

Nathan Crace's

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An Hour Before Sundown

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I'm often asked two questions: "What is your favorite course that you've played?" and "What course would you most like to play that you haven't yet?" Like most golfers, the spring of every year brings forth the cure for cabin fever—the elixir of azaleas and dogwoods that we know as the Masters. We are all stirred to take to the our respective course as our clocks push forward sixty minutes, affording us an invaluable extra hour of daylight to shake loose the dust and rust of the winter's layoff. Even children can be seen on putting greens this time of year on courses across the land making "winning putts" for their first green jacket. I would assume that in the spring, most golfers would list Augusta National at (or at least near) the top of the golfing wish list—myself included. But the question of which course has been my favorite to play is a difficult one at best. There have been a number of courses I have enjoyed more than others for a myriad of reasons ranging from the history of the course and its design characteristics to the general atmosphere of the facility and the people I was playing with at the time. What I can say, however, is that my favorite course is the one I find myself playing when I start out an hour before sundown.

Even as a child learning the game by watching Jack Nicklaus play on television and reading his "Golf My Way" books because no one in my family played golf, I can remember rushing back out onto the County Parks course in Clarksville, Indiana with my friends to squeeze in four more holes before our parents came to pick us up at the end of the day. We thought our plan was ingenious—as most twelve year-olds do. We knew that we could call the parent who was elected to retrieve us on that day, head to the first tee, play holes one through three, and then skip over to play #6 back to the clubhouse before they would get to the course to pick us up. On occasion, we would cross over to #6 just as a group from #5 would arrive. So we waited—throwing a wrinkle into our otherwise "perfect plan." Later on in college while working as an assistant golf professional as part of my experience in Mississippi State's professional golf management program, we would close the golf shop at the appointed time, grab our clubs and a cart, and another assistant and I would try to work in as many holes as possible before dark.

Perhaps due to those experiences I find myself enjoying golf most when I am on the course—any course—and there's about an hour's worth of sunlight left. The entire course seems more peaceful. The traffic of the golfers from the day's rush of play has subsided and the wildlife begins to wander back out from the depths of the woods. Squirrels chase each other in continuous circles around the trunks of large trees and on occasion, you might notice a handful of deer braving contact with man before nightfall. The clouds that have built up during the heat of the late afternoon now appear to be less threatening. As they cross in front of the sun, they become translucent and open up holes for the setting sun to shoot through like laser beams stretching across the afternoon sky. The sounds of the course have changed too. Long gone is the hum of maintenance equipment and the sound of the course itself becomes more evident. The chirping of the late afternoon crickets creates nearly imperceptible supporting role for the staccato calls of birds winding down their day. It becomes almost musical in its rhythm and movement. The course now plays different as well. The dew has long been erased from the greens and replaced by a handful of un-repaired ball marks and—to a lesser extent today—the occasional unintended spike mark. In an attempt to play as many holes as you can before dark, your swing achieves a more precise timing and shots seem more solid. It is some type of Zen-like connection between your inner self and the course or just the fact that you have forgotten of all the things you try to remind yourself to do and not to do during your swing? The colors of the course have changed as the haze of the day has subsided and the dark greens are now highlighted by hues of red, amber, and orange cascading through trees from the setting sun. Shadows begin to highlight sand bunkers, making their edges less defined and seemingly more treacherous than before. But strangely, my most memorable part of playing golf this time of day is the trip around the course. As you stroll down the fairway or ride along the cart path, you notice that you pass through pockets of cool, moist air that have accumulated throughout the course. Usually in low-lying areas and near lakes and streams, these noticeably cooler and refreshing "microclimates" have already achieved their evening temperatures before the rest of the course. If you've ever had the occasion to play golf in the late afternoon just before sundown, you understand.

So for me, it is not so much a question of "where" as it is of "when." Of course there are some courses I like to play more than others—everyone has his or her favorites. For me, however, even my favorite course is that much more special an hour before sundown. And a few hours later, the sun will make its way back around to the eastern horizon, the day will begin again for the golf course, and the end of the day will come again the same as it always does, relatively speaking.

Nathan Crace is the Senior Design Associate at Maxwell Golf Group in Jackson, Mississippi. His freelance "Lipouts" column is based on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2002.