GABO, THE BABE AND THE MID OCEAN CLUB

By Chip Brown

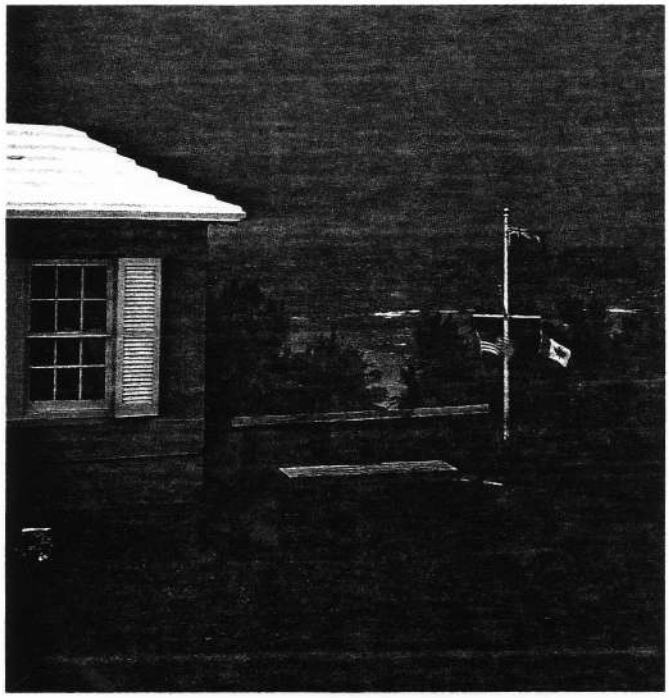
Six hundred miles out in the Atlantic, on Bermuda, there's a wonderful, treacherous, wind-swept golf course that my grandfather played — and played well — for the better part of a century. For him, a good round at Mid Ocean was a metaphor for paradise. For my father and me, it is paradise just out of reach.

NOTHING, NOT WORK OR love or family, raised the same keen feeling in my grandfather Allan Brown as the prospect of a round of golf. Gabo, as we called him, played the royal and ancient game on 1600 courses in ninety countries. He putted on the oil-soaked sand greens of Zambia, where etiquette called for players to drag a Turkish rug around when they were done. He hit drives from termite-proof concrete tee boxes in Kenya and spanked irons into clouds of sulfurous gas in New Zealand. He ventured onto a course in Singapore where the

IN 1934, ALLAN BROWN (CENTER) PLAYED IN MID OCEAN'S AMATEUR TOURNAMENT WITH BABE RUTH (RIGHT), WHO, ON THE FIFTH HOLE, PUT TWO IN THE LAKE. GOLF DOES NOT RESPECT IMMORTALITY IN OTHER SPORTS.

hazards of the rough included still-buried World War II land mines. His enthusiasm for the game took him to the British Isles, to Venezuela, to India, where teams of women pulled fairway lawn mowers steered by men. He was once tendered ashore by lifeboat for a quick nine on St. Helena, where Napoleon had been exiled. On one African course he was advised that "elephants have the right of way." In Japan his golf cart carried traffic instructions in translated English: "When coming across a golfer on hoof, tootle the horn melodiously. If the golfer still obstacles the course, tootle with vigor and cry out, 'Hi, hi!' "

Perhaps a man with his mania needs psychiatric help, but past a certain point obsession has an epic grandeur. Gabo played his first golf in the nineteenth century, and he did not stop until he died, eight years ago this May, at the age of ninety-two. Toward the end he was virtually blind and obliged to paint big red Xs on his golf balls. As soon as he teed off, he'd holler, "Where'd it go?" Supplied with the general coordinates, he'd career away in his cart like some crazed motocross champion. Golf was tailored to his work as a public-relations executive. When he retired, he took up painting, and he liked to collect records, but his cultural range didn't extend much beyond fairways and greens. (Knowing my mother's love of opera, he once dragged her to the phonograph to hear highlights of Verdi's *Trovatore* by Borrah Minevitch and his Harmonica Rascals.)



THE BENCH ON THE FIRST TEE WAS DEDICATED TO MY GRANDFATHER; YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO SIT ON IT UNLESS YOU CAN SHOOT YOUR AGE.

To me, nothing symbolized his decline like the disintegration of the oval bent-grass green behind his summer house in Vermont. Grandchildren had debuted there with sawed-off putters; grown-ups had settled bibulous midnight wagers. Mornings after a blowout you might find a slice of lime in one of the holes, with a tang of gin on it. Gabo's green, like all greens, had the aura of a sacred place, but it needed a lot of tending, and when he got old and could no longer hold back the crab grass and the clover, the green began to lose its islanded beauty and distinction. Eventually it was subsumed in the sea of ordinary lawn that lapped about its edge.

