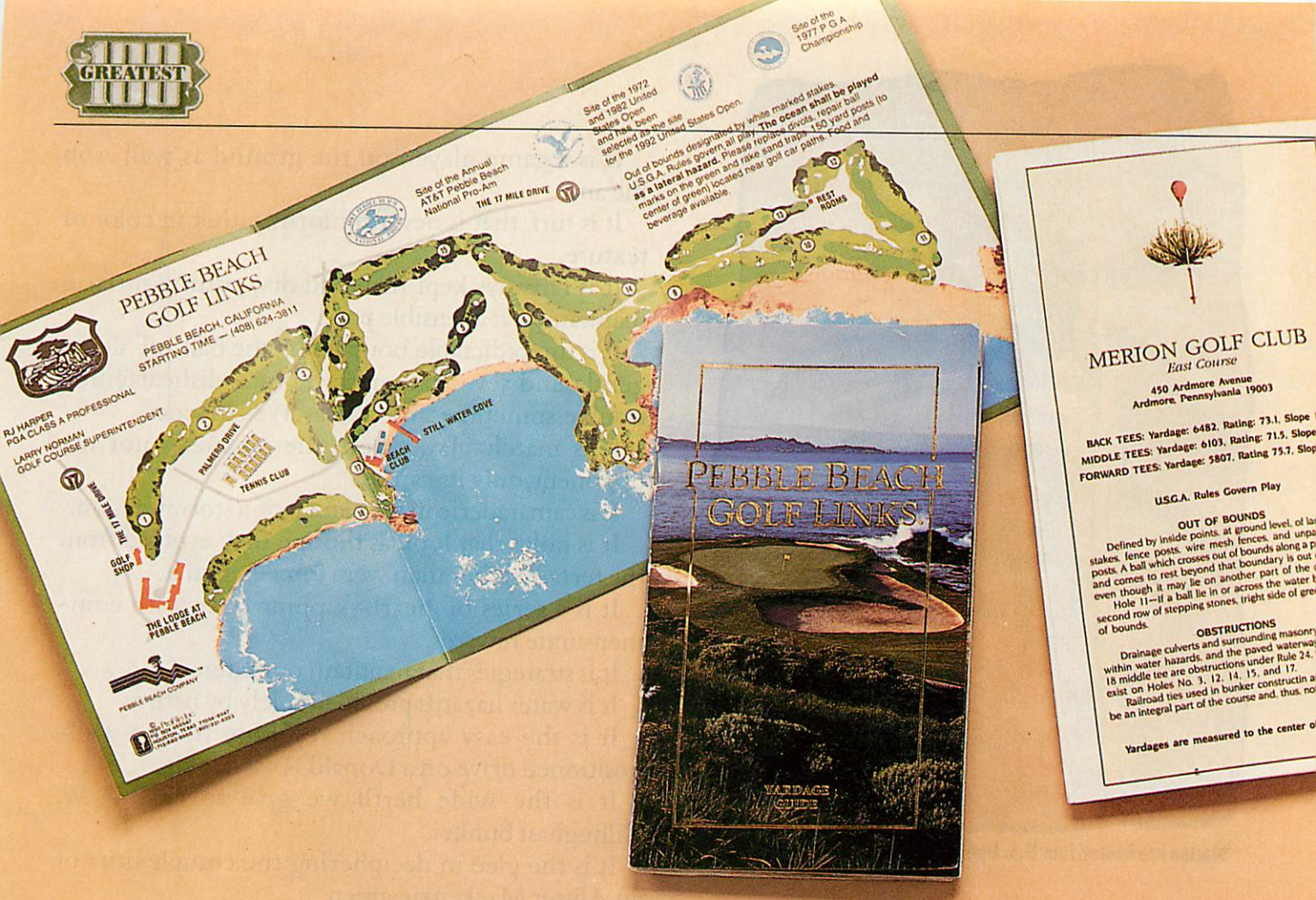


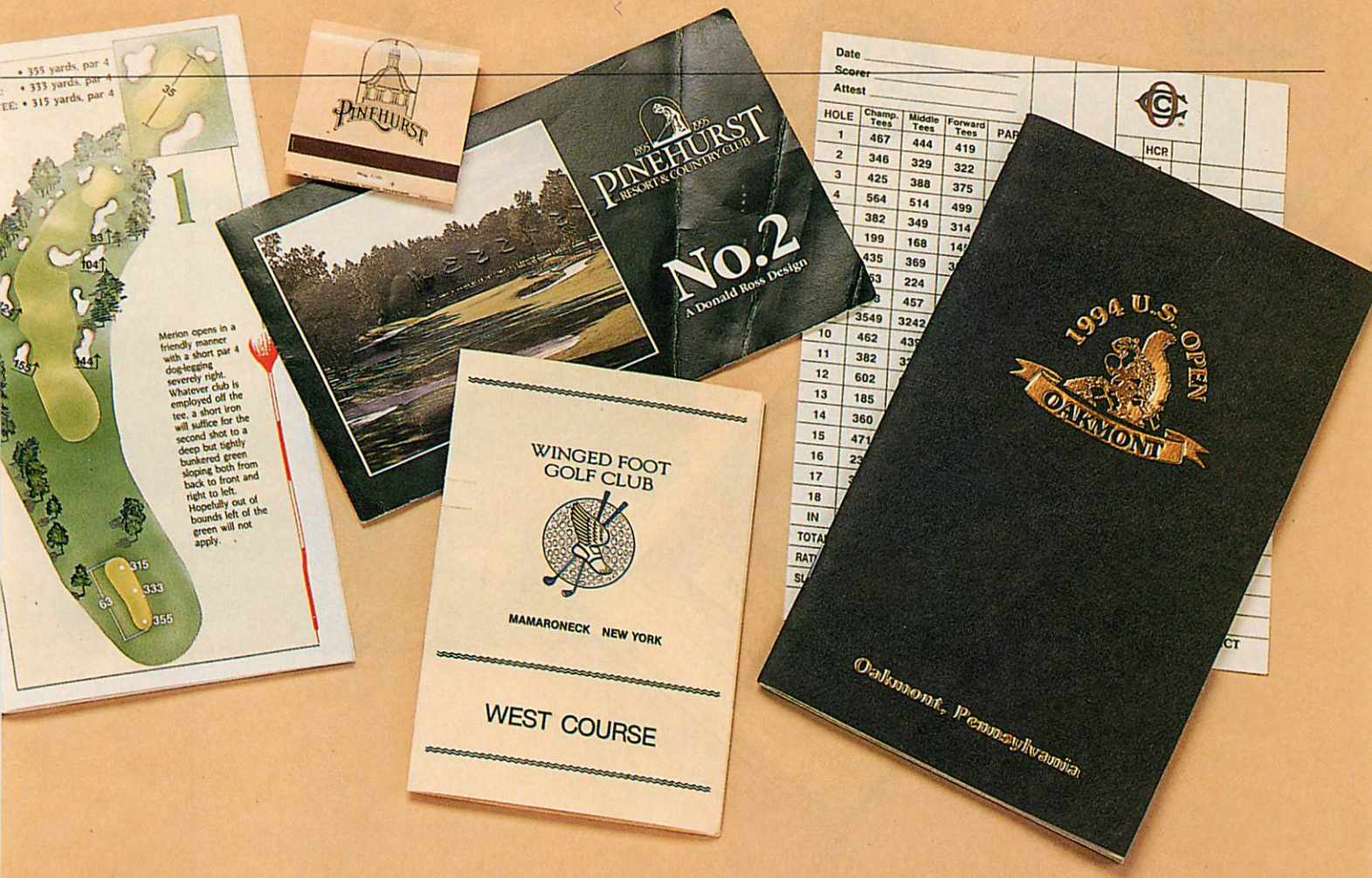
THE PERFECT 10

Want to play the best of the best? Our wandering tour guide samples the rarified air of America's top courses

BY DAVID OWEN

Standing on the first tee at the Augusta National Golf Club not long ago, I gazed contentedly at my fellow playing partners and thought, "Gee, I'm the only guy here who's working."

Over a period of several months, my job was to play the First 10 of America's 100 Greatest Courses. My mission was to sample the best of the best, to see what sort of revelations these courses might inspire—golf's true spirit, the meaning of life, world peace, that sort of thing. My golfing odyssey was tremendously satisfying, as one might expect, but it did not make my life any easier. My playing partners at home began to turn the other way when they spotted me bounding up the clubhouse steps, a stack of exotic scorecards in hand. My wife, who once thought herself a golf widow, began to think of herself as a golf divorcée. My feeling was: Who *cares?*



My tour of America's best courses began where it might logically have ended, at the course that has never seriously threatened to sink from its No. 1 position in the 100 Greatest rankings: Pine Valley.

For many golfers, a Pine Valley round is the game's Holy Grail. Jack Nicklaus played it on his honeymoon, leaving his bride in the car. (Women usually are permitted on the course Sunday afternoons only.) A teaching friend of mine once drove all night, skipping the first day of school, to fill out a foursome here. I made my way in without signing away my soul—a friend of mine is a member—but I still appreciated the gravity of the invitation.

The approach to Pine Valley is unprepossessing. As you draw near, you stagger from stoplight to stoplight in the anonymous strip-mall vastness of southern New Jersey. Once you cross the railroad tracks and pass through the gate, however, you enter a different world. The driveway to the clubhouse separates the 18th green from the 18th fairway. First-time visitors crane their necks and veer into the oncoming lane, trying to take it all in. The grass is not littered with diamonds, as one has halfway been led to expect, but the 18th hole nonetheless fails to disappoint. Even glimpsed through a windshield at 5 m.p.h., Pine Valley is way cool.

