ireland's most celebrated courses, the Old Course of the Lahinch Golf Club, on the country's west coast. Despite my worries, the pro assured me that I was in no danger of being rained out. "We've not seen the goats," he said. He was referring to a handful of disheveled animals that graze on the course's knee-deep rough and invariably seek the shelter of the clubhouse if rain is imminent. Knowledgeable players, upon arriving at Lahinch in ambiguous weather, immediately ask, "Where are the goats?"

From the farthest corners of the course, I caught several glimpses not only of the goats but also of one of Ireland's most highly regarded new pitch-and-putt courses, one that P.J. Coonerty had urged me to play. Called Sandfield House, it is situated just a few minutes from the Old Course, on a beautiful and precipitous piece of linksland in the neighboring town of Liscannor. After my round at Lahinch, I drove over and met the owner, a sheep farmer and

innkeeper named Eamonn Slattery, who was working on one of the greens with his son.

Slattery built the course mainly as an added attraction for guests of his inn, a big, pink Georgian house across the road. It's a true links course in miniature. The holes are routed among heaving dunes, and several have sweeping views of both the water and the surrounding countryside. (From the tee of one, you can see the remains of four castles.) The course is demanding as well as beautiful; twice, I had to break a local rule by climbing an electric sheep fence to retrieve an errant tee shot. My favorite hole was Slattery's version of one of the best-known holes at Lahinch, a quirky par 3 called the Dell.

On the road back to Limerick, I stopped in Ennis to play another fine pitch-and-putt course, called Clare Road. (One of the great pleasures of pitch and putt, for an unrepentant golfaholic, is that you can play half a dozen different courses in a day.) Clare Road is the labor of love of Frank White, who owns a pub called the Halfway House, which stands in front of it.

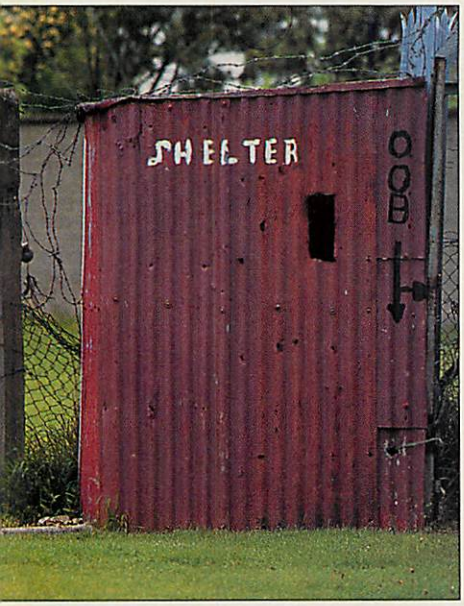
While a regulation pitch-and-putt course will fit comfortably onto four acres, Clare Road stretches luxuriously across 13. The holes, unlike most, have compressed, serpentine fairways, a feature that makes them resemble scaled-down replicas of holes from the long game. There are swales, hills, hedges, old stone walls, venerable trees and numerous thoughtful plantings. It's a beautiful course.

The fact that surprised me most about Irish pitch and putt is how varied the courses are. You might not think it would be possible to create much individual character in a track measuring less than 1,000 yards, but every course I played made a unique and lasting impression. There was the deceptively simple layout of Portmarnock Pitch and Putt, a links course just up the road from the great old Portmarnock Golf Club. There

was the prim, garden-like setting of Campions, to the north of Dublin. There was the sweeping, wooded backdrop of the carefully tended Hillview, in Clonmel. And, among my very favorites, there was Tipperary Hills, a long, rugged course in a public park in Tipperary.

Tipp Hills, as it is known to locals, is unusual in that it doesn't loop back on itself; when you putt out on the 18th green, you are standing at the farthest point of the course. The greens were in poor condition when I played there—one had been patched haphazardly with a pelt-size chunk of rough—but I loved the sprawling layout. As I was leaving, I passed two elderly couples putting on their golf shoes in the dusty parking lot. Every year, they said, they took two or three trips together to courses they had read about in Backspin, the monthly newsletter of the pitch-and-putt union. They had just had lunch at a pub down the road, and now they were ready to play.

My own playing partner at Tipp Hills, and my guide to all of the courses I played in the Limerick area, was Dan Dunford, a retired resident who is active in the local pitch-and-putt organization. Dan plays with an old pitching wedge that has punch marks instead of grooves. He praised my putting stroke as "firrum," and



Short-game star Kevin Bermingham, a 41-year-old Dublin bus driver, has the touch of Phil Mickelson but not the riches.

told me that several local courses had been struggling to eradicate a certain kind of "wurrum." Dan and his wife live in Limerick in a small, tidy house across the street from a course called Catholic Institute. He said that he had been so busy lately organizing tournaments and doing other administrative chores that his game wasn't in top form, although he had no trouble dissecting me.

At one point, Dan asked me if I thought pitch and putt would catch on in America. I said I hoped it would. The game is quick and inexpensive, and the courses are easy to build and maintain. Wouldn't you spend a few bucks to take your family out for a round if there were a course next to your local driving range? Wouldn't you rather hit wedge shots onto real greens than putt a purple ball past the blade of a windmill?

The only thing that worries me, I told Dan, is that the Irish pitch-and-putt swing is not a golf swing. To catch on in a big way in America, I said, the game would have to appeal to regular golfers, and to do that it would probably have to reinforce regular golf skills.

Dan looked more than a little pained when I mentioned regular golf.

"There was a time when my wife and I considered joining a golf club," he said, "but we didn't. I was afraid I might like it too much."

He looked away for a moment, then turned to me suddenly and asked, "What is it about golf? Why is it that good young pitch-and-putt players go on to golf, and then that's all they want to do? Is golf really that different?"

I thought for a while. "The main difference, I guess, is power," I said. "In pitch and putt, you never really get to smack it."

"I suppose I don't want to know," Dan said. "That's why I've never played golf even once. I've always been afraid that if I tried it I would get locked into it, and I would never play pitch and putt again."

It's a shame that the long and short games are divided by their swings. We regular golfers could learn a lot from our Irish cousins, especially when it comes to accuracy. The rounds I played with P.J. Coonerty and Dan Dunford permanently altered my view of what constitutes an acceptable miss from 50 or 60 yards. While I was at first thrilled merely to hit greens, they were apt to grumble over any tee shot that ended up outside the leather. Back in the 1970s, an Irish newspaper columnist wrote, "If any golfer can guarantee to get down in two from 40 yards six times in a round he will return a good card. If a pitch-and-putt player does not do that in a round, then he has a bad card."

That's a high standard. Play a few rounds of pitch and putt, and your wedge game will never look the same to you. For the best of the Irish players, a par comes close to being a disappointment; a bogey—perish the thought—is a disaster. Toward the end of the tournament at Old County, I overheard Alan Hanlon, the left-hander with the oddball swing, account for a disappointing performance by explaining, with a snort of disgust, "I had a *four*." ■