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Kevin O'Hara: Epiphany at the 19th hole

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By Kevin O'Hara, Special to The Eagle

PITTSFIELD

When my dad caught himself becoming irritable at some petty annoyance, he'd explain it by saying, "It's not the cross you bear, but the splinters in it." I've lately been reminded of his phrase as I now find myself -- at a bonnie 65 -- easily aggravated at things that didn't bother me years ago.

For example, nothing inflicts a splinter into me quicker than being served a two-inch frothy head on a pint of Guinness. "Sir," I politely say, "I asked for a pint of stout, not a shaving mug."

But my gravest shard is being stuck behind a caravan of slow golfers. Forgive me, but there have been duffers I could've mowed down with a smile on my face. But last month, following a most tumultuous round of golf, I fell into a swoon of tranquility that lifted this grievous shard once and for all.

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It was a lovely September morning at Pontoosuc Lake Country Club, and I playing with my good friends, Terry Hall and John Sauer, of Lenox, and Sandy McNay, of Adams. Like our beleaguered president, I had ventured out to forget the world's ills and selfishly confront my own -- namely a persistent snap hook. However, ominous signs greeted us on the opening holes when we came upon trampled sand traps, fresh divots the size of porterhouse steaks, and the ultimate defilement -- sunflower shells strewn upon our fourth green!

"Who's playing in front of us," I blurted, "Godzilla?"

We soon came to a bottleneck at the par three 8th hole, where three foursomes loitered around the teebox.

"What's the hold-up?" I asked the rankled dozen, my blood simmering. One player pointed to the 8th green. "Those bozos playing tiddlywinks in front of us."

I squinted toward this quartet, 200 yards away, who were seemingly oblivious to the lynching mob assembling from behind. One clown was chatting on his cellphone, another popped out of the woods zipping his fly, a third went chasing his runaway putts like a kitten pursuing a grasshopper, while the fourth, sporting plaid shorts and white nylon thrombotic stockings, sipped on coffee from a matching plaid Thermos bottle.

Stewing in my juices, I listened to the others jaw their complaints.

"What our club needs is a ranger."

"Yeah, a Texas Ranger armed with a Smith and Wesson."

"Those jamokes teed off at 8:32, and it's now noon! We're talking a seven-hour round!"

"No wonder the game is losing five million players a year."

One chap with driver in hand addressed his ball, saying, "Time to send these jackasses a suppository!" He let one rip, the ball whistling over their heads. In turn, the moronic four gaped back like cows in a field, before resuming their game of putt-putt.

My blood was now at a boil. "Guys," I pleaded to my gang, "let's jump to 11 before my next stroke is cerebral."

We finished our play, minus holes 8, 9 and 10, thus erasing my rare birdie on five, our incomplete round deemed invalid. Saying farewell to my troops, but needing to let off more steam, I replayed the front nine, knowing the Four Hackers of the Apocalypse were presently carving up the back side. Completing my nine, I adjourned to the 19th hole, where I witnessed these four stooges zigzagging in golf carts toward the clubhouse, their marathon complete.

As newly crowned senior club champ (OK, I confess, I was the only one who entered my division), I thought it my duty to tactfully chastise these dumbbells on golf etiquette, but also offer tips to expedite their play. But before doing so, I eavesdropped a table away as Mr. Plaid Pants tallied up scores with a pocket calculator.

"Davy, you went 73-75, for a 148."

"Those seven plopped balls in the pond killed me," sighed Davy. "Even lost one in a ball washer."

"Wilbur, you went 70-70, 140."

"Wow, 140, really! Same as my bowling scores."

"Stan, you fired a 133."

"If I didn't take that quadruple triple-bogey 12 on the 15th," lamented Stan, "I would've broken 130 for the first time."

"And I shot a 122."

"And a pig's nose!" the others protested. "More like 192!"

Mr. Plaid Pants hiked up his stockings. "That's the benefit of keeping score."

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I sat dumbfounded as peals of laughter escaped them. Truly, in my 50 years of golf, never have I witnessed hackers so good-humored after posting such pitiful scores. Yep, four buddies from the Garden State, no doubt, who had escaped the Tanglewood Lawn to dig up our own.

Leaning toward them, I was set to launch into my homily, but found I no longer had the heart to admonish them. After all, despite their dismal play, didn't they enjoy this royal game as much as myself? And isn't this ancient sport all about endearing friendships and camaraderie?

So there I sat, gazing contentedly at the maples flecked with color, while savoring a perfectly pulled pint by club manager Paul Ferdyn. And sure as I'm reigning senior champ, a passing zephyr of goodwill enveloped my being, and lifted that needling old shard clean from my heart.

"Hey, bud," Mr. Plaid Pants called to me, "pull up a chair and join us."

"Why not," I replied, and did so, gladly.

Kevin O'Hara is a frequent Eagle contributor.

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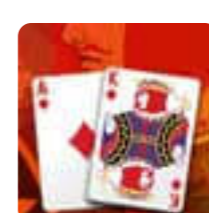
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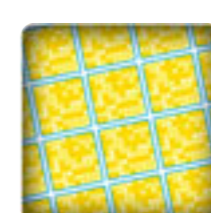
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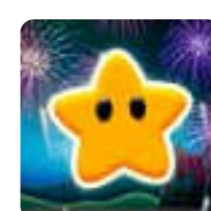
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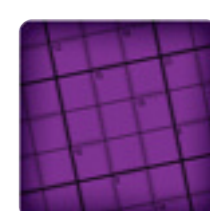
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