

PAUL HUNT - MY BRITISH OPEN EXPERIENCE – ‘Inside the ropes’

All young Golf Professionals, whether serious players or not, dream of playing ‘The British Open’!

Less than 1 percent ever realise their dream. This was my chance!

Here is my story of how I tried to join the worlds golfing elite for the 1987 Open at Muirfield, on the east coast of Scotland.

I knocked on the golf manager’s door and a voice from inside prompted me to enter. ‘Hi Tom. I don’t suppose I could have a work with you, could I’? I questioned. ‘Yes Paul, what can I do for you’?

I was 25 and working at the Broome Manor Golf Complex in Swindon, Wiltshire. I loved my job but was starting to get itchy feet and becoming disenchanted with spending hours out on the range with the other pro’s and green keepers once a week digging plugged range balls out of the ground and more hours than I can remember behind the till in the shop, serving queues of shop customers and green fee players.

I loved teaching and helping people to play better golf but was starting to realise that I also had a talent to play the game as well.

Everyone says, ‘If you’re not a scratch handicap golfer at 16, you will never make it on the tour’, but there are always exceptions to the rule and it’s these exceptions that linger in the back of young golf professionals minds. What if? Why not try sometime? If you never give it a try, you will never know?

I took up the game of golf at 13, after captaining many school teams at other sports and played county cricket at 15 and 16 for Middlesex in the summer and club rugby 4 times a week in the winter, including Middlesex Colts training. I had really no idea about golf at 16! How then could I expect to become a tour player at 21 like most of the successes on tour?

I spent 3 wonderful years at Broome Manor, had a lot of fun, met a range of wonderful people and grew up! So, what was the next step? Unfortunately the Club Pro, Barry Sandry, wouldn’t allow me to follow my desire to become a full time teacher because we could only teach outside of our working hours. Barry would ‘cream off’ about 40% of our lesson money to boot, so I saw no future at the club, sadly. A move back to London looked likely.

‘I am thinking about trying to qualify for ‘The Open’ next year, you come from Gullane don’t you?’

‘Yes and my father was the head green keeper at the club for 25 years’.

Really, I thought, putting two and two together, ‘Maybe I could meet up with him? ‘I’m also thinking of playing the Northern Open next Spring and popping into Muirfield on my way there, for a practise round, what do you think?’

‘Good plan’, said Tom, ‘I’ll see what I can do.’

The seed was sewn and the plan in motion. There were 2 challenges ahead of me though. Firstly, I needed to save money, which was not always easy on about 120 pounds on a good week! Barry was a nice guy but paid very poorly considering the gold mine he was sitting on at one of England’s busiest golf complexes. Secondly and easily the most important, I needed to qualify, which would be much tougher than extracting more pay out of my boss! Consistently, in the 80’s, there are about 1,500 players from all over the world trying to qualify for about 50 places. I had a handicap of 19 when at college studying Sports Science. What a cheek to think that I might qualify for the one of golf’s 4 major tournaments at 25!

Letter to the Muirfield Golf Club

To whom it may concern:

Dear Sir/Madam, my name is Paul Hunt, a golf professional working in London and would like to ask for your kind permission to play your course.

I have the intention of trying to qualify for next year's 'British Open' and on my way to play the 'Northern Open' in May would like to have the chance of playing a practise round at Muirfield. If agreed, the dates possible for this would be either Thursday or Friday, the 7th or 8th of May.

Yours faithfully,
Paul Hunt

Dear Mr. Hunt,

Thank you for your letter addressed 15 January. I can confirm that it will be possible for you to play on either of your 2 proposed dates at 8:40 am. Would you like me to arrange for you a caddy?

I'm pretty sure the letter was signed by a Sergeant Major somebody and I could just imagine him sitting at his desk stroking his moustache whilst reading my letter.

Anyway, I had my wish granted thankfully, never always sure at such a strict club and this was and still is one of the most exclusive clubs in Britain and made plans for my first golf trip to the land of the brave.

My plan of playing tournament golf, starting 1987, depended on another factor, finding a flexible teaching job where I could work only 2-3 days a week. This I found at the Ealing Golf Range in London, starting in March and will be ever grateful to David Elliott for this chance, even though, when it was wet, he also made us go out all together on the range and dig out all the plugged balls before the range opened!

