
No.36

A MAN IN HIS ARENA

Darren Clarke and the art of doing hard things in one of the world's easiest places

Words by Tom Coyne

Photographs by Jason Jahnke

THIN LINES OF WHITE SAND pressed into short, wiry grass, and you know a player's been here.

Darren Clarke is clipping wedges off his personal tee at the back of the driving range, the one his superintendent and best pal, Matt DiMase, built for him. He feels at home here. There are such spots all around the Abaco Club, places where a golfer from Northern Ireland is reminded why he spends so much time here: the new putting course, El Diablo, that he designed and based on his favorite three greens from Abaco's championship course (Nos. 6, 7 and 9); his home up on the hill, where, on an island not known for its Wi-Fi, he's figured out how to stream English Premier League soccer and rugby on his TV, never missing a Liverpool match; his regular seat at Flippers, the octagonal beach bar shaded by thatched palm and named after the three-flippered turtle that swims in the waters to his back; and the salt flats. Forever the salt flats, where he's spent countless hours tossing a fly at the toughest fish to catch on the planet.

You watch him punch his lob wedge a dozen times. Then two dozen times, his hands never higher than his hips. It's not a shot he's practicing for the course; it's a drill he uses to keep his clubhead in front of his body. "Behind is fucked," he says, and he says "fuck" a lot, but in his County Tyrone accent it sounds more like polite emphasis than profanity. "If I can get my lobber going low and left, then I know I've covered the ball."

He rips nuggets of turf from a practice tee the size of a basketball court, where the grass is flawless save for a few white stripes, repairs from practice sessions past. He points to one and says, "That was me getting ready for Phoenix," referring to the Charles Schwab Cup Championship from which he's just returned, where he finished T23 and ended the season 15th on the points list. "I don't work this hard for 15th place," he says as he completes one row of divots and moves on to the next. He's got

the World Champions Cup coming up in Florida, where he'll play for Team Europe (flashing forward, his strong performance will help secure them the win), and as you study these emblems of a ball-striker, these long lines of white powder, your capricious mind wanders toward narcotics. Cocaine's not your drug of choice—you're more into flushed 4-irons and rippy nippers—but the pull, you imagine, is the same among all addicts. And Darren Clarke is one of them. Addicted to the effort. To the challenge. To the craic. But maybe to this place most of all.

Blue skies and shorts in November. Sunscreen and sandals. Light breezes off water that's clear enough to see the bumps on the turtles' backs as they paddle past your feet. Beach and bar and first tee and a range stocked with fresh Pro V1xs, all within a 200-yard radius, and nothing to trouble you but the predicament of how to divide your hours between lounge chairs and uncrowded golf holes, where you could get around in two hours, provided you don't stop at the waterside taco bar down by No. 6. But this is the place where Clarke comes to work—on the range and on the water. He comes to an easy place to do hard things, and you hear your Irish grandmother in your ear: Only an Irishman could go to paradise and make it difficult.

***

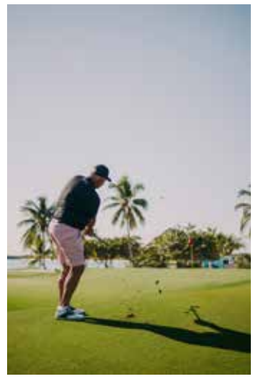
The drive from the tiny Marsh Harbour airport, where the luggage carousel is a door in the wall and customs is two simple counters in a space the size of your bedroom, is a confusing initiation. You've been to islands and

the Caribbean before, so where are the palm trees and the paragliders? The gated resorts and the roadside spots selling coconuts with straws? There's no traffic to the Abaco Club, no scooters zipping past, and a beige road guides your taxi through miles of landscape that looks like it's been sheared with one violent swipe. That shearing came in 2019 when Hurricane Dorian slammed the Abacos with 185 mph winds, the strongest storm ever to touch the Bahamas.

