

## THE LEGEND OF BAGGER VANCE \_\_ 9.5/10

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*This "golf as life" allegory works like a champ*

*Novel Steven Pressfield*

*Screenplay Jeremy Leven*

*Directed by Robert Redford*

Will Smith ... Bagger Vance

Matt Damon ... Rannulph Junuh

Charlize Theron ... Adele Invergordon

Bruce McGill ... Walter Hagen

Joel Gretsch ... Bobby Jones

J. Michael Moncrief ... Hardy Greaves, child

Jack Lemmon ... Hardy Greaves, old man

***Rannulph Junuh:*** *Grow up Hardy!*

***Hardy Greaves:*** *It ain't time for me to grow up, Mr. Junuh.*

***Rannulph Junuh:*** *You're daddy is out sweeping streets because he took every last dime he had, and used it to pay up every man and woman he owed and every business who worked for him, instead of declaring bankruptcy like everyone else in town, including your best friend Wilbur Charles' dad, Raymond, which is why he's able to sit around all day long on his dignity! Your daddy stared adversity in the eye, Hardy. And he beat it back with a broom.*

Few movies have the combination of period reminiscence (Savannah, Georgia, late 1920s), jock-story appeal, love story, inspirational message, spiritual realization, and assertion of moral universals as *The Legend of Bagger Vance*. The quote above, which occurs following the first round of a special championship golf match at Krewe Island, Georgia, is from Savannah contestant Rannulph Junuh (Matt Damon) to young Hardy Greaves (J. Michael Moncrief). Junuh is 12 strokes down to golf immortals Bobby Jones and Walter Hagen in the match.

They're in the locker room and Hardy has just suggested to Junuh that he's ashamed of his father for his father being so visible out sweeping streets in the city. It's one of my favorite statements of simple loyalty to moral values, the virtue of being a man of one's word, in all of moviedom. And it comes at the beginning of a sequence of scenes that runs the table:

- ❑ A conversation with Adele Invergordon, showing she still loves him, "I liked the way we danced."
- ❑ The discussion between Junuh and Hardy—certainly Moncrief's magical acting moment—of the "greatest game in the world."
- ❑ Out on the course, the transition to Bagger's discussion of this spiritual essence, "the field" and Junuh starting to play golf in the second round, picking up four strokes.
- ❑ That night, at the party, Walter Hagen (Bruce McGill) offers to have Junuh join him on the road for golf exhibitions; Junuh creatively deflects Hagen's manipulative power play.
- ❑ Then out on the dance floor, Junuh kisses Adele passionately, and vice versa, then seeming to recover his "swing," his confidence, he bids her "I liked the way we danced."

The film is based on a book by Steven Pressfield, which I did read but don't remember too well. In fact, I only remember that the screenplay, by Jeremy Leven, is considerably different... and better. It's better in the sense that everything in the story integrates around the decline and redemption of the character of Rannulph Junuh. His conflict represents the challenge we all face in "finding our authentic swing." The message from Junuh's above statement to Hardy is excellence in life only comes from facing your fears and doing the right thing.

As one who plays the game of golf with some competence, I really appreciate the filmmaking technology of *Bagger Vance*. There's a particular scene where caddy Bagger Vance (Will Smith) is walking the course with Hardy and taking distance measurements, checking the breaks on the greens, and so on. On a green he has

Hardy close his eyes and swing a putter back and forth, then at the right moment Bagger places the ball in front of the putter face. Plink. Or is it plunk?