Thankfully I was also allowed to move back in with my parents again in nearby Hillingdon. Finances would be tight!

On May 6th, 2 months later, I was jumping into my old ford escort, excited like a child at Christmas, not thinking that it may not even make such a long trip and headed north on the M1 out of London.

I have to say at this point that most English people I recon have no idea how far Scotland is to drive from London! Whoever thinks of walking John O'Grouts to Land's End must be crazy! It is much further than most people realise.

So here I was, 410 miles and nearly 9 hours later, pulling into the car park of the Gullane Golf Club to ask directions to the address I had in my hand. What a wonderful atmosphere these old links golf clubs have. A combination of fresh sea air, an old club house steeped in tradition, a certain stillness, even if the wind is blowing and the excitement and anticipation of seeing the sand, humps and hollows off in the distance, ready to be explored.

The following day the sun shone and Old Tom Watt and I had a wonderful round together on the Gullane no. 1 course. I didn't know yet but this could be the course, one of 4 possibilities, I play in for the final qualifying, assuming I get through the regional round? I shot 3 over par and especially enjoyed Tom's stories from the past and the magnificent view from the 7th tee!

The next day, after rising early I eagerly set off for the Muirfield Golf Club. I had already heard that the tour players loved playing this open venue, regarded as one of the fairest to play. At 8:00 I found myself walking down the long corridor to the Secretaries office to pay my dues and there he was! The Sergeant Major with his handle bars! Just how I imagined it. Very strange.

So I paid my 22 pounds for the green fee and 15 pounds for the caddy, which may not sound like much these days but was heavy then for my over stretched bank account and set off.

I loved the course! I couldn't remember what score I had, I had learnt not to score during practise rounds, just to get to know the lay out but I remembered thinking that it was a course one had to know well to play well and was very happy to have had the chance, added to which, all the stands were already up and one could almost imagine already the echoes ringing from the crowds, magical!

After driving another 4 hours further north and playing in the 'Northern Open'* at the Royal Aberdeen Golf Club with views of the North Sea oil rigs out at sea, I drove back to London, a mere 1160 miles round trip and amazingly, the car was still running well!

On May the 19th I entered for the 116th British Golf Open with 190 pounds in my bank account.

In the 6 weeks leading up to 'My Open Experience', I played some good golf tee to green and was let down only by my putting. Now was the moment of truth. I had practised the most during that year than I ever had before, played as full time as my finances allowed and was ready for the challenge.

Monday 6th July: Regional Qualifying ...Here we go!

The first test was at Porters Park Golf Club in Hertfordshire for the regional qualifying. I chose this course out of the 8 different regional qualifying courses in Britain as it was the nearest and one I liked, luckily.

I had accustomed myself for my ridiculously early start time of 6:50 by progressively, over the previous 3 days, going to bed and waking up earlier and earlier. This morning I rose at 4:50 and was the first to the practise ground at 5:50. By the way, what a lovely time to hit balls!

Before the round, the Titleist Rep. asked me which ball I was playing? 'Titleist 100 compression', I replied truthfully and he gave me 2 dozen Titleist balls for the correct answer. Easy question!

18 holes, 10 greens in regulation and 29 putts later, I had a level par round 71 and secured one of the 12 places for the final qualifying in Scotland. You could say I was just a little bit pleased with myself! 2 days later I found out I was to play at North Berwick for the finals, starting in 4 days at 7:55. Even though I was a little disappointed not to be playing at Gullane, I thought, at least it was better than playing at 6:50!

Travelling up to Scotland with a friend Philip Golding**, who shot a 70 at Porters Park, we stopped off at the Gullane G.C. Pro Shop and spoke to Dave Torrance the assistant pro, who kindly helped us find some great digs for 4 nights at 12.50 pounds a night, a bargain.

On Saturday the 11th July, the two of us played a practise round at North Berwick with Jeremy Bennett and Philip Walton***

*..... sadly, I missed the cut

**..... Philip Golding would eventually win the 'French Open', some 20 years later

***... Philip Walton holed the winning putt for Europe in the 1995 Ryder Cup

Sunday 12th July: 1st round of the final qualifying.

Up at 4am (couldn't sleep much) to see a wonderfully sunny day developing before us.

