

The Lucky Ones

(Published in *The Golfer's Journal*)

Their battle with the hell of addiction began alone, but for members of The League, it continues together on the course.

Words by Tom Coyne • Photos by Lexey Swall

THANK GOD FOR MY CADDIE, because I was blacking out between shots. I had woken up in Monterey, California, with the shakes and was due on the tee in a half hour. I choked down a Bloody Mary to steady my hands and headed to meet my partner, the CEO of one of the largest liquor conglomerates in the world. He was hosting a Pebble Beach getaway for his company's top 100 accounts, though I was not here as a liquor salesman. I was just a dedicated consumer—and that weekend's keynote speaker.

Blackouts weren't part of my routine, and I structured my drinking to avoid them. I drank mostly wine—I'd lost the stomach for beer—and three bottles stretched through the day, from a breakfast Chardonnay to the last glass in bed, usually kept the jitters and panic at bay and got me through to the next morning. I avoided liquor, as it unbalanced the scales, too quickly tipping me from functional to foggy, but there was little chance to avoid it this weekend. Not that I really cared. I'd gotten through my speech the night before—something about golf and living your best life; it was all a bit fuzzy. I did recall a standing ovation—I must have done OK—and as I looked out at a room of a hundred applauding liquor kings, I wondered if any of them had a clue about the wreck for which they were clapping.

The CEO had read one of my books and invited me to join his morning foursome. I was terrified, as I was most days—not of golf, but of being found out and spoiling a reputation I was holding together with spit and tape. I had no choice but to try to drink my way back to normal, so I told my caddie to keep bringing screwdrivers from the drink cart whenever it appeared. It appeared often, and by the back nine I was veering in and out of awareness, though my scorecard was somehow filling up with numbers. I remembered making a birdie. I remembered how hard it was to tee up my ball, my head's weight so unwieldy. On one of the greens, I stood over a putt, not able to recall how I'd gotten there or what hole I was on. I had to ask my caddie, "Hey. What am I lying?"

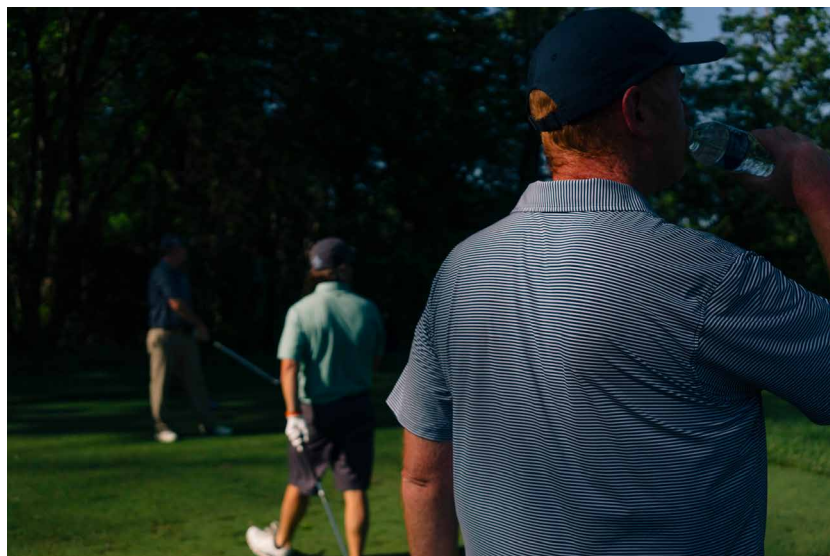
He paused and tilted his head, confused. "Dude. You're lying one."

I should have been embarrassed, but reminded myself that it was fine; I was allowed to be over-served on the golf course. Golfers drank, and it was a small matter that I'd drunk too much. My partners wouldn't judge me for it. For some people, golf courses were a place to make pars or cultivate friendships, but for others, they were cover. Fairways were just a sipping safe space for a drunk like me.