The ball, of course, goes straight in the hole. But what's so memorable is how the camera and audio unite to give you the feeling of a pure, sweet gravity-pendulum swing, and how the sound of impact—while in the background of a cool summer night with the crickets chirping and the breezes rustling the leaves and grasses—captures that perfect strike like an echo in a canyon. Similarly, the sounds and images for the full swing are suggestive of the most exalted feeling one (rarely) achieves by fairly and truly smacking a golf ball.[1]

And the music of course. I've seen the movie several times, and only recently has it occurred to me that above all the film satisfies the aural sense. It, more than most others, is a movie to hear. There's even a hole-in-one sequence where the heavens open and the angels sing. And I love the eerie majesty of the music and images flowing from Bagger's description of "the field," casting golf in the role of a spiritual practice of the highest connection to Mother Nature:

***Bagger Vance:** Put your eyes on Bobby Jones... Look at his practice swing, almost like he's searchin' for something... Then he finds it... Watch how he settle hisself right into the middle of it, feel that focus... He got a lot of shots he could choose from... Duffs and tops and skulls, there's only ONE shot that's in perfect harmony with the field... One shot that's his, authentic shot, and that shot is gonna choose him... There's a perfect shot out there tryin' to find each and every one of us... All we got to do is get ourselves out of its way, to let it choose us... Can't see that flag as some dragon you got to slay... You got to look with soft eyes... See the place where the tides and the seasons and the turnin' of the Earth, all come together... where everything that is, becomes one... You got to seek that place with your soul Junuh... Seek it with your hands don't think about it... Feel it... Your hands is wiser than your head ever gonna be... Now I can't take you there Junuh... Just hopes I can help you find a way... Just you... that ball... that flag... and all you are...*

Truly for those who play the game, the movie provides a tonic through the look and feel of such a potentially wonderful recreational experience —"Okay, so this is what it feels like, the Rhythm, the Incredible Beauty of Nature, the Majestic Music." [Needless to say, finding that experience in actual golfing reality usually requires endurance (and acceptance) of a considerable amount of learning pain. Yet like childbirth, the work and pain usually produce something worthwhile.]

It helps to know a little bit about golf, especially in the fourth round of the tournament, where Junuh goes through a big-head syndrome and, finally, the stirring resolution. The single-phrase reference to the cross he has had to bear—unimaginable horrors of being a captain in the field in WW1 in Europe, winning the Congressional Medal of Honor—both by Bagger and by Adele ("It was just a moment ago.") picks up that thread of what one needs to lay down in order to go forward in life.

***Bagger Vance:** Oh no sir it was just a moment ago... Time for you to come on out the shadows Junuh... Time for you to choose...*

***Rannulph Junuh:** I can't...*

***Bagger Vance:** Yes you can... but you ain't alone... I'm right here with ya... I've been here all along... Now play the game... Your game... The one that only you was meant to play... The one that was given to you when you come into this world... You ready?... Strike that ball Junuh don't hold nothin back give it everything... Now's the time... Let yourself remember... Remember YOUR swing... That's right Junuh, settle yourself... Let's go... Now is the time, Junuh...*

A few of my golf buds disdain The Legend of Bagger Vance, as if it's some sort of New Age hooey that doesn't make any sense. But it does make sense. Can you say "allegory?" To me Vance is cinema within half a point of being perfect (the only thing lacking is Matt Damon's golf swing doesn't look quite as good as one would expect). Otherwise, not a single false step, or false stroke. It inspires, teaches... and makes me want to be a better human, not to mention golfer.[2] [3]

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[1] Now that I think of it, Robert Redford, who directs this movie, has a precedent in this magic of sound with the 1984 movie he starred in, The Natural. Who doesn't remember the scene where he launches ball

after ball into the upper deck—the crack of the bat and the musical, persistent echoes through the stadium as the ball bounds off the wooden chairs, concrete stairs, and metal framing.

[2] Some of the filming was accomplished on Jekyll Island off the coast of Georgia, the infamous setting of the origin of the Federal Reserve. Ref. *The Creature from Jekyll Island*.

[3] There are not too many movies about golf, and very few concerning its spiritual dimension. In the literature, I recommend Michael Murphy's book, *Golf in the Kingdom*, and for nonfiction *The Inner Game of Golf* by Timothy Gallwey. Remember, golf is not like freedom: it's not for everyone.

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*Bagger Vance | Krewe Island | Matt Damon | Charlize Theron | Jekyll Island*