

The Earliest Balls and Clubs

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Golf as we know it was originally played with a leather-covered ball stuffed with feathers, and the principles of the present Rules of Golf were developed in this era. The feather ball remained the standard missile for at least four centuries, until about 1848. Featheries undoubtedly were in use far longer than that, but the details of golf's origin are lost in antiquity.

It is known that the Romans in their day of Empire, played a game called *paganica*, which involved the use of open countryside, a bent stick and a ball stuffed with feathers. In the first century before Christ, Romans overran Europe, crossed the Channel and occupied parts of England and Scotland. They did not withdraw until the fourth century after Christ. It is therefore assumed that their game of *paganica*, with its feather ball, was the forerunner not only of golf but of kindred games played in Holland, Belgium, France and England.

However the transition from *paganica* to golf may have been made, "fute-ball and golfe" had become so popular in Scotland by 1457 that they threatened the practice of archery for defense and the Parliament of King James II outlawed both sports. This proscription provided the earliest authentic evidence of the existence of golf, and the proscription apparently remained effective until the introduction of gunpowder near the end of the fifteenth century lessened the importance of archery and restored golf to the people.

Featheries Were Seldom Round

The making of feather balls was a tedious and wearisome task, and most ball-makers could produce only about four specials a day. The best balls sold for up to five shillings apiece; in bulk,

From an exhibit of the development of clubs and balls in "Golf House."

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The "Golf House" Fund has crept upward to \$102,326 since the last issue of the USGA JOURNAL, and the number of Founders now stands at 5,562. We still need \$7,674, however. The recent Founders have been:

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rarely less than 1 pound for a dozen. In the making, the leather was softened with alum and water and cut into four, three or two pieces. These were stitched together with waxed threads outside in and reversed when the stitching was nearly completed. A small hole was left for the insertion of boiled goose feathers. The ball-maker held the leather cover in his hand, in a recessed ball-holder, and pushed the first feathers through the hole with a stuffing rod, a tapering piece of wrought iron sixteen to twenty inches long and fitted with a wooden crosspiece to be braced against the ball-maker's chest. When the stuffing iron failed, an awl was brought into play, and a volume of feathers which would fill the crown

WHAT THEY PLAYED WITH TWO CENTURIES AGO



These clubs and feather balls in the USGA Golf Museum at "Golf House" date back to the earliest days of the game. The two clubs at the left were called "track irons," designed to enable a golfer to play a ball out of a wheel track. The third club from the left was called a "bunker iron," or "sand iron" and was made about 1780. The three woods at the right were characteristic of the feather era.

of a beaver hat eventually was inserted into the leather cover. The hole was then stitched up, and the ball was hammered hard and round and given three coats of paint.

Feather balls were seldom exactly round. In wet weather they tended to become sodden and fly apart. They were easily cut on the seams. A player was fortunate if his ball endured through two rounds.

Originally, there appear to have been ball-makers in each golfing community, but in the middle of the eighteenth century the Gourlay family, of Leith and Musselburgh, Scotland, became preeminent and a "Gourlay" was accepted as the best and most expensive of all the feather balls on the market. The patriarch of the family was Douglas Gourlay, at Leith, but it was his son at Musselburgh, who brought the family name its greatest renown.

Their principal competitor was Allan Robertson, of St. Andrews, son of Davie Robertson, tutor of Old Tom Morris and generally regarded as the greatest player of his day. Robertson, who died in 1859 at the age of 44, turned out 2,456 feather balls in 1844 and was unalterably opposed to the introduction of the gutta percha ball shortly thereafter. When he caught Old Tom Morris playing a gutta ball in 1852, they had words, and Morris left St. Andrews, not to return until after Robertson's death.

No Matched Sets Then

The full, free style which has come to be known as the "St. Andrews swing" developed out of the feather ball period. The clubs, which were at first rudimentary, tended toward the end of the period to be long, thin and graceful; and the feathery was swept from the ground with a full swing which also tended to be long

and graceful. The shafts were whippy, and the grips thick. There was a considerable elegance to these clubs. The foremost club-makers, Hugh Philp and Douglas McEwan, have become known as the Chippendale and Heppelwhite of club-making.

The earliest known club-maker was William Mayne, of Edinburgh, who received a Royal Warrant as club-maker and spear-maker from James VI in 1603. An old notebook of this same period indicates the nomenclature of clubs Mayne must have made by noting payments for the repair of "play clubis," "bonker clubis" and an "irone club." There are no known examples of these clubs, although some were pictured in the art of the times so that their rudimentary nature is known.

Among the oldest known clubs is a set of six woods and two irons preserved in a case in the Big Room at the Troon Golf Club, Troon, Scotland. These were found in a walled-up closet of a house at Hull, England, with a copy of a Yorkshire paper dated 1741. It is possible that they are of Stuart times. All six woods and two irons are shafted with ash. Only one wood and one iron have grips. The woods are leaded and boned, the lead extending from near the toe two-thirds of the way to the heel. Although the stamp is too worn for identification, they could have been made by Andrew Dickson, of Leith, or Henry Mill, of St. Andrews, who were well-known club-makers of the Stuart era and next in our line of knowledge after Mayne.

Club-making reached its zenith in the last century of the feather ball era, with the advent of the real artists — Simon Cossar, of Leith; the successive generations of McEwans, James, Peter and Douglas, of Leith and Musselburgh; Hugh Philp, of St. Andrews, and his assistant, James Wilson; and White, of St. Andrews. Cossar, Philp, Wilson and the McEwans were noted for their woods; Cossar, Wilson and White for cleeks and irons. White is credited with giving Allan Robertson and Young Tom Morris such refined irons that they were able to in-

troduce a wide range of new strokes into the game.

Douglas McEwan made his club-heads from small cuts of hedgethorne which had been planted horizontally on sloping banks so that the stem grew at an angle at the root and created a natural bend for the neck. The shafts, spliced onto the heads, were made of split ash.

By the first half of the nineteenth century, clubs had come to be divided into four classes: Drivers, spoons, irons and putters.

Drivers were distinguished by their long, tapering and flexible shafts and their small raking heads. They comprised "play clubs, which had little loft and were designed for use over safe ground only, and "grassed drivers," which had more loft and were designed to lift a ball from a heavy or downhill lie or over a hazard. Spoons were of four types: long spoons, middle spoons, short spoons and baffing spoons, the distinctions being in the degree of loft. For a time there was also a fifth spoon, the niblick, a well-lofted club with a small head designed to drive a ball out of a rut or cup. Irons were three in number: driving irons, cleek and bunker irons, and their uses are apparent from the terminology. There were two types of putters: driving putters, for approach work over unencumbered terrain, and green putters, for use on putting greens.

With these sets, players negotiated their feather balls over holes measuring 80 to 400 yards.

In the era of the feather ball there were no Championships as we now know them, but four of the great players of the period returned this card in a feather-ball match at St. Andrews in 1849:

Willie and Jamie Dunn:

OUT—6 5 4 6 6 6 4 4 5—46

IN—5 3 5 6 5 5 5 6 6—46—92

Allan Robertson and Tom Morris Sr.:

OUT—6 5 6 5 5 5 5 4 4—45

IN—6 4 5 6 5 5 5 6 6—48—93