It would be a few more years of shame and fear before I finally got help. My life in the interim was an exhausting charade, clinging to family and career while finding the drinks I required. I didn't want to drink, I had to, and I understand that's hard for normal drinkers to understand. They might view addiction as a matter of self-will or strength of character, and I wish I had the choice to believe that too. We lose a lot when a chemical takes control of our minds and bodies, and choices are the first to go.

A friend told me that if I wanted to quit drinking, I only had to change one thing: everything.

My routines were hard to shake, but they were eventually replaced by healthier ones. Friendships faded, but they, too, were exchanged for better relationships. As for golf, I expected I would have to stay away, abandoning what had become an excuse to drink early and outdoors. But as with every expectation I had about getting sober, I had it all wrong.



Stan

I remember being on a work trip, a conference down in Florida at Disney World, and I had to play golf. I didn't really play golf then, but my company was hosting and I had to golf with two clients, and I woke up going into withdrawal. What I remember most is trying to get to the gift shop to buy a bottle at nine in the morning, because they actually sell booze in all the gift shops in Disney. There's a little tip for the folks out there. I remember getting to the gift shop and it was closed, and not being able to get that bottle and having to go out and try to play golf, which I didn't know how to do, with my boss, while I'm withdrawing and shaking and sweating and trying not to puke. And imagine if the shop was open: "Hello, Mr. Disney Gift Shop Worker. I'll have your finest plastic bottle of Gordon's Gin at nine o'clock in the morning." Yeah. Pretty awesome.

I was 28, 29 at the time. And my day would start—actually, I'd start my day with bedtime. I couldn't go three hours without a drink or I would start shaking and convulsing. So I would pour a glass of gin and hide it under the bed. I'd pass out around 11:30, and I knew that around two, two-thirty in the morning, I'd wake up shaking. I still remember reaching under the bed as quietly as possible, trying not to wake up my girlfriend, and grabbing that glass of warm, melted-ice gin, and getting enough down so I could fall back to sleep. Then I would wake up around five-thirty or six, and [the shakes] would really be on me.

I did this every morning. I'd get up and I'd go downstairs to the living room, where the TV was. I was drinking these shatterproof half-gallon bottles of Gordon's Gin. I remember they were \$18.95 on sale, and I had a rotation of five different liquor stores I'd go to, because God forbid the guy at the liquor store figures out I'm going through a bottle a day. I would just grab the bottle, no glass or nothing, and I wouldn't even turn on the TV, but I would stare at the cable box. The cable box had the digital clock on it, and I knew it took 11 minutes. It took 11 minutes for me to feel OK.

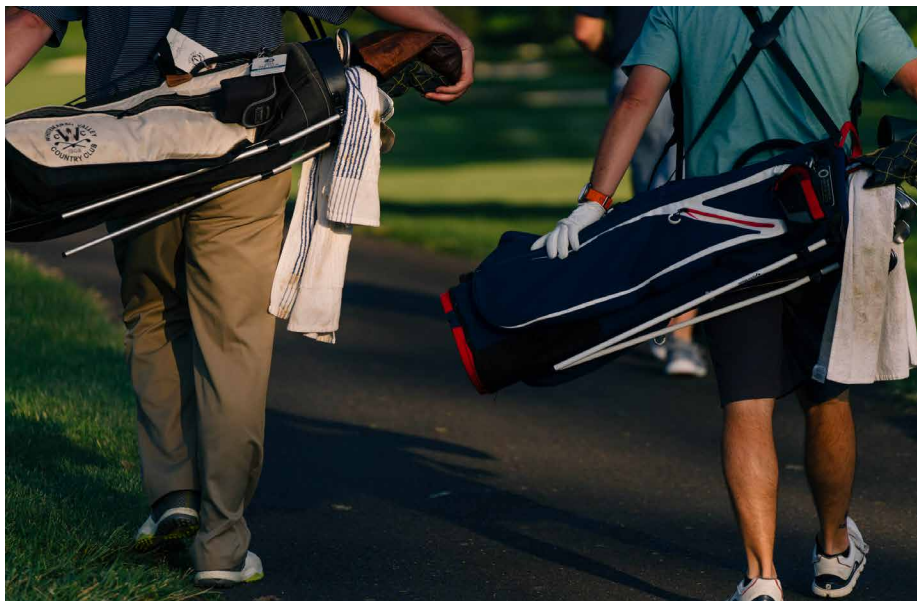
I'd drink for 11 minutes and I'd stop shaking, and I'd be able to catch my breath. I had real shortness of breath. I later found out that was likely early onset congestive heart failure. I'd be able to start breathing, and then I'd turn on the TV and I'd sit and watch "SportsCenter" for a fucking hour, drinking, and by seven o'clock I was "normal."