The town of Marsh Harbour was decimated; somehow, the Abaco Club was damaged but largely spared. As you pass a wilderness that seems to have been vacuumed off the earth, it's hard to imagine you're headed to meet a golf superstar, a man who could live anywhere but lives here—so much so that he now plays under the Bahamian flag on the Champions Tour. It's hardly a half hour from the airport to his resort community, but the scale of the storm's wake gives the island a feeling of being larger than it is, an interminable space of long, bare views, lonely tree trunks dotting your horizon like broken candles. You wait for this paradise to appear in your window, a promise that, so far, is deferred.

Marsh Harbour's progress has been encouraging—judged by island time, it has been a rapid recovery—thanks in no small part to the millions raised by the Abaco Club's owners and its members, many of whom opened their homes to shelter displaced staff. As you watch for road signs or arrows pointing to your destination, the damage seems to soften by the mile, and soon you're riding through thick tropical

DARREN CLARKE IS ADDICTED TO THE EFFORT. TO THE CHALLENGE. TO THE CRAIC. BUT MAYBE TO THIS PLACE MOST OF ALL.



green. A parrot on a small billboard leads you to a simple wooden gate—no columns or wrought iron here, just sandy trails and pastel-colored buildings—and soon you're provided the only thing you need at the Abaco Club, aside from golf clubs and a good book: Your golf cart awaits, and its tank won't need refilling during your stay. The distances from golf to tennis to pickleball to the beach to your bed perched above the bay are all short, and in a few minutes, you get a sense of the place's magic and why, for Clarke and other tour pros from around the world, it's become their under-the-radar getaway.

Not too big but not too small. Exclusive but not pretentious. Relaxed but not boring. It's a Goldilocks ideal between opulence and ordinary, where fancy isn't fancy enough to not feel like yourself. And if Clarke strives to be anything in life, being himself is his primary pursuit. It's one he has mastered, in an optimal place to practice it. You've come to discover what that is, exactly, and why it happens here for him. Why a man raised on Irish rain feels like himself under Bahamian blue. Why a major champion seeks a place where nobody cares about his trophies. Why someone who loves the grind has settled in a place where others come to escape it.

It all seems a contradiction, not unlike the island itself, where you traveled through wasteland to arrive at an oasis. And maybe contrary is the point. Maybe that's the best place for someone who finds joy in the work and peace in the struggle. It's in our disparities where we find our genuine selves, discovering we're much more than the one-lane personas we save for cameras and cocktail parties. You're ready to dismiss such overwrought thinking, but you recall all the people who say they play golf for fun, and you realize that our truth, it seems, lies in our incongruities.

***

They call it the gray ghost. The black-tailed devil. The PhD fish, because it requires that level of expertise to hook one. Unlike the bonefish and tarpon that twist through Abaco's waters, permit are famously picky eaters with exceptional eyesight. They look like silver dinner plates, round and flat. They're intelligent and rigorously inspect their food's authenticity, refusing most meals—these fish are not your Labrador—and spooking at the slightest ripple or failed cast. You must land your hook at a precise angle at an exact location in front of their eyes, meaning you need to see them first. Such sight fishing is the pinnacle of the craft, pursued by only the most masochistic or accomplished anglers. No cast-and-hope here—you watch the water for hours, praying for just one shot. And you get only one. It can take a lifetime to get a single bite; it can take another to get a permit to the boat. They run long and fight hard; don't get too excited about that pull, because permit are built to shake hooks and shatter dreams.

Sounds like golf, you think. One shot, and when it goes, it's gone. Celebrate a good effort, only to feel the line go loose in your hands. Good golf, we know, is its own sort of ghost, so it tracks that Clarke has spent so many years chasing balls that want to go elsewhere and fish that don't want to bite. And you can see how there's satisfaction in that frustration. It hints at someday rewards; its promise may be slight, but its potential has no bounds in our imaginations. And it reminds us that waiting and working is the path to worthwhile—that small, easy victories are not victories at all. Succeed at the hard things, and achievement moves farther offshore, until it's just a ripple on a flat ocean, a glimmer that's gone before you're sure it was there.

