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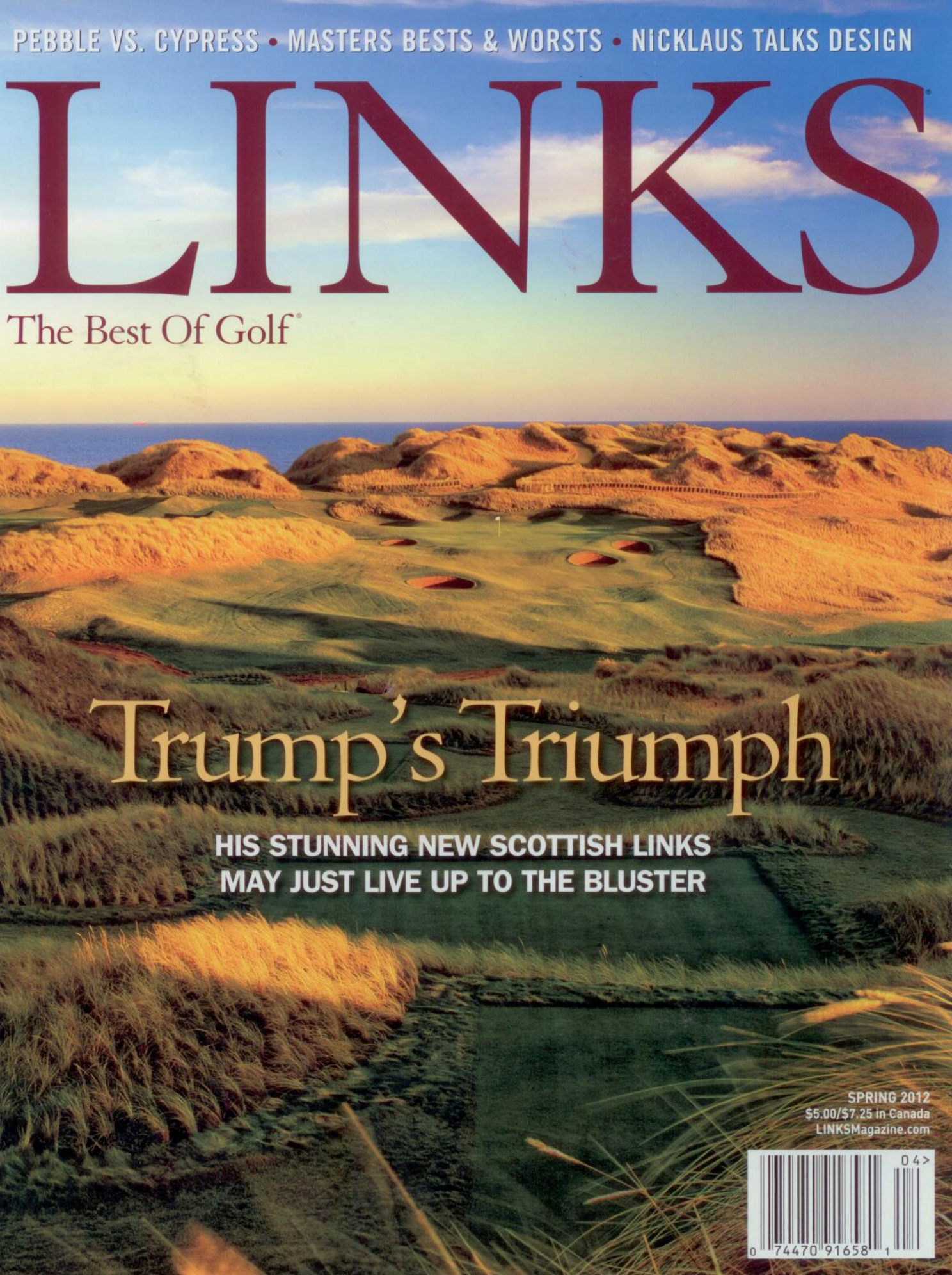

Trump's Triumph

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Trump acquired a one-of-a-kind site and he and Martin Hawtree have made the most of it. This is the par-four 12th hole.

