



Poetic Justice at Torrey Pines

Dean Nelson survives the South and finds redemption in a celebrity-studded foursome



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I'll admit it. I was nervous.

It's not that I had something to prove in my upcoming golf game with former poet laureate Billy Collins and comedy writer/actor Brian Doyle Murray. It's just that I didn't want the next volume of Collins' work to include a poem about this guy who said he golfed and turned out to be a hacker and spent the entire time looking for his ball in the poison ivy. Likewise, I didn't want to see a character in the next Caddyshack movie based on my inability to keep my temper under control.

There was one other thing. After we played, that very evening, I was going to conduct an interview with Collins in front of a sold-out audience that was expecting a great time. And it was going to be televised. I didn't want to do the interview while pretending that we were all chummy, when in reality he was composing a limerick in his head, There once was man from Point Loma, who golfed like a guy in a coma ... or something like that.

I remembered the last time I golfed with someone famous. It was a pro-am tournament that was an alleged fundraiser for horses after they were no longer useful as a means for betting and carrying short people quickly around in a circle and wearing crazy hats. Instead of sending them off to the dog food factory, this organization wanted to let them wander and eat grass for the rest of their lives like some equestrian nursing home. Feeling noble, I signed up. Actually, I signed up because some famous athletes were also going to be playing in the tournament.

And, of course, the horses. Didn't want them turning up as hamburgers in Europe. At that pro-am "save the horses" event, at a very nice country club in Orange County, Calif., I lost my cool and threw a club. Not like a horse throws a shoe. I purposefully launched it after yet another errant shot. I didn't throw it at anyone, or anything in particular. But somehow it ended up in a tree, no doubt relieved that it would never again be used for purposes such as gouging beautiful lawns or sending unsuspecting balls to their watery graves. It looked peaceful up there. Harmless. Happy. Like a retired horse.

I never considered trying to retrieve it. Anger is one thing on a golf course. People understand it, even when it's a little embarrassing. But remorse is another thing altogether. Yelling "Fore!" is the closest thing you'll ever hear to an apology on a golf course. I looked at the club exactly once and then kept walking. I had 13 more spears yet to chuck, I figured. I wouldn't miss that one.

When our group got to the next tee, we were missing the professional who was assigned to our foursome. We were used to not seeing him much because his tee box was set up a trolley stop behind us, and he rode in a cart by himself and smoked his cigars at a distance and checked his phone a lot. But this time we couldn't see him at all.

"There he is," one of our guys said. We looked back at the previous fairway. He was standing under the tree where my club had found refuge. We watched as he methodically, even lovingly, tossed one of his own clubs up into the branches, trying to dislodge my club. I couldn't watch. It was like seeing someone be kind to one of your kids after you've just yelled at him in public. The guilt is just too much.

A few minutes later the pro strode up to the tee box and gently put the club in my bag. I managed a "thank you" out of my constricted throat.

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So here was my chance to play golf with a famous person again. At first it was just going to be Collins and me. And he wanted to play Torrey Pines.

Despite living in San Diego for nearly 30 years, I had never played Torrey Pines. We might not have a caste system in San Diego, but I know my place in golf's social order here. I was one of the untouchables. I have thrown clubs. I have walked — nay, even run — into water hazards to retrieve balls fired in there like moisture-seeking missiles. I have used drivers when I should have used 6-irons and launched balls so far over the green that they shattered windshields in cars that were in presumably safe parking lots. I have set off countless car alarms with hooks, fades, toes and heels.

Why would I subject myself, my celebrity guest and one of the most picturesque golf courses in the world to my brand of golf?

I tried to weasel my way out. "It's pretty hard to get on that course, as I'm sure you know," I told Collins' agent on the phone. "People sleep in their cars the night before just to get in line."

"But you offered him a round of golf at Torrey Pines in your invitation to him," she reminded me. "It's in the contract you both signed."

So there it was. A contractual obligation.

We play Torrey Pines or the event is off.

He won't do a poetry workshop with our writing students, he won't do the public reading of his poetry and he won't do the public interview with me. Agents. Contracts. What are they good for?

I got a tee time at Torrey Pines (it was easier than I thought, dammit, since I'm a San Diego resident) then called my friend Allen, who has been president and keeper of the greens at Friendly Hills Country Club in Whittier. I have played with him before. He's even given me lessons in his back yard, where I pocked the stucco on his house a few times. He could hear the panic in my voice.

"Let's spend some time at the driving range," he said, sounding like a therapist about to prescribe a triple dose of Klonopin. I drove to his place on a Sunday afternoon and he gave me personal instruction for more than two hours. He suggested I invite my university's golf coach to play with us.

"That will take the pressure off you," he said. Brilliant. The coach was happy to oblige. I watched golf on TV. I told just a few people about my big day coming up.

"Which course are you playing?" they always asked. "South," I said. The response was always the same. Eyes widen. Then a slow shake of the head.

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About a week before our golf date, I got an e-mail from Billy Collins' agent, saying Billy wanted to add a friend to our threesome.

"His name is Brian Murray," she said. "You may know of him as Brian Doyle Murray, the comedian who wrote Caddyshack."

I think I hid my anxiety pretty well. I picked up Billy from the hotel, and we met the others at the course.

While warming up, I asked Collins what the maximum was that I could lose. "We'll change teams every six holes, and the bet will be five bucks for each," he said. "The most you could lose is \$15."

I pulled out a 20. “Do you have change?” I asked.

The golf was great. You can tell Murray and Collins play a lot. They don’t get rattled, and they’re consistent. I even had a few good holes. I started out strong, which is all I could reasonably expect, then deteriorated, but nothing major. At one point it did seem that Collins was growing weary of the constant military jet and helicopter activity overhead. Torrey Pines is a few miles west of the Miramar Marine Corps Air Station, and the aircraft fly above the golf course on their way to do exercises over the ocean.

“It’s pretty clear to me now,” Collins said on the 15th hole, looking skyward, “that if Syria attacks us, we’re going to kick their ass.”

Just behind us were hang gliders launching off the cliff, capturing the offshore wind and climbing hundreds of feet over the water.

“Human drones,” I said. “Sequestration style.”

I thought of movie lines to quote to Murray while we were putting but always choked them back. He did seem amused, though, when we stopped for lunch and saw a golf bag with a driver cover that looked like a Caddyshack ground squirrel. We wondered if he should ask for some residuals.

He wasn’t a comedian on the course. When he found out my son lived in Kansas, he told me about all the things he loved about Kansas, which are many. And he wasn’t joking. His voice is even more gravelly than it sounds in his movies and TV shows, as if he inhaled an entire sand trap. Best word to describe him? Mellow.

They each shot in the high 80s and seemed satisfied. I was around 100 and was overjoyed — and retained all of my clubs and a good amount of my dignity. In the lounge we swapped stories about different places we’ve played. Then Murray headed back to Los Angeles, the golf coach headed back to campus and I took Collins back to his hotel. The poetry workshop, the reading and the interview went well. I even read a poem that I had written about preparing to interview Billy Collins. He smiled when I was done, and said, “You have learned well, Grasshopper.”

At the airport, we talked about playing again. I hope we do. If it happens, I won’t be nervous. I won’t be afraid of embarrassing myself. I won’t be thinking of it as a contractual obligation. I’ll think of it as two friends who love to be outside chasing a ball around the lawn and making each other laugh. That’s poetry and comedy enough.

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