So we are all fetched under, I suppose. Gabo's prized license plates — stamped GOLF — reverted to the state; surely they have been reissued to some other fanatic. He left an unpublished autobiography, notable mainly for its neglecting to mention the birth of my father and my aunt. In truth, the real record of his times was the hundreds and hundreds of score cards he amassed from courses around the globe — strings of 4s and 5s and 6s and faded penciled tallies from long-ago days. He had bound them all into a green leather folio inscribed THE WORLD WAS MY GOLF BALL.

Of all the courses Gabo played, the Mid Ocean Club, in Bermuda, was one of the two or three closest to his heart. He spent winters in Bermuda for most of his life, having been introduced to the island during World War I when his navy ship *El Capitan*, a 10,200-ton steam-powered cargo vessel, ran aground on some ball coral off Whale Bay. His lifelong romance with Mid Ocean's hilly fairways and puckish winds began shortly after the club opened in 1922. He played with Babe Ruth in Mid Ocean's amateur tournament in 1934. In those days his game was in crack form, and it was not unusual for him to shoot par. He was a deft chipper, always expecting to get down in two. When he was sixty-nine, he managed the considerable feat of shooting his age; he did it every year thereafter for twenty years.

More inward by temperament, my father, especially in his younger years, played with all of Gabo's love and aptitude for the game. They won lots of bowls and trays in father-son tournaments. For making holes in one, they each earned suitable-for-framing certificates and boxes of bar glasses from the Spalding Company. Came the next generation. As the oldest grandson, put off by the fat-cat connotations of the game, I was slow to realize that I had inherited my grandfather's love of golf; even slower to realize, when I began to play in earnest, that I had inherited almost none of his skill.

But just as golf cannot be defined by the segments of society commonly associated with it, so its spirit is not solely embodied in players who know where the ball is going when they hit it. Golf has less to do with sport than with religion, and what makes a golfer is not talent per se, but faith — faith that a better day, or a better hole, or at least a better shot, is coming. Drain a putt, tag a drive, knock a wedge stiff to the pin and suddenly you will have captured all the glory of the game. What other sport offers so many chances for redemption or is so quick to lift the gloom of ineptitude with a moment of grace?

One fall not long ago I went back to Mid Ocean with my father, Sandy, and my younger brother, Toby (whose game improves at a distressing rate). I had not seen the island since a family visit twenty years earlier. I was curious about the place that had engrossed my grandfather for the better part of a century. I was curious about the game itself. Something about golf seems to resonate in the relations of fathers and sons. Something about it seems to echo the intricacies of existence — the game, like the lives of those who play it, is a solitary contest waged in the presence of others; interludes of release and contemplation follow moments of concentrated effort. Reaching for a Zen-like blend of focus and relaxation as you glide down the avenues of grass or stand stock-still in the cemetery hush of greens, you may find yourself hovering in the old mysteries of origin and self. Golf, not baseball, is what men play late in life, when they are half-blind and afraid. For Gabo and my father it was a way of being together. It held the comfort of unselfconscious communion. It became the very substance of family.

MID OCEAN IS NOT LONG OR SHOWY, AND IT DOESN'T make it onto lists of the world's top 100 golf spots. But its design is as understated and imaginative as its setting is dramatic, and the vintage character of the course has not changed since my grandfather's day. It lacks the more theatrical hazards of land mines and sulfurous gas clouds, but Mid Ocean routinely torments players with midocean wind, and a blowy day can turn the course into one of golf's toughest tests.

The course was created by Charles Blair Macdonald, who in 1909 designed and built the National Golf Links of America, in Southampton,

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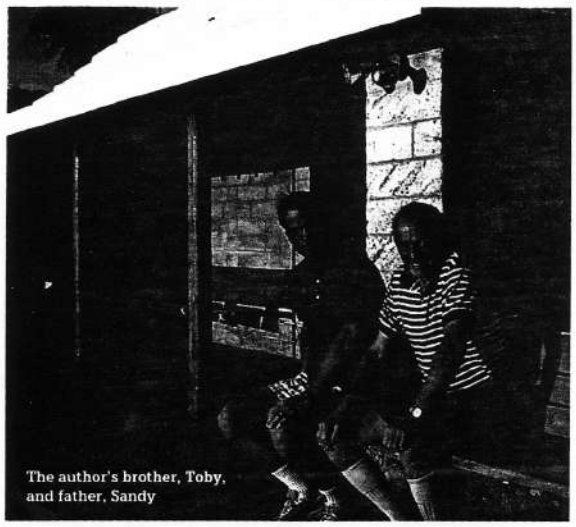
PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID MAISEL

