

'K-Cup' Means Excellent Golf & Food

It would be a gross exaggeration to claim that the number of golf-buddy trips I've been part of are uncountable. But the actual tally is somewhere north of the number of ice cream flavors at Baskin-Robbins, and far fewer than the dimples on a golf ball.



Author Joel Zuckerman & K-Cup founder Glen Rapoport

But I have never before experienced the unique privilege of participating in the Kiddush Cup, the Jewish version of the Ryder Cup recently contested at one of the world's most exceptional golf courses, Prairie Dunes. Wind-addled and fescue-framed, with baffling greens that feature more drop-offs than a skateboard park, storied Prairie Dunes is the golf pride of Hutchinson, Kan., outside of Wichita. Known affectionately as the "Links of the Prairies," it's currently ranked 25th on Golf Magazine's listing of the world's top-100 golf courses. Despite the club's credentials (seven times a USGA host venue, including a Women's Open and Senior Open), it was the assemblage of participants, the vast majority of whom I had never met before and the ongoing culinary theme (more on that later) which puts this trip among the most memorable golf junkets in my experience.

There were several themes that threaded their way through the group of 17 souls who gathered mid-continent from all points on the compass, not the least of which was that most (not all) stepped to the pulpit (a *bimah*, actually) and celebrated a Bar-Mitzvah three, four or even five-plus decades ago.

Many Kiddush Cuppers are affiliated with Golfweek magazine as course raters, and combine a high golf I.Q. with lots of travel experience. Collectively, they've seen and played the majority of the world's most desirable courses, and most can really golf their ball. Several are at or near scratch, played or tried to play professionally, competed and succeeded in high-level amateur events, won club championships and, generally speaking, know which end of the club to hang onto.



K-Cuppers donned eye patches for Moshe Dayan Putting Contest

While not overtly religious, most of the K-Cup participants are acculturated to their faith, and appreciated the Moshe Dayan Putting Contest (see photo) named for the fiercely combative, eye-patch-wearing military commander and former Foreign Minister of Israel, which kicked off the tournament's festivities.

A wise guy (literally?) once commented that, "Italians are like Jews, but with better food." But he might have changed his opinion had he feasted, early and often, as we all did, meal after meal, on a smorgasbord of Old World delicacies shipped to Kansas directly from New York. (Talk about adding flavor to the festivities.) But beyond the superb golf and over-the-top gastronomy, it was the people who made the difference.

There was irrepressible Laurent Khaiat (first name pronounced like Bon Vivant, an analogy that goes miles beyond the rhyme), a thoroughly entertaining USGA rules official (how's that for a contradiction in terms?) and former golf professional. He's a name-dropping, glad-handing, smooth-operating French Jew

of Tunisian descent based in Los Angeles. He and his Japanese wife have a young son, near-scratch handicaps and memberships at several of the finest clubs in the states and Europe (Prairie Dunes among them, where she once played in the U.S. Women's Amateur.) He can exchange his French accent for a Southern drawl that is partly passable, mostly laughable, and is happy to converse about most any subject, although he is truly ecstatic when the subject matter is him.

Speaking of those born outside our nation's borders, another fantastic character was Michael Campbell. No, not the former U.S. Open champ, but a late-addition fill-in to the K-Cup, a low-handicap Canadian who chain-smokes cigars ("my last bad habit," he told me) which he refers to as "energy sticks." Maybe I should fire up a stogie myself, because this former hockey tough cannons his tee shots about 280 yards, the most notable aspect of his rock-solid golf game. (And I should know - he carried me around so effortlessly in our better-ball match he might just as well have been wearing a baby snuggly.) As an added bonus, he tells outrageously funny, totally non-PC jokes, and can turn on a fake stutter as though he was just whacked upside the head with a shovel.

My favorite young gun of recent acquaintance was Chicago's Jim Alvarez. He was inspired to take up the game in earnest the day after age-contemporary Tiger Woods won his first Masters, and now he does a passable imitation of the golf deity himself. (I watched him shoot a smooth 71 at scary-to-the-point-of-intimidating Prairie Dunes, laying waste to his opponent with a series of orbited drives and clutch putts.) An entrepreneur and inventor, "Alvin" cajoled LPGA bombshell Natalie Gulbis into using his Hammy Putter, with which she enjoyed great success for awhile, including her only win thus far on the LPGA Tour. The Hammy never quite captured the public's imagination as he had hoped, and now he's onto the next idea. (Though he uses his invention with such aplomb, rolling in back-bracing 5-footers as well as bombs, he might want to can the name Hammy, and remarket this impressive flat-stick as The Crenshaw.)

Though we never played a single hole together, I got a kick out of Adam Clayman, a former Chicago commodity trader, who moved himself to the bustling 'burg of Ogallala, Neb. (population 5,000) way out in the western prairies, because of it's relatively easy access to Ballyneal, a very special links-style course across the state border in Holyoke, Colo.

I did have the pleasure of the playing company of a couple of fellow Georgians. Leigh Bodner is an Atlanta lawyer who could moonlight as a celebrity look-a-like for the fruit-smashing comedian Gallagher, in the unlikely event there would ever be a market for such a service. Even with titanium screws in his back that must be a TSA nightmare, Lee is a fine golfer and great fellow.

The same can be said for businessman Allan Flamm. Among plenty of other memorable shots over four days, this "Flimm-Flamm Man" celebrated his 61st birthday by holing out a 50-yard pitch for eagle at Prairie Dunes par-5 seventh.

The team captains, Rick Crotty of Team Judah, and Mike Gallner of Team Israel, were exceptionally warm and engaging. They are Omaha-area lawyers, fast friends and longtime Prairie Dunes members who played host for the weekend. Everyone was awed by the storytelling of Arizona's Josh Asher, who would've absolutely killed 'em in the Catskills with his crushingly funny humor and delivery, denied his true destiny by the harsh reality of generation and geography. There was Mike Reich, undoubtedly one of the nicest guys on the trip, a Detroit-area dentist who explains that, even though his new wife has yet to celebrate her 30th birthday and is more than 20 years his junior, "She is way more mature than me. It isn't even close."

Speaking of dentists, kudos to Glen Rapoport of West Hartford, Conn., who serves as the Kiddush Cup's founder, spiritual leader and organizer. Glen dreamed up the Cup several years ago with good golf buds Larry "Let-me-tell-you-something" Hirsh of Harrisburg, Pa., whose honeyed swing tempo is the first indication he'll be flirting with par all day long, and Glen's fellow tooth-yanker, Allan Dorfman, of Long Island. Dr. D pulled double duty on this exquisite visit to the nation's heartland.

The rest of us were only concerned with making our tee times, avoiding the omnipresent fescue grasses lining the rolling fairways and attempting to decipher the mysterious, unknowable greens. But off the golf course, Dr. D was also in the Prairie Dunes kitchen and, depending on the meal and the time of day, making sure that the imported provisions were all being prepared properly. He made sure that the brisket and the matzo-ball soup were hot, the Challa-bread French Toast warm, the dill pickles and sour tomatoes cold, the pastrami and corned beef plates replenished, the cream cheese abundant, the nova lox cool and the kasha varnishkes (don't even ask) stirred.

It's no easy commute from Wichita to Savannah, and it was well past midnight by the time I made it home, still a bit hyped up after the trip. Unwillingly roused from slumber by my clattering, I recounted for my wife, a classic golf widow if ever there was one, the wondrous details of the menus, venues, and cavalcade of characters.

Her sleepy response was a mixture of admiration, exasperation and a touch of sarcasm. "Just what you need," she yawned. "More golf buddies."

My sentiments exactly.