I would go and get myself ready for work, and my girlfriend would leave for work and her son would go to school. I would fill up a water bottle, like a Dasani water bottle, with gin. I worked about 20 miles outside of the city, and I had to drive, so I'd get in my car with this bottle of gin and drive up I-95 to work.

The fucked-up thing is, I remember the last couple months, knowing how wrong what I was doing was, and just not being able to do anything about it. I would play out these stories in my mind, where there's an 8-year-old girl somewhere out there in a minivan that I'm going to kill. I remember every day getting in that car and wondering, "Am I going to kill that girl today?" And that thought was still not enough to stop me from drinking the way I was drinking.

At work, I tried to distance myself from people and hide in my cubicle, and then, every 90 minutes or so, the itch started to come on, so I'd go out to my car and take a drink, and I'd do that throughout the whole day. Then I'd get home and hit happy hour, because I just put in a hard day's work. I wouldn't drink super heavy at happy hour because I'd been drinking all day, so to the naked eye, it looked like I went to work, went to happy hour, had a drink, maybe two, went home, made some dinner, watched a little TV. But then I had to get myself prepared to have that glass of gin hidden under the bed again. Wash, rinse, repeat.

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I bumped into Stan in a downtown coffee shop. We'd met briefly once before, and when he spotted my Merion sweatshirt, he asked if I played golf. He was an Ivy League grad who dressed in Brooks Brothers and loafers, and I tagged him as a golfer with a course I might like to visit. I was right. He had just joined one of Philadelphia's big-cheese country clubs, but he was new to golf, he said, taking his first lessons now that he was a few years sober.

Stan had heard there was a group of sober guys around Philly who played together, and asked if I was interested. I hadn't touched my clubs since quitting drinking, and was curious how anyone like me went to a golf course without finding himself in front of a transfusion. People in recovery talk about sobriety empowering them to do anything, go anywhere, and I believed that, with two exceptions: airports and golf clubs. I would learn how to walk past bars in the terminal (watching travelers down beers at 7 a.m. always reminds me to be grateful), and I soon found myself at a revered Philadelphia golf club with Stan and 50 other ex-drinkers, guys to whom I didn't need to explain myself. We all had different stories that were exactly the same.

There's a quick recognition and connection among people who have dangled their toes out over the abyss; it's a lifeboat sort of bond that I didn't bargain for when I quit drinking. I just wanted to lose some of the contempt I had for myself, and maybe feel normal for a few minutes each day. I got plenty more, and I got golf back too. I got first-tee nerves back; I got money-on-the-line back; I got grinding-for-par back, thanks to a bunch of former fall-down drunks who call themselves The League.

Brian

I had a pretty low bottom. It wasn't just drinking for me. I was a garbage guy: crack, cocaine, booze, all of it. I was completely and totally self-centered. I can't even describe it. I was just a slave to drinking and drugging every day.

On the surface, I was like a successful suburban guy—the car and the polo shirt, all that veneer so I could manipulate people. It was all about manipulation and self. I was not a moral person, although I was raised in a very moral family. I have nothing to point to in terms of a broken family to say that's why I lived the way I did. I robbed houses. I was a bad person. I'll tell you this, because I never want to forget it: My dad died in June of 1992. He was my age now—he was 49—so my parents had been married 27 years. I broke into my mom's house and stole all the jewelry, including the wedding ring he had given her. I would do absolutely anything to get on.

I went to my second or third rehab, and after that, because I was such a hardcore case, they recommended I not go back into society because I was going to relapse, and they were right. So I went and lived in the Salvation Army for 13 months. I go from smoking crack to living in the Salvation Army, and now I'm entrusted to manage pension funds. Believe me, the irony is not lost on me.