New York — one of the first eighteen-hole courses in America. As a golfer, Macdonald won the first amateur championship of the United States Golf Association; as a golf architect, he was a headstrong visionary who aspired to design courses without dull stretches, courses that demanded golfers to think and exercise judgment rather than just walk up to the ball and whack away. He preferred to construct courses, not just lay them out. He studied the best holes of the world's top links. He consulted agronomists and established turf nurseries. In lieu of a salary, he would accept lifetime memberships to play on his handiwork.

Ten years after the National Golf Links, Macdonald visited Bermuda with the Furness-Withy Steamship Company, which wanted to develop a golf course to make the island a more alluring port of call. Macdonald canvassed potential sites until he found a large hilly tract of potato and onion fields in Tucker's Town. Fine white-sand beaches footed seaside cliffs, and magnificent views opened across ponds and lakes and stretches of turquoise ocean. The developers wanted to sprinkle private homes about the course, so eventually some 600 acres were acquired for $600,000. Macdonald — now one of the main backers — set to work.

He plotted a course that ran along the southern coast of the island for the first three holes, turned north and made its way through the hills toward Harrington Sound before heading back. Among his concerns was minimizing the amount of hill climbing; only the sixteenth hole entailed a long uphill march. Macdonald modeled some holes on holes at other courses. The third at Mid Ocean — a beautiful par 3 called Eden, with a green backed by the Atlantic — was adapted from Eden, the eleventh at the Old Course at Saint Andrews. The seventeenth hole, Redan, was patterned on the Redan hole at North Berwick. As he had at the National Golf Links, Macdonald built a "Cape" hole — the fifth at Mid Ocean. With its magnificent thronelike tee and lake-side dogleg, it is easily the course's most dramatic and today is considered the paradigm of Cape holes.



The author's brother, Toby, and father, Sandy

Macdonald finished in December 1921, having spent $300,000. With a characteristic lack of modesty, he reported his success in a letter reprinted in his autobiography: "The glory of this semi-tropical course, other than its picturesque side, will be the lies in the fairway. Saint Augustine grass, so abominable in the temperate zone, grows so thick and luxuriantly that every ball sits up in the fairway, and it is doubtful if a brassy will be necessary in one's bag. The bunkering has been cunningly devised so that a golfer, to make a low score, is compelled to drive to a particular spot, thereby placing his ball for an advantageous second. All badly topped shots will be punished. . . . A more fascinating, more picturesque course than Mid Ocean . . . will not be found in a pilgrimage around the world."

The very first drive Macdonald hit was to show that Mangrove Lake at the Cape could be crossed easily if the golfer played conservatively. Macdonald teed the ball up with the governor general of Bermuda and an admiral looking on. "[The admiral] asked me where I was going to drive to," he said in his autobiography. "There were two dogs about 160 to 170 yards from the tee, one running ahead of the other. I told him I was going to drive where the dogs were. He asked, 'Which one?' and I said, 'The second one,' and strange to say, I did and hit the second dog on the rump. I think the Admiral is still telling that story — of what a wonderful golfer I was."

The course looks much the same today as it did when Macdonald hit the dog. Nature has wrought the rudest changes, blighting the island's cedar forests in the Fifties and felling many of Mid Ocean's casuarinas with hurricanes and tornadoes. The course is perhaps a stroke or two easier. "A lot of the psychological effect was lost," says club pro Keith Pearman. "On the eleventh, the fourteenth and the fifteenth you had to shoot down tunnels with your drive."

The late Archie Compston, who served as Mid Ocean's pro from 1948 to 1962 and was once Britain's top golfer, went around in a record 65. Apparently someone else once carded a 64, but nobody can remember his name.

"I still think it's one of the most difficult courses to score well on," says club president C.H. Ford Hutchings, a club champion who never runs short of golf balls because the yard around his house off the second fairway functions as a catch basin for hooked drives. "It requires a lot of finesse. It requires different types of shots. You have to adjust your game to play in the wind. If you can only hit it high, you're in deadsville. You have to be able to hit it down and maneuver left and right. You have to feel your way around. You've got to have a feel in your hands."