Among the rolling sand hills of the

The finishing hole at Pine Valley is a stern par 4 that leaves golfers with an indelible impression.

Pine Barrens, Pine Valley's site was selected in the early 1900s by a Philadelphia businessman named George Crump, who liked to design holes by hitting shots into the scrub and building greens where the good ones ended up. He died before his masterpiece was completed. Today even the caddies speak of Crump reverently. John Schmidt, who carried my bag the first day, entertained me between shots by reciting poems he'd written to celebrate each hole. His verse for the 18th concluded: *I feel at one/With the incredible vision/I now behold/Above this signature hole./Thank you, George Crump.* For Schmidt, as for most golfers lucky enough to play here, a round at Pine Valley has a theological dimension.

The course has a reputation for being not only America's best but also its toughest. Many golfers use those terms interchangeably. But equating mere difficulty with quality misses the point. It would be easy to build a golf course that's harder than Pine Valley, and people have. But no one, if GOLF DIGEST's 100 Greatest panelists are to be believed, has yet succeeded in building one better.

As a matter of fact, the course strikes some first-time players as disappointingly "easy." Even from the back tees it measures just a little more than 6,600 yards. Only one hole—the chasm-spanning par-3 fifth—requires a big do-or-die shot from the tee. Virtually every hole offers a safe, accessible path to the green. Many of the fairways are so wide as to seem essentially unmissable. A golfer with a reasonably reliable swing, who is content to shoot a mediocre score, can play the course without coming close to cardiac arrest.

The essence of Pine Valley, though, is that for every notch above mediocrity to which a golfer aspires, there is a seemingly exponential increase in danger. Working your way around the course is like crossing the Nile by skipping along the backs of hungry crocodiles. One day, I shot an 86 that might have been a 76 if I hadn't yanked a few drives and four-putted a couple of times. The next day I shot a 102 that might have been a 204 if I had counted every stroke and finished every hole. The difference between the two rounds was perhaps a 1-degree shift in swing plane, temperament and ambition.

