Pembroke Vaile, an intriguing and pensive man from the last century, wrote expressively on the “soul” of golf. Among its elusive elements, he claimed, is “the sheer beauty of the flight of the ball,” and the almost “sensuous delight which comes to the man who created that beauty, and knows how and why he did it.” There is something intoxicating in the harmonically pure meeting of club and ball. Ben Hogan, one of the best to ever play the game, loved to practice and hit golf balls from sunup to sundown. He once said that the perfectly struck shot “goes from the ball, up the club’s shaft, right to your heart.” This is the true essence of what has attracted people to the game for five centuries. For whether it’s a hickory shafted club from the 1800s or a modern graphite shafted titanium driver, the player still has to execute the shot properly.

Golf is a game that has been called a microcosm of life, as every day offers a new set of challenges. To succeed you must work hard to develop your gifts, possess healthy doses of self-confidence and patience, and persevere when times get tough. Golf has been described as a “self-reliant, silent, sturdy,” game, which “leans less on its fellows,” and “loves best to overcome obstacles alone.”

Success or failure depends on one person, ourselves. There are no teammates to help us out when things go wrong, and unlike baseball, we have to play our foul balls. To excel at the highest levels, particular and rare talents are required. Not only physical skill, but a strong and resolved character is necessary to overcome the adversity that will undoubtedly come. As Charles Blair Macdonald, one of the founding fathers of American golf put it in 1898: “No game brings out more unerringly the true character of a man or teaches him a better lesson in self-control.”

The people in this book all possessed confidence in their abilities and were dogged in their pursuit of excellence. But without natural talent, they would never have been heard from. Each of us is born into this world with certain gifts, which, if fully exercised, lead us to the life path we are meant to follow. There are different kinds of gifts, and different kinds of work, but the same God works those gifts in all men and women. So says the Bible. To express our gifts and build a fulfilling life around them is the highest expression of our true essence.


Haultain, 15.


Romans 12:6; 1 Corinthians 12:4-6.

CHARACTER – the mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual.

Rudy T. “Never underestimate the heart of a champion.”
The Lure of the Game
February 6, 2015

Golf certainly can make our stomachs churn and scramble our brains. Mark Twain famously described it as “a good walk spoiled.” In the short space of the fifteen minutes or so it takes to play a hole, it’s possible to experience a full gamut of emotions – you name it and it can be felt, in a million different combinations. Fear and trepidation of the opening tee shot, followed by joy and relief after a great drive nailed straight down the middle, then consternation at the fat second shot plunked into the water, and ending with sadness and disappointment as we walk off the green with a triple-bogey. Herein is a great part of the golf’s attraction.

People are also drawn to the game because it takes them into the great outdoors; to open spaces away from the office. Theodore Arnold Haultain discussed the tactile lure of the course, each with its own personality and varied terrain, in his book The Mystery of Golf. Speaking of the delights of the game in 1910, he described the varied elements that stimulate our senses:

“The great breeze that greets you on the hill, the whiffs of air – pungent, penetrating – that come through green things growing, the hot smell of pines at noon, the wet smell of fallen leaves in autumn, the damp and heavy air of the valley at eve, the lungs full of oxygen, the sense of freedom on a great expanse, the exhilaration, the vastness, the buoyancy, the exaltation.”

“We live in small spaces,” wrote Henry Leach in The Happy Golfer, “with many walls and low roofs.” Away from the city, and its cacophony of angry noises that strangle silence, the golf course provides us with a few hours of refuge. Steaming asphalt and concrete, honking horns, and the incessant buzz and clatter of people coming and going gives way to a quiet oasis of cool grass, green trees, chirping birds and the smell of pine needles. “A golfer on the links is uplifted to a simpler, freer self,” claimed Leach.

Michael Murphy, in his classic book Golf in the Kingdom, spoke of golf in terms of ‘walkin’ fast across the countryside and feelin’ the wind and watchin’ the sun go down and seein’ yer friends hit good shots and hittin’ some yourself. It’s love and it’s feelin’ the splendor o’ this good world.” To David Forgan, who crafted “The Golfer’s Creed” in the late nineteenth century, golf offers “a sweeping away of mental cobwebs, genuine recreation of tired tissues….It is a cure for care, an antidote to worry.”
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“walkin’ fast across the countryside and feelin’ the wind and watchin’ the sun go down and seein’ yer friends hit good shots and hittin’ some yourself. It’s love and it’s feelin’ the splendor o’ this good world.” To David Forgan, who crafted “The Golfer’s Creed” in the late nineteenth century, golf offers “a sweeping away of mental cobwebs, genuine recreation of tired tissues….it is a cure for care, an antidote to worry.”

ENDNOTES

Epigrams after chapter title from http://www.goodreads.com/quotes


[vii] Ibid.


Tags:Add new tag, character and golf, Golf, Pembroke Vaile, spirit of golf, Theodore Arnold Haultain

Posted in Bobby Jones, Golf History, Scotland | Leave a Comment »

Excerpt of Ben Hogan chapter from my book “Never Despair”
August 26, 2014

Ben Hogan loved to practice, but on this warm Texas day his body was working through the recovery process following surgery to remove troublesome calcium deposits from his collar bones. Before going under the knife, it looked as if the top half of a golf ball was sitting under his shirt, nasty residuals of the car accident that nearly killed him two decades earlier. The condition was painful and had impeded his shoulder movement. Although retired from competition and now an old man, he still loved the game and enjoyed hitting golf balls out to his caddy Jody Vasquez. Hogan took a fairway wood, testing his progress. “Then, as he swung forward at the ball,” recalled Vasquez, “all I saw was a blast of turf exploding into the air. The ball jumped forward about 50 yards in front of him. He must have hit inches behind it…Mr. Hogan stood looking down at the ground for what seemed like an eternity.”

Hogan leaned on his club, shoulders slumped, head bowed. After a few seconds he walked over to his cart and sat down. “This icon of a man looked suddenly mortal,” according to Vasquez. “He was tired, physically and mentally,” and “must have simply been asking himself, ‘Why am I doing this?’” Finally, he got up off the cart seat and continued hitting shots. There was no quit in this man. He accepted this difficult day as he had each tough day since he was nine years old, and kept pushing forward.

Sportswriter Charles Price once described Ben Hogan as “a myth everybody knows, and a man nobody knows.” William Benjamin Hogan was born August 13, 1912, the third and youngest child of Chester and Clara Hogan. The family lived in Dublin, Texas until 1921, when Hogan’s father, a blacksmith, was beset with bouts of depression. Early that year he ceased going to church and at times never left the house to go to work at his blacksmithing shop, which, in an age when automobiles were becoming ubiquitous, was making his trade obsolete.

Clara sought treatment for him at a sanatorium in Fort Worth, 70 miles to the northeast, and moved the family there. Chester underwent calming mineral baths and mild electrotherapy treatments, and five months later declared himself cured. He returned to Dublin to open his shop again, telling friends he would bring his family back with him. But he was not a well man. He was drinking and displaying manic-depressive tendencies, in good spirits one day and down the next. He came back to Fort Worth in February and tried to convince Clara to move back to their old home. Clara objected, telling him she thought it best for the children, Royal, Princess, and Bennie, to remain in school until the end of the term. Arguments followed throughout the night.

Despondent, 37-year old Chester Hogan grabbed his.38-caliber revolver on Valentine’s Day 1922, put it to his chest, and pulled the trigger. He was rushed to the hospital but died twelve hours later. A newspaper reported that the only one in the room with Hogan at the time was “his six year old son, who was playing on the floor.” In that moment, Bennie Hogan’s life changed forever. “Ben’s father was his idol,” explained Hogan’s wife Valerie years later. “I was told that at his father’s funeral, they were not able to get Ben to go into the church, that he couldn’t bear to see the casket.”
The little boy had to grow up in a hurry. Chester's death left the family in difficult straits financially. While Clara took in sewing, Ben sold newspapers at Fort Worth's Union Station. "I was skinny and small and I wasn't getting much sleep," he'd remember, "between selling papers and trying to go to school. I don't think it did me any good." When he was 12, he also began caddying, walking seven miles each way to the Glen Garden Golf Club. His mission in life from that point on, he would say years later, was to not be a burden to his mother. "I sold newspapers until I found out caddies got 65¢ for 18 holes. That was a lot more than I was getting staying up to 11:30 and 12:30 every night selling newspapers."

