

# haven

A magazine exploring the *exceptional nature* of Bald Head Island, North Carolina



## diversions



The sky threatens to call off the round this morning. A blanket of clouds and the occasional raindrop has four golfers watching with a wary eye and wondering if today is a good day for golf at the Bald Head Island Club.

"There's an onshore wind," says Dave Shadday, a BHI Club member and resident of Indigo Plantation, Bald Head Island's sister community on the Southport mainland. "It'll blow those clouds out in a few minutes. I think it's going to be a fine day for golf." He used to live on Bald Head Island and still plays golf here twice a week, so he knows the island and the course.

In a moment, the onshore wind punches a hole in the clouds to the north and a bright patch of blue sky opens in the midst of the grey clouds.

"It looks like the wind is doing us a favor for once," says Bob Hart, Dave's cart mate today. Bob lives on Bald Head Island and plays here three times a week.

The wind freshens and the clouds dissolve in earnest over Southport. Harry Aylor, an Indigo Plantation resident and twice-a-week

golfer here, hops into the cart he's sharing with Laura Hendrick. He smiles at the prospect of a rain-free round.

"Laura," he says. "How long have you been playing?"

Laura, a Bald Head Island resident and the youngest of the group, fishes her glove out of her golf bag. "Ten years," she says. "And I think I'm finally starting to figure this game out."

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Today is the first time this particular foursome has played together, although they've played in various combinations plenty of times. Dave, Bob and Harry play in a larger men's group twice a week, and Laura plays with a regular group of ladies. They've crossed paths in the golf shop, the Pelicatessen and the dining room, but not on the course, so today will be an experiment in just what makes a great foursome.

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At the first hole, they decide to play from the gold tees, the third longest set on the course at 5,546 yards. Laura declines the offer of playing



# Four's Company

By Jason Frye

Photography by Chip Henderson

from the red ladies' tees. "I'm one of the fellows today," she says, "so I'll play the golds. Besides, I've got 20 yards on you guys."

The heckling starts, good-natured of course, and the remarks fly as fast and as far as the ball, a good sign the chemistry is favorable.

Dave tees off.

"Is that as far as you can hit it?"

Harry's shot.

"Maybe you should have played the reds."

Bob gazes down the fairway and Dave chimes in, "What's taking so long? We don't have all day."

"Yeah we do," Bob fires back, "we're all retired."

"Laura, you're sure you want to play with us today?" Harry asks.

She only looks at the three of them, then tees up and hits her drive. After her ball comes to rest a dozen yards ahead of theirs she replies: "Yeah, I think I'll do OK today." Laura keeps up the pace with her game and her retorts, another sign the group is gelling.

With her performance on the first hole—enduring the light-hearted teasing, playing from the gold tees, out driving them and

sinking a beautiful birdie putt—Laura has integrated herself into the foursome and they can all get to the business at hand: golf.

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A great foursome starts with a great course, and that is exactly what George Cobb set out to create in 1972.

Drawing on his experience as consultant for Augusta National, Cobb laid out a beautiful course on Bald Head Island. Starting seaside and moving inland through the dunes and forest before returning to the sea, a round of golf takes you on a tour of the island. By shaping the holes according to the dictates of the terrain, Cobb created a picturesque, playable golf course that blends in with its environment so well you may forget the round of golf for a moment and lose yourself in the serenity of nature.

Cobb's dedication to preserving the harmony between course and natural surroundings certainly shows. Two ospreys have made nests here; red-tailed hawks, great blue herons, night herons, ibises and egrets are common sights on the course. The occasional alligator

drifts in one of the ponds or lagoons. Deer cross the fairways and greens and watch golfers from just inside the tree line.

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On the par-3 second, Dave's drive frightens a doe and her two fawns, still spotted, from the woods near the green. She leaps, lands on the green and dashes into the safety of the woods opposite. The fawns walk across the green, their ears alert and their tails half up, and follow their mother into the woods. Everyone hits their drives, unfazed by the interruption.

"We see deer out here all the time," says Bob as he repairs the dent his ball left in the green. Still bent, he turns to repair the hoof prints the doe left when she landed. She and her twins watch from the woods. "It's just part of the game here."

"The serenity of this course and all the wildlife really make this a special place to play," Dave adds. "I've been playing here since 1985 and it's never gotten old."

The par-5 third continues to deliver Cobb's promise of a bucolic course. Surrounded by near-constant birdsong, the animals take little notice the course is here. That is quite a testament to the course design and maintenance. By nature, a golf course is a series of manicured meadows, artificially watered, and mown by men on machines, but this course feels different. The cart paths on most holes are cedar chips that release a spicy scent and crunch like leaves underfoot as the carts roll over them. It all makes a round of golf here one part sport, one part communion.

Dave has honors on five and drives one just right of center. The ping of his driver on the ball silences the birds, but their chatter is back as soon as the ball is in the air. Laura is next. The boys watch as she tees up. The birds' chatter stops; the boys' chatter stops. She swings, fluid, easy, and, right on center, drops it ten yards past Dave. She lets her swing say everything as she moves away from the tee.

The silence holds for a moment.

"Well, I'm not too excited to follow that," Harry says, stepping up to the tee.

"I'm not too excited about it either," Bob adds.

Harry and Bob drive, and all four balls are clustered together a couple of hundred yards ahead. Three birdies and a par later, we move on to the next hole.