TRUMP SCOTLAND

He promised "the greatest golf course in the world" and The Donald has clearly given it his best shot

BY DAVID J. WHYTE

So The Donald and I are chatting. On the phone. He's on his cell while playing a golf course somewhere in sunny Florida. I'm sitting behind a desk in not-so-sunny Scotland.

"It was actually a countryman of yours who told me about this place," he says. "Hang on a second."

The phone goes quiet, then I hear a dull thump, the unmistakable sound of clubhead meeting turf. Two seconds later Trump is back. "David, you've brought me luck," he says.

That was nice to know but not wishing to be held responsible for his entire round I asked if I could call back when he'd finished.

"Yeah!" he continues three hours later. "The Scottish golf photographer Brian Morgan heard I was looking at Old Head in Ireland. It's not a great course," he opines. "It's spectacular but too windy! Brian told me 'If you want the greatest piece of golf land in the world, the best piece of land I've seen—ever in my life—it's in Aberdeen.'

"I bought it because the dunes are the biggest in the world. We looked at 141 sites and at the end of the day there was nothing that came even close."

I'd arranged a pre-opening tour of Trump International Golf Links, about eight miles north of the City of Aberdeen, with John Bambury, the course's Irish superintendent, an agronomy graduate of Penn State University who has worked on a number of grow-in projects in Ireland including Colin Montgomerie's Carton House in County Kildare.

We drove to an earthy platform overlooking the site. "This has surely got to be one of the most impressive golf views in the world," Bambury enthused, switching off his engine as if to intensify my experience. To the right was a rolling, restless North Sea. To the left rose a

BRIAN MORGAN

line of immense sandhills. Below us unfurled a driving range the size of several football fields.

"The range is nearly 23 acres," the superintendent went on, "with North and South tee boxes." Impressive as that was, what drew my eyes were those formidable sandhills. In the oft-used phrase of Old Tom Morris, this was terrain "specifically designed by The Almighty for playing golf."

We drove to the front nine and carried on by foot, Bambury's enthusiasm ascending with every step. "This is the greatest golf property on the planet," he declared, emulating his boss's skill for embroidery. "There is nothing like it! The size of the property is humongous—2.9 miles from north to south. There are 107 tee boxes. No course has that many tee boxes! The scale is amazing!"

As passionate and charming as the Irishman was, I'd begun to drift into my own reverie. "The greatest golf course in the world" is what Trump and his organization have been touting ever since they commenced work on this prime linksland more than five years ago. Now let me tell you as a Scotsman, that's not the kind of talk that wins over locals, least of all Aberdonians who may be the most dispassionate people on the planet. A big, brash, billionaire Yank blowing his trumpet in their buttoned-up little corner is bound to get backs up.

And of course it did. Assorted groups came out of the woodwork, pouring scorn. Campaigns like "Tripping up Trump," complete with a feature-length film entitled *You've Been Trumped* tried to highlight the inequity of the coastal invader. The fracas came close to home (I live about an hour south of the project). Danny McDonald, a staunch Scottish socialist (I was best man at his wedding), went to see *You've Been Trumped* and came out incensed at the injustice Trump was perpetrating against local residents who didn't want to move from their homes. Dr. Jim Hansom (I used to go out with his sister) was the principal geomorphology witness for Scottish Natural Heritage at a public inquiry on the development. He felt the dynamic dune system would be lost if it was planted with golf course grass—as indeed it would be.

On the other side of the fence Ernie, my golf-mad brother-in-law, was one of the first to book a round on the course together with thousands of other Scots eager to sample the new links. And if the blogs and comments on local websites

Dwarfed by the dunes and buffeted by the sea breezes, the par-three 6th exemplifies both the splendor and sternness of the course.

were any indication, the people of Aberdeen were substantially more for the project than against, many stating that this is one of the best things to happen to Aberdeen since the discovery of North Sea oil.

It's all water under the bridge now. The course is built, settling in spectacularly, and set to open ahead of schedule on July 1.

I continued my tour with Bambury and had to admit, as we stood on the first tee (I would be churlish or half-blind not to) the course-in-progress looked incredible. As a golf writer and photographer, I've made my way around a fair number of the world's most notable courses, and I honestly couldn't think of any that was so instantly, strikingly impressive.