It is easy to get into trouble at Pine Valley, and very, very hard to get out of it. The first hole sets up the problem nicely. There is ball-hungry scrub in front of the tee, but the carry across it is less than 150 yards. The fairway is so wide it looks like a football field turned sideways, but even a moderately long hitter has to be careful not to drive through it into the rough on the other side. The hole doglegs to the right, generating a powerful temptation to cheat the corner, but the elbow is protected by dead-end weeds and bunkers from

which the green cannot be reached. The green is broad and flat, but it drops off steeply in back and on both sides. The conservative player has every opportunity to chicken out. The ambitious player is tantalized by the prospect of glory. On paper the first hole looks like a cakewalk; in practice it has often been the club's hardest hole in relation to par.

Every hole at Pine Valley is distinct and memorable. The second looks short on the card but plays like a thousand miles, with an elevated green that is inevitably too high to be reached by whatever club is long enough to reach it. The sprawling unraked desert that interrupts the seventh fairway has such a fatal attraction for golf balls you might as well surrender to your fate and aim for it. Members whose tee shots land in the 10th green's tiny pot bunker (called among other things the Devil's Advocate) typically declare their balls unplayable and re-tee without even walking up to have a look. You can see the 15th green from the 15th tee—across a lake, up a hill, through a tightening throat of fairway carved from the forest, 600 yards away.

Pine Valley is one of the last unashamed strongholds of masculine privilege. It is not the sort of club where you would dream of holding your daughter's wedding reception, even if they'd let you. (It might be the sort of club where you would bring a few old B-school pals to celebrate a divorce.) There is no men's room in the clubhouse because there is no women's room; there's just the bathroom with a plate-glass window in the middle of the door.

Lines of trees tightly guard the par-4 first hole on Winged Foot's West Course.

The ban against tipping is absolute. Members have been suspended for sponsoring guests who violated it. When I heard this, I felt like the child who'd been warned not to lick the frozen pump handle. I walked the property in dread that I might uncontrollably plunge my hand into my pocket and thrust a bill into a waiter's hand. Ernie Ransome, the club's revered chairman, lives near the seventh tee

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and is said to scan the course with telescope and stopwatch, looking for players who play slowly, throw clubs, or fail to replace divots—three other offenses for which rustication is a possible penalty.

During my long weekend at Pine Valley, I stayed in a mansion called Dormy House, owned by the club. There is a putting green in the yard. The bar in the paneled den was fully and imaginatively stocked. In the mornings we were served breakfast in the lovely dining room.

One evening we had cocktails at the home of Jim Marshall, who is the club's secretary. Marshall's golf cart was parked in his driveway next to his car, and the entryway to his house was lined with golf shoes. A hundred or so wedges leaned against one wall of his living room, a hundred or so putters against another. There were spike marks on the dining-room floor. Near the door was a blanket-sized square of Astroturf. Like all guests in Marshall's home, we were invited to pitch Styrofoam balls from the Astroturf over a couch onto a small oriental rug. Sticking a ball to the rug on the first try is so hard that in 15 years it has been accomplished only twice. (Nick Faldo didn't do it in his first five tries.) I don't know that I would choose to live as Marshall does. After four rounds at Pine Valley, though, I can see how it could happen.

A couple of hours' commute from Pine Valley, but eons away in sensibility, is the West Course at Winged Foot in Mamaroneck, N.Y. Like Pine Valley, Winged Foot is the creation of rich, early-20th-century urban males. It was founded in the 1920s by golf-crazed members of the New York Athletic Club, the logo of which provides the club's name.

The two courses are very different. Whereas Pine Valley overwhelms you with a sense of omnipresent peril, Winged Foot impresses you first with its scale. Indeed, the club's forefathers instructed architect A.W. Tillinghast to design them "a man-sized course." The result is what might be viewed as the consummate American country-club course. The fairways are long, narrow and lined with trees. The greens, smallish, elevated and fast, are protected by bunkers that from the fairways look like enormous outfielders' mitts. Some of the bunkers are so steep the sand on their sides seems to contradict important physical laws.

Then there are the other vertical features: Trees are an important part of Winged Foot, as they are of many great American courses. The club claims some 50 different species. Because trees don't stand still in time, the course has evolved considerably during the seven decades it has existed. When built, it was virtually barren and shots that once sailed over are now shaped around. This gradual, natural metamorphosis is a distinguishing feature of many of our exalted courses.

The clubhouse at Winged Foot was built using stones turned up in the course's construction and looks like the country home of an English lord. Its principal amenities are a sprawling, two-story locker room—which in early years was the source of an annual upstairs-versus-downstairs tournament—and a wonderfully dark and welcoming grillroom. The specialty of the house is toast soaked for days, weeks or years in vats of melted butter. Like the menu specialties at most great American clubs—the snapper soup at Pine Valley and the peach cobbler and golf-ball-sized olives at Augusta National—Winged Foot's toast is celebrated out of all proportion to its actual distinction. The members love it—I would guess mostly because Winged Foot members have always loved it. It's like the Jell-O your mother made when you had the sniffles.

History drips from the clubhouse walls at Winged Foot the way cholesterol drips from the bread. (Or maybe that's testosterone. Women aren't banned at Winged Foot as they are at Pine Valley, but the masculine weight of the very air diminishes them to the point of invisibility.) On display in the main hallway are mementos from the club's storied past, among them a golf ball used by Bobby Jones, who won the U.S. Open here in 1929. The ball is lumpy and uneven and looks like something your first-grader might have fashioned from salt dough. Jones set up his Open victory by draining a snaking 12-foot putt for par on the 18th.

Grantland Rice, who was in the

Warm sunlight bathes the front of Shinnecock Hills' classic-looking clubhouse.

gallery but couldn't bear to watch, called Jones' 12-footer the greatest putt in history. It put Jones in a tie with Al Espinosa, whom he beat the following day in a 36-hole playoff—by 23 strokes. Rice also credited the putt with sparking Jones' epochal Grand Slam the following year. If Jones had fallen to Espinosa, Rice figured, his competitive career might have ended in despondency then and there. (Few first-timers at Winged Foot can resist adding their names to the ever-lengthening list of those who have tried and failed to make that putt, including me.)

