

The Last Green

Lane Walker

LOCAL LEGENDS
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The Last Green by Lane Walker
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*This book is dedicated to
Uncle Rich “Pro” and Aunt Nancy Kitchen.
Thanks for always exemplifying the importance
of family and “hitting the ball straight”
in life and business.*

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Prologue

The 17th hole on the Pete Dye Stadium course at PGA West in La Quinta is called *Alcatraz*.

Named after the infamous prison of Alcatraz Island located off the San Francisco coast, the island green is considered the toughest hole on the course. The 166-yard par 3 is one of the most challenging holes in entire state of California.

The backdrop of the 17th green was like a Claude Monet painting. The Santa Rosa Mountains tower over the Coachella Valley, giving the landscape a surreal view.

I stood on the tee box, looking straight ahead, and trying to keep my focus on the green. Staying

focused was hard as all around me were dangerous hazards. The small island green left little room for error.

“Straight is good; if you’re going to miss it, miss it straight,” kept running through my mind. I glanced over my right shoulder and made eye contact with Pro.

The look my athletic, confident mentor gave me calmed my racing mind. As soon as we made eye contact, I suddenly knew how he thought I should play this hole.

In the game of golf, the person hits a small white ball off a tee with the goal of getting the ball in the hole with the fewest number of strokes as possible. If that objective alone doesn’t sound hard enough, a golf course also features undetected hazards and difficulties. Add in the basics like grip, tempo, and consistency, and the game becomes even harder.

Millions of little, seemingly insignificant aspects can go wrong on the golf course. One small movement or one wrong hand placement can bring complete disaster on the course.

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I believe those challenges are what drew me to the game. In addition to the technical and physical demands, the mental side of golf is by far the most intimidating.

I glanced back at Pro.

His stern, focused stare was now fixated on the green. Pro's low voice kept echoing in my head, "Avoid danger; keep your ball straight." Over the past couple of weeks, I thought of the many lessons I had learned from Pro that extended well beyond the fairways and greens of a golf course.

I slowly drew in one last deep breath as I stared toward the 17th hole. As I approached the tee, I tried to block out all the hazards around the hole in the island of green surrounded by water and jagged rocks. This hole had no fairway.

This swing is all or nothing. I knew I had to land my ball on the green if I wanted to take the lead.

My mind raced with all the events over the past month that had brought me this day. I was seemingly destined to play in the championship round of the Best of the West Tournament.

Playing so well the day before had gotten me into the championship round and a pairing with Brady Matthew, the #1 ranked junior golfer.

The small crowd began to grow as word had spread about the final two battling it out for the championship crown. The fact that I was massive underdog in the tournament didn't hurt the storyline. Some familiar faces were in the crowd, but most were strangers.

My mind started to race with doubt. "Stop!" I told myself. "Not this time!" I took control of my mind, focusing only on my tee shot.

I stood in the tee box, trying not to notice the jagged, crooked rocks or the towering mountains in the background. My vision narrowed as I watched the small blue flag blowing lightly in the wind.

Alcatraz was in front of me.

"Miss straight, miss straight," I whispered to myself as I took my backswing.

I was down one shot...with two holes to go.

This is my chance.

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I love living in the Palm Springs area. My home is actually in La Quinta, which is about 25 minutes from Palm Springs. Commonly referred to as the golf capital of the world, Palm Springs is located on the western edge of the Colorado Desert in Southern California.

When most people think of California, they think of beaches, movie stars and the Pacific Ocean, which doesn't properly describe Palm Springs. This inland city is close enough to Los Angeles and San Diego to attract locals as well as many out-of-state visitors.

What is the main attraction to Palm Springs? Golf! Over 150 golf courses spread over the Palm

Springs area, and the weather is perfect for hitting the links.

Palm Springs is also recognized for the list of celebrities who vacation there. The city started to gain notoriety in the 1920s as Hollywood movie stars took the two-hour drive east from Los Angeles. A-list stars bought second homes in Palm Springs that became their oasis retreat from the busy city life.

Once this “paradise” was discovered, the Palm Springs’ population exploded as stars like Frank Sinatra; Dean Martin; Sammy Davis, Jr.; Bob Hope; Elvis Presley; Marilyn Monroe; Dinah Shore; Lucille Ball; and Elizabeth Taylor fell in love with the area. Shortly thereafter, American Presidents including Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama became frequent visitors. After the Roaring 20s and throughout history, more star-studded names flocked to Palm Springs. Modern-day stars like Leonardo DiCaprio, Brad Pitt, and the Kardashians vacation in this glamorous getaway.

I wasn't impressed with all the movie stars... Instead, I found all the professional golfers who visited Palm Springs more amazing than any of the Hollywood people. Seemingly, a pro was always playing in Palm Springs or attending one of the huge golf tournaments. For a kid who loved golf, seeing a pro was way more impressive than any movie or rock star!

My family took a lot of pride in Palm Springs and its surrounding area. My grandpa had moved our family to Palm Springs from Chicago when my dad was two years old.

Grandpa Ron, who everyone called Pops, was in the construction business, and for that line of work, there was no better place than Palm Springs. New construction in the Coachella Valley was expanding at a rapid rate. Work was easy to find, and eventually Grandpa started his own construction business designing and building golf courses. Taylor Builders had an excellent reputation and was now managed by my dad.

Dad worked frequently in the valley, but he

also traveled the world building elite golf courses. Due to my family's business and passion for golf I fell in love with the sport at a young age. When I was younger, Dad would frequently take me to the land before building a new course. I loved seeing a bare spot of desert and imagining what the course would look like. My favorite part was returning after its completion, to see his vision become reality, and then playing the course that Dad had helped build.

Dad had many connections in the golf world. When I was six years old, we started golfing together so that I could learn the game from him. Now at age 14, I was known around the valley as one of the best junior golfers in the area.

I had already played more rounds of golf than most adults, typically playing five to six rounds a week. Dad was always my favorite playing partner and helped me as well. He was a good golfer and taught me everything he could.

I had grown up playing in some of the smaller youth and junior golf tournaments around Palm

Springs. I had even won several of the tournaments, and my name was now being mentioned as an up-and-coming golfer.

Everything was going well, and I was playing fantastic golf heading into the Spring Showcase Tournament at the Indian Wells Country Club.

I was up six strokes heading into the third and final day of the tournament. All I had to do was stay focused and play consistent golf.

If only the game were that easy...