The professorial Martin Hawtree was an unlikely partner for Trump, but they proved to be a good team.

The opener will offer an interesting start, a tough par five when the wind is coming out of the southwest as it usually does. The 3rd, 4th, and 5th are almost surreal, with fairways and greens melting into the dunes. The multiple tee boxes perch like miniature lawns atop marram-tufted mounds and occupy diverse positions, changing not simply the distance but the corridors and playing strategies of the holes. Luxurious, grassed walkways descend to the fairways, giving golfers the "green-carpet" treatment as they progress toward their shots.

"Fescue tees, fescue walkways, fescue fairways," Bambury was waxing on. "The greens are bent/fescue." Nothing unusual in that, I thought, the obvious choice for free-draining Scottish linksland. "On a normal golf course you have one hectare of greens turf," he told me. "Here we have 4.4 hectares, the same amount of greens turf as four normal golf courses." They'd extravagantly applied the same seed to the green surrounds.

Trump was clearly out to impress, but to be honest he couldn't fail to impress on a site like this. Every hole is a pleasant surprise, a joyful, happy-slap to golfing sensibilities. As we walked along I became increasingly captivated, drawn in not only by the breathtaking

BRIAN MORGAN (2)

Left: No. 14 snakes naturally through a corridor of dunes. Above: The opening par five plays upwind to a split-level green.

beauty of the place but by how the course had been entwined into it.

The ultimate test, of course, will be how the course plays, but as a turn-on to the imagination Trump International Golf Links has it all—graceful, curvaceous fairways, wafting marram grass, refreshing breezes, and beckoning, beautifully proportioned, greens. And as an added bonus, you see the sea on nearly every hole.

Compared to the front, the back nine is even more astonishing, the enormous primordial dunes creating a spectacle of exaggerated proportions. But, Bambury assured me, apart from the planting of five million marram sprigs to stabilize the drifting sands, the dunes had not been invaded—the fairways and greens had been simply and sympathetically draped among them. From the lofty perch of the 14th tee, pointing north toward Cruden Bay, the contrast of woolly mammoth mounds and sinuously curving fairway is sensational.

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We made it to the stern conclusion of 18, an immense 617-yard battlefield generally navigated into the wind and surely the scariest hole on the course. There are 18 bunkers, most of them ganging up around the green. Yes, there are six tee boxes, but from all six of them this hole looks terrifying.

We finished our tour and went off to "The Store," a nearby farm shop, for a bite of breakfast. "How do you handle working for Donald Trump?" I asked Bambury, looking perhaps for a bit of gossip.

"He likes things done a certain way," he told me, "and not necessarily his way. He wants you to excel in what you do. The result was that everyone raised their game—from the bottom to the top.

"You have this amazing canvas and you have the support of the Trump Organization to create something perfect. It's been quite an experience. Even among the contractors it's like, 'Where do we go after this?'"

I reflected on my trans-Atlantic phone call with Trump. I had to admit he was a billionaire with few airs. "I'm a wealthy man, David," he told me as if sharing half a ham and cheese sandwich. His wealth was not his point. His message was that he had the funds to pull off what he has.

"What about the real estate development?" I asked him, knowing it had come into serious question.

"The overall project including the hotel, luxury lodges, and housing was never really important," he told *(continued on page 65)*

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me. "The important thing was the dunes. We have 2,000 acres and we're using 600 acres for one golf course. The rest of the project will follow, depending on what happens with the world economy. The thing that was most important to me was building the greatest golf course in the world. Somebody had to do it!"

I had asked him about finding an architect sensitive enough to do the site justice. "I hired Martin Hawtree, which was one of the great moves I've made," said Trump.

Hawtree Limited, the longest continuous practice in golf architecture, was established in the UK a hundred years ago by Martin's grandfather Fred who went into partnership with Open Champion J.H. Taylor. Martin is now at the helm of a three-generation dynasty.

"I first saw the site in about 2007," Hawtree told me from Rio de Janeiro, where he was among the finalists vying for the job recently awarded to Gil Hanse of designing the course for the 2016 Summer Olympics. "I was very enthusiastic on first seeing it. Certainly it was the most dramatic stretch of duneland I'd ever seen. I just soaked myself into those dunes and felt the layout as I walked the site."