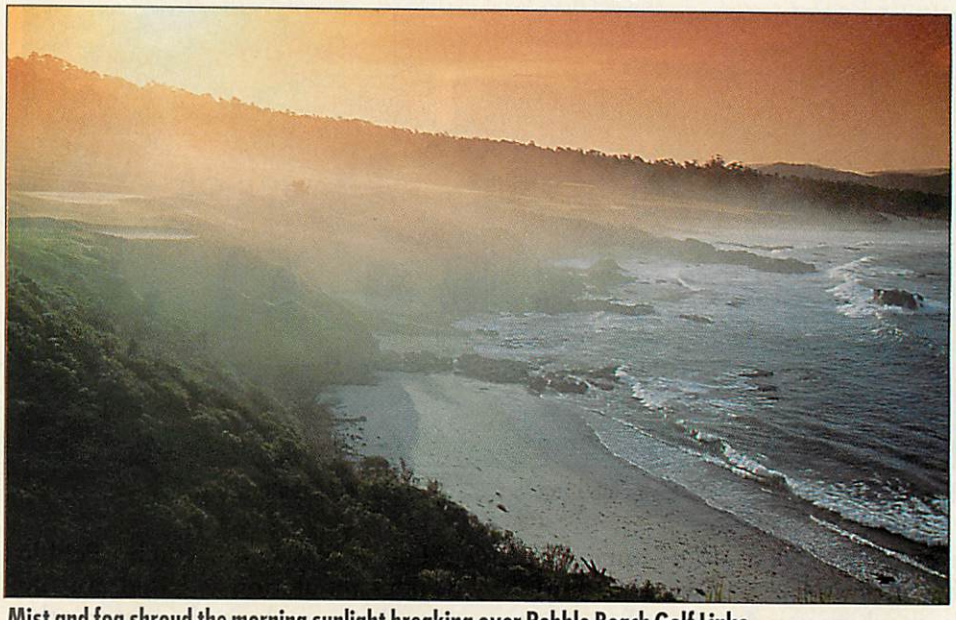
Winged Foot is most famous for its West Course back nine. It begins with the 190-yard, par-3 10th, whose steeply elevated green is guarded by a pair of bottomless, kidney-shaped bunkers. This is the hole that can grab you by the neck if you've let your attention drift during a mid-round pit stop at the bar. The last five holes are an unrelenting succession of long par 4s, the final three averaging 450 yards. (The members play one of these killers as a par 5.) After stumbling through the first 13 (beginning, as Bobby Jones did, with a double bogey on the first), I managed to play the final five in even par. If Tom Watson had been as efficient on the back nine in the final round of the U.S. Open here in 1974, he'd have won nine majors instead of eight. Why do people say golf is a difficult game?

Located a few hours' drive from Winged Foot is another great U.S. Open course, but one as different from Winged Foot and Pine Valley as these two are from each other. Shinnecock Hills, in eastern Long Island, is set among the windswept dunes and potato fields of Southampton. Like the Old Course at St. Andrews, it doesn't necessarily look like much as you survey the course from the first tee. You can't see the ocean (though if the breeze is up you can smell it), and the fairways are not flanked by wave-battered cliffs. Trees are in the distance, but they might just as accurately be described as tallish shrubs; they seldom affect strategy on the course.

Still, like the great Scottish courses to which it continually alludes, Shinnecock looks placid but runs deep. Not surprisingly, the course's original designers in the 1890s were Scots, and Shinnecock served as an important evolutionary link between the Scottish and American games. You would never mistake Long Island Sound for the Firth of Forth, but the rolling terrain is pleasantly reminiscent of linksland. I played with a well-traveled Scottish friend whose handicap is zero. Shinnecock Hills was the first American golf course he unreservedly loved. (He views Pine Valley as being punitively monomaniacal and Winged Foot as simply sprawling and bland.)

When we visited Shinnecock early last summer, the U.S. Golf Association was already hard at work bringing the rough up to its fiendish standard for this year's Open. The tall grass at Shinnecock is thick and wiry under any circumstances, and especially so when the USGA is breathing down the greenkeeper's neck. This grass, which must draw its power from the salty air, is one of the course's strongest suggestions of Scotland. It's something you seldom find on courses farther inland. The stuff grabs a club by the hosel, closing the face and making the ball go left. Advancing the ball a significant distance is phenomenally difficult for anyone wimpier than Ernie Els. Simply getting it back into play is often a tall order.

On two holes, I drove into the left rough, aimed a wedge straight back at 90 degrees to the line of play, swung hard and ended up farther left than I had begun. The cruelest hole is the ninth, a 411-yard par 4 whose steeply elevated green sits atop what from the fairway appears to be a vertical wall covered with foot-long grass. Land your ball a half-club short of the pin and you won't find it unless you accidentally poke it with your ice ax as your caddie hoists you up the precipice.



Mist and fog shroud the morning sunlight breaking over Pebble Beach Golf Links.

Shinnecock has an air of timeless nonchalance that may be achievable only by a club whose membership consists of a small group of absentee kajillionaires. The club has more than 250 members, but about half of them can be counted on not to show up in a given year. You don't get the feeling they hold a lot of square dances in the clubhouse. There was only one other golfer in sight when my friend

and I set out. We asked our caddie if we should invite the fellow to join us. "No," he said.

The sense of aloofness may arise from the course itself, which is so direct and unpretentious that it virtually cries out for someone to screw it up. Somewhat surprisingly, no one ever has.

The clubhouse—the first in America, designed by Stanford White—looks big and imposing from a distance but is in fact as unassuming as a beach cottage—complete with creaking porches and banging screen doors. There is a dining room but no grillroom. The lockers are not slathered with black-walnut veneer. The bag drop is exactly that: a section of lawn where you drop your bag as you turn into the gravel parking lot.

The views from Cypress Point Golf Club's comfortable clubhouse are breathtaking.

When our round was over, my Scottish friend and I wistfully shook hands with our caddie, then took the ferry from Port Jefferson back to Connecticut, drinking beers on the fantail as we watched the red sun sink into Long Island Sound, wishing we were rich.