I had a fast start and holed a few really good putts to be 5 under par after 11 holes. I then dropped some shots, probably through nerves, never having been 5 under for 11 holes in a competition before, let alone the British Open, but finished solidly for a 6 birdie round of 2 under par. Great start!

Monday 13th July: 2nd round

Start time 11:30. Another beautiful day! I felt good and ready.

As in the regional qualifying rounds, there is only so many who can progress to the next stage. At the 4 final qualifying courses, all courses around 'the Open' venue, there were also about 12-13 places available, making a total of 50 places for the qualifiers to tee it up with the golfing greats the following week.

To achieve this would normally mean a 2 round score of a minimum of 2-4 under par for the 2 rounds, depending on the weather.

Here I was, a young, part time teaching professional from London with no amateur record and no previous professional tournament wins to date, attempting to qualify for the biggest golf event of the year! Was I nervous? Of course I was!

I thought I needed another 2 under round to have a chance.

On the 14th tee I stood 1 under par having played well and scrambled well when needed. This was it!

After a good drive on 14, I had a dilemma. I couldn't see the green and was not sure what line to hit the ball for my second to the par 4, over a ridge. My first mistake of the week was that I should have walked ahead to check but rushed the shot and pulled it slightly, onto the beach and I thought, out of bounds. In the heat of the moment, I made the second mistake of the week, walking back to hit another ball when, if I had checked, would have found out that the ball was technically in a water hazard and even looked playable. I took a double bogie 6 and dropped to 1 over.

Thinking that I now had no choice but to attack made the next shot easy. I ripped a 5 iron on the 190 yard Par 3 15th to 5 yards from the hole and holed for a birdie. Back in the hunt, I wasn't sure?

I bogied the difficult par 4 16th but slid a nasty, downhill, left to righter from 4 yards at the last hole for birdie and finished on level par, 2 under for the 2 rounds, and felt exhausted, thinking that I had missed my chance.

The Caddy:

My father had very kindly helped with the cost for this trip but I couldn't splash out in any way so before the qualifying I picked up a local lad for a caddy, not one of the wise old caddies who could probably save me 1 or 2 shots a round. Doug Carlyle, was about 15 years old, a junior member of North Berwick and was pleased as punch to be able to carry my bag for the 2 rounds. In hindsight maybe the more experienced caddy would have told me where the beach was on 15! But then, maybe I wouldn't have birdied 2 for the next 3 holes? We will never know.

Anyway, I got on very well with young Doug and he did a good job of chatting to me during the rounds and keeping me focused. As I sat in the clubhouse, Doug went to check the scores.

'Hi Paul', said a man approaching me all smiles. 'Well played. Do you think you could make the play-off?' Doug burst in and announced that 'we' still had a chance.

We had 4 hours to wait so Doug went into town. 'I know a bed and breakfast lady who may have a room for the week', he suggested.

The smiling man introduced himself as Christopher Hilton, sports writer for the Daily Express newspaper. 'Would you mind if I interviewed you', he asked.

There were 9 players on 2 under par, playing off for the last 3 places available, second reserve and 6th reserve. Now I was really nervous. We set off in 3 groups of three and all waited after finishing the first hole. The play-off holes were holes number 1 & 2, then 17 & 18.

'Chubby' Chandler* was a notable who fell at the first, making a mess of his approach shot. 2 others dropped out. I remember holing a great putt from about 5 yards for par to stay in. 2 players made birdie and were in!

At the second hole, Graham Laing, a good west region player and winner of many golf titles there started the long walk back to the club house.

At the 17th, I holed what I thought was the putt to get me into the Open but failed to realise that Craig Parry** also had a par putt, which he made. After 3 play-off holes we were already down to 2, myself and Parry.

2 more holes went by, both halved with pars. The light started to fade and by magic mist appeared around the 100 or so loyal spectators who followed.

At the 6th play-off hole, Parry made his birdie putt to a resounding cheer from the crowd. There were obviously quite a few Australians watching. All 3 qualifiers were from Australia.

We all walked back to the clubhouse. I had given it my best shot and secured 2nd reserve place. Would I get in, I didn't know but a few people congratulated me and said that should be ok? Well done.

Note: On Thursday 16th, in the centre pages of the Daily Express, there I was! Along with various articles about the Open starting that day and news of how the qualifying stages panned out, there were 3 pictures of golfers, myself, Tom Watson and Jack Nicklaus. How good was that!

