For **John Ashworth**, golf is more than the style and the score—it’s a metaphor.

Written by Wendy Hinman
Sticks and rocks. Those are the primitive tools that originated many sports, especially those of Scottish invention such as curling, caber tossing and shot putting. Golf has become the most developed, sophisticated, even elitist of the Scottish sports, but there is still something primeval in its allure. To outsiders it appears a mere game, a pastime at best, but to habitual duffers it is a life skill.

"Golf is like a sharpening stone," says John Ashworth. "It affords anyone the chance to work on their mind, body and spirit all at once. It's a diabolically difficult game but it is 'truth.' The little white ball is just sitting there staring up at you." Sitting there waiting for the stories to emerge.

"Four guys walk onto a golf course, they don't know each other, but they know each other at the end," Ashworth says. They can talk or not. Golf has a voice without words. They play each other, but more than that they play themselves. That is the language which links their souls.

Link soul is Ashworth's latest brand name, but it is a concept greater than a brand. It is also, for Ashworth and those in his company, a creative expression revealing the art and soul of golf, and a chance to promote the recreational and socializing aspects of the game. Ashworth knows brands. His name is forever connected to the game by "the golf man," the iconic logo of Ashworth, Inc. So simple, so inspired, so primitive that some golfers have it tattooed on. "I know of at least 12," Ashworth says.

The story of the little golf man really began when Ashworth attended Orange Glen High School in Escondido. We never seem to realize in high school what is incubating for our destinies. Ashworth was passionate about two things in high school: golf and not appearing to be a geek.

He played on the school basketball team, but he shone on the golf team. In the '70s, golf didn't have the swagger of other sports. It was akin to being in the chess club. Ashworth was voted "Best Dressed" in high school. Unlike many men, "I was pretty con-

a) Ashworth (bottom row, second from left) was a member of the Orange Glen High School varsity golf team (photo courtesy of John Ashworth); b) Ashworth in 1977 (photo courtesy of John Ashworth); c) Ashworth and his son, Max, participated in the Hundred Hole Hike fundraiser at Goat Hill in Oceanside, 2012 (photo courtesy of Link soul).
scious of clothes, how I looked.” This was rooted, he surmised, in “wanting to impress the girls and not look like a geek.”

Out of high school, he was on the golf team at Palomar College in 1978 and then was recruited by Arizona. There he majored in agronomy, which is the science of soil management and crop production. For a golfer it’s the science of greens and fairways—Ashworth was enrolled in a turf grass management program. He had his eye toward being a golf course architect or a course superintendent. By the end of college Ashworth knew he didn’t want to be a pro, but he did want to be around the game he loved.

Like a lot of kids right out of college, Ashworth bounced around a bit. He was assistant superintendent at Whispering Palms, now Morgan Run. He sold insurance for a bit, then was assistant pro at Fairbanks Ranch when it opened. By the early 1980s he was caddie for Mark Wiebe. They were old golf buddies, competitors from high school days; Wiebe went to Escondido High School while Ashworth was at OGHS.

Ashworth didn’t want to be a tour caddie forever, but he got to see some of his idols, such as Jack Nicklaus and Tom Watson, up close. He also got to see a lot of the country in his VW Jetta, which sometimes doubled as his sleeping quarters. And he met a lot of great people.

One of those was Jerry Montiel. Montiel was a sponsor of Wiebe’s and offered Ashworth a job opening a retail sports store in Denver. “I became sort of a buyer/shop manager.” The economy in the mid-80s was only slightly better than it is now and the business struggled. As they closed up shop, Montiel suggested Ashworth stay on to help him figure out another business.

His time in retail helped Ashworth see what everyone else was doing in the market. “The clothing was so bad. I hate polyester,” he says. “There was a stigma that golfers were nerds.” He had an opportunity to make golf cool. He suggested to Montiel that they do their own clothing line. “I can remember where I was on I-5 when the idea came.”

Ashworth moved to L.A., the land of dreams and hard knocks, the land of networks and who you know. “I had a friend whose girlfriend kind of had design experience.” They had a clear direction, but they needed a name to spread and a mark to leave.

Montiel suggested Ashworth as the name. “He thought it had an old English sound to it,” Ashworth says. “And Jerry is about 11 years older than me and knew that if my name was on it, I would work 10 times harder.”

The mark came when Ashworth called Barry Grimes, a local graphic artist and “a friend of a friend.” On the phone they talked about golf and how cool the heritage and philosophy of the sport are. “He drew the logo as we talked.” Thus was born an icon as brilliant as the Nike swoosh, the Macintosh apple or McDonald’s golden arches.

Success came with “a lot of hard work and a lot of luck.” Their sample line hit the trade shows in August 1987 and they got Fred Couples interested. “I knew him from college; he was cool,” Ashworth says. “We went from zero to $100 million in 11 years. It went by in a blur.” The company went public. They brought in a
The Man Makes the Course

new guy to be president. Ashworth says he not only didn’t see eye to eye with him, but “I was probably a little burnt out. I just wasn’t enjoying it anymore.”

He left the company and went back to where it all began. Ashworth and some friends envisioned reclaiming a couple of golf courses that disappeared in Scotland. Could they reclaim the missing links? Eventually, the Archerfield Links were reestablished.

Ashworth, also a surfer, came back to the States and was working with Bob McKnight and Quicksilver incubating brands. One idea was a line called Fidra, after the romantic, wind-swept island off of Scotland’s Firth of Forth.

But in business, timing is as important as hard work and luck. Everything went quiet after 9/11. Quicksilver bought Rossignol Ski and Cleveland Golf edged in. All the while “Linksoul was in the...
back of my mind, the connection, a place,” the way golf makes a foursome of strangers into comrades.

After “a couple of years as Mr. Mom” for his two sons while his wife, Tam, was running Isari Flower Studio in Solana Beach, he played with Linksoul in his mind. He wanted to make golf even cooler, “more natural, transitional, so you can move seamlessly from the office to the golf course to the pub and not look like you’re wearing a polyester golfing uniform. The style of Linksoul is simple and comfortable; it’s what I want to wear.”

Ashworth surrounded himself with good people that he trusted. His brother, Hank, is the sales director. His nephew, Geoffrey Cunningham, is their art director and photographer. His sister, Mary Seymour, is their office manager and sales support. “It sounds like a bit of nepotism, but they have your back.” And “like a good band” he leans into “key people I’ve worked with over the years. So far so good,” he says. “We have good accounts and great ambassadors on tour: Mark Wiebe, John Merrick, Geoff Ogilvy, Lucas Glover, Jeff Hart, Michael Allen and Golf Channel travel guide Matt Ginella.”

Linksoul is about golf for the people, not just the attire, but the attitude. “Golf companies are ego driven,” he says. “It’s more than just hitting it farther. It’s about health and well-being.” Linksoul has a couple of mottos: “Tempest fugit”—time flies—and “Make par, not war.” He is in Carlsbad, the home of Callaway, Titleist “and TaylorMade, a golf Mecca. “It is the best weather on the planet and I’ve been everywhere. It is simple living and the people are nice.”

Muir Field is his favorite course, but he likes Cypress Point in the States. He loves Goat Hill locally for its everyman sensibilities. If doing what you love and loving what you do is a life goal, John Ashworth has come home. He’s old school. He uses persimmon woods, a 1959 McGregor driver and he has “a lot of relationships with putters.”

He has come back to his “sharpening stone.” Linksoul has MGF, or Mandatory Golf Fridays. Sharing a day with your buddies and then going for a beer—there’s nothing better than that. Golf is his metaphor and he is anything but a geek.