When Ben reported for caddy duty, he was "was given the works," according to friend Jimmy Demaret. Hogan was showed forward in front of the biggest kid and told to fight him. His opponent soon wished someone else had been picked for the task, noted a Sport magazine article in 1953. "The skinny kid tore into him with the sharp fury of a wildcat in battle." As Hogan remembered it, "they threw me in against one of those fellows and I got the better of him." His initiation wasn't over, as next he was stuffed into an old barrel and rolled down a hill behind the clubhouse. After travelling 30 or 40 yards and dropping 20 feet, he emerged a bit battered, but more determined than ever to show his peers he would not be intimidated. He was also determined to do a good job. Some Saturdays he would sleep in a sand trap, using newspapers as a blanket, to be first in line for a bag on Sunday morning. According to Demaret, when Ben spoke of those early days he'd only say, "They were real rough," and let it go at that.

The game appealed to Hogan from the start. In high school he had tried to play football, but was too small, and baseball just didn't catch his fancy. "Why golf did I do not know, but I just loved it." He played and practiced as much as he could. "The grocery where my mother used to send me on errands," Hogan told Look magazine in 1941, "was a half a mile away and I used to hit a ball all the way there and back. At home I wore our lawn bare hitting golf balls of it." When Walter Hagen came to town in 1927 to play the PGA championship in Dallas, an impressionable Hogan took notice. Hagen arrived in a purple car and raincoat fit for a king. "I made up my mind," Ben would remember, "that if golf could make it possible for a fellow to live like that, then I would have a fling at it myself."

But Hogan was no instant prodigy as was Bobby Jones. What Jones was born with, Hogan had to acquire, and he also had to overcome the objections of his mother Clara, who was not happy with all the time he spent on the game. She told him in those early years that he'd never get anywhere fooling around on a golf course. "It's time you went to work," she'd say. To which Ben replied, "I'm going to work harder than anybody you ever knew," adding that someday he was "gonna be the greatest golfer in the world." He would work hard, and when self-doubt crept into his mind, he used anger to drive away the fear.

The same year he saw Walter Hagen, he also met a man who would become a mentor and act as a surrogate father. Marvin Leonard was a successful business man whose doctor told him he needed more exercise in his life. In golf, Marvin found an ideal game. He would rise early to play nine holes, then go home and eat a big breakfast before heading off to work "feeling like a new man." When he found young Ben in the caddy yard, there was something about the kid he liked. He told Ben he was a rank beginner, but that didn't matter to Hogan. "That's okay, sir. Maybe I can show you something." In Leonard, Hogan would find a decent, widely respected man, and the transformative role model he needed.

Leonard, 17 years older than Ben, would serve as surrogate father or older brother, just as O.B. Keeler had done for Bobby Jones. The friendship and support was welcomed by Hogan, who felt the pressure of living up to his mother's expectations. He was always hearing, "Why don't you do it like your brother?" Ben's older brother Royal had become Clara's rock after Chester died, working hard to help the family. Ben's golf, on the other hand, was "nothing," according to his mother. "And nothing divided by nothing is nothing." This, ironically, would become one of Ben's pet sayings. Hogan's wife Valerie always contended that he "had the misfortune to be the youngest of the family."

For Ben, golf became the driving force in his life, notwithstanding his mother's disapproval. At Glen Garden, he also found a boy his age who was not only his greatest competition, but would become one of the greatest players in the history of the game—Byron Nelson. "Friends, but never close ones, they would find distinctly different paths to greatness. Byron began a pattern of superiority in the early years when he beat Ben in the caddies' tournament at Glen Garden in 1927. When Nelson was given junior membership at the club instead of Hogan, it left Ben embittered. He would be spurred by Byron's early success and a rivalry was born, in part perhaps rooted in Ben's jealousy of Byron's easy going personality that made him very easy to like.

Ben would caddy until he was 16, then went to work in the golf shop at Glen Garden. On weekends he'd polish clubs until 3 a.m. "Boy, I'd look at those clubs and they were the most beautiful things, Nichols and Stewarts, all made in Scotland. I got my own set of mongrel clubs out of a dime store barrel for a dollar a piece." Hogan kept working on his game, and turned professional at the tender age of 17. His first tournament, the Texas Open in February 1930 began a 10 year struggle to find his place in the world of golf.

As Ben told Sports Illustrated 25 years later, "I didn't think I was good enough to win anything as a professional, but I figured if I played enough I might make some money...They thought I was nothing divided by nothing. Although I practiced day and night, I was so small a lot of people didn't have faith in me." Apparently, he didn't have much faith in himself either in the beginning, withdrawing from his first two events. In his first attempt he shot 78-75 and withdrew, then did
events, once said that the tour was an "education in survival of the fittest…If you don’t get an easy life. Bob Harlow, founder of the Curtis Cup in 1934, met Hogan when he was caddying as a young man. She saw promise in him and gave him a dozen brand new golf balls and a new pitching wedge. A month or so went by and Hogan went to see her, and asked politely if she might be able to give him more balls. Had he lost them all, she asked? He gave her the box with all the balls inside, with covers so worn that the dimples were almost smooth. There were no cuts or creases; Hogan had simply worn them out.

As he kept wearing the dimples off his practice balls, he found various jobs to put money in his pocket. He was a mechanic, he worked in a bank and a hotel, and even as a croupier at the Blackstone Hotel before trying the circuit again in 1932. "I don’t know why Ben denies having been a croupier,” said Jimmy Demaret. “He was a hungry kid. It was an honest game. Hell, there was nothing to be ashamed of.”

Hall of Famer Paul Runyan recalled card games in the clubhouse with Hogan, and marveled at how he dealt cards “so fast they just spilled out of his hands.”

After going bust on the tour again during a brief stint in 1932, Ben returned home and rented the golf shop at Oakhurst Country Club. “No friend ever showed up,” he told writer Herbert Warren Wind 23 years later. Said Wind: “I’ve never heard a man so bitter.” At Oakhurst, Hogan practiced 4 hours a day and hustled gamblers in his spare time. Hogan would bet that he could hit drives to his friend Buell Matthews from 220-240 yards and have Matthews catch them barehanded. This ploy hooked a lot of suckers, who would usually give up after Matthews shagged the balls. But as his ball approached the cup, the caddy couldn't get the flagstick out of the hole in time. She didn't know if the ball hit the stick or what, but he finished out of the money.

Even after another failed try to play the tour in 1934, including a missed cut in his first U.S. Open, Hogan was not deterred. He was stubborn, practiced all the time, didn’t seek help, and rarely hung out with other players in the bar at the end of the day. Aside from golf, he was also spending considerable time with Valerie Fox, a pretty young woman he had met when he was 14. She was attending Texas Christian University majoring in journalism when they started seeing more of each other. She would recall the early struggles before they were married. “When he got home one year, he talked about the day he hit bottom.” He was playing well, with Horton Smith in his group. If he made a putt on the last hole, he would have made a nice sum of money. But as his ball approached the cup, the caddy couldn't get the flagstick out of the hole in time. She didn't know if the ball hit the stick or what, but he finished out of the money.

Valerie remembered Ben describing that day. “I went over and sat on a bench and just felt like I didn’t want to live,” he told her. “But then Horton Smith came over and sat next to me. Horton told me, ‘Ben, I know you think the world is against you because that was a bad break, but you must get over this and go on. You’ve got a wonderful future.’” Even if he was only trying to be gracious at the time, Smith turned out to be a prophet. Part of that bright future began when Ben and Valerie married on April 14, 1935. They both found in each other something they needed. She believed in him and pushed him when his resolve flagged. Ben’s mother claimed: “Valerie is the only one who can honestly say, ‘I told you so.’ The rest of us hoped Ben would make it, but Valerie was always sure he would.”