That's the way it is among friends, even new ones. The catcalls rise and fall, the conversation ceases as someone lines up a shot, and always comes back as the ball flies toward its target.

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The mix of personalities is the biggest determining factor in the making of a good foursome, and Dave, Bob, Harry and Laura combine to make a great one.

"Dave's got the experience, Bob's got the equipment, Laura's athletic and on top of her game, and I'm here for comic relief," explains Harry. "We're a good mix."

What he says rings true and points to some of the personality traits that make a good group. Harry credits Laura with being athletic and

on top of her game, but, at the end of the round, only a few strokes separate everyone. They're all athletic, they're smart and play to the strength of their games, and their rate of play (and lack of shots in the rough) shows it.

Harry calls himself the comic relief in the group, but jokes, netting and laughter flowed freely between everyone for the duration of the round, rising and falling in the morning air, but never to the detriment of any player or to the flow of the game.

The same can be said for the morning's conversations. *How's your son? When did you move here? Did you read about such-and-such in the paper?* Never interrupting a shot, never slowing the pace of the round, they catch up, get to know, and enjoy the company of one another.

The humility of the group goes a long way to foster good chemistry. Look at the leader board at any of the tournaments and you'll find their names. Dave was the Club Champion five times, the Senior Division Champion six times, and he shares the senior tee course record of 68 with Thad Wester. Laura was the 2007 Ladies' Club Champion and the 2008 Ladies' Match Play Champion. Bob has a hole-in-one on 16. Harry is consistently at the top of the leader board. Despite the accomplishments of the group, they leave that all behind them and play to have fun.

"It's not about keeping score," Harry says. "I mean, it is, but it's not about who beat who or who had the most birdies. Golf is about playing against yourself and trying to improve your game. Who won in the group isn't important..."

"It is if there is lunch on the line," Dave interrupts.

"Ok, it's important if there is lunch on the line, but we're playing to have fun," Harry continues. "Tournaments are about keeping score and winning and losing, but golf is about enjoying the friends and the game, in that order."

"That's why he buys us lunch all the time," Bob adds with a sly grin.

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As they round the corner to the tee box on seven, an osprey sitting on a limb turns to watch them. Laura pulls a rangefinder out of her golf bag and peers through it at the huge bird. He watches her then turns back to watching for fish in the water hazard.

"Beautiful," she says to Harry. "I was hoping to see him today. There's one more on 13 with the biggest nest."

Moments later, on the green, the osprey's cry draws their eyes to his upward-circling flight. With Old Baldy and the clear blue sky behind him, and the emerald carpet of the course beneath him, he rises on the thermals and leaves to hunt the marsh. You couldn't find a more perfect marriage of nature and sport.

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They emerge from the forest and look out at South Beach from the top of the dune ridge at the par-3 16th tee box. A flock of laughing gulls takes flight at the sight of them, calling out as they leave.

"It gets tricky here," Dave says. "Sometimes I'll hit a driver. The

**Top left:** Dave and Laura compare shots after both sinking birdie putts on one. **Top right:** The new foursome shares a high five after a competitive yet congenial round. **Below:** Blue skies dominated the game despite the day's overcast start.



wind really makes this hole long sometimes. I'd bet one is playing 30 yards shorter right now."

The wind is blowing in from the ocean, crossing from left to right, and, true to his word, Dave uses his driver and leaves the ball long and left. Laura is the only one who plays it with enough finesse, hers the lone ball on the green in regulation.

"I think I figured out who won," Dave says.

"We've got two holes left," Laura says, "You can still make a comeback."

The playful heckling they've been knocking around today is just an extension of the give and take of conversation. These four have it down. They are at ease with each other, at ease with themselves, and at ease with the game.

On 17, the final par-5 of the day, Harry takes out his driver.

"Step back everybody, he's about to turn it loose," Bob says.

And he does, wailing the ball for a 220-yard drive just left of the center of the fairway. Most players will try for the green with three iron shots, but Harry's aggressive play could land him an eagle if it pays off.

The others hit their tee shots, ending up short of Harry. With their second shots, Harry hits the green but Laura ends up in the rough to the right, only the second time today she's been off the fairway. The third shot finds everyone on the green, with Laura hitting a shot Dave calls

"tournament golf" to get her out of trouble. The green proves tricky today, with everyone misjudging the speed and falling short of the cup. Harry misses his shot at eagle, but sinks the only birdie of the hole.

"I've really enjoyed playing with you guys today," Laura says as she tees up her ball for the last time. "It was a blast."

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She hits her typical drive of the day, dead center and long.

"Well Laura, we play every Wednesday and Friday at 8:30," Dave says, watching her ball roll even with his.

"You just want to take my money," Laura says.

"No, I'm just telling you when not to be here because I think you'd end up taking all of mine," he says.

That's how it has been all day. Quips and needling, the conversation of old and new friends, and some high-quality golf. Going onto the green on 18, no one is certain of the score, but here in the rumble of the surf and the rustle of the flag in the pin, it doesn't matter. Nothing does. ☀

*Jason Frye is a freelance writer living in Wilmington, N.C., with his wife Lauren. He holds his MFA in creative writing from UNC -Wilmington and wishes he could play golf as well as the group featured here.*

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George Cobb's course design plays upon the natural beauty of Bald Head Island.