I asked him about the bent/fescue surrounds which had somewhat baffled me. "Yes," he said, "they are different but they look terrific and the tight lies should inspire great play."

Now that the course was finished, which were his favorite holes? "All the holes were favorites as we were building them," he said diplomatically, "but I do particularly love the par threes. More generally, I like and have worked hard to achieve a sequence of surprises. Every visit to the site brings some new treat, because the site is so extraordinary. My work has simply been a modest exercise in midwifery."

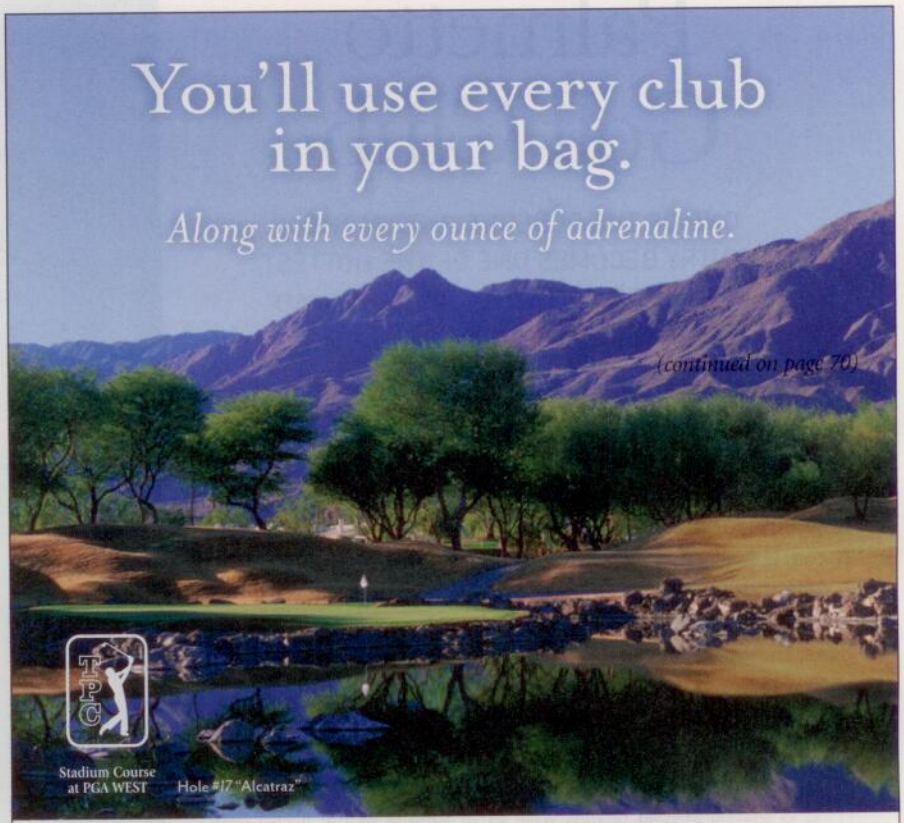
Hawtree is unassuming, a kindly professor, diffident about his talent. One would be hard pressed to find two more contrasting characters than Hawtree and Trump, and yet they have meshed.

"I get on well with Mr. Trump," said Hawtree. "Our characters are very different but we have intriguing ways of coming to agree with each other. I have come to respect his judgment and understanding and have thoroughly enjoyed working with him."

I had decided to change my mind about Trump too. Talking with him helped me understand he walks the walk and certainly talks the talk. Like the rest of us he's a keen golfer so perhaps it really is all about the golf course. He has pulled off something hugely significant here in the Home of Golf, an historic move, a boon to Scottish golf, and a certain boost to the Aberdeen economy. Once the stature of Trump International Golf Links is established, golfers from all around the globe will be queuing up to play here.

I'd been determined not to jump on the bandwagon, determined not to fall prey to the hyperbole, but the realist in me had no choice. Donald Trump has gone and built his "Greatest Golf Course in the World" and I can sleep soundly at night knowing that I won't be the last one to say it.

David J. Whyte is one of Scotland's best-known golf travel writer/photographers and is the creator of www.go-golf.tv.



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