Of the relationship, Valerie’s niece Valerie Harriman believed they filled a void in each other’s lives. “She needed his strength of character and he needed someone to wholeheartedly believe in him through thick and thin. He provided her with a life she could never have found on her own, and she rewarded him with unwavering devotion and loyalty.” When Hogan ventured out on tour again in 1936, she went with him. When he ran out of money after missing the cut again in the U.S. Open, Marvin Leonard, who over the years had built a small business empire with his brother, never forgot his young friend, and helped Hogan out financially. In January 1936 Leonard also opened Colonial Country Club in Fort Worth, which would host the U.S. Open in 1941 and remains one of the most famous courses in America, thanks in large part to Hogan’s later association with it as winner of five Colonial Invitational tournaments. But success was only a dream when Ben Hogan ran out of money again in 1937.

“I tried to quit this game thousands of times, because I didn’t feel I was taking care of my wife in the manner I should have…We were staying in crummy hotels and driving broken-down cars. That was no way to live and certainly no way to take care of a wife.” But Valeries wouldn’t let him. She kept saying, “You can’t give up now. You’re so close. I just know it.” So in a lot of ways, in those days, my wife was my sports psychologist.”

When he complained to her that he wasn’t making enough putts to win, she suggested matter-of-factly that he should just hit the ball closer to the hole. Jimmy Demaret claimed that Ben hit the ball as well in the Thirties as he did in the late Forties, but he couldn’t buy a putt. As Demaret put it, “I thought that he would never get the touch. Most good putters are born that way, not made. But Ben made himself into a great putter. To me, that will always be one of the most amazing parts of his success.”

Hogan kept pushing himself to make it on the tour, perhaps motivated by the fact that his old caddy mate Byron Nelson had won the Masters in 1937. But it was not an easy life. Bob Harlow, founder of Golf World and early manager of tour events, once said that the tour was an “education in survival of the fittest…” If you
and left little room for friendly banter on the golf course. "He let it be known early that was going to become workaholics as adults. Hogan's dedication to the game was his obsession, and this leads to detachment and bitterness, and the child often becomes a loner. Many without an adequate support system lacks a strong capacity for intimacy and trust.

Hogan would never forget the "hunger" he spoke of, and could never escape it. "Three, I needed a place to sleep." "Three things. One, I didn't want to be a burden to my mother. Two, I needed to put food on the table. Three, I needed a place to sleep." "Three, I needed to put food on the table. Three, I needed a place to sleep." Hogan later told Jimmy Demaret that at that moment he didn't have a bit of hope left, but Valerie bucked him up. "Don't be silly" she told him. "Things will be okay. We'll just ride out to the club with somebody else. Don't get upset about it." He got a ride to the course, but it is interesting that in a 1983 interview he could not remember who took him there – his old friend and rival Byron Nelson. "So I played. I won $385.00. It was the biggest check I've ever seen in my life. And I'm quite sure it will be the biggest check I'll ever see.

This was his defining moment and a turning point. Later that year Hogan teamed with Vic Ghezzi to win his first event, the Hershey Four-Ball. Ghezzi said in an interview fifteen years later: "Maybe I was imagining things, but his face seemed to turn gray from the almost violent effort he put into every shot. I knew from that day on nobody, but nobody, was going to stop Hogan." By the end of year Ben finished 15th on the money list.

Before he got to Hershey, Hogan had earned the admiration of that year's Masters champion, Henry Picard, who hadn't even seen him play. Hogan's reputation as a hard worker made Picard curious. When Ben arrived for the tournament, Picard sought him out for a practice round. "And on the third tee," he remembered in a 1990 interview, "I watched that swing and I said, 'You can beat the world.' That's what I saw.

Picard was also a kind man who offered Hogan financial support if he needed it. He recalled seeing Ben and Valerie arguing in a Chicago hotel. Their finances were low and they were a long way from home, and Picard sensed their predicament. "Well, I don't have all the money in the world," he told Hogan. "But I've got enough to support you...And that's the way it's going to be. And of course he never did call me for money." Hogan never forgot that gesture. "Picard gave me a terrific boost. Even if you're digging as hard as you can, you like to have somebody on your side." In 1948 he would write in his book Power Golf, that "knowing that help was there if I needed it helped me forget about my troubles.

In the next couple of years Hogan would seek out Picard for practice rounds, and pick his brain. In early 1940, he asked Picard why he wasn't winning. "What are you worrying about, a duck hook? We can change that in five minutes." He weakened Hogan's left hand grip and Hogan liked the results. Hogan practiced at Pinehurst for 12 days in preparation for the North and South Open, a major event in those days. They played together, and Picard was amazed by the display of golf. "I've never seen such power in my life from a man that size." Hogan was hitting it 25-30 yards past long-hitting Craig Wood. Hogan broke thorough, winning three tournaments in a row by an accumulated 34 under par, remarkable scoring in those days. He ended up the leading money winner with $10,655.

Hogan won 4 tournaments in 1940 and 5 in 1941, but was still fighting the hook off the tee. "I hate a hook," he would tell Sports Illustrated in 1955. "It nauseates me. I could vomit when I see one. It's like a rattlesnake in your pocket." That rattlesnake had its origins in the caddy yard at Glen Garden, when the caddies would have driving contests to determine who would shag the balls they hit. Hogan, being small, employed a strong grip and long backswing to maximize his distance, but it was an action that created a tendency he fought until the late 1940s.

In the 1942 Miami Biltmore Four-Ball the hook rose up with a vengeance as he lost in the first round with partner Lawson Little. He sought out Picard, who weakened his left hand grip again. Harry Cooper also noticed that Ben was re-gripping the club at the top of the swing, and told him so. The struggle with the hook would continue, but when World War II came, many players, including Hogan, enlisted, and he lost two years of his career to the war.

Before entering the Army, he was quoted as saying, "I know a lot of people don't like me. They say I'm selfish and hard, that I think only of golf. Maybe I do. But there's a reason. I know what it means to be hungry. I sold papers around the railroad station in Fort Worth when I was 12. I never intend to be hungry again." Forty years later, when asked what drove him so hard to succeed, he responded: "Three things. One, I didn't want to be a burden to my mother. Two, I needed to put food on the table. Three, I needed a place to sleep.

Hogan would never forget the "hunger" he spoke of, and could never escape the tragic consequences of his childhood. His behavior in adulthood was not difficult to understand. Counselors who work with suicide survivors point out that a child without an adequate support system lacks a strong capacity for intimacy and trust. This leads to detachment and bitterness, and the child often becomes a loner. Many become workaholics as adults. Hogan's dedication to the game was his obsession, and left little room for friendly banter on the golf course. "He let it be known early
that he was all golf and no fooling around," Paul Runyan remembered. "Some of the fellows began to even fear getting near Hogan — that icy look he would give you that said, 'That's far enough, friend.'"

Hogan would explain his approach when he started out this way: "I was so broke I couldn't afford to talk to other people, because I was afraid of losing my focus. So I stayed to myself on the golf course ..." Tommy Armour once said Bobby Jones was the "most ruthless, ravenous destroyer" on a golf course he had ever seen, but that was before Ben Hogan came along.

Hogan's refusal to let up, no matter what the score, was never better demonstrated than the 1941 Inverness Four-Ball. He and partner Jimmy Demaret were five up, when Demaret suggested they coast to a win. "We're five up now," protested Hogan, "but what's wrong with winning by eight or ten?" His perfectionism was legendary. "You got the feeling," noted Sam Snead, "that he hated — I mean, hated — the mistakes he made.

This is the answer to why he kept trying to build a swing he could rely on.

Even though he won 6 times in 1942 — and after the forced break caused by the war — 5 in 1945, he was still troubled by the hook that crept into his game. "The more people would be content to win and accept an imperfect swing, Hogan could not. "I was in Chicago, as I recall it," he told Ken Venturi in 1983, "and I was hooking so badly that I couldn't get a 4-wood off the ground, and I had to use iron clubs all the time. I came home and I said to myself, 'you can't play this way.'"

