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1. Les Ferdinand at Llandrindod Wells Golf Club

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2. The fantastic four – Iestyn, Norman, Melissa and Les



The fantastic fore!



A quartet of golfers land the golden ticket of golf and good times in Mid Wales, as Iestyn George reveals

“That’s the first time I’ve had that reception on a golf course”

Les Ferdinand is grinning. He’s just hit as fine a drive as one could have wished for after a three-hour drive from London to Llandrindod Wells Golf Club and has received a standing ovation from a dozen club members as the ball sails past them towards its intended target. The October sun is not shining, it’s *beating* down on this delightful piece of rugged hillside golf. We’re just one shot into our 54-hole trip to the Heart of Wales and it already feels like golf doesn’t really get any better than this.

Llandrindod Wells would appear to have more Tottenham Hotspur fans among its

membership than any golf club outside North London. The man who currently coaches the forwards at Spurs needs no introduction to them. For the uninitiated, however, here goes...

Les Ferdinand is a footballer of renown, one of the best British strikers of the 1990s. Capped 17 times for England, his wholehearted commitment to the cause made him a fans’ favourite at every club he played.

Les loves golf, but has never played in Wales before. The lure of three days’ golf in Mid Wales with a few pals during a break in Premier League action has him chucking his clubs in the boot of the car the minute he’s waved his players off on international duty.

Along for the ride are Norman, Melissa and myself.

Norman is a teaching professional raised in Durban. He grew up playing amateur golf with the likes of Ernie Els, Retief

Goosen and Rory Sabbatini. At one point during our trip a man will shake him warmly by the hand and thank him just for hitting the golf ball so beautifully.

Melissa is an agent representing sports people, entertainers and TV presenters at the Wasserman Media Group. She smacks the ball a mile and is joyously unfussy in her approach to the game. When she was a little girl her father used to pay her a pound every time she stayed silent for three minutes.

Then there’s your correspondent, a lefty hacker with an armoury of excuses, the least credible of which is that I’m actually right-handed. Then again, Phil Mickelson’s not done too badly considering he signs cheques with his right paw.

So why Mid Wales? Simple enough – it’s Wales’s most peaceful region. Not that there’s anything sedate about the golf, as we are to discover. It’s also surprisingly accessible – a three-hour drive from

London, half that time from the West Midlands and an hour from the home of The 2010 Ryder Cup.

The course at Llandrindod Wells is a curiosity – a links track on top of a mountain, designed by Harry Vardon with further amendments made by James Braid. They were joined by the third member of The Great Triumvirate, JH Taylor, for the official opening of the course in May 1907. As we climb up to the top of the course with club captain and lifelong Spurs fan Grahame Glover-West we marvel at the tricks the course delights in playing with a strategically-placed cluster of trees here, a dip in the fairway there.

Today's match is a titanic clash between Wales (Grahame and me) and the Rest of the World (Les and Norman). Mel is still stuck in a board meeting while we bask in the autumn sunshine. Shame. This is one of those afternoons for standing in the middle of the fairway with arms outstretched at the wonder of nature around us and admiration for the craft of Vardon and Braid.

We approach the 18th all square. And what a final hole. 'Death or Glory' is a 297-yard par four, for which there is little option but to carry your drive over a quarry-sized chasm and avoid bouncing on the mountain road just short of the green. Les' drive flies the green, but he holes the winning putt to take the honours. Curses.

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"What's not to like about 50 acres of tranquillity, a fabulous wine list and two lovely black Labradors?"
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We tear ourselves away from the clubhouse and head off to the Lake Country House & Spa (www.lakecountryhouse.co.uk), a lovely Victorian hunting and fishing lodge on the outskirts of Llangammarch Wells, the smallest of the four spa towns in Mid Wales. When the railway line was built in the 1860s, there was a stampede to the hotel – albeit a very dignified Victorian

one – to sample the only barium springs in the UK. The setting is idyllic. What's not to like about 50 acres of tranquillity, a great spa, a fabulous wine list and two lovely black Labradors called Belle and Cassie?

Builth Wells is just eight miles from Llandrindod Wells and is best known as the venue of the biggest agricultural show in the UK. We're greeted outside the traditional Welsh longhouse dating back to the 15th century by club president Bob Hardwick and Gwynfor Evans, one of the brains behind the Heart Of Wales initiative, which promotes golf in the area. With Melissa having joined us we decide to split into two threeballs, with the best two scores in the team counting on each hole. So that's Les, Gwynfor and myself versus Bob, Melissa and Norman. Bring it on!

After the challenging back nine of Llandrindod Wells, the opening holes at Builth Wells are something of a relief, with everything laid out in front of you. Easy-peasy you might think, particularly

if you're skilled enough to use a neat deflection from the corrugated iron roof of the pro shop to assist you on the par-three fifth, as some members like to do. By the time you reach the tight, tree-lined tee box on the 382-yard par-four eighth you get the distinct feeling the course is now calling the shots. As we walk past the waterfalls separating the eighth green and ninth tee, Les asks: "Is it me or are the greens getting smaller and the course tighter?" Gwynfor smiles quietly to himself.

A gallery of Charlet cows greet us just a few feet behind us on the 12th tee – more Moo Meekly than Boo Weekly. A loud explosion of methane greets my hideous hook out of bounds. "I don't think they thought much of that," says Les.

Our trio loses out by a single point, but our disappointment is tempered by the healing powers of a pint. We wave our goodbyes and head off to our next destination, pausing for a photo opportunity with a group of squaddies who spot Les as we drive across Epynt Mountain.

The Felin Fach Griffin (www.eatdrinksleep.ltd.uk) has a reputation as one of the best pub restaurants in Wales. Having already been spoilt rotten, the pink Welsh beef takes things to another level. Les reflects on what drew him to golf.