Of all the well-known disadvantages of *not* being rich, holding little hope of playing the best golf courses in this country must be near the top of the list. Only two of the First 10 of America's 100 Greatest are in any sense public courses. These two—Pebble Beach and Pinehurst No. 2—are not the sort of places you drop by for a quick nine holes on your way home from work. Playing a single round at Pebble Beach, including hiring a caddie, eating a couple of meals and bankrolling the mandatory overnight stay at the Lodge or the Inn at Spanish Bay, costs more than the annual dues at my local golf club.

If American golf had a home field, Pebble Beach would be it. So powerful is the aura of the place that nonplaying visitors often feel moved to rent clubs and—what the hey—give the game a whack, with the result that the first tee at Pebble Beach has witnessed as many whiffed and topped drives as any tee in the world.

The holes on which Pebble Beach's reputation is based are the ones that run along the water—the sixth through 10th, and the final two. Any one of these holes would be enough to carry a lesser course. Played one after another in a single round, they make a deep and permanent impression.

I had seen Pebble Beach on television and in photographs many times, but I was still unprepared for the heroic scale of these holes. The most notable is probably the eighth, which is viewed by many (among them Jack Nicklaus) as the best par 4 in the world. The tee shot is blind, up a hill to the top of a cliff. The second shot has to cross a corner of Carmel Bay and find a smallish, steeply sloped green that is protected by bunkers, beach, thick vegetation and a wall of rock. Even if you decide to be sensible and treat the hole as a par 5, you still have to figure out where on earth you are supposed to lay up.

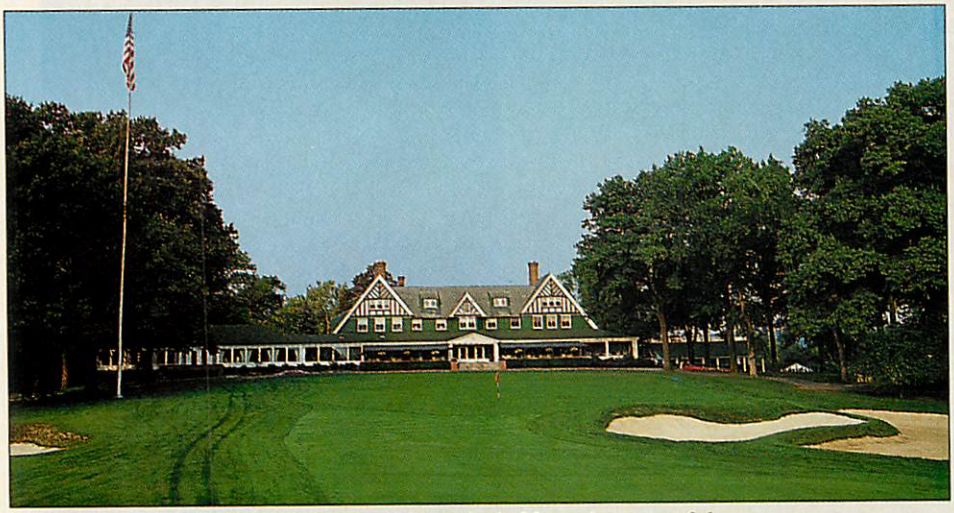
The eighth is followed by two endless par 4s that appear to be sliding sideways off the cliffs to the beach below. Any shot that bends to the right is in danger of skidding off the edge of the world. This is where the pros spend the birdies they hoarded on the first few holes. It is one of the hardest, most breathtaking stretches in tournament golf, and the challenge continues as the course turns back toward New York.

On the 14th tee each day of my three rounds, I gazed respectfully toward the house of the only Pebble Beach Golf Links member, a woman in her 90s, who is the last surviving member of the old Del Monte golf club that was folded into the modern Pebble Beach resort during this century's front nine. I could see her television set flickering in her living room. She has her own golf cart, and her own cartpath leading to the course. She likes to play a couple of holes toward the Lodge to pick up her mail and then play a couple back home.

The only aspect of Pebble Beach that disappointed me was the greens. The relentless tide of heel-dragging, putter-leaning, ball-mark-ignoring humanity that washes over the course on a typical day takes a heavy toll on the short grass. The grass itself compounds the problem: Poa annua grows unevenly and doesn't putt true unless it is mowed every few minutes, something that isn't possible on a course in constant use. On several long downhill putts my ball hopped and bumped like a marble rolling down a flight of stairs. (That may not be all bad. Like most golfers, I probably score better when my putts don't go where I aim them.)

Quite astonishingly, the Monterey Peninsula is the home not only of Pebble Beach but also of Spyglass Hill and Cypress Point—not to mention

Poppy Hills, Pacific Grove, Monterey Peninsula and several other courses. I played Poppy Hills and hated it, Spyglass Hill and loved it. The course that really got me was Cypress Point. Toward the end of my round there I turned to my playing partners and said, "You know, if I had to choose one course to play for the rest of my life, I think I would choose this one." It was only later I learned that this is one of the hoariest clichés in the game. Among the many golfers who have said just that about Cypress: Deane Beman, Dave Marr, Bob Rosburg, Sandy Tatum, Ken Venturi, Tom Watson and a couple of orthopedic surgeons I recently had dinner with in Georgia.



Oakmont's clubhouse provides visual and physical relief from the rigors of the course.

Cypress Point has been called the Sistine Chapel of Golf. Bobby Jones was so taken with it he hired its architect, a Scot named Alister Mackenzie, to help him dream up Augusta National. Cypress is sometimes mildly criticized for certain eccentricities—back-to-back par 5s on the front nine, back-to-back par 3s on the back, an uncharacteristically wacky finishing hole—but no one has ever suggested the layout is anything less than divinely inspired.