In the famous 1955 Life magazine article that described the "secret" to his success, he related how he found his flash of genius in 1946: "I left the tour and went home to Fort Worth about as desperate as a man could be. I sat and thought for three or four days. I didn't pick up a golf club, although I wanted to in the worst way. One night while laying awake in bed I began thinking about a technique for hitting a golf ball that was so old it was almost new.

What he came upon was the concept of wrist pronation — that is, keeping the left wrist a few degrees concave at the top of the backswing and on the downswing supinating it on the downswing so it was bowed outward coming onto the ball, allowing him to swing as hard as he wanted without the clubface closing coming onto the ball and causing a hook. "It worked. It worked all day long. And the next day. And the next day, too."

Hogan was resilient enough to try new things and had the strongest of minds and spirits when dealing with adversity. After losing the 1946 Masters by 3-putting from fifteen feet on the last hole, he didn't curl up and disappear, but came back to win three of the next four events. That June, after failing to get into a playoff at the U.S. Open — again on the final hole — he came back the next week to win the Inverness Four-Ball with Jimmy Demaret.

Then, at the end of the summer, he won his first major championship, the PGA, in Portland, Oregon. He beat Ed Oliver in the final, but it was his thrashing of friend Demaret 10&9 in the semi final match that drew the attention of reporters. Lawton Carver wrote that Hogan was the most "ruthless, most cold-blooded and least compassionate" of competitors. "He doesn't merely want to beat you. He wants to trample you underfoot."

He was Tiger Woods before Tiger Woods.
as well as a cunning hand. It is also a social game, where one may go out with a friend or with three, and enjoy mutual intercourse...It never falls or grows stale, as morning by morning the players appear at the teeing ground with as keen a relish as if they had never seen a club for a month.

It is a game requiring not only physical skill but the ability to control our emotions, as we try to beat our best scores each time out, as well as the scores of our friends who join us in the endeavor.

The game is different because the ball must wait for us. It isn’t baseball or tennis where a ball comes towards us that we have to react to in a split second. The golf ball just lies there passively, sometimes seeming to taunt us. It’s up to us to make it go. “There is no hurry,” wrote John Low in Concerning Golf, “we fix our own time, we give ourselves every chance of success.” It is this deliberate quality of the game which “makes it so testing to the nerves; for the very slowness which gives us opportunity for calculation draws our nerves out to the highest tension…”

Golf certainly can make our stomachs churn and scramble our brains. Mark Train famously described it as “a good walk spoiled.” In the short space of the fifteen minutes or so it takes to play a hole, it’s possible to experience a full gamut of emotions—you name it and it can be felt, in a million different combinations. Fear and trepidation of the opening tee shot, followed by joy and relief after a great drive nailed straight down the middle, then anger and consternation at the fat second shot plunked into the water, and ending with sadness and disappointment when we walk off the green with a triple-bogey. Herein is the great part of the golf’s attraction.

People are also drawn to the game because it takes them into the great outdoors; to open spaces away from the office. Theodore Hautain discussed the tactile lure of the course, each with its own personality and varied terrain, in his book The Mystery of Golf. Speaking of the delights of the game in 1910, he described the varied elements that stimulate our senses:

The great breeze that greets you on the hill, the whiffs of air—pungent, penetrating—that come through green things growing, the hot smell of pines at noon, the wet smell of fallen leaves in autumn, the damp and heavy air of the valley at eve, the lungs full of oxygen, the sense of freedom on a great expanse, the exhilaration, the vastness, the buoyancy, the exaltation.

“We live in small spaces,” wrote Henry Leach in The Happy Golfer, “with many walls and low roofs.” Away from the city, and its cacophony of angry noises that strangle silence, the golf course provides us with a few hours of refuge. Steaming asphalt and concrete, honking horns, and the incessant buzz and clatter of people coming and going gives way to a quiet oasis of cool grass, green trees, chirping birds and the smell of pine needles. “A golfer on the links is uplifted to a simpler, freer self,” claimed Leach.

Michael Murphy, in his classic book Golf in the Kingdom, spoke of golf in terms of ‘walkin’ fast across the countryside and feelin’ the wind and watchin’ the sun go down and seein’ yer friends hit good shots and hittin’ some yourself. It’s love and it’s feelin’ the splendor o’ this good world.” To David Forgan, who crafted “The Golfer’s Creed” in the late nineteenth century, golf offers “a sweeping away of mental cobwebs, genuine recreation of tired tissues....it is a cure for care, an antidote to worry.” As Ballour and Murphy point out, golf is also a social game, one we play with fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, sons, daughters, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and friends in our Saturday foursome. We even play with strangers who join us on the first tee when we sneak out for a quick nine holes after work. The game allows time for conversation between shots. “How’s the job going?” “How are the kids?” “What about that game last night?” “How’s the new car?” There is also considerable time for thought directed at how we are succeeding – or failing – in getting the ball from the teeing ground to the hole, as we commiserate with each other around the course.

We may enjoy the park-like setting of the golf course, the competition, and the chit-chat, but the most intriguing element of the game is trying to hit that little damn ball where we want it to go. “Without doubt,” wrote Hautain, “the ball must be impelled by muscular movement; how to coordinate that muscular movement – that is the physiological factor in the fascination of golf.”

When one considers the physics involved, this is a daunting task. We apply about 33 pounds of muscles to swing a golf club almost four feet long in an arc of twenty feet around our body, while shoulders and hips turn, arms move up and down and five separate torques may act upon the club. All of this motion is focused on making contact with a ball 1.68 inches in diameter squarely in the center of a two inch square club face on a path that will propel the ball with sufficient force to send it the correct distance to the target.

The ball is in contact with the face of the club for half a thousandth of a second (as the club travels about three quarters of an inch), and the margins of error are incredibly slim. If the club face is open or closed just 2 or 3 degrees with a driver, the ball will fly 20 yards or more off line, depending on the speed of the swing. Sometimes just hitting the ball at all is a challenge, and a proper club/ball contact that sends the ball straight to our intended target seems a minor miracle. All of these gyrations are produced with one objective: to put that ball in a four and a quarter inch hole placed in the ground hundreds of yards away. All the while around we have to negotiate water hazards, bunkers, trees, and perhaps wind and rain – in addition to our own nerves and tempers.

Yet, in spite of these considerable challenges, on the occasions when things work, by design or divine intervention, and the ball is struck solidly online, it provides...
Tom Watson before succumbing to his illness. What kept them going? They all inspired people with his fight, carrying the bag for one final major victory with boss Bruce Edwards was afflicted with ALS, or “Lou Gehrig’s disease,” but kept going and the championship ever produced and later have a successful broadcasting career; syndrome, but would capture the U.S. Open in some of the most trying conditions the highest levels of the game, paving the way for the likes of Tiger Woods.

Charlie Sifford was the victim of incessant racism which included harassment and death threats, but he never bowed, and was a winner at the cancer returned; Babe Didrikson Zaharias was struck down by colon cancer but wouldn’t quit. She became a spokesperson for the American Cancer Society and was an inspiration to fellow sufferers, especially after winning another Women’s U.S. Open over a century ago that nerve, enthusiasm, and practice are the three essentials to succeed in golf. But to be great requires the gift.

The people in this book all possessed confidence in their abilities and were dogged in their pursuit of excellence. But without natural talent, they would never have been heard from. Each of us is born into this world with certain gifts, which, if fully exercised, lead us to the life path we are meant to follow. There are different kinds of gifts, and different kinds of work, but the same God works those gifts in all men and women. So says the Bible. To express our gifts and build a fulfilling life around them is the highest expression of our true essence.

These champions – all of whom, with the exception of caddy Bruce Edwards, are members of the World Golf Hall of Fame – came from different times and had different backgrounds, but they all shared a gift for the game of golf. This is what defined them, just as our gifts define us. Horton Smith, winner of two Masters Tournaments, claimed that “golfing genius strikes seldom. It is something that cannot be attained by practicing any more than a really great voice. It can be developed but before a man is a genius at golf, he must have within him a spark that is the gift of the Almighty.” Three-time British Open champion Bob Ferguson said over a century ago that nerve, enthusiasm, and practice are the three essentials to succeed in golf. But to be great requires the gift.

