

# 50 Years Ago in the Amateur

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USGA AMATEUR CHAMPION 1898, USGA PRESIDENT 1929-30

When my eldest brother, Robert, invited me to spend the summer of 1897 in the United States—the summer after my graduation from St. Andrews University—I was, of course, delighted to accept, but I had one very important question.

"Do they play golf in the United States?" I asked him. "Should I bring my golf clubs?"

Although I had played the game nearly all of my 21 years and had been fortunate enough to win the St. Andrews Gold Medal in 1895, my brother had been in the United States for some time and had lost touch with the game.

"I believe," he answered, "that some golf is played. I don't know where, but I think you will be able to find a course if you bring your clubs."

That episode, it seems to me, illustrates the difference that 50 years has made in American golf. Half a century ago my brother, in New York, did not know a

golfer or a golf course. Today, with 5,000 golf courses and nearly 3,000,000 golfers, the situation seems hardly credible.

After my arrival here, in order to find a course, I went to a sporting goods store, A. G. Spalding & Bros., and found it had a golf department. Charles S. Cox, the manager, talked to me for a time and then introduced me to H. L. Fitzpatrick of the *New York Sun* and Chappie Mayhew of the *New York Herald*, two of the first golf writers.

The next day they took me to the Van Cortlandt Park course, ostensibly to introduce me to my first American golf course but secretly, I suspect, to see if I really could play the game at all. Later I joined the old Fairfield County Golf Club in Greenwich and became an American golfer.

Although it will be 50 years next month since I had the good fortune to win the Amateur Championship, it will be 51 years since I played in my first Amateur Cham-

## The Amateur Champion of a Half-Century Ago



Two views of the swing which won the USGA Amateur Championship and two Metropolitan Amateur Championships for Findlay S. Douglas between 1898 and 1903. He was also leading amateur in the USGA Open in 1903, the only Open in which he ever competed, and the United States Seniors' Golf Association Champion in 1932. Note the rolled-back jacket cuffs in the close-up of his follow-through and the firm left arm and side as he plays a full shot.

## Fairfield County Players in the Early Days



*Courtesy H. B. Martin*

Seated on the steps of the old Fairfield County Golf Club at Greenwich, Conn., in 1898 are, left to right: rear—Findlay S. Douglas and Charles S. Cox; front—Frank Freeman, Julian W. Curtiss, Ed B. Curtiss, Dr. Carl Martin, James Mason and F. W. Sanger.

pionship at the Chicago Golf Club in September, 1897. That year I was beaten by Jim Whigham, the subsequent winner, in the semi-finals.

The following year—the year of which the forthcoming Championship at Memphis will be the 50th anniversary—the play was at the Morris County Golf Club in Morristown, N. J.

A gallery which I would estimate at about 500 persons followed the leading players. There were 120 entrants. And not only for the Championship but also in non-competitive play, there were plenty of caddies. I wish caddies were as easy to get today.

In form, the Amateur Championship was in a state of flux in those years, even as it has been more recently. In 1897, there was a 36-hole qualifying competition to determine the 16 players who would enter match play. The first three match play rounds were at 18 holes and the final at 36 holes. The following year, the number of qualifiers was raised to 32, and all matches were at 36 holes.

In the 1898 Championship, Joe Choate, of Stockbridge, the son of the Ambassador to the Court of St. James, led the stroke round with a score of 175, and the highest qualifying score was 189. I am afraid the scores look rather terrible when placed against Skee Riegel's 136 at Baltusrol two years ago. But most of us were just weekend golfers 50 years ago and, of course, we used the old gutty ball.

In our defense, I would like to point out that rounds in the low 70s were scored, even by amateurs playing the gutty ball. I know because I scored one myself in the third match-play round against James A. Stillman. After I had won the match, 9 up and 8 to play, we finished out the bye holes so that I could make a new record for the course.

Apart from the scoring, however, qualifying rounds did not change much over the years. In 1898, with 120 players competing for 32 places, there were bound to be upsets, and that year we had one of the biggest ones in the history of the Championship. Jim Whigham, who had won

the two previous years, failed to qualify in defense of his title. His failure was excusable, however. He had just returned from the Spanish-American War, in which he had been a war correspondent and had contracted a lingering fever.

I was fortunate enough to be very much on my game in that Championship. Although I had saved my summer vacation in order to play, each week-end I had taken the train from New York to Greenwich or some other course, and the regular play enabled me again to hit the ball as I had in my school days at St. Andrews. My opponents, in addition to Jim Stillman, were James F. Curtis, of Essex County, Mass.; A. H. Smith, of Huntingdon Valley, Philadelphia; my perennial rival, Walter J. Travis, of Oakland, New York; and Walter B. Smith, of Chicago, whom I defeated in the final, 5 up and 3 to play.