I've got a great family now, girls in college. I'm teaching my son golf. I've got a great life, a career, and I could not have fathomed having any of that. Every single thing that is good in my life, I owe 100% to recovery. Getting sober gave me an innate sense of what is right and wrong that I never had, and when I'm not on that beam and doing the right thing, I feel it, and I don't like it. That's probably what I love about golf. I didn't grow up playing, or belonging to a country club. But I'm teaching my son now, and it makes you realize golf is all about you doing the right thing.

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Stan and I were invited to The League's two-day end-of-year event, where Brian was playing in the finals of the season's round-robin. The rest of us played ahead of the big matches, then had a steak dinner and played poker and hit the putting green at 2 a.m., gambling with whatever chips were left in our pockets. We slept in rooms in the clubhouse, then pegged it again early the next morning. It was the sort of dream golf weekend I had erased from my board of possibilities, and suddenly here I was, walking around in it.

It was a golf society unlike any I'd visited, and not just because they took their club sodas without vodka. I couldn't find any egomaniacs or bullshitters, which in my experience were foundational for any golf club. The guys were genuine and humble and bonded like kin; they shared hugs instead of handshakes, and talked about their lives as they actually were, not how they wanted you to believe them to be.

I was told they'd all taken the same alcoholic ass-kicking as me, yet they were smiling and laughing, two practices I was just beginning to relearn. I wanted in, and was relieved to find I'd already passed the entrance requirement: Be a drunk who doesn't drink. It made The League a tragically exclusive group—we all had friends who no longer qualified, or died trying—and maybe that's what the hugs were about. Official League rules said new members had to have a year of continuous sobriety, an established USGA handicap and a home club for hosting matches. But that all translated to, "You have to be one of the lucky ones." Given the odds of addiction, you had to be a fucking miracle.

And I thought it was tough to get into Pine Valley.



Marty

*I was one of those kids that used to leave school and go hit golf balls in the rain by myself. The first golf book I read was *Golf My Way*, by Jack Nicklaus, and I covered it with a grocery store paper bag and wrote “SCIENCE” on it. I’d sit in the back of science class, and I could read what I was going to go practice that day.*

My parents were going through a really ugly divorce, with alcoholism rampant in the house. It was a fucking mess. Golf was my escape. I’d just throw myself into hitting balls and playing golf. I had a knack for it and got some attention from colleges. And then I got into my own addiction and lost that connection to golf in some sense, because in high school, I would go play and get high or drunk during the rounds. My first round shooting par, I was pretty messed up. Then it was downhill from there.

I was 16, and we had a half day of school, so the golf team was supposed to play 18 holes for practice. We were ready to go: We had bottles of Jack [Daniel’s] and Coke 1-liters in our bags. Then our coach kicks one kid out and says he’s going to join us, and I’m like, “Shit, the coach is playing with us; I can’t drink.” So I started hitting shots every once in a while into the trees so I could take a couple of swigs. I remember the second hole: I threw one into the trap in front of the green because it’s a really deep bunker. I could squat down and take a couple of drinks, and by the end of the round, I was just shit-faced. I think I shot par, and the coach is congratulating me: “Great round, man. Great round.”

I had the chance to play in college, but I had to get sober first. I delayed one semester so I could go to rehab, and my first introduction to college was being dropped off at a fraternity house to meet the guys on the golf team who I was getting in a van with the next day for a tournament at Kingsmill. The coach told the guys, “You’ve got to watch out for this guy. He’s sober, just out of rehab.” The coach took me under his wing and kept me in line. Golf became that outlet again, in a positive way.

We would drive this 15-passenger van to tournaments, with our clubs stacked up in the back. We’d play a practice round, then the guys would get some beer and go back to the hotel and start drinking. I’d go to Coach, and I’d be like, “I need to go to a meeting.” He’d just look at me; I mean, we’d be in the-middle-of-nowhere Virginia. They didn’t have cell phones then, and he’d say, “All right, here are the keys,” and I would head off into the night, by myself, in this big passenger van, and go find the meeting.