To be great requires the gift. It is this unique and branded gift that set the truly great above all the rest. The men in this book: Harry Vardon, Bobby Jones, Ben Hogan, Charlie Sifford, Ken Venturi, Bruce Edwards; and the lady, Babe Didrikson Zaharias, all had gifts they exercised freely and rigorously, never squandering them, even when circumstances might have forgiven them for fading away quietly. They never quit, even when things looked bleak. Bobby Jones claimed that golf “is the most rewarding of all games because it possesses a very definite value as a molder or developer of character.” It was character which guided these people’s lives and girded them against persistent struggles in the face of adversity that threatened their very lives.

Harry Vardon was at the peak of his game when struck down with tuberculosis, but he resolved to play on, winning two more British Opens, and acting as a mentor to promising new players; Bobby Jones was stricken with a rare and debilitating spinal disease that would confine him to a wheelchair when he was still a young man, but he kept building the Masters Tournament, writing about golf, and being an ambassador for the game; Ben Hogan nearly died in a car crash that permanently damaged his body and caused him chronic pain for the rest of his days, but he came back and won six more major championships, and built a company bearing his name.

Babe Didrikson Zaharias was struck down by colon cancer but wouldn’t quit. She became a spokesperson for the American Cancer Society and was an inspiration to fellow sufferers, especially after winning another Women’s U.S. Open before the cancer returned; Charlie Sifford was the victim of incessant racism which included harassment and death threats, but he never bowed, and was a winner at the highest levels of the game, paving the way for the likes of Tiger Woods.

Ken Venturi lost his game after a car accident and later to carpal tunnel syndrome, but would capture the U.S. Open in some of the most trying conditions the championship ever produced and later have a successful broadcasting career; Bruce Edwards was afflicted with ALS, or “Lou Gehrig’s disease,” but kept going and inspired people with his fight, carrying the bag for one final major victory with boss Tom Watson before succumbing to his illness. What kept them going? They all
"However mean your life is, meet it and live it.” These words of Henry David Thoreau could describe the lives of all the people in this book, who faced tremendous physical and emotional trials in their lives, yet persevered and overcame. The strength and resilience of the human spirit – indeed, its stubborn persistence – was a common denominator in facing their struggles. Golf can be a vexing and cruel game, and teaches us much about ourselves.

Golf has been described as “a contest, a duel, or a melee, calling for courage, skill, strategy and self-control. It is a test of temper, a trial of honor, a revealer of character.” Jerome Travers, the great amateur of the early 20th century, believed the character of an individual is laid bare under “the microscope of golf influence. The good and bad qualities in our make-up are exposed to view under the spell which golf casts over man …” In the end, as with most of life, our success hinges on the character and spirit we possess.

How would our temper be tested if we were struck down by a serious illness, a near-fatal accident, or some career-threatening injury from which we would never fully recover? How would our honor be preserved if we had people telling us we were washed-up, unwanted, and persona non-grata on the golf course?

How would our character be revealed if Lou Gehrig’s disease robbed us of the ability to walk and talk?

How would we face the fear? Would we give in to self-pity, or persevere and keep going? Where would we find the strength to actually carry on with our careers with any measure of success?

The people in this book displayed their character vigorously by not giving up or giving in to the suffering that afflicted them. This is not a chronicle of the tournaments they won and lost, but an examination of how they applied their gifts and pushed themselves to achieve success. Champion golfers have been identified as sharing certain qualities; among them tough-mindedness, confidence, self-sufficiency, and emotional stability – all of which provide players with the armor to press on when things look hopeless. The very nature of the game prepares one for adversity, and rewards a persevering spirit that doesn’t accept surrender without a fight. “It is merely a blessing,” claimed Jerome Travers, “if our temperament is such that we are able to blind ourselves to the drudgery which usually goes with indomitable persistence and hard application” in overcoming obstacles.

The stories of these champions bear witness to their courage and discipline, but also to the love and support of family and friends who helped them. As Robert Tyre Jones, grandfather of Bobby Jones, claimed, “No man ever accomplishes anything really worthwhile alone. There are always two additional forces at work – other people and Providence.” Their families and friends bolstered them, but the game itself offered them refuge and therapy for both body and mind when they were suffering.

In recent years Golf Digest magazine has featured a series called “Golf Saved My Life,” which focuses on this therapeutic side of the game. Whether the men and women telling their stories have struggled with cancer, autism, bipolar disorder, or serious injuries brought on by war or accidents, they all reveal how the game has helped give renewed purpose to their lives.

This theme is nothing new. In 1965 Golf Journal ran the story of a James Ranni, 62-years old at the time, who had suffered a major stroke years earlier. The neurosurgeon who saved his life was a golfer, and had come to see the game “as an additional therapeutic measure to help patients overcome serious handicaps and regain health that has been lost.” As for Ranni, he claimed that when people spoke of “how close you can get to God on a golf course,” he knew exactly what they meant. “I can’t tell you how important it is to me to be an example of what golf can do in rehabilitating the disabled.”

The National Amputee Golf Association was formed in 1954 in response to World War II veterans returning home with missing limbs and wanting to get back into the game. It has followed the motto, “It’s not what you’ve lost, but what you have left that counts.” Bert Shepard, who lost his right leg in WWII, spoke to Golf World in 1997 of how people claimed he had “the guts to go out and play golf and all that. What about some credit to the game of golf? I’ve seen guys who never got out of the house get fascinated with golf, and it changes their lives.”

Thomas M’Auliffe is a wonderful example of doing his best with what he had left. In spite of losing both arms in a horrible accident when he was 9-years old, he learned to play golf. In 1915, the then 22-year old told his story to The Golf Monthly. By gripping the club between his cheek and shoulder, he was able to hit the ball 100 yards with a driver. With a “combined swing and jerk of the body and shoulder,” the article explained, “he is able to give the ball a telling stroke,” and it noted that he had shot 108 at the Buffalo Country Club. M’Auliffe was certainly a positive thinker. “I never permit the thought of my accident to take possession of my mind,” he declared, “nor do I think of anything being impossible for me to overcome. When the time comes, I just go ahead as best I may, and somehow, someway, I generally get there without any great difficulties.”

A decade before Thomas M’Auliffe, there was the story of Old Tom Morris. His son Tommy, who like his father won four British Opens, died on Christmas Day 1875, three months after his wife and baby died during child birth. Old Tom would see his wife and all five of his children die before him, and he claimed that if not for his God and his golf, he would not have found the strength to go on. The game sustained him – he died in 1908 at the age of 86 – and played up until the end. The
when Bobby Jones, with his retinue of 5,000 hero worshippers, met old Harry Andrews, “recorded the achievement of 285. “What a dramatic little episode that must have been on the third green at St. Andrews of Harry Vardon’s favorite venues. Bobby Jones won that year, with a record score of 285.

Triumphs of Golf’s Great Champions Below is an excerpt from a book I am writing called

Harry Vardon Gives Way to Bobby Jones

[96x26]

Golf is a test, Arnold Hautlain claimed, “not so much of the muscle, or even of the brain and nerves of a man,” as it is a test of his or her innermost self....

...of his soul and spirit; of his whole character and disposition; of his temperament; of his habit of mind; of the entire content of his mental and moral nature... it is a physiological, psychological, and moral fight with yourself; it is a test of mastery over self.

What is there to learn from the challenges these golfers faced and how they overcame them? Why should we care? Hautlain once again offers insight. “In a picture, a sonata, a statue – the color, the sound, the form assuredly may interest us,” but these “are but vehicles for the artist’s thought and emotion.” He continues:

It is the artist’s conception of life that is so interesting. So it is with sport. We like immensely to know exactly how a man boxes or fences or drives; but underneath this, we like immensely to know how he fights the battle of life; for he will do the one as he does the other – that we feel. So there is a great kinship between artist and sportsmen. Each reveals himself in his work; and it is in this self-revelation that humanity takes an absorbing interest.

