

# C H A

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# L L E

# N G E



Andy Wright and Mark Townsend represented GM



← The excellent closing par 4 at Moortown in Leeds

# Accepted

The Yorkshire Challenge offers the chance to play three Ryder Cup courses in three days. We sent a team to try and land the most unlikely of wins







It dominated everything that happened over the few days, from the pre-game to the post-game. Even when I was first asked if I wanted to play in it months in advance, I could already feel the dread building....”

If I do have a kindred golfing spirit, it is Andy Wright. Andy is a scratch golfer at Royal Troon. He comfortably drives the ball 300+ yards, his irons, Mizuno blades, are a standout strength and he’s considering trying to qualify for next year’s Open at his home club. He’s the kind of golfer you’d stop to watch on the range and has the look of someone who genuinely knows what he’s doing with some tour sticks. You could easily think he plays golf for a living and, for a good while, that will have been the dream.

But, up top, he’s as risible as I am. Andy’s inner chimp resembles a kind of frenzied orangutan, with dark thoughts constantly getting in the way of anything productive. His body language is a complete giveaway of what’s either just gone on in his head or is about to. All of which made him my perfect partner for the 10th Yorkshire Challenge.

My main concern, I would repeatedly reassure myself, was that we would be a bit lightly raced for the opening exchanges. I was just back from a family holiday – Crete should you be interested – while Andy has a five-month-old baby daughter. But the rota had been kind to us – Lindrick, Ganton and then Moortown – and we both, without saying as much, had mentally envisaged a steady start before putting the clog down at the business end of things.



Hand off club tells the story for Andy on the last at Lindrick

## “THERE WAS A RALLY OF SORTS AND WE GOT TO SEE MOST OF GANTON’S BACK NINE FROM THE SHORT STUFF”

He had never played Lindrick or Ganton before, so I would be able to lead him round the first couple of days before removing the blinkers at Moortown, where he had played a few times and where I have been a member for the past five years.

In truth, I had summered well and had even come through two holes, both par 5s, with Matt Fitzpatrick unscathed, posting back-to-back pars by not having to chip. My irons are quickly catching up a crippling short game, but I can generally nudge my way round. A performance coach might point to the fact that I’ve broken 75 half a dozen times this year; a realist would quickly temper that by reminding me that all of them came during rounds where none of it mattered. Not that it ever does.

We both knew that our collective negativity would likely render us useless. If you were to handicap us for our mental ability to get the most out of a round, Andy would probably struggle to get by on a stroke a hole, while I would require the gentleman’s maximum for whatever was going on the day. Together, there was a possibility we could be a genuine abomination.

### ● ROUND ONE: LINDRICK

The 1st at Lindrick has thankfully been cleared out in recent years, which allowed for a nervous prod up the left from me and a more purposeful 2-iron from Andy. Ten minutes later, I was able to produce a 30-yard flop shot over some timber to kick-in distance, which should have put me in a positive frame of mind... but only served to tell me that this would be as good as it was going to get.

Two holes later, carried away by a back-foot, checky little pitch to the 2nd, I advanced my tee shot at the par-3 3rd not even a third of the distance. Again, part of my brain delighted in the fact that my partner was able to brush off having to then follow this



Looking back up the 1st towards the clubhouse at Lindrick



There was too much of this over the course of the three days



cataclysmic fat on what I had left behind of the tee, as he flushed his tee shot to four feet (he missed). But the more vocal monkey was telling me that I wouldn't be able to shake this off for at least the rest of the round, more likely the remainder of the week.

We reached the turn on 16 points, mainly due to Andy's run of four pars to finish the nine. It felt like a crushing disappointment, but should have been a cause for celebration. We wouldn't better it all week.

Stranger shots began to emerge and, while we knew that less was more when it came to any pre-shot chat, there was that familiar nagging doubt that things were about to get worse. Our first blob came at the 17th, a hole where Greg Norman made a 14 in the Martini International in 1982, and we consolidated that with a one-putt bogey on 18 for 31 points.