Other times I’d call a phone number, and I’d say, “Hey, I’m in town, I’m a college student. I don’t have a way of getting around. Where is the meeting? How do I get there?” I’d sit in the lobby, and there are 16 teams at one tournament, so the hotel would be filled with college kids all hanging out. They’d see me sitting there in the lobby, and then some old dude or old woman would pull up and I’d get in the car and drive away. They’d be like, “What the fuck is with him? Is he an escort?” Honestly, I didn’t care. I met some really wild people, and it was pretty cool to travel around like that. I tried to play in every tournament; I begged Coach sometimes to let me go, even though I might not have been playing well, just because I needed something to get me away from the college scene. He got it. He helped me out a lot.

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Marty was there for the end-of-year matches, a few fairways away from us in psychedelic-print golf pants. We’d never met before, but he overheard his playing partners talking about the Irish golf book I’d written, the one with an empty pint of Guinness on the cover.

“I heard about that book,” he said. “I saw that guy on TV. I have no interest in reading some asshole’s drunk-alogue around Ireland.”

They looked at Marty like he was missing something, then pointed to me across the fairway.

“Who’s that?” Marty asked.

“That’s the guy. He wrote the book,” they said.

“But he’s a drunk. What is he doing here?”

They smiled, and Marty let it register. “Shit,” he said. “He is a drunk. That’s awesome.”

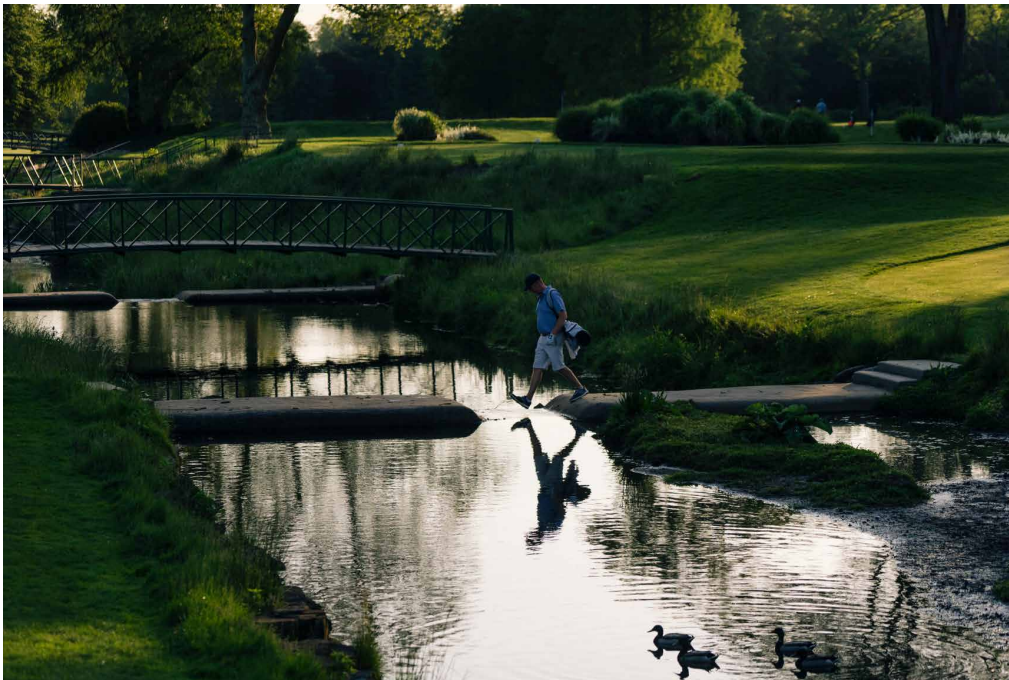
Since that introduction at The League, Marty and I have golfed together across America and the British Isles, squaring off in ruthless matches where I refuse to take strokes, to my detriment. He remembered how I looked that day, when I first showed up to meet The League.