Like Pine Valley, Cypress has a teensy-weensy parking lot. You don't see guys in sneakers standing around it, drinking coffee and fiddling with the X-outs in their pockets. I had my choice of most of the handful of parking spaces. The starter paired me with two other nonmembers, wealthy out-of-towners in their 50s who, after months of scheming, had finally managed to wrangle an invitation from a friend of a friend and were now smiling so broadly they were practically squinting. During our round we saw no one behind us and no one ahead. As at Shinnecock, the club's members were notable mainly for their absence. At 250, Cypress claims the smallest membership of private clubs in the top 10.

Cypress feels like several different golf courses. There are holes that wind through forests of pine and cypress, holes that play around or over enormous sand dunes and holes that seem to have been spread with a trowel on the tops of the seaside cliffs. The first shot at Cypress is simultaneously inviting and terrifying. You hit down a hill to a fairway you can't see and over a tall, thick hedge protecting 17 Mile Drive. You are warned to keep your ball to the left of a score-annihilating clump of cypress trees that would otherwise look like something you might be supposed to aim for. I had woken up in a cold sweat at 4 that morning, worried about that tee shot. Miraculously, I hit a good one.

Alister Mackenzie's confident hand is evident everywhere. At the fifth, an uphill par 5 in the woods, my caddie pointed out one of the architect's favorite visual tricks: From the tee the hole appears to be nothing but bunkers, but looking back from the green you see almost no sand at all.

Every hole is memorable, but the ones on the cliffs are unforgettable. In fact, you know them before you see them, since—along with the holes that constitute Augusta's Amen Corner (which, of course, are also Mackenzie's)—they must be the most photogenic holes in golf. The epiphany begins at 15, a shortish par 3 playing from the side of a cliff over a narrow inlet in which you are likely to spot sea otters splashing among the kelp. Playing this hole invariably takes a newcomer 30 minutes or so. First, snapshots must be taken. Later, wayward tee shots must be found and rescued, from the many large bunkers, the cypress trees, the lethal ice plant, the rocks.

No. 16 is another par 3 over water, but it's nearly 100 yards longer than the 15th and its inlet is bigger, the waves louder, the cliffs higher. The pin looks so far away it might as well be in Tokyo. It's a hole that might have been designed on some cloudless summer evening by four guys sitting on the clubhouse veranda, working on their third gin and tonic. ("Hey, let's put a hole over *there!*") Going for the green requires a shot designed by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Laying up is nearly as scary, since a well-struck iron played too far left of the green can soar over the bail-out zone, ending up on the beach on the other side.

The 17th hole plays back to the mainland from the other side of the 16th green. I tried to shorten the hole by cutting off an extra wedge of ocean and ended up on the rocks. When our round was over I wished I'd played those three holes better, but I felt unspeakably lucky to have played them at all.

If Bobby Jones had never played at Cypress, Augusta National would

have been designed by Donald Ross. As it is, Ross' masterpiece is undoubtedly Pinehurst No. 2, which he laid out in his early 20s. After Jones had angered him by choosing Alister Mackenzie to work on Augusta National, Ross made several major changes to Pinehurst No. 2 in 1935. Other hands, including those of Tom Fazio and Jack Nicklaus, have fiddled here and there. Despite the changes and the passage of time, Pinehurst No. 2 remains true to Ross' original conception. Now as then, the greens are the key to the course. They are crowned, firm and fast. The straightforward—and indeed somewhat bland—appearance of most of No. 2's holes is deceiving, as are the generous fairways.

A pathway from green to tee offers a moment to reflect on a round at Merion.

To score here, you need to be in the right place with the right club in your hand. And you need to be on top of your putting. Unless the course is sopping wet, the greens are hard to hold from any distance; they are easy to putt right off of, even for the pros. If you do roll off, there are few easy up and downs coming back.

Golf at Pinehurst was made considerably more enjoyable for me by my caddies, two sons of a local legend called "Loose Tooth" McLaughlin. Jerry McLaughlin carried my bag the first day, his brother Carl (a favorite caddie of Jay Sigel's) carried it the second. We spotted Loose Tooth at one point working on an adjacent fairway.

The first day, I played with three German tourists who shared two carts. Because they had to keep their carts on the inconvenient paths, they walked many more miles than I did walking the full 18. They trotted back and forth across the fairways, most of the time perpendicular to the line of play, to change clubs or retrieve their vehicles. What can they possibly remember of their rounds, except all that pointless hurrying? One of the common denominators of the nation's top-10 courses is that carts are never mandatory. Caddies are always available.

After playing golf, I wandered around the little hamlet of Pinehurst. The town's principal haunt is the Pine Crest Inn, a dog-eared hotel just off the main drag, which was owned and run for a number of years by Donald Ross. There's a piano bar in the lobby and a chipping target in the fireplace. The main attraction is Bill Jones, who runs the bar just off the lobby and is a sort of walking encyclopedia of sports opinions. Jones has a loud voice and a photographic memory for bar tabs. He also has a loyal following that includes both locals and visitors across a broad range of ages. It's a great bar—and it's more crowded when Jones is there than when he's not.

A crowded bar was exactly what I needed after visiting the next course on my tour, Oakmont Golf Club outside Pittsburgh. Of all the courses I played, Oakmont is the only one I would be just as happy never to play again. It was simply too hard for me. In the first place, it's miles long. In the second place, the greens were faster than the rate at which my brain is able to process information. On one hole I faced a 30-foot putt that ran almost imperceptibly downhill.

"Putt it like a three-footer," my caddie said.

I looked at it again. "An Oakmont three-footer or a normal three-footer?"

"An Oakmont three-footer."

I took my putter back perhaps an inch and gave the ball a gentle, indecisive tap. It rolled very slowly. I could read the name on the ball each time it turned. About 10 feet short of the hole it began to lose speed. Still slowing, it nicked the edge of the cup. About three feet past the hole it collided with a neutrino and veered off on a tangent. A crow cried plaintively from a branch in a nearby tree. A good 10 feet past the hole, my ball finally stopped. It was quivering when I picked it up.