The professionals play golf, while we play at it; they know they can succeed, we hope we can. For those who have the gift of golf, we wonder what it is that makes them special. This is especially true when they triumph over adversity that could just as well crush them. What are they really like? As a spectator once asked a reporter who was covering Babe Zaharias, “Is she tough?” “Is she nice?” “I’d sure like to know how she really is.” We want to know about their lives, but are at the mercy of what they tell us, or want us to know.

We do our best to find out what they are really like? In the heat of battle, how do they react? How do they deal with victory and defeat, both on and off the course? These are questions this book attempts to shed new light on.

These individuals, with the exception of Mr. Sifford, have all passed away, but their struggles are as relevant today as ever. They were connected, in more than a casual way, to each other by the game. Consider Harry Vardon, the greatest player of his era, knew Old Tom Morris and played with Bobby Jones in the latter’s first U.S. Open in 1920. He told reporters the young Jones would be one of the very best golfers ever seen, and was right. After Jones retired in 1930, he played an exhibition in Houston attended by Babe Zaharias, which “fired up” her own golf aspirations. Earlier that same year, Jones started the Masters Tournament, which Ben Hogan won twice. Jones used to say if he had to choose one man to hit one shot to win a major championship, he would pick Hogan because of his “spiritual ” assets. Hogan, late in his career, saw a tenacity in Ken Venturi that he admired, and took him under his wing. They became great friends, and Ken was a pallbearer at Hogan’s funeral.

Venturi befriended Charlie Sifford in those days when racism dogged him. When the restaurant at Pensacola Country Club wouldn’t let Charlie eat there, Venturi spoke up, and took his own breakfast and joined his friend in the locker room. Bruce Edwards worked for Tom Watson, whose teacher was Byron Nelson, the same man who tutored Ken Venturi. The first tournament Edwards and Watson won together was the Byron Nelson Classic. Amazingly, the chain of golf history is often connected by one or two links, much less than the well known “six degrees of separation.”

The talent of the seven people in this book, in concert with character, defined the lives and created more links in a chain going back to the beginnings of the game. Today, we still remember them. When Old Tom Morris died over a hundred years ago, his achievements as a golfer were well known and documented, and were sure to endure. The greatest moral of his life, it was stressed upon his passing, was that “no matter in what sphere, it is character that achieves the greatest victories.” As Arnold Hautlain wrote plainly, “It all comes back to character; not intellect or acumen or ability...just character.”

In many ways, the legacy of how these champions dealt with the physical and emotional trials life handed them is more impressive than the records they set on the golf course. “We define and admire greatness,” wrote Mark Frost in his wonderful book, The Greatest Game Ever Played, “not only by the magnitude of achievement but also for the degree of difficulty that person has to...”

Tags: inspiration, soul of golf

Posted in Bobby Jones, Golf History | Leave a Comment »

Harry Vardon Gives Way to Bobby Jones

October 12, 2013

Below is an excerpt from a book I am writing called Never Despair: Trials and Triumphs of Golf’s Great Champions.

In 1927 the British Open was played over the Old Course at St. Andrews, never one of Harry Vardon’s favorite venues. Bobby Jones won that year, with a record score of 285. “What a dramatic little episode that must have been on the third green at St. Andrews,” recorded the Literary Digest,

when Bobby Jones, with his retinue of 5,000 hero worshippers, met old Harry
Vardon, who was playing the homeward nine. The correspondent draws a graphic picture of Vardon, conspicuous for his loneliness, swallowed up the milling mob which swarmed in Jones’s wake. What thoughts must have burned through Vardon’s brain as he stood…above his ball, arms outstretched to fend off the rabble which threatened to trample him.

Perhaps Harry recalled the day at Prestwick in 1914, when the thundering herd cheered him to his 6th Open championship. Vardon knew his time had passed, and when he looked at Jones, he realized here “was one so young and yet who had the game at his finger tips,” innately knowing that “he would be one of the very best golfers ever seen.” This precocious Jones boy was the vanguard of change, noted the article:

The old order changeth, yielding place to new. Sport can be mercilessly cruel. There is pathos in the picture of Vardon struggling to save his ball as the man-pack surges around the latest Caesar. Few in that thrill-drugged crowd noticed Harry Vardon. Fewer still recognized him if they saw him. Some day even Bobby Jones will know that stilly quiet, the silence that roars with the echoes of vanished ghosts.

Tags:bobby jones, British Open, Harry Vardon, st. andrews
Posted in Bobby Jones, British Open, Golf History | Leave a Comment »

Phil is “The Man”
July 27, 2013

Four years ago my heart was broken when Tom Watson lost the Open after hitting two perfect shots on the last hole. Last year Ernie soothed some wounds and last Sunday Phil Mickelson made me realize more than ever that golf is a game of fate, and when it is your time, you can’t stop whatever is going to happen from happening. A month removed from a crushing defeat at Merion, Phil came from 5 back on Sunday to win going away. After his bogey on #11 he was still four shots back – then the wheels fell off everyone else’s train and he didn’t miss a shot. Birdie at #13 after a perfect tee shot, birdie at #14 with a long putt, then a fantastic up and down on #16 when a pitch hit just a hair heavy would have left the ball back at his feet. The guy has nerves of steel. Then, by his own admission, two of the best 3-woods he had ever hit to the 17th, setting up a 2-putt birdie. It was all over, except it wasn’t. Phil? Would he go all Winged Foot on the 72nd? No. A pure hybrid off the tee, then an iron that came five feet from landing in a bunker, but instead bounded up 15 feet from the hole. It was the bounce Tom Watson wanted in 2009. Then, like Watson on the 72nd at Pebble in 1982, Phil rolls the putt into the dead center of the hole. That is what makes the game so great and why I love it’s history so much. Champions rising to the occasion and forgetting past mistakes. Good for you Phil. Well done!

Tags:Muirfield, Open, Phil Mickelson
Posted in British Open, Golf History, Golf on TV | Leave a Comment »

In Memory of Francis Ouimet’s “Shots Heard Round the World”
February 16, 2013

At 360 yards with a sharp dogleg left, the 17th hole was no brute. A birdie could be had, and he needed one desperately. His second shot, piercing through the cool grey sky, settled fifteen soggy feet from the hole. Surveying the putt, he knew it was now or never. Feet squished in the turf as he took his stance. Just give it a chance. The putter swept back and forward into the ball, and it clicked off toward the hole. The line and pace down the slippery slope were perfect. The large crowd held its collective breath as the ball curved right and rolled quickly toward its target. Slow down! It struck the back of the cup hard, bounced into the air, and disappeared from sight. An explosion of ecstatic shouts, whistles, and applause reverberated through the moist autumn air, and may well have shaken a few leaves off the trees.

Twenty-year-old Francis Ouimet had done it! He was tied for the lead in the U.S. Open with Harry Vardon and Ted Ray. A hard-earned par on the last forced a playoff, a fitting conclusion to a story few people would believe had it not really happened. “In years to come it will become more famous,” declared the American Golfer. “Not a soul who witnessed it, including Vardon and Ray, will ever forget.” Nor shall we.

A century is a long time, a hundred years of yesterdays and memories long since forgotten. The participants in this battle entered their eternal sleep generations ago, but the events of those three days in September, 1913 at The Country Club in Brookline, Massachusetts will always be remembered by those who love golf.

The Bible tells us that “time and chance happen to them all.” Mr. Ouimet’s time was married to that place, to that championship. How else can one explain an unknown amateur, with one modest Massachusetts State Amateur title to his name, beating men who had won British Opens and competed in major championships since young Francis was a child? It was simply meant to be.

As Ouimet noted later, “fortune has to deal kindly with any golfer in winning a championship. There are times when things seem to go just right with a player and others when everything goes wrong.” Pretty much everything went right for him, and it all began across the street from that fateful 17th green. “I have often wondered.”
Francis wrote in his book, *A Game of Golf*, “what my golfing activities would have amounted to if my father had not bought a home bordering on The Country Club.”