Clarke knows about succeeding at the hard things. He's landed 19 permits alongside his guides from Abaco's Blackfly Lodge—the guide who poles your boat

through the salt flats is to permit fishing what a caddie is to pro golf, and Clarke speaks of his regular guide, Patrick, with reverent affection—and he's lifted two claret jugs: the original, for his 2011 win at Royal St. George's, and its squatter cousin, for the Senior Open Championship, which he hoisted in 2022 at Gleneagles. Whether he'd trade one for a record-setting permit… the golfer in you hesitates to ask. It's early, and you're sitting at his regular spot at Flippers, in the chair to his left that's reserved for his wife, Alison. She's off at the pickleball courts, where it's said she's a tough draw, so you're safe here for now.

It's warm for 8 a.m., but Clarke is wearing black, the Abaco Club's signature parrot embroidered on his shirt. He's been an ambassador for the place from the start: He first visited the property in 2005, when there were just a few buildings, and bought a home on the spot. The club has changed ownership over the years, and he's glad it has landed with Southworth, the club development company behind Scottish properties Willowbend, Creighton Farms, and Machrihanish Dunes. Southworth has not only been generous in the hurricane's aftermath, but it's investing heavily in his island community, with a new beach club and racquet center, plus a healthy spend on golf. Clarke and Tom Mackenzie are currently restoring three holes to enhance the tropical links feel that Mackenzie and fellow designer Donald Steel first envisioned for the course, site of the Korn Ferry Tour's Bahamas Great Abaco Classic, and plans are in the works to reseed every inch with fresh paspalum. The practice facilities have been overhauled, adding the putting course that Clarke designed with Southworth's resident architect, Troy Miller (of Charleston Municipal note). Its holes are lit at night, and a nearby bar is shaped to accommodate the club's beverage cart—pull it in, instant party. Instead of sitting on stools, bar guests dangle from swings. They called the course El Diablo, after Clarke's favorite fish, and the holes play around a set of palm trees with hammocks that tempt you to put down your putter and nap.

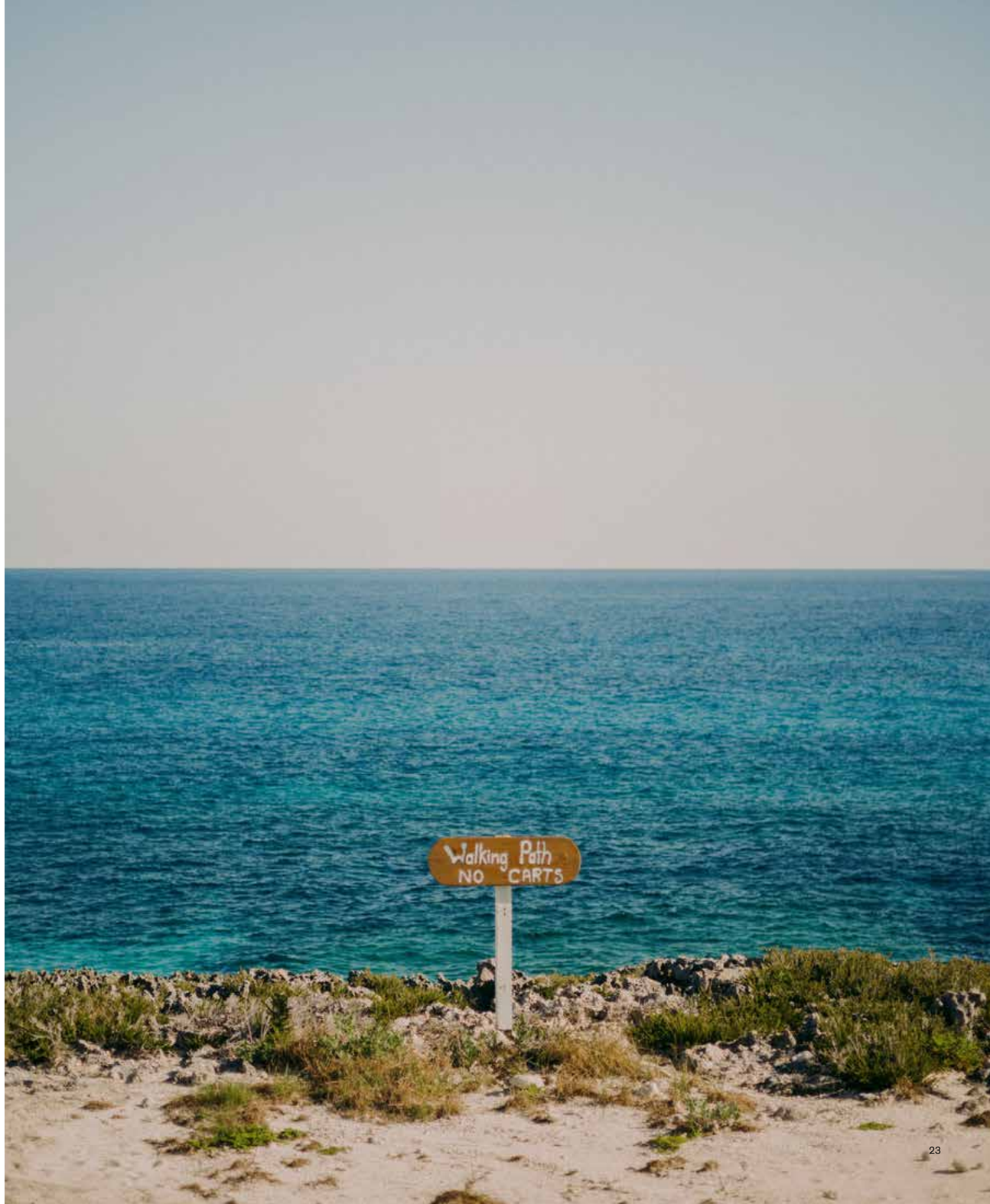
It's the happy dilemma of Abaco: For every chair in the sand, a box of range balls is calling. For each foam seat floating in the bay, an empty green on the short course is telling you to dial in your wedges. Get lost in your practice, or wander over to Wake Field, the Wiffle ball diamond built in honor of husband and wife Tim and Stacy Wakefield, Abaco members and dear friends of Clarke's, who passed from cancer in 2023 and 2024, respectively. Tim Wakefield's Red Sox record for most innings pitched still stands, and at the field that bears his name, behind the driving range, a tub of fresh Wiffle balls and a miniature Green Monster in left field look like a lot more fun than working on your weight shift.