I am prepared to think Oakmont is a swell course for people who have more moral fiber than I do. It is stirringly beautiful and topographically complex—something that does not come across on TV, which makes it look as flat as a parking lot. And it is probably the ideal venue for the U.S. Open, since it permanently embodies in grotesque form every one of the harrowing qualities the USGA likes to see in a championship course: It is endless; its rough is deep, punishing and slashed with vengeful ditches. Its fairways are narrow to the point of inducing claustrophobia.

It's easy to spot the members on the club's practice green, which is the

rear-most quarter acre of the ninth green. They're the guys with the facial twitches and nervous, stabbing strokes. The club's guiding philosophy was succinctly stated by William Fownes, who with his father, Pittsburgh steel titan Henry Clay Fownes, designed the course in the early 1900s: "A shot poorly played should be a shot irrevocably lost." For someone who is prone on occasion to play a poor shot, a round at Oakmont can seem to last a very long time. In 18 holes I didn't manage a single par (although I did make one birdie, on the short par-4 17th). *No más!*

I had a very different experience on the other side of the state, at Merion Golf Club outside Philadelphia. Merion is to Oakmont as Philadelphia is to Pittsburgh. It is the all-time favorite course of many good golfers who have played it, and no wonder. It is beautiful to look at, perpetually (and deceptively) challenging to play and thoroughly steeped in history. If I could choose a second golf course to be the only one I would play for the rest of my life, it would be Merion.

Merion is tightly shoehorned into the Main Line suburbs west of Philadelphia. While Pine Valley floats in a world, if not a universe, of its own, Merion seems like the logical extension of the genteel neighborhoods surrounding it. The course is bordered on the east by the Philadelphia & Western Railway and is bisected by Ardmore Avenue, a thoroughfare that players must cross twice in 18 holes.

As you hit from Merion's first tee, you are intensely and sometimes fatally aware of being watched by members sitting on the clubhouse terrace a few paces behind you. No doubt they are checking to see if you will violate the sacred first commandment of the club's first tee: Thou shalt not take a mulligan.

The clubhouse itself is a bit gone at the seams, like a favorite old jacket. Unlike Augusta National's, it doesn't give the impression of having been repainted 15 minutes ago. Merion is so old that at the time of its founding, one of its original members had recently lost an arm after standing too close to a cannon firing a salute at the funeral of Abraham Lincoln. It was a cricket club in those days. Golf was first offered 30 years later, and the current course was built in 1912.

Merion's single-greatest golf moment was undoubtedly Bobby Jones' victory in the 1930 U.S. Amateur—the title that completed his Grand Slam of the four major championships of that era. Jones closed out his match at the wonderful 11th hole, where an unspectacular par gave him an 8-and-7 victory over Eugene Homans. (The hole is a short par 4 playing downhill to a green protected in front and to the right by a moat-like creek.)

Jones' feat is commemorated by a bronze plaque near the 11th tee. Shortly before the plaque was unveiled in 1960, someone noticed that it attributed the feat not to Robert Tyre Jones Jr., the immortal amateur, but to Robert Trent Jones Jr., the distinguished course architect. A narrow strip of bronze bearing the correct name was hastily produced and affixed to the face of the plaque, thus permanently memorializing not only one of golf's greatest triumphs but also one of its goofiest boo-boos.

Merion's most famous hole—and, for most players, its most horrifying—is the 16th, a long par 4 known as the Quarry Hole. The quarry is an abandoned rock pit that figures in the design of Nos. 17 and 18 as well. On 16, it takes the form of two jagged bulwarks of stone, which stand like Scylla and Charybdis on either side of the weed-choked wall of sand that passes for an entrance to the green. I managed to squeak a 3-wood just over the abyss, where my ball nestled into some thick rough that by comparison with the rocks and sand seemed almost cozy. The next time I play the hole, I'll hit 8-iron, 8-iron, 8-iron and say the heck with it.

The northeastern quadrant of the

country is heavily represented by courses on the upper slopes of America's 100 Greatest list, accounting for six of the first 10 spots. Is this a sign of some sort of regional bias among the panelists? Some people may think so. On the other hand, the Northeast is where golf first took hold in the United States. The courses here have had longer to settle into their sites and to acquire the historical dimension that is an indispensable element of true greatness in a golf course.

In golf, more than in any other sport, history is a living part of the game. When Chip Beck laid up in front of the 15th hole at Augusta National during the 1993 Masters, for example, he was playing short not only of the water but also of Gene Sarazen, who holed his 4-wood second shot there while winning the Masters in 1935. Great golf courses become greater by accumulating moments like these.

A course that over the last century has ornamented itself with any number of enduring moments is the Open Course at The Country Club in Brookline, Mass., outside Boston. The club has hosted the U.S. Open three times, the U.S. Amateur five times and the Walker Cup twice. It will host the Ryder Cup in 1999.

The Country Club was the site of one of the great watershed events in American golf: Francis Ouimet's astonishing victory in the 1913 Open. Ouimet was a gangly 20-year-old amateur who had grown up in a house across the street from the club. His parents were not prosperous enough to be members, but he had caddied there as a boy and had played the course many times. With a caddie the size of a kindergartner, Ouimet tied British golfing deities Harry Vardon and Ted Ray in regulation play, then beat them in an 18-hole playoff. His victory amounted to a don't-tread-on-me declaration that American golf was henceforth to be taken seriously. Best of all, Ouimet was a perfect American hero—an ordinary kid from a modest background who through hard work and indomitable courage had brought a couple of smug foreigners to their knees.

Like Merion, The Country Club had no connection with golf when it began. The main interest of the founding members (whose last names sound like a directory of Harvard dormitories) was horse racing. You can still see the outline of parts of the track, used until the early '60s, in the rough alongside the 18th fairway and elsewhere. Even today, golf is only one of the club's attractions. Included are tennis courts, a curling rink, swimming pools, a secluded pond that in the winter is maintained for ice skating, a skeet-shooting range and an enormous, rambling clubhouse for launching Boston's debutantes.