His opportunities in the game were certainly blessed by his proximity to the course, which in later life he would consider hallowed ground. His older brother Wilfred got a job caddying at the club, and Francis became enamored with the game on his walks back and forth across its green fairways on his way to school. Hunting for golf balls in the tall grass along the way was a fun and beneficial fringe benefit. Francis and Wilfred laid out a 3-hole, homemade course in the cow pasture behind the house, and Francis practiced every chance he got. His father Arthur was not a golfer and looked down on the game, and his mother Mary thought he “had gone crazy because golf was the only thing” he seemed interested in. Parental feelings notwithstanding, he never wavered from his path.

At eleven, Ouimet joined his brother as a caddie and was able to see many great golfers play in tournaments at the club – Jerome Travers, Willie Anderson, and Walter Travis among them – practicing aspects of their techniques he deemed useful. A kind member, Samuel Carr, gave the young boy some discarded clubs; a driver, lofter (similar to a 7-iron), midiron (2-iron), and putter, and more fully armed, Francis kept building his game. Rising at 4:30 or 5 a.m., he’d play a few holes at The Country Club “until a greenskeeper drove me away. Rainy days, when I was sure no one would be around, I would do the same thing.” Francis formed a golf team at his high school, and at sixteen won the Boston Interscholastic championship. When the U.S. Amateur came to his home club in 1910, he tried to qualify, but failed by one stroke. He tried again the following two years, but again failed, each time by a single agonizing stroke. He’d keep trying.

By the time 1913 rolled around, Francis had earned a certain reputation in his home state. In June he won the Massachusetts State Amateur, closing out his semi-final match by playing the last 6 holes in an incredible 6 under par. Two weeks before his tussle with Vardon and Ray, he finished second in qualifying at the U.S. Amateur in New York, then gave eventual winner Jerry Travers a game fight in their second round match before losing 3&2.

People in the know were impressed with Francis. The tall, angular-faced lad with the ready smile had a cool, even temperament that complimented his shot-making and putting skills. Bernard Darwin, the English golf writer, affirmed at the time, “Mr. Ouimet stepped at a bound into the forefront of American amateurs.” He had talent, but how far would it take him?

Time and chance then took the stage. The first bit of luck was getting into the field for the U.S. Open. Based on Ouimet’s good performance in the U.S. Amateur, Robert Watson, president of the USGA, encouraged him to play. “He thought I should enter,” recalled Ouimet years later. “I argued with him about the folly of such a thing, and he won the argument.” The main draws were undoubtedly Vardon and Ray. The stoic Vardon, 5-time British Open champion, at age 43 was still the game’s consummate ball-striker, but erratic on the greens. The burly 36-year-old Ray, winner of the British Open in 1912, was one of the game’s longest hitters, but also possessed a wonderful short game. “If only Harry could putt like Ted,” people whispered.

The two had been touring the U.S. since August playing exhibition matches and exciting crowds wherever they went, including an eleven-year-old boy in Atlanta named Bobby Jones. The strong field also included two-time defending champion Wilfred Reid, another strong English player, and Louis Teller of France added to the international flavor.

The Country Club course they faced measured 6,245 yards, a hardy enough test in the days of hickory shaft clubs when a 250-yard drive was a monster. Francis successfully negotiated the two qualifying rounds, and did more than hold his own in the first rounds of the tournament proper. After smoother-topping his opening tee shot about 40 yards into the rough and starting 6-6-5, his nerves smoothed out, and he shot rounds of 77-74. He trailed Vardon and Reid by four shots, Ray by two, and the two had been touring the U.S. since August playing exhibition matches and exciting crowds wherever they went, including an eleven-year-old boy in Atlanta named Bobby Jones. The strong field also included two-time defending champion Wilfred Reid, another strong English player, and Louis Teller of France added to the international flavor.

The final round would validate Bernard Darwin’s assertion that never “was there a championship in which the fortunes fluctuated in so amazing a manner.” Ray was finishing up his round of 79 as Francis walked to the first tee. Francis began well, parring the first four holes. While playing the sixth he was told that Vardon had tied Ray with 304. “There are three or four still out there who will beat us,” Vardon told a British reporter, lamenting that his putting had let him down once again. Ray was beside himself. “I played rotten, and to make matters worse Harry went out and did the same thing.” But those chasing, including Hagen and McDermott, all came up short. The only hope for an American victory rested with Mr. Ouimet.

“I will admit that my pulse beat a trifle faster,” he recalled, “for I felt confident that I
Arnold Palmer won at Cherry Hills in 1960 and lost at Olympic in 1966, how Larry Ben Hogan survived a near-fatal car crash and then won at Merion in 1950, how Francis Ouimet won for the same reasons Bobby Jones won at Inwood in 1923, how particular moment in time.

Lowery, who Francis claimed was "a veritable inspiration all the way around," had failed to convert his putts on 17 and 18 that final round?

Francis played two warm-up rounds with friends at Wellesley Country Club, shooting a pair of wretched 88's.

How did it happen?

How could it happen – especially on the course Francis grew up on?

Walking to the 11th tee he heard someone in the gallery say, “It’s too bad, he has blown up.” I knew he meant me, and it made me angry. It put me in the proper frame of mind to carry on. There was still a chance, I thought.” Champions find a way, and he steadied himself with pars on 11 and 12. “Standing on the 13th tee, I realized I must play those last six holes in two under par to tie.” After a good drive, he missed his second on the 320-yard hole and was left with a 30-foot shot from the fringe, but chipped the ball right into the hole for a three and “was still in the hunt.”

The cheers brought Vardon and Ray out to the 14th to watch him finish, “and a great finish they saw,” noted one reporter, “which impressed them enormously even if in the circumstances it did not exactly delight them.” Ouimet parred the 470-yard par-5 fourteenth and saved his par on the 370-yard fifteenth with a delicate pitch over a bunker that he played to perfection, leaving him a yard from the cup. Time was running out. The 16th was a short 125- yard par-3. A birdie from 18 feet seemed possible until he left his putt short – 9 feet short – but somehow he coaxed the next one in.

By the time he reached the 17th tee, an estimated 10,000 spectators had come out to watch him, a huge crowd for that time. Something special was happening, and they wanted to be a part of it. Ouimet’s mashie second was struck well and opened the door to a putt. One thought filled his head as he looked over his 15-foot downhill, side hill winder – get it there! A car honked its horn repeatedly as he putted, a horn he never heard, so “thoroughly was my mind centered on the business of holing the putt.” He stroked it as firmly as any putt he ever hit and knew he holed it “the moment I struck it.” Bernard Darwin reported that amid the tumult of cheers, catcalls, and yells, the people appeared, “one and all, like madmen.”

When Ouimet chipped up and sank a 4-foot putt on the final hole to secure his place in a playoff with Vardon and Ray, “there was a briskness and decisiveness about every movement, and whatever he might have felt, he did not betray it by as much as the movement of an eyelash.”

The crowd was euphoric, young Ouimet’s performance had been grand, a dream – but surely he’d blow sky high in the playoff. “That their boy hero, after a night to sleep on it, should go out in cold blood and beat, not one, but two champions, was too much to hope for,” added Darwin.

From Francis’s point of view, “it would be nonsensical for me to say that at the start of the playoff I felt confident of defeating Vardon and Ray. While I did not feel nervous, I did realize the formidable task in hand. Two things and one person, in particular, helped me amazingly. The person was my little caddie, Eddie Lowery; one of the two things was the appeal which he made to my patriotism; the other thing was my determination that Vardon and Ray should not be able to say that my tying them for the championship was a fluke, which I felt they could say if I ‘went to pieces’ in the playoff.”

On the first hole he made a 4-footer for a five to tie his fellow competitors. When it fell, “almost instantly any feeling of awe and excitement left me completely. I seemed to go into a coma.” After 6 holes Vardon was one up on Francis and two on Ray. This heartened Ouimet, who realized “my opponents were not infallible in their play.” They all turned in 38 strokes and Francis took the lead on the tenth with a par. “Once he got the lead I was very much afraid for our British representatives,” wrote correspondent Henry Leach, “and I think they were a little afraid too.

The 16th was a short 125-yard par-3. A birdie from 18 feet seemed possible until he left his putt short – 9 feet short – but somehow he coaxed the next one in.