It must be even tougher for Clarke, you think, with his fishing lodge not far from a practice facility tuned to his needs. The range balls at Abaco are all Pro V1xs—funnily enough, the same ball he plays—and his secret range was built with Platinum TE Paspalum to provide him the best practice surface available. All of the short course's surfaces were raised in recent years so players could better see their balls react on the greens (less important for us mortal golfers, but essential for a man headed to the Open). If Clarke has a major coming up, superintendent DiMase will speed up the greens to match the venue. And he can find such deference at Flippers, too, where the bartenders don't have to ask what he's having because the signature DC Breeze is their take on a Sea Breeze—all the same booze, plus coconut water, you know, "for the health benefits," Clarke says with a smile. ("You don't feel so healthy after four or five of them when you go to stand up," he says. "You feel wonderful, but not so healthy.")

A face doesn't pass you at Flippers without Clarke sharing a hello, a "How's the family?" or a comment about that swing he spied on the first tee. ("Did you chase down that mallard? I'd say that duck

It's speculated that the common name in English for Clarke's fish of choice comes from its Spanish/Portuguese moniker. As fishing for the elusive species grew in Latin America, visiting anglers misheard "palometa," meaning "little dove," and "permit" stuck.

The black-tailed devil.



hook is still going!") None of it feels fake or forced, or like the duties of a resident golf celebrity. No fans here—just friends made over 20 years as a part-time Bahamian. And that, you think, is what might make this a paradise for Clarke, and why he returns here whenever his playing schedule allows. You get the sense that he does not excel at being someone he isn't, and here, he's free to be a golfer, a husband and a dad, an angler, a guy who enjoys small company and a beverage at day's end. Where the routines—even the luxurious ones—can be arranged to offer the satisfactions an achiever requires.