“You looked like shit,” Marty said. “A mentally spent skinny white dude. But that’s what The League’s about: Invite the new guys in, get them talking to guys who have been around longer than they have. Help them figure it out. And you were that guy that year.”

This year is my fifth playing in The League, and the eighth since my last drink. Each season kicks off with an opening dinner in March, where the two-man teams are shuffled into divisions and the matches are announced, and a winter’s worth of pent-up ball-busting is unleashed over rib-eye steaks. The League has a logo and apparel, a website and a season-long leaderboard, as five matches are played from May through August, with playoffs running through the fall.

We all joined The League to meet like-minded golfers, and to re-acclimatize ourselves to golf sans booze, but we stuck around for the courses we got to play. The League has members from every notable club in the Philadelphia section, which includes some of the top-ranked courses in the world. Only one member of each team has to have a home club for match-hosting purposes (we all pay our own way, lest the guys at the most coveted spots get crushed with guest fees), and for the first year, I sponged off Stan’s membership and bounced from one golf Eden to the next in unaffiliated golfer bliss.

The League is made up of only men, but not by rule. Recovery has traditionally been a men-with-men, women-with-women experience, so as to keep any distractions or other addictive behaviors out of the process. Our sober friends tend to be other dudes, so that’s who we partner with in The League. Stan and I have been a team in the better-ball format since we joined together, and thanks to his beginner’s handicap (he had so many dots, our scorecards looked like they’d been blasted with buckshot), we took home the champions’ trophy in our first year. Our fortunes have since declined in step with Stan’s handicap, but the idea of The League as a trophy hunt was never part of its charter.



Jim

I didn’t grow up as a golfer. I didn’t really take it up until later in my career. I grew up near Bethpage on Long Island. I had been on Bethpage Black before. It was the last time I dropped acid.

I was living a pretty fast-paced life in New York. And it was going nowhere good. I was bartending, running with that world. I borrowed 700 bucks from my parents and checked myself into a \$35-a-day rehab upstate. I came home sober at 28 and had to start life over.

I remember I was at a conference for my company and they had a social day—golf or spa. So I'm sitting at the spa with the spouses and thinking, "Man, I have to be out there with all the clients." Next company outing, I bought some clubs, and I wasn't bad. I started showing up at a public course outside Philadelphia, meeting up with other sober guys I knew who played. And I got the idea: Hey, let's make a league out of this so that we have some golf on the calendar—so we were guaranteed to get together and play, rather than it being a haphazard thing.

Selfishly, this was going to help me in a few ways. First, we could schedule golf together, and I knew when I was going to be playing. And it also gave me the chance to play other courses I wanted to see. Some of these guys—there were seven of us, and we pulled in an eighth guy to make a league out of it—they belonged to nice clubs, and it was a chance to play at good places. But the most important thing was I needed to be around other sober guys. We all did. This was four hours out of the office, out of airports and out of the car, in the outdoors, away from phones. The golf was great, but it was that time with other people like me, away from the pressures of starting a new company, that was a huge part of my sobriety. We met more guys—there are a few at every club—and it grew from there. Twenty years later, we have 70- something players now.

Like any group of guys this size, we have the occasional asshole or sandbagger, and we deal with that. Originally, we played for money, for a pot at season's end. And then The League got bigger, and the pot got bigger, and we were playing for serious money, which brought in some shady handicapping and disagreements about matches—stuff we didn't need. We had to get back to what this was really about: getting to know other guys like us. There are guys who will tell you The League saved their lives. We had to keep that community aspect as our focus. So now we have a trophy for the winners. We charge \$300 a year for dues, which covers two events, the trophy and [the] website, and then with what's left we give out about \$3,500 to charity—to caddie scholarships, to recovery places, to charities that some of our members have started. Some of our guys have lost kids to this disease, so we are supportive of those causes.

A friend in New York told me early on, "Hey, if you aren't going to enjoy life, go drink. If you want to be miserable, you can drink and do that. It's easier. But if you want to live and be happy and enjoy your life, then start doing it." And taking up golf was one of the ways I started enjoying my life.