One positive thing about being a reserve is that we could play practise rounds at Muirfield on the Tuesday and Wednesday before the first round on Thursday.

Another, from a poor assistant Pro's point of view was that in those days, the golf companies were keen to give the competitors hand outs, in the way of golf balls, gloves, shoes and maybe clothing. The big boys were the ones with the club contracts but we were happy with anything that was free.

In this Open, I was approached by another Titleist man and asked again if I had made up my mind about which ball I was to play with. 'Well', I muttered, 'Why do you ask'? I found out from him that Titleist were matching Maxfli's offer of 300 pounds for anyone playing with their balls. 'I'll play Titleist', I confirmed. The man had done his job! Having already been given 2 dozen Titleist balls at the qualifying, I was going to play with a Titleist ball anyway but 300 pounds was a large amount of money for me then and would pay for my traveling expenses.

*..... Andrew 'Chubby' Chandler who played the 1986 Open, retired in 1989 to set up a very successful sports management company, with clients, Lee Westward, Darren Clarke & David Howell

**.... Craig Parry was a 21 year old 'unknown' then but went on to win 23 tournaments worldwide

THE FOOTJOY SHOES STORY:

With a little time on my hands before I started my first practise round I thought I would try my luck and make a visit to the golf companies who had set up, stretching down the right side of the practise range in wooden cabins. From the first couple of visits came back the same question, had I qualified or not? 'Well, no, I'm still waiting..... 2nd reserve', I said. Then the same answer, that I should come back when I was in. 'Ok, I'll do that', I replied and moved on. I wasn't expecting much. I knew the score.

My last visit was to the Titleist cabin. 'I was wondering if you could do anything for me if I am only 2nd reserve', I asked with not much hope. 'What are you looking for', he answered. 'Well...ur... a pair of shoes actually', I replied. 'Take a seat, I'll be with you in a minute'.

So there I was, walking out, through the crowds, onto the practise ground, on the first practise day at 'The 1987 Open', at Muirfield. I have to say that I feel good. I didn't have any logos on my clothing. I had no sponsor. What I did have though was a brand new pair of Footjoy classics on my feet and a brand new white Footjoy cabretta glove on my left hand.

The balls were already laid out for the players. I took my place and gently warmed up, taking in the unique atmosphere of a major tournament. The special sounds around were of large crowds of people on the move, laughter from people happy to be there with their friends on a day they have been looking forward to for months and the respectful whisperings around the players on the practise putting green. From the high up TV cameras, the masses following the designated pathways through the dunes look like armies of ants but on the ground it felt like herds on the move.

This year for me though was completely different. I was inside the ropes! No pushing. No hurrying to the next best position from which to watch your favourite player. I was there, being watched and loving it! I was convinced that, given the chance, I would play well this week and prove to myself and others how good I could be. 2 days to go.

I started to gently hit a few balls, always taught to warm up slowly to gain feel for the ball and prevent possible injury.

The golfing legend from South Africa, Nick Price was in front of me and another South African David Frost was behind me. I felt great, that is until I hit my first socket! I tried to look composed. What else can one do in front of a full stand of on lookers?

The classic golf question came to mind. What is the most difficult shot in golf? Of course, the shot after a socket!

I took a couple of deep breaths and continued. The next shot was fine and the next. OK, I thought, no problem. Then, ping, 45° right, again a socket. Oh no, this isn't happening. Nick Price turned round and asked me if I was ok? We would spend an hour practising together and chatting away to each other somewhere in South Africa just before a 'Sunshine Tour' event the following year but for now I was a no-body. 'Yes, no problem', I answered, now getting very nervous. I could feel a tingling sensation in my body that I always felt just before I lost control of my game through nerves. What should I do now, continue or go and practise my short game for a while? I decided to change clubs and hit another shot.

As they say in Australia, the next shot was a beaut! Not only was it way to the right but long too and with an almighty bang, made a direct hit onto the same Titleist cabin I had just visited. That was it. I was off! I marched straight back to the clubhouse changing rooms, took the new shoes off and put on my old ones. Who cares if I play with old looking golf shoes in the British Open? At least I'll know where the ball is going.

Wednesday 15 July (The day before the Open)

On the course, playing up the 3rd hole on the 2nd practise day of the 1987 British Open at Muirfield, I heard a shout from the people on the right side of the fairway, walking up the hole with us. 'Are you in yet', came a voice. 'No', I shouted back, amazed that someone recognised me.