It seemed to me, however, that the Championship really was won in the semi-final round. Walter Travis and I had first become acquainted in an invitation tournament at Baltusrol the year before. It happened to be his first golf tournament and my first in this country. We were both beaten in the first round, rode back to New York on the train together, quite disgusted with ourselves, and became good friends and frequent rivals thereafter. After I had beaten him at Morris County, I felt sure I could win the Championship the next day.

In that tournament I carried a driver, brassie, spoon, driving iron, midiron, mashie, niblick and a wooden putter. Just eight clubs, which was a normal bagful in those days, although just half the number the professionals were carrying in recent years, until last spring. They seemed sufficient then, and I am not at all sure that they wouldn't be sufficient now. I carry more today, but I noticed after a round at Blind Brook recently that the only clubs I had used were three woods, a No. 2 iron once or twice, a pitching iron, a niblick and a putter.

My clothing also was a bit different in that 1898 Championship. All my life I have had my jackets made with real button-holes on the cuffs. I see no purpose in having buttons without button-holes. And

when I played golf, I wore my jacket, unbuttoning the buttons and turning the cuffs back.

### The Palm Grip

As did most players then, I used the old-fashioned palm grip: I simply laid the shaft in my fingers, without overlapping or interlocking, and wrapped my palms around it. It was not until Harry Vardon came over here in 1900 and won our Open Championship that any of us heard of the overlapping grip. Vardon had to use it because his hands were so big. He had the biggest hands I've seen, and he had to overlap the little finger of his right hand to get them onto the club compactly.

After Vardon's tour, nearly every American golfer adopted the overlapping grip, but I never did. I still thicken my grips with extra felt and use the palm grip. And although it is unusual now, Eb Byers, in 1906, and Jimmy Johnston, in 1929, also won the Amateur Championship with the same palm grip.

Soon after the turn of the century the golf ball underwent a radical change when the rubber-cored ball was introduced. In winning the 1903 Metropolitan Amateur Championship at Deal, N. J., I used a pneumatic ball—just a shell filled with compressed air.

The golf swings were not at all uniform in 1898. Each player took an individual stance in his quest to achieve balance. Balance, of course, has remained very important in the swing, but it seems to me it was even more important 50 years ago. The gutty ball took a lot of hitting. Two hundred yards was an exceptionally long drive. And without balance, we couldn't achieve any distance worth mentioning.

A full swing, with free pivot and wrist action, were standard, however. The comparatively shorter, compact swing has come into the game quite recently.

The one shot that has changed most in the last 50 years is the bunker shot. Half a century ago, bunkers were not raked and manicured, and the lies were often nearly impossible. We had no sand wedges and had to get the ball out as best we could with a niblick. Whether a player chose



**Mr. Douglas with Robert T. Jones, Jr., in 1930, when Mr. Douglas was President of the USGA and Mr. Jones scored his "Grand Slam."**

to hit a crude explosion shot or chip the ball cleanly, the stroke was a real test which has now practically disappeared from the game. The sand wedge tends to make all players equal when playing from a bunker.

In many other respects, some for the better and some, I'm afraid, for the worse, the game has changed as it has grown in popularity. But it still remains a game in which skill without sportsmanship is meaningless—and therefore it is still a game.

It is a game which has been good to me. I have been fortunate enough to have played in 15 Amateur Championships from 1897 to 1923 and to have won other championships. And I am most proud not of what I have won but of what I have been able to contribute—three years as President of the Metropolitan Golf Association, two years as President of the United States Golf Association, and four years as President of the United States Seniors' Golf Association.

## PROPOSED BRITISH RULES

The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, Scotland, has distributed a draft of proposed revised Rules of Golf to interested parties prior to adoption. The revision, when and if adopted, will be the fifth, previous changes having been made in 1903, 1912, 1920 and 1934.

The policy of the R. and A. Committee, of which Bernard Darwin is chairman, has been to simplify the layout of the Rules and to clarify their interpretation, especially in instances which experience shows to have been most productive of questions, but to leave unaltered those Rules which have stood the test of time. In some cases, decisions have been incorporated in the Rules, so that a good deal of case law will become statute law. In this respect, the revision is similar to those made in the USGA Rules in 1946 and 1947, although the two codes will not be identical.

"Governing bodies at home and overseas were asked if they wished to retain the present 'stymie' rule, and if not, whether they preferred abolition, the adoption of the American rule, or the retention only of what is generally called the 'self-laid stymie,'" Mr. Darwin explains. "The replies showed a slight preponderance in favor of the present Rule.

"Various alterations were suggested, but there was a remarkable lack of unanimity in favor of any particular one. The Committee having therefore received nothing even approaching a definite mandate for change, propose to leave well alone.

"The most important change in layout is a regrouping of the Rules so that those for any point in match or medal play will now be found together. . . . The Etiquette of the Game now precedes the main text of the Rules on the ground that it is a golfer's first duty, even before he reads the Rules, to know the correct procedure on the Course."

Of particular interest to American golfers is the information that the Rule on Number of Clubs to be Carried has been made more definite as to replacement of a club becoming unfit for play; as proposed, it is now practically identical with the USGA 14-club Rule.