As is often the case, the further away we got from having to hit a golf ball, the more our confidence rose. Next day's 1pm tee time would give us time to hit a few balls, enjoy a liquid lunch and get acquainted with the rapid putting green at a very special golf course. The forecast was for 26° and we were going to have ourselves a day at what *Golf Digest* ranks as the 71st best course in the world. We were now into the competition proper and we'd "get after it a bit more", whatever that means.

● **ROUND TWO: GANTON**

The first five holes at Ganton are still something of a fog. I failed to find my tee shots at the 2nd and 3rd, courtesy of two very anxious

flat pulls that came hot on the heels of a very unsettling opening hole, which showed up my inability to a) play a fairway bunker shot and various distances of chip-and-run, and b) display some element of self-awareness as to when to pick up!

Three holes in and we had a solitary point. Come the 6th tee, a 469-yard par 4 with a stroke index of 1, Andy power-piped his 2-iron into a very dark corner of North Yorkshire, which, bizarrely, he refused to label a shank ("I blocked it"). Even more oddly, he actually went to look for it. This was a new low point and, though it probably was just about possible to sink even deeper, thankfully we didn't.

It should be added that I did miss an 18in putt for par, and three points, but, in the grand scheme of things, this was a big move forward. Now we could hit the reset button; Andy's shank was out of the system and the driver would now come out of the bag. I was on the board and we could happily go about our business of making too many bogeys and enjoying a course that is unlike many others.

There was a rally of sorts and we got to see most of Ganton's back nine from the short stuff. Thirty-one holes in to the event, we would each add our second three-pointer, sadly at the same hole, and would finish with the possibility of a thundering climax... one which never even looked like materialising ▶



Ganton offers a one-off inland golfing experience



The vast Pandy bunker between 17 and 18 at Ganton has been restored to its former glory





Competitors making their way through a parting of the sand

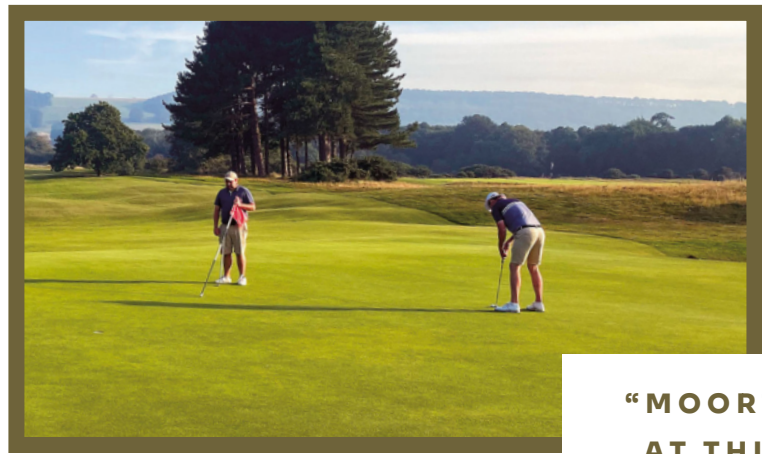
after we had both knocked our short-iron approaches to within 15ft of the final pin.

The easy headlines around both Lindrick and Ganton are that they have both held the Ryder Cup, part of a special club of just nine English courses to have done so. But it is their ability to also move with the new that keeps them relevant. In 2022, Lindrick staged the Girls' and Boys' Home Internationals, while Ganton held the Senior Amateur. Indeed, Ganton remains the only inland course to have hosted The Amateur Championship.

Both have undergone management programmes to clear out gorse and woodland and, while the modern professional game might now sadly overlook these types of courses, they're perfect for the rest of us. And, judging by what seemed like everybody else's scores, very playable.

The bit not spoken about in the promotion of competitions like this is the camaraderie, both with your partner and those playing the same loop of courses. If you want to sign off a round with a drink, the club actually has its own gin, and Ganton is right up there for sitting round a table with eight relative strangers having a laugh about what's just happened.

The past two days had been two of the greatest on record for laughs, friendship, new faces and the odd good shot, and all played on two of the very best courses in one of the game's leading golf counties.



All three courses in the Yorkshire Challenge have hosted the Ryder Cup

We departed up Station Road, one of the great thoroughfares to and from a golf course, half of them turning left to Scarborough for fish and chips while we returned to Leeds. We filled the journey with the self-affirming game of our worst three shots of the day and then what was the particular mental breakdown that helped fuel them.