"When I was young, I always felt that golf wasn't for me," he admits, "so when I was at Newcastle and we used to stay at these five-star golf resorts I'd point blank refuse to play, thinking: 'They're only letting me play because of who I am.'"

He caught the golf bug after retiring as a player. "I've got no time for elitism or prejudice. I would never play a club that had those kind of values." Fortunately for us, there is no sign of such values here in Wales – just a refreshingly relaxed, atmosphere and plenty of hearty banter.

Back at Peterstone Court (www.peterstone-court.com), a fabulous Georgian hotel with quirky contemporary touches in the shadow of the Brecon Beacons, we rest easy for the night. The next morning, after feasting on a wonderful breakfast, we amble the six miles to Cradoc Golf Club, pretty



Me:
"Putting the wrong way again."

Grahame:
"Another tap-in then..."

Les:
"Spur of the moment."

Norman:
"The model pro."



Cradoc Golf Club

philosophical about the dull grey sky that greets us on the final day of our trip. For the good folk of Cradoc, however, it's as if the golfing gods had torn the blue skies from the heavens in reprisal for an inappropriate mulligan taken by one of the members. "It's a real shame," says Robert Southcott, "the Brecon Beacons look fantastic from here."

No matter. The views would have been wasted on this quartet, as we have spent two far-too-polite days playing social golf and a little competitive edge needs to be introduced to add some spice to proceedings. It's England (Les and Mel) versus the Rest of the World (Norman and me), as this glorious course unfolds in front of our eyes. The land used to form part of the Penoyre Estate. The mansion house was designed by Anthony Salvin, who had a hand in restoration work at both Windsor Castle and the Tower of London. Mel is very taken by the idea of living in the house.

We stop off for an impromptu photo opportunity with some lady members ("Which one of you is the famous one, then?") before encountering the picturesque 12th at Cradoc.

It's a downhill 160-yard par three, framed beautifully by tall trees and, on clearer days, by the Beacons. Our first efforts are ragged, but a hole like this deserves better and with no pressure from behind we reload, Les practically pitching straight in the hole with his second attempt.



Cradoc Golf Club

The Rest of the World claims victory on the 14th green, allowing us to relax for the last few glorious holes. Les hits the perfect towering tee shot at 17. At that precise second, the sun starts fighting its way through the flat grey curtain of cloud and a jet fighter crosses the horizon above the hole. It's a beautiful moment – all that's missing is a choir of celestial angels. Minutes later on the 18th, we're all itching to give it one last

shove with the big stick in the knowledge that our time together is very nearly up. Les duck-hooks his first attempt into the trees. The second is one of those rare but impressive skiers that travel the distance of a pitching wedge. Just as he's teeing up his third, we spot one of the greenkeepers on an adjacent green patiently waiting for us to clear the tee box so he can fire up the ignition of his vehicle. "Sorry about this," shouts Mel, "He won't let us play our shots until he's hit a decent one. Been like it all day."

Right on cue, Les creams one down the middle as we clap enthusiastically and shout "Lovely shot, Mr Ferdinand!"

"I hate you lot," he mutters quietly.

We wander back to the Range Rover contemplating the drive back across the Severn Bridge. Mel is momentarily distracted by the discovery that her post-round Kit Kat contains solid chocolate. "It feels like I've won the golden ticket!" she exclaims. After the last three days, we all know just how she feels.

Where to play

Starting with the links course on top of a mountain...

1 Llandrindod Wells Golf Club

A vibrant club with a rich history. Originally laid out by Harry Vardon at the turn of the 20th century and adapted by James Braid, this is a course that delights in playing tricks with your eyes from the tees. A warm welcome is guaranteed – this is a golfing experience to savour.

www.lwgc.co.uk

T: +44 (0)1597 823873

2 Builth Wells Golf Club

Beautifully maintained throughout, this parkland course gets better and better as it heads away from the clubhouse and into the beautiful Powys countryside. A worthy element of the Heart of Wales group of courses.

www.builthwellsgolf.co.uk

T: +44 (0)1982 553296

3 Cradoc Golf Club

Deservedly billed as one of the best parkland courses in Wales, Cradoc is a picturesque joy that plays beautifully for golfers of all abilities. The practice facilities are excellent, the setting is superb and the members are rightly proud of this jewel in the Welsh crown.

www.cradoc.co.uk

T: +44 (0)1874 623658

Go to

www.heartofwalesgolfbreaks.co.uk for details of their latest offers.

Discounted accommodation can also be arranged at selected hotels, B&Bs and self catering cottages in the area.



Apres golf

Go wild in the country.

4 Off road: You can feel overwhelmed by the beauty of Mid Wales, which is why these expert guided tours of the area are so useful. Jump in the back of a four-wheel drive and explore the rugged landscape via little-used narrow lanes and tracks or take one of the guided walks.

www.exploreheartofwales.co.uk

T: +44 (0)1597 851781

5 Explore the Beacons: That might appear to be stating the obvious, as you'd be a bit daft to travel here and ignore one of the most striking natural locations in Britain. Covering 520 square miles and four mountain areas, there is no shortage of things to do and see in the Brecon

Beacons National Park. The park is home to an assortment of rare and endangered flora and fauna, some of the longest cave systems in the UK, stunning waterfalls and hundreds of miles of walking trails.

www.breconbeacons.org

T: +44 (0)1874 624437

6 Wild at art: Mid Wales is a hive of activity for creative artists of all description. Two collective groups worth investigating are The Hay Makers, based in the famous literary town of Hay-on-Wye and Artbeat Brecon, which promotes a close-knit network of galleries and craft shops around Brecon.

The Hay Makers:

www.haymakers.co.uk

T: +44 (0)1497 820556

Artbeat Brecon:

www.artbeatbrecon.co.uk