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Then, The League took a little bit of vision, and now it takes a lot of work. Jim sends the emails and organizes the spreadsheets and collects the checks, and there are plenty to collect these days, after 20 years of expansion. Jim and The League members were willing to let me write about them, in the hope that other sober golfers might kindle similar communities elsewhere.

The 72 players this season are split into six divisions. Teams are left to schedule their own matches and input results on the website, and Jim keeps it all running as smoothly as he can. If you think sober folks are all born-again peacemakers, our end-of-season event would suggest otherwise. There's nothing quite so quarrelsome as a recovering alcoholic who thinks he didn't get enough strokes.

We certainly aren't saints, but I'm always struck by the lives my friends have built from their ashes. None of us got sober to improve our résumés; we were as desperate as the drowning, and we're one drink away from being back there. But I remember walking into that first dinner and seeing proof in every seat that being an alcoholic was my strength and not my shame. I could do anything, because so many of them had.

The rewards of recovery—self-respect, hope, courage, honesty, peace—are not material things, but it doesn't hurt the case for sobriety that The League's ranks include actual captains of industry, and a handful of CEOs. Jim sold the company he founded after getting sober, and today owns three more. Brian has two himself, and Stan and Marty started up their own recovery business that's expanding across the Mid-Atlantic. Lawyers, builders, hedge-fund managers and writers, too, who once drank gin for breakfast or scoured crack houses for a fix. Our friends in The League keep us from getting too impressed with ourselves. The League adds new golfers every year, but that doesn't mean it doesn't lose a few along the way.

Aside from our monthly matches, most of us have become go-to partners in recurring foursomes. A dozen members were just out in Bandon together, and every year Jim takes a gang down to his place at The Homestead. I still play plenty of golf with guys who refill their coolers at the turn, but there's a comfort with League guys; you feel more like yourself, so you gravitate back to those groups, as we did last fall at Marty's club, where he and Brian didn't give near enough shots to me and Stan. We sat around a table in the grillroom, passing the peanuts

and explaining what The League meant to us.

“Truth is, golf saved my life,” Marty said. “It was there for me at exactly that moment I needed something to fill my time that wasn’t going to kill me. And that’s what The League is about: getting better. A lot of golfers are struggling. Golf revolves around drinking, and it can keep guys stuck in that shitty cycle. The League, I think, shows that’s not the only option.” He opened a menu. “You guys want ice cream?” Ex-drunks have insatiable sweet teeth, by the way. There’s a lot of sugar in booze.

“It keeps us honest,” Stan said. “Recovery does. And The League does. Alcoholism is the only disease where one of the symptoms is your brain telling itself it doesn’t have that disease. Like, yeah, I just had my third DUI and my second wife left me and I don’t have a job, but I’ve got this all under control. If I’m in The League, hanging around a bunch of other [recovering] alcoholics, I’m either not going to drink or I’m going to quit The League. If I’m drinking, the last thing I want is to be around people in recovery. They’re going to see right through my bullshit. And yes, I want ice cream.”

Brian sat up in his chair. “That’s the best part about it: the people. The fellowship. I like to play competitive golf, and this is my only chance to do that, so that’s fun. But what started as an excuse to get out for more golf turned into these relationships with guys who have become my best friends. I wasn’t expecting that at all.” We gave our dessert orders to the waiter, and I raised my hand for butterscotch.

“It’s funny, guys talk about playing better when they’re loaded, or needing their swing oil to relax,” Marty said, “but I’m playing the best golf of my life right now, college or any other time. I remember I was out with the team once, and we were practicing on this beautiful golf course and the sun is setting, this awesome red sunset. The rest of the guys are talking about where they were going to party that night, and I said, ‘Guys, look at that sunset. It’s beautiful.’ They all literally stopped and looked at me, and were like, ‘What are you talking about?’ They didn’t get it. That’s the best part of golfing sober for me: being able to pay attention to everything that’s going on around me. We play a sport out in the middle of nature, in the most beautiful places on Earth. That’s how I relax out there. I look around and I think, ‘Man, I get to play golf. I’m the luckiest dude I know.’”

Note: Names have been changed to protect anonymity.