ALAS, THE FEEL IN THE HANDS OF ALLAN BROWN'S DESCENdants left a lot to be desired. We got onto the course the first afternoon, a muggy, overcast day threatening rain. The bench on the first tee was dedicated to my grandfather; you're not supposed to sit on it unless you can shoot your age.

Mid Ocean does not look especially daunting from the first tee, a broad green dogleg to the left. With the starter eyeing us curiously, our threesome got off without humiliating the family name, pushing our drives up the right side of the fairway.

After that the trouble began.

If golf for my grandfather was a metaphor of paradise found, it is paradise forever just out of reach for my father. Long gone is the summer he returned from the navy after World War II and shot a 77 at Mid Ocean. Only his putter has the old lightning. His drives, like mine, tend to fade right, though he's not tempted to compensate by aiming to the left, as I am, in which case they inexplicably hook left. (And when I need loft, they whimsically take it upon themselves to beat their way along the ground like little white moles.) His iron game, once his forte, raises much dark muttering with the divot. True to his optimistic nature, my father persists in believing that he will regain "the secret" of his old form. It's merely a matter of keeping his feet planted, or his left arm straight, or his backswing smooth. For a while his secret was a technique borrowed from the New Age: He tried to visualize the club face as it swept down for the big kiss. The trouble has always been that he finds the secret on the practice tee but loses it the moment he steps onto the course; he has an uncanny ability to obstacle himself.

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All the same, he was elated by the promise of his latest discovery, a twenty-five-dollar mail-order book. The gist of the advice was to cut the brain out of the swing altogether. Just dip the left side of your body as you bring the club back, and straighten it up as you bring the club down. Now, standing over his second shot on the first hole, he dipped the left side of his body as the club went back and straightened up as the club came down. The swing propelled the ball clear across the fairway into rough. Not good. But not as bad as the shot I hit, which flew into a semitropical plant kingdom.

After wading through the dense morning glory in a fruitless search for

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHIP BROWN

my ball, I learned the first lesson of Mid Ocean: Bring a zillion balls. (Bring a zillion balls or, as President Bush did two years ago when he dropped in for a round at Mid Ocean, deploy a complement of Secret Service agents to track down errant shots.)

Toby was experiencing some opening jitters, and Dad, after a brilliant recovery, one-putted and took the hole with a bogey 5. We were on the second tee when the rains came; we scuttled under a shelter cleverly designed to protect you no matter what direction the wind was coming from. The turquoise sea was riled with whitecaps. Frogs cheeped and gusts shook the Norfolk pines.

When play resumed, I contributed a brand-new Titleist to Ford Hutchings's front yard. The wind was really blowing now. I sprayed a drive right on the par-3 third and had a short wedge to the green. I hit it high — too high. It got caught up in some kind of low-lying jet stream and sailed like a speeding gull over the green out into the Atlantic, where it was just as inaccessible as it would have been had it landed in the plant kingdom.

And so we made our way around the course. Toby was booming two-irons off the tee, straight and long. Dad had given up his twenty-five-dollar secret and was playing out of the memory of his salad days, matching Toby hole for hole. I was mostly communing with the morning glory.

After nine holes, we stopped at a little cottage overlooking Harrington Sound and calculated our scores over ginger beer.

"What did you have on the ninth?" asked Toby.

"A newspaper 6," my father said.

"Six?" Toby said incredulously.

"I chopped one and two, dumped three into the trap, sklaffed four to the back of the green and then — "

"Three-putted."

"What's a newspaper 6?" I asked.

"It means that for all practical purposes you had a 6," said Dad. "You missed a two-inch putt you should have made."

"It's cheating," Toby said.

On the back nine we exhibited occasional flashes of brilliance, but on the uphill par-4 sixteenth, Dad dipped and straightened up and then immediately dipped again, the second time with a groan. It wasn't the ugly duck hook — he had wrenched a muscle in his back. When he tried a second shot, he winced again. "I'm going to have to pick up," he said. The intimation of mortality seemed to weigh more heavily on him than the pain itself. Oh, for the summer of '47 . . .

MID OCEAN ROUTINELY TORMENTS PLAYERS WITH MID-OCEAN WIND, AND A BLOWY DAY CAN TURN THE COURSE INTO ONE OF GOLF'S TOUGHEST TESTS.