A hole later he was still one up on Vardon and two in front of Ray. A double-bogey at the 15th took Ray effectively out of it, but Vardon stayed one behind going into the penultimate hole. In need of a birdie, Vardon tried to cut the corner of the dogleg, and instead, found the bunker that now bears his name. When Francis saw where Vardon ended up, he felt, “for the first time in the match, that the title was mine and I felt absolutely sure of it when, after getting safely on the green in two, I sank the putt for a three.” A par on the last gave him a 72 to Vardon’s 77 and Ray’s 78. Victory! The multitudes rushed in and gathered up the beaming champion on their shoulders, as delirious cheers filled the air.

How did it happen? How could it happen – especially on the course Francis grew up on? Harry Vardon claimed he played the worst golf of his entire tour that week of the Open. What if he had played his best? The Sunday before the championship began, Francis played two warm-up rounds with friends at Wellesley Country Club, shooting a pair of wretched 88’s. What if he had done that in the tournament? What if he had failed to convert his putts on 17 and 18 that final round? What if ten-year-old Eddie Lowery, who Francis claimed was “a veritable inspiration all the way around,” had not been his caddy? Golf, like life, isn’t about “what if,” it’s about what happens at a particular moment in time.

Francis Ouimet won for the same reasons Bobby Jones won at Inwood in 1923, how Ben Hogan survived a near-fatal car crash and then won at Merion in 1950, how Arnold Palmer won at Cherry Hills in 1960 and lost at Olympic in 1966, how Larry
Mize won at Augusta in 1987 and Tom Watson lost at Turnberry in 2009. Time and chance happened to them all. It was meant to be. It was golf.

Ouimet’s victory was a watershed moment. As Herbert Warren Wind put it, the luckiest thing that happened to American golf was that its first great hero was a person like Francis Ouimet. He wasn’t a rich kid; he wasn’t a hard-nosed professional. “Here was a person all of America, not just golfing America, could understand.” Ouimet, the ex-caddie, the working-class boy who quit high school to help support his family, the boy who played for the love of the game, remaining an amateur to his final days – the boy who grew into the man who mentored other great champions like Bobby Jones and Gene Sarazen. No one-hit wonder! After this day he went on to win two U.S. Amateurs, the last in 1931, and was a member of eight Walker Cup teams. He was a gentleman, without scandal in his life, and the ideal of an American hero.

Harry Vardon wrote in his autobiography that Ouimet’s performance “was one of the finest exhibitions of courageous golf which I have ever witnessed.” He was also firmly convinced that it was from this victory that the seeds were sown for what “was to become the remarkable improvement in the play of golfers from the United States.” In 1913 fewer than 350,000 people played golf in the U.S.; ten years later the number had increased to 2,000,000. With Ouimet’s victory, America had graduated as a first-class golfing power. As one reporter put it, “Francis Ouimet, besides having achieved immortal fame among golfers, has done something splendid for the good of that game.”

Time and chance brought Arthur Ouimet and his family to that house on Clyde Street across from the 17th hole at The Country Club, and for that we can be forever grateful.


Posted in Golf History, U.S. Open | 3 Comments »

The Golf Ball Went Too Far 100 Years Ago!

September 6, 2012

In today’s game, tour pros launch the ball so far and high into the atmosphere that you can’t see their drives land. I am reminded of the repeated entreaties of Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer and Gary Player that the golf ball must be reined in for the greatest players in the world, otherwise golf courses will all have to be 8,000 yards long. The impact of “juiced up” golf balls on the game is not a new dilemma. As Harry Truman was fond of saying, the only thing new under the sun is the history we don’t know.

Over one-hundred years ago John Low wrote that the “character of golf has been considerably changed by the introduction of india rubber into the composition of its balls.” This was a year after the Haskell ball was introduced and the old gutta percha ball went the way of the dodo bird almost overnight.

“The reason for this change is not far to seek,” he explained in his book Concerning Golf, “nor could it have been prevented except by prompt and decisive legislation. But the legislators were neither prompt nor brave enough to carry out their own convictions, and thus an irredeemable opportunity was lost. The committee which was supposed to be acting did nothing.”

As in today’s current debate concerning the anchored putter, Low lamented that the genie had been let out of the bottle. “After resolving that ‘the new balls were not suited to the courses as at present laid out;’ they were incapable of offering any proposal, either as to the balls or the courses, which should restore the game to its proper position; they were too timid to risk defeat at the hands of the vulgar, who were from obvious reasons only too ready to greet the advent of the rubber balls with satisfaction. A simple announcement of a negative character, prohibiting the use of balls containing india-rubber in competitions would have...fixed the game in a scientific position.”

The “vulgar” would seem to refer to the average golfer – the duffers of the world. Of course we like to hit the ball further, but our less than perfect swings don’t propel it 350 yards. And even though we are all hitting the ball farther than we did twenty years ago, the average scores for amateurs have not decreased. We may be 15-30 yards closer to the green off the tee, but still take 4-5 shots more to get the ball in the hole.

But for the pros, it’s a different story. “A glance at the play on any well-known course,” Low continued, “is sufficient to show the change which has taken place in the character of the game, whether the scores be changed or not. When we find the iron used where the spoon did duty in the former days; when we find the second shots played from a point nearer the hole; when we find the men who carried three or four wooden clubs carrying but one; when we find, not perhaps the advisability, but the necessity for long straight tee shots diminished, then we know that the character of golf has been modified.”

The character of the game is an evolving thing. Harry Vardon won most of his championships with the gutta percha ball. “I personally shall always regret the passing of the guttie ball,” he related in his autobiography, published in 1933. “In my own mind I am firmly convinced that with its passing, much of the real skill had gone forever... In the days of the solid ball it was necessary for the drives to be properly struck if anything approaching a good round was to be recorded... On the other
hand if the solid ball had remained as the recognized one to be played, there is no doubt golf would never have taken such a hold on the community.”

Vardon was nostalgic for the old days, as was John Low before him, and to a lesser degree perhaps Messrs. Nicklaus, Palmer and Player. The USGA may one day change the nature of the ball, but it’s not going to force a return to persimmon head drivers and hickory shafted niblicks. Those days are gone, and the game will continue to evolve. What is important is that the genie in the bottle doesn’t change the nature of the game to such an extent that in 100 years it will be unrecognizable. We can only hope that the “legislators” John Low spoke of will be prompt and brave enough to preserve the essence of this great game.

Tags: golf ball, Harry Vardon, John Low
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Walter Hagen and a Feel for the Game
July 10, 2012

When Bubba Watson hooked that spectacular wedge shot 40 yards around the trees and onto the green to win the Masters, he said simply “I got in these trees and hit a crazy shot that I saw in my head.” He saw it, he felt it, and he hit it. Walter Hagen would have been proud. For Hagen, learning to control the swing by feeling rather than by thought was the only route to a sound golf game. Feel, art, imagination, experience, and mental toughness were his requisite qualities that made a champion. Hagen’s understanding of golfing artistry was marked by a tolerance for a diversity of styles, whether technically perfect or not. For him, it all boiled down to “sensibility,” a concept he coined and one nearly lost in today’s era of mechanical golf. “Acquire and cultivate the feeling of the swing, by visualizing it” he maintained. “The club generally follows the inclination of the mind.”

The great Henry Longhurst once poignantly noted that in spite of Walter Hagen’s 11 major championships “It is Hagen, the man, who will be remembered more than Hagen, the golfer.” He was “the Haig,” “Sir Walter,” a larger than life figure in the game. We remember Hagen as a swashbuckler, the guy with a sway in his swing that sent the ball into parts of the course unseen by most golfers, but possessed of a magical short game that saved him time and time again. Few ever consider his theories for playing the game, or the ideas that made him a great teacher.

His theories have a historical context and had an impact on some of the finest teachers of the last 50 years – Harvey Penick, Bob Toski, and Jim Flick among them. Moreover, his ideas of imagination and feel have been embodied by players of various generations – such as Seve Ballesteros thirty-five years ago and Bubba Watson today. It is helpful to demonstrate the evolution of the game and politely remind people that the likes of Butch Harmon and Sean Foley did not invent golf instruction.

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