Clarke ranks high on the list of golfers you'd like to have a beer with, and for good reason: He's usually up for more than one, and he's got stories about every golfer you hope to someday meet. (Ask him about the note Tiger left in his locker after Clarke beat him in the finals of the 2000 WGC Match Play Championship.) But he probably won't have that beer until he feels he's earned it, and while most visitors would be happy to tell you about their trip to Abaco where they did absolutely nothing, Clarke is eager to explain how his days unfold with precision in such a beautifully imprecise place.

"I'm up every day by 4 a.m.," he explains, and suddenly you realize this breakfast you're having is closer to his lunch—not that he stops his day for a meal. He's already crossed lunch off your day's itinerary, and you understand why as you listen to his schedule. "I'll read the news online, check in with the world. Then I go into the gym and get loose. A little walking on the treadmill to warm up, then a lot of stretching. Then I'll go practice at my spot at the back of the range. Putt on El Diablo. Short game on the short course. I'll relax a little, then, around 3:30, it's usually nine holes with Matt and the boys here. They'll play a scramble against me, with a little bit of banter going on. And then we will go on and sit at Flippers for an hour or two. Alison will probably join us for a drink here, then we'll take some food up to the house or cook dinner there. It's very easy to sit here and socialize every night, but it's usually a couple of drinks and up to the house. It's '8 o'clock to bed' sort of stuff. So I'm awake early the next morning and ready to go."

If he's preparing for a tournament, he'll resist a detour toward the salt flats, but those fishing days begin just as early and conclude in the same chair. "I leave here at 6:30 in the morning and go down to Blackfly. I'm on the water about 7:15, back in by 4 o'clock, back here by 4:30. Meet Alison for a drink, back home for dinner, and repeat and repeat and repeat. It doesn't get old."

In those eight-plus hours on the water, he might not make a single cast. He only throws toward fish he's spotted, and he's only going for permit—no bonefish, a lazy bait-gobbler that, for him, presents no challenge or intrigue. "Once you get a permit, you're ruined for anything else," he explains. And he won't use live crab, like some fishermen—that makes it easier, he says, and the purest challenge is catching permit on a fly.

You can't help but ask him how staring at the water without catching a fish, or even casting a line, can be enjoyable. Why not take a bonefish every once in a while? Try one of those crabs? How can it be fun to go months without a bite? It doesn't seem to fit. He's a man of action, efficient and organized, a high-energy individual who speaks and moves with pace. Patience, you suspect, might not be his forte.

He likens the angler's plight to golf, where even though it may seem like little is happening, everything is happening. And he admits that he must be mad to pursue professional golf and permit fishing, two pastimes that can be very one-sided relationships. He tells you that it's about putting in the time, about doing the work, about looking yourself in the mirror and knowing you were prepared to meet the task. Even if he can hardly sit still sometimes, he can do so for hours—on the range or on the boat—if it's in service to success.

He tells you about the time he spends every year with the best junior players in Ireland—it's part of the mission of his foundation, and last year he brought them here to Abaco—so that he can be the resource to them that he didn't have when he was coming up in golf. Someone to ask how to practice, how much to play, how to prepare for a big event. And he's always sure to ask a few of them about a tournament they recently lost, and how it made them feel.

"They'll say they hated it. They didn't like it at all," he says. "And I tell them, 'If you're not prepared to accept that feeling and make it work for you, then forget about professional golf, because you're going to have that feeling more often than you're going to have any other. If you can use that as something to make you feel better and give you that extra push forward to prepare more and work harder, then carry on. If you can't, then professional golf isn't for you.' I've always been a man of trying to be prepared, because if you lose and you've done all your preparation, you can move on. But if you lose and you haven't done your preparation, you've got no excuses. If I'm not prepared, if I haven't put in the time, that's not acceptable."

Mediocrity, it seems, doesn't sit well with Clarke. Not in golf or fishing. You wonder if he's nearly as happy to not catch a permit, or to not lift a trophy on Sunday. Of course, the pints taste better after a win, but you suspect he loves the pursuit as much as the payoff. If a greyhound someday grabs the rabbit, he'll never run as fast again. You've touched a few rabbits in your time, and it

CLARKE SAYS IT'S ABOUT PUTTING IN THE TIME, ABOUT DOING THE WORK, ABOUT LOOKING YOURSELF IN THE MIRROR AND KNOWING YOU WERE PREPARED TO MEET THE TASK.