He walked with us the next day, taking notes and, where it was to be had, vicarious pleasure in the shot making of his sons. I gave him a camera, and he took pictures that inadvertently decapitated us. It was hard for him to be soldiering up the fairways unable to play, but there was a sense that as he walked his father's earth, he was paying his respects.

A glorious morning then, and all the more so for me because I stayed out of the morning glory. For the first four holes at least. Mid Ocean has no less than half a dozen world-class par 4s. Even without the wind, the ninth is a tough uphill par 4 requiring a frightful drive over a pond. The tenth has an intriguing, undulant fairway. The par-5 eleventh is long and narrow. Nos. 12, 13 and 14 are considered Mid Ocean's toughest stretch. And God help the golfer with a slice on the eighteenth: It's bordered by a hundred-foot cliff. But of all the holes, the fifth — with its mangrove lake and topgallant tee — is the most famous, one of the world's most unforgettable holes, according to the *World Atlas of Golf*. It was on the tee of the fifth that Babe Ruth stood in 1934 in a foursome with my grandfather. Ruth was a left-handed golfer. When he sliced the ball, it tailed away toward the lake, not the fairway as it would with a righty. His first tee shot splashed down in the lake. Pride stung, he passed on the chance to descend to the drop area and drive from what were the women's tees, where you have to clear only a little neck of water. He teed another ball up and swung again, and this drive also buried itself in the lake. Golf does not respect immortality in other sports. Ruth went down to the drop area and took an 11 on the hole.

As the years went by and the story was retold, it got mossier and mossier. In some versions Ruth vowed to drive the 433 yards to the green and hit eleven shots into the water before admitting defeat. Some versions had it that Ruth hit twenty-two balls into the water. A man with a lifetime of score cards in a scrapbook entitled "The World Was My Golf Ball" is nothing if not a stickler for accuracy. My grandfather always took it upon himself to "set the record straight" and so would turn a lovely tale of Ruthian overreaching into a routinely factual anecdote of yet another golfer's trial at the fifth. I was thinking of Gabo that second day as Toby and I stood on the championship blue tees, which are set back higher and farther and risk more of the lake. The lure of that alpine launching pad was so great that even Dad tried to swing a club. The effort made him grimace, and he returned to photographing us from the neck down. Toby reached the fairway with a handsome wood, and then it was my turn. As I stood over the ball, it seemed there were more eyes on me than those of my father and my brother. I swung and — miracle of miracles! — felt through the shaft that the shot was true and strong. And it was. The drive flew straight, aimed way up the fairway — a risky gamble, but where did playing safe ever get anybody? Perhaps it would reach. . . . No, the ball tailed left, where no margin for error was offered. I saw the splash, a yard short of the fairway, a brand-new Titleist never to be seen again.

My fine start and subsequently the rest of the round unraveled. But it was not until the next day on the fifth that I felt like weeping.

Somehow you never know when you're going to hit a great shot, but you always know when you're going to hit a bad one. As I stood over the ball on this last encounter with the Cape, I knew I was doomed. The driver felt like a broomstick in my hands, and golf itself seemed a metaphor not for paradise or possibility but for the blight of self-consciousness with which all men obstacle themselves — for the futility of effort. One more way of underlining the inevitability of failure. I swung, and sure enough the topped ball didn't even reach the lake but vanished into the mangrove thicket on the side of the plunging hill. It was with a kind of desperation that I hit another, hoping before I fled the island to see, at least once, my signature on the arc of a golden drive, a drive noble enough to span the high tee and the promised land of cropped green grass. But that mulligan headed for the water too, as if by instinct, like a sea tortoise done with laying eggs. I was resolved to hand-deliver my ball to the far fairway and play from there, but under pressure from my father and Toby and the ghost of the man who had set us all in motion, I tried again from the drop area, where you still have twenty yards of water to cross. "Use an iron," Toby advised smugly. The iron shot went into the lake.

If I am more like my father now, it is because my well-being also depends on a healthy set of delusions. And yet there I stood, nakedly revealed, with no excuse to save a shred of self-esteem — no land mines, no sulfurous gas clouds, not even the old reliable Bermuda wind, which was off napping at the moment. Well, come to think of it, maybe there was a little wind; maybe there was quite a lot of wind, in fact. Maybe hell hath no fury like the wind that was howling that day. Somewhere I knew the Babe would be commiserating. And somewhere my grandfather would be adding up the score and setting the record straight. Maybe he loved Mid Ocean because he had the luxury of sitting out the windy days. Maybe he was just good in the wind. Hi, hi, Gabo. For the record, I had a newspaper 6.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID MAISEL