● FINAL ROUND: MOORTOWN

Day three and the denouement of our efforts at Moortown, another Ryder Cup venue and another course that is very much on the up thanks to the efforts of its staff and the architect, Clyde Johnson. No need to overthink this one; this is my happy place.

Away from the course, we were now dovetailing beautifully. We were able to order each other's food without the need for unnecessary chatter, and our anti-inflammatory programmes – Andy for his thumb, me for my back – were now perfectly in tune. In just a few days we were acting like an old married couple, albeit one that isn't very good at golf.

Moortown plays at its very best at this time of year (September) and the old girl was looking resplendent. Again, the early exchanges are something of a blur. There is something called post-traumatic amnesia where you can't remember a distressing event, like a car crash, and this comes close to describing the front nine. I do remember Andy emerging from the halfway hut having reconvened with his mental coach over a WhatsApp SOS; he was muttering something along the lines of "this can't carry on like this" as we arrived on the world-famous par-3 10th, Gibraltar. He promptly missed the green.

At the 15th, Andy split the fairway 320 yards away and would then chip in, both of which were things of beauty in their own right. But they would sadly bookend a knifed approach and subsequent chunked chip. My own tale of woe was summed up at the next where, for the 15th time in 17 shot holes over three days, I would make the most straightforward of bogeys from less than a 6-iron in. For the past decade, my sole focus has been not knowing where I get a shot and now, when the big occasion arose, I couldn't dim the inner noises. In among all the self-loathing, this remains one of life's great mysteries – why does the possibility of scoring three points on a golf hole cause such needless anxiety?

There was still time for Andy to hit a screaming hook at 18 that sends a shudder through me even now and we sign for 29 points and 168th place. We've managed to finish ahead of two teams. If there were to be a happy ending to this doomed relationship,

**“MOORTOWN PLAYS AT ITS VERY BEST AT THIS TIME OF YEAR AND THE OLD GIRL WAS LOOKING RESPLENDENT”**



it's that we're still good friends, probably even better than when we both missed Lindrick's opening fairway. Andy is now back with his mental coach and has an almost never-ending body of work to refer to, while I am now the new owner of his old TaylorMade Spider putter. Three days watching me underhit putt after putt after putt may well have done nothing for our scoring, but it did prompt Andy to courier something more suitable down from Scotland.

"Not even having a partner could keep the demons at bay," Andy reflected afterwards. "They've penetrated my psyche so deeply that a route out now seems impossible. Still, what a laugh. If I had to do it all again, I wouldn't change much and I'm not sure I'd even be able to learn from the countless errors. Mark and I have bonded over many things since we first met, but nothing glues us together like our inability to access even a fraction of our golfing potential.

"There were a lot of factors that came together to make the Yorkshire Challenge arguably the most enjoyable competition I've ever played. Up there with the old university tournaments that are as much about the social element as they are about the actual golf. The golf, however, was excellent. Not literally, but as an experience.

"Playing with a partner who's just as needlessly nervous as you are creates a brilliant atmosphere. There's nothing like shared misery to bring people together. Everyone is out to have a good time on three brilliant courses and the way it is run by everyone involved makes that possible, no matter the scores. If you can't enjoy playing in the Yorkshire Challenge then I'd consider hanging the sticks up, as it's about as good as it gets for amateur golf."

Looking down on 'Gibraltar', Moortown's famous par-3 10th hole



## The Yorkshire Challenge

The Challenge was created by some forward-thinking Lindrick members and is one of the most popular multi-day events in the UK. As well as being able to play three of Yorkshire's most historic golfing venues – Ganton, Lindrick and Moortown – competitors will

also receive a dozen Titleist Pro V1 or Pro V1x balls, a glove and the opportunity to book club, shoe and ball fittings. There are daily prizes at each course and the best aggregate points score over the three rounds wins the Yorkshire Challenge. It is a men's pairs better-ball Stableford with an 85 per cent handicap allowance. The maximum shot allowance is 18 and competitors must be aged 18 or over. The 2024 event will take place from September 4-6.

➔ [yorkshirechallenge.co.uk](http://yorkshirechallenge.co.uk)