I played well that round, not at all worried about the happenings on the range the day before. It's incredible what confidence can achieve! In fact I made 4 birdies at holes with stands on by the greens, so received a warm welcome from the crowds looking down on me.

The par 3 14th hole was the highlight of my round this day. The hole was cut at the very back section, about 3 yards on the green and with a perfectly hit 6 iron I managed to land the ball 2 yards from the hole, pin high! The applause I received from the crowd in the stands was enough to make me get excited but it was nothing like the applause after I holed the putt for birdie. Something I had never experienced before or since. Walking up the hole I could just imagine people looking down thinking who is this guy? Some would be looking through their programs trying to match a name to the face. Leaving the green at 14 I thought wow, this is what it's all about. I signed my signature about 50 times during that round (autographs are signed by famous people!) to people who had no idea who I was! It didn't matter though, I was inside the ropes!

Standing on the 15th tee, a high point on the course, I took in the scenery for a moment, wanting to make sure the moment would never be forgotten. I looked to my right, back to the last tee. It just so happened that Tom Watson and Jack Nicklaus were playing in the group behind, the reason large crowds were always waiting for me on each hole. I hadn't planned it that way but if I wasn't able to compete, if 2 players didn't drop out by the start of their first round, at least I had experienced what it's like to play in front of thousands of spectators. What a day!

Thursday 16 July (Up at 4:45)

After hitting balls on the range I arrived at the 1st tee at 7:00.

The wait in the starter's tent close to the first tee unfortunately was to be the longest wait of my life.

At 8:00 Craig Lawrence, the first reserve, heard that the Spanish player Canizares, was having problems with his back and thinking off pulling out. Craig was ready to jump at his chance.

Canizares played just 9 holes, not able to play on through the pain. That was a low moment for us. How selfish not to give a good, young, fit player a chance to fulfil his dream. I would have then been next in line. It wasn't looking good.

The rest of the day was a blur. I don't remember leaving the club or even if I stayed overnight in the area. I do remember the feeling I had in my stomach driving back down the motorway to London. I do remember watching Nick Faldo*, with my parents, on TV somehow winning the title on Sunday with his incredible round of 18 pars and thinking what if and feeling very deflated!

I found out much later that it was the first time in 7 years that no reserve player played in 'The Open'. I realised then why people were shanking my hand after qualifying with second reserve. It didn't help!

It also didn't help when Philip Golding and I stopped off at the Chorley Golf Club on the way back to London, a practise round for 'The Lord Derby' tournament later in the year where I made 7 birdies in a round of 67!

*Faldo won 75,000 pounds for his win

It took me a week to get over the disappointment. My father had suggested I use the experience in a positive way and I started to practise again.

On September the 25th, I played in a top Pro-Am at the Ellesborough Golf Club and finished 4th with a 3 under par 68, behind 3 tour players.

On October the 2nd, I won the Middlesex Pro's Championships with rounds of 70 and 71 at the West Middlesex Golf Club, in London and had a magnificent trophy* for a year with Tony Jacklins name on it. The tournament was first played in 1925 and Tony Jacklin won the trophy twice, in 1963/64.

He also won the British Open in 1969.

END

Postscript:

At the end of the year I had over 1000 pounds in the bank and a brand new, second hand car!

My old Ford Escort lasted until the 14th September, when a broken camshaft meant a visit to the giant scrap yard in the sky.

Years later, in 2002, I received a call from Doug Carlyle. Was I going to play this year at Muirfield? I wasn't digging balls anymore and at 41 was very happy with how my career as a golf coach was progressing and had lost the desire for playing tournaments. I said no sorry and after a good chat, wished him well.

Many years later, on June 8th 2011, I receive a letter from the PGA.

It was a proud moment for me as the British PGA had just awarded me the title of 'PGA Advanced Professional'.

Within the letter it stated: 'The Council are impressed with your all round ability and diverse experience shown in teaching, coaching and playing'.

Sitting with my wife, when reading out the letter, I then told her the story about my 'British Open Experience'.

When finished, she turned to me and said, 'Well, if you had qualified that year and became a tour player, you wouldn't have met me'.

'Very true', I said, smiling at her. Life was good 😊