Unlike the other clubs in America's top 10, The Country Club is truly a country club. The ancient paneled library is painted dark green, and its characteristically oddball selection of books includes a directory of Episcopal priests. The men's locker room is housed in an old brick building that from the outside looks like the administration building of a distinguished prep school. The lockers are massive steel vaults marked with mismatched lengths of plastic labeling-tape—solid, practical, unpretentious furnishings that would seem equally at home in a fine old Federal penitentiary.

The Country Club's Open Course is not the course members play every day. It is pieced together from the best holes on the club's three nines and is too demanding for regular use by mere mortals. All three nines are worthy of celebration, however. The holes were conceived in the days when course architects bent their ideas to fit the landscape instead of the other way around. They have ragged edges, inexplicable dead ends and inconvenient rock outcroppings. The sand in the bunkers looks like sand, not something you might stir into your coffee. The course is comfortable on its site, as Merion is on its,

and it seems entirely unpretentious, like Shinnecock. If I could pick *just one more course* to be my one and only, I would choose this one.

The most infuriating stop on my tour of America's top-10 golf courses, in the view of the people I normally play golf with, was the final one: Augusta National.

"I don't want to hear about it," a friend said.

"Did I mention I'm going to be spending the night there, too?" I added cruelly.

Angry silence. Steam virtually venting from ears.

No matter. I can make other friends. But there will never be another Augusta.

At some clubs I visited even the members must feel a little like guests. At Augusta National, in contrast, guests are made to feel almost like members.

This fantasy began for me at the front desk, where I was greeted by name, the news of my arrival having been forwarded by the guard at the gate. My caddie was magically waiting by my bag at the driving range when I strolled over to hit balls after lunch. The guy in the shoe room had my shoes in his hand before I could open my mouth to ask for them.

This illusion of belonging is not entirely wholesome. Some of the members in the clubhouse bar look as though they are awaiting word of the outcome of the Civil War. The world that is preserved behind the fences at Augusta is a world whose passing is not widely mourned. But the place can be wonderfully seductive nonetheless.

Augusta National is so isolated from the rest of the world that it seems to have its own weather. Sleet could be falling on Washington Avenue, outside the front gate, and a warm evening breeze would still be ruffling the green coats of the members sipping bourbon on the terrace behind the clubhouse.

The city of Augusta is gaudy and sprawling, filled with gas stations and fast-food restaurants. Inside the gates at the golf club, time stopped when Bobby Jones hung up his clubs.

Augusta National is the only place where I've ever seen people sweeping grass. And the grass they were sweeping was not on the golf course. It was just a little triangle of lawn near the flagpole in front of the clubhouse. Even before it was swept, that grass looked better than any grass that I have ever had anything to do with. In fact, like all the other lawns on the club grounds, it was indistinguishable from the fairways.

And the fairways—did you know that at Augusta they cut the fairways in one direction only? The big mowers drive toward each tee in formation, then lift their blades and return (in the rough) to where they started, then drop their blades and drive toward the tee again. Mono-directional mowing reduces the chance that a misaligned blade of grass will accidentally bring the entire 500-year-old game of golf grinding to a standstill. Or something.

It's easy to laugh at such fetishistic care, but it's hard to laugh at the result—the Masters. Because the Masters is the only one of the four majors that is held year after year on the same course, it has a historical density that no other tournament can match. (The British Open has been held at the Old Course at St. Andrews 10 times since 1934; the Masters tournament, which began that same year, has been held at Augusta National 59 times.)

Every year, the course embellishes itself with yet another layer of great shots, brilliant strategies, bad luck, undeserved disaster, heart-stopping heroics, lost opportunities, rescued fortune and all the other highs and lows of competition at such a level. Even for a bumbling hacker on a weekend pass, the place reverberates with all the transcendent golf that has been played here.

Teeing off on the 10th hole is like walking into a dream. By fiat of the club's executives, only the back nine

is shown on television. If you follow golf at all, you know these holes. You remember great rounds that have been made, or broken, at Amen Corner. You remember epochal putts that have dropped or lipped on every one of these greens. And when you hit two consecutive shots into Rae's Creek on 12, you feel, in addition to the usual anger and disappointment, a powerful (if deluded) sense of kinship with all the great players who have done the very same thing.

It's almost a cliché to say that Augusta National is overrated as a golf course. (It's not very long! It has no rough!) But I think the Masters makes any such criticism virtually irrelevant. Besides, the course itself really is terrific. The 450-yard 10th, a par 4 that plays 485 yards in the tournament, may be my favorite hole anywhere. From the tee you look down into a deep, left-bending chasm that will tack an extra 50 yards onto a big smooth draw. The elevated green, which is protected in front by a bunker that from the fairway looks like the Gobi Desert, is hard to hit and harder to hold. It's a cool, cool hole—and you know as you play it that other cool holes lie ahead.

Leaving Augusta National at the end of my final round, I felt like Cinderella at the stroke of midnight. My rented Taurus turned back into a pumpkin, leaving me with a lot of nice memories and a suitcase full of go-to-hell golf shirts.

Naturally, I have devoted nearly every waking moment since then to figuring out how I can weasel my way back onto all those great courses.

The few friends still speaking to me sometimes ask which of the top-10 courses I liked best, or how would I rank them myself. I never know how to answer. If I could snap my fingers and have a tee time at any of them tomorrow morning, I would probably pick Cypress Point, because of all 10 courses it seems the most, well, ineffable. But that doesn't mean I think it's a better course than Pine Valley. In fact, the first 10 courses are so different from one another that ranking them at all seems like a pointless exercise.

I do sometimes fantasize about the perfect golf course. It would look pretty much like Merion, although it would be set on the Monterey Peninsula like Pebble Beach. The Pine Crest Inn at Pinehurst would stand beside the 18th green. The clubhouse would look very much like Shinnecock's, with the men's locker room from The Country Club tacked on around in back. I would live beside the first tee in a house like Jim Marshall's at Pine Valley, except I would probably go ahead and park my golf cart right in the living room.

Most important of all, the perfect golf course would share a crucial characteristic with my little nine-hole course at home: Its membership would include me. ■