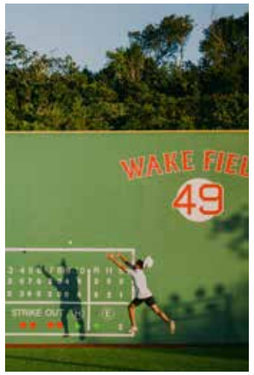
One person you won't often spot on the Abaco Club's immaculate Wiffle ball field (opposite)*: Darren Clarke. His paradise is found on the green, on the water and at the bar.*

was never quite as fun as dreaming about the day when you finally might.

You ask him why he's wired differently than others, those who might be happy to take a bonefish or raise a runner-up prize, and he talks about growing up in Northern Ireland, where his parents sacrificed so that he could play golf, and how he never took that sacrifice for granted, and that if they were going to give him that chance, he'd better get damn good at it. So he worked. He learned to love effort early, and, as we do with most habits from our youth, he returns to it to feel joy, meaning, consistency. We find those habits again to feel like ourselves.

The reality that work doesn't mean winning is something he can accept, even appreciate, and when you ask him why that is, he tells you about some words he found in a card shop, a little placard people stick to their refrigerator that he still thinks about. It's an oft-cited quote from Theodore Roosevelt: "The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood...who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."

Roosevelt would have enjoyed permit fishing, you think. Better to be on the boat or the range, available to achievement, than elsewhere, dreaming of what achievements might someday come find you.



And here, at home at Abaco, Clarke is free to pursue it in a place where he isn't pedestaled and doesn't need to play pretend. The greatest success, you're reminded, is not needing to be anyone but yourself, and Clarke is there—maybe he always has been. And he returns to his Bahamas home not to sign autographs but to have his chops busted by his afternoon foursome and to bust theirs back in return.

"It's an Irish thing, isn't it?" he replies when you ask him about not needing to be a name among big shots. "You gotta remain humble in some shape or fashion, or someone will remind you of just who you are. I'm not going to say success hasn't changed our lives, because, look around, we're living in paradise. But we don't live an ostentatious life here. We go to the grocery store, we cook at home. There's no scene here, and that's what we like about it."

No cars, no running, no rush. A long way from the Jupiter vibe, and even longer from Northern Ireland, a place that may have taught him to appreciate the simplicities of a quiet life. But it was no simple place when he was growing up there—as a young man, he worked as a bartender in a nightclub, making money during the winter so he could play more golf that summer. After the IRA phoned in a bomb threat to his bar, he soon found himself standing on a sidewalk, watching the club explode into pieces. The bomb, he would learn, had been planted a few feet from where he had just been stocking short bottles of Coke and club soda.

A different person might want to put such a place behind him, but he lights up when you ask him about Portrush and the Open, and you don't talk much about the tournament. He asks you if you've been to the Harbour Bar in town, and when you tell him you have, he gets wistful in a way that confirms he's the product of a place, perhaps more than he realizes.

"They haven't decorated the place in 40 years. You can smell the peat from the fire, and you're crowded around a little bar at the front, and you could be standing next to the best heart surgeon in Ireland, who's standing next to someone who collected trash all day, standing beside a solicitor, standing beside somebody who's just come off their shift at the supermarket, and nobody cares," he says. "It's a nobody-cares bar. And those are the kinds of places I like to be."

The Harbour Bar and Flippers might appear as different as two watering holes can get, but they do share one loyal customer, and they're both nobody-cares places, and you wonder if that's why you're somehow so comfortable here, talking with a golf hero as if you were old friends. Nobody here cares whether you really know him, or whether you'll spend your afternoon sleeping on the beach or figuring out your 3-wood on the range. Nobody cares whether you're Darren Clarke or the stranger sitting next to him who doesn't own one of those homes on the hill, and doesn't really belong here, but right now feels as if he does. And nobody cares that, even if you probably shouldn't, you feel like yourself right now, so easily at home. •