

How Great Is Ben Hogan?

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Not for a very long time—perhaps, not since Bob Jones won them all in 1930—has a performance by a golfer excited the admiration of the game's insiders as did Ben Hogan's four rounds over the Augusta National last April when he lowered the Masters record by five strokes simply by not playing one loose shot in 274.

This happened many weeks ago and ordinarily it would have been pretty well digested by now. Yet here we are, still talking about Hogan's display and trying to assess it properly. It was, to use Bernard Darwin's favorite adjective, that "indecent." Nobody, not even Hogan, was supposed to be able to play golf that well.

How great a golfer is this nerveless man who seems to hit the ball straighter as the gallery and pressure increase, who reels from the jolt of missing a five-footer for a birdie on the fifty-seventh to the extent of hitting his tee shot on the next hole, the par-3 fifty-eighth, one foot from the cup?

Well, he can no longer be passed off as "the best golfer pound for pound who ever lived," "the finest exponent of the steel-shaft swing," or with the other discreet qualifications used by those of us who knew how good Ben was but were jealous about protecting the standings of our favorite Champions of earlier eras, in whose victories we felt a greater sense of participation than Ben's austere personality permits.

Yet again, I wonder if we *really* knew how good Ben was before this last Masters. Between 1948 and 1952, we had watched him, before his accident and after his brave recovery, win his first Masters, his second PGA and three USGA Opens in four attempts. When Ben faltered last year on his final rounds in both the Open and the Masters, just as if he were human, a good many of us privately

believed that he had passed his peak. So what did Ben do? He proceeded to unfurl what were undoubtedly the four most masterful consecutive rounds of his tournament career and what may well be the four most nearly errorless rounds any golfer ever produced in a major competition.

It is certainly understandable if, since Augusta, a number of reliable critics have decided that Ben is, without any qualifications whatsoever, the greatest golfer who ever lived. A golfer's exact historical rating, though—as the admirers of Vardon and Jones and of Hagen, Sarazen and Nelson have pointed out—is a difficult thing to determine in a game in which the equipment and the playing conditions have undergone such drastic changes over the years. Perhaps it would be fairest to put it this way: in the long history of golf, there probably never has been a better golfer than Ben Hogan.

What Hogan Must Prove

This disposition to elevate Hogan to a status comparable to that of Vardon and Jones is widespread but not by any means unanimous. The most interesting dissent comes from that band of traditionalists who claim they cannot go along with such a rating until Ben wins a British Open and demonstrates he is equally a Champion at "that other kind of golf"—controlling the ball when the wind is ripping hard across a British links, with its snuggger fairway lies, its rougher rough and its hard, unwatered greens.

Whether or not you agree with this reasoning, the implicit suggestion that Ben take a crack at the British Open is one that, indeed, stirs a golfer's imagination. How would Ben, who has never played a competitive round in Britain, make out in their Open? Would he be able to adapt his magnificent technique

to those foreign conditions and be the same master tactician, the same dynamic machine relentlessly fashioning one just-about-perfect shot after another?

The guesses vary.

The we're - not - so - sure - Ben - could-do-it school has doubts about his long approach-putting, but the most provocative point they raise is based on the assumption that in very windy conditions Ben might be blown off the fairways and, on some courses, be faced with the one shot he has apparently not mastered: the recovery from high, tough grass. In our 1951 Open at Oakland Hills, they continue, Ben played some shots from the rough with an almost unbelievable lack of authority. On the fifty-first hole, for example, after driving into the rough along the right on this medium-length dog-leg par 4, Ben hooked a weak, ducking iron across the fairway into the rough on the left, fluffed his third halfway to the green into a bunker and had to settle for a 6. The exaggerated flatness of Ben's swing, which accounts for his tremendous hitting power, is his undoing in tall grass, this school avers. His blade must force its way through many more inches of impeding grass than the blade of the golfer who attacks the ball with a more sharply vertical arc.

Hogwash, the Hogan-could-do-it school answers. All Ben would need would be a few weeks of practice to make all the necessary adjustments—he has always managed to modify his repertoire of shots to meet the different requirements of the courses selected for our major tournaments.

The precise dates of the USGA and British Opens vary each year, of course, but there is usually at least three weeks, ample tune-up time, between the conclusion of ours and the start of the British. Let us hope that at least one of these summers, while he is at the top of his game, Ben will arrange his schedule to include playing in the British Open. If he did, it would be a wonderful thing for international golf. And, on the other hand,

it would be a downright shame if a golfer of Ben's rare genius were to pass from the scene without taking at least one crack at the oldest of the great Championships.

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