

AT THE AMATEUR CHAMPIONSHIP?

• For All Match Play •

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THERE ARE MANY possible ways of conducting the USGA Amateur Championship, and many ways have been tested since the start of the Championship in 1895. There have been Championship qualifying rounds variously at 18, 36 and 54 holes, qualifying fields of 16, 32 and 64 players, double qualifying at the Championship site, all match play with a field of 210 after sectional qualifying.

Every pattern which seemed to have any merit has been tried. There is no gospel on the subject, no single wholly right pattern.

Through all the experiments, one fact stands out clearly: the Championship has always been ultimately determined at match play. Match play is the essence of the tournament, even when some form of stroke-play qualifying has been used.

The reason for this is embedded in the original nature of golf. Golf was and is essentially a recreation, and that means fundamentally a game for amateurs. It was first a man-to-man contest. Later, score play, or stroke play, evolved and became the primary game for professionals.

There are simple and natural reasons for this difference: match play for amateurs, stroke play for professionals. Match play is a friendly game, played by amateurs ostensibly for fun. One serious error can result in, let us say, an 8 for a hole—but the loss to the player is just that one hole.

Stroke play is a stern, unforgiving test. Every stroke counts. An 8 can cost a professional the Open Championship and its great rewards. That is as it should be, for golf is the professional's full-time business and the Open Championship should demand his best at all times. (Interestingly enough, match play is used by the Profes-

sional Golfers' Association for deciding its annual Championship.)

So in the Amateur Championship the winner has always been determined at match play. The very first Championship, in 1895, was entirely at match play, with no qualifying. Today, after many wanderings among the highways and byways of other schemes, the Championship proper is entirely at match play, after sectional qualifying at 36 holes.

Purpose of the Championship

Now what is the purpose of the Amateur Championship?

Primarily and on the surface, it is to determine the Champion golfer among the members of the hundreds of USGA Regular Member Clubs.

But as much as we might like to believe otherwise, the winner is not necessarily the best amateur golfer in the country. He happens to be the best player of the particular Championship week. He is not an invincible. At some time or other, he has been defeated and he will again be defeated by men whom he has eliminated in the Championship. That is the kind of game golf is, and there is rarely any such person among amateurs as an unbeatable Champion.

Besides, as has been said by Richard S. Tufts, USGA Vice-President, "Who wants to go to all that trouble for the benefit of one individual? More must be accomplished than just selecting a Champion. . . .

"Just as the Open is commercial, so is the Amateur non-commercial. The pace is more leisurely. It is designed for friendly combat, and there is the feeling that here are gathered those who play the game for pleasure and for sport.

"The influence of the Amateur on the game is far more general and more intimate than can ever be true of the Open. Competitors at the Amateur come from every golfing district, and they are men who come in close, every-day contact with the golfers of their communities. As the leading players, they are respected and followed. To this extent, the thoughts and attitudes they may bring back with them from the Amateur must exert a considerable influence on American golf. The Amateur must, therefore, be conducted in a manner in keeping with the true spirit and the best traditions of the game."

Thus, we do not deplore what William O. Blaney calls the lack of lustre of the Amateur. Actually, the Amateur has its own special appeal and lustre. As Paul wrote to his friends the Corinthians, "There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differeth from another star in glory."

A Growing Entry

From the start of the Championship until World War II, there was one year in which the entry for the Amateur Championship reached 1,000. Since the War, the entry has exceeded 1,000 every year except 1946. The all-time high was 1,416 in 1951; this year produced the third highest total of 1,281. Thousands of eligible amateurs (handicaps not more than 4) enter only occasionally or when the Championship proper is near their homes.

There are more good players today than ever before. If individual stars are not quite so bright as in the Twenties, perhaps it is because there are more of them to share attention.

How can the USGA best serve those members of its member clubs who want to compete for the Championship? As all of them cannot convene at one location, the USGA began, in 1931, a system of sectional qualifying rounds at many locations. For expediency, these trials have been at 36 holes stroke play in one day. The size and the quality of each sectional field has determined the number of qualifiers in the

section for the Championship proper. The sectional qualifiers join certain exempt players to form a field of 200 for all match play in the Championship.

Why is this the present form, instead of further stroke play qualifying at the Championship site? Besides the reasons given already, there are the following:

1. A larger field (200 players) can be admitted to the Championship proper for all match play. This is important in view of the premium on each qualifier's place. This year the ratio of sectional entries to qualifiers' places was $7\frac{1}{2}$ to 1. If there were qualifying at the Championship, the field would have to be cut to about 150. In 1946 at Baltusrol, the last year of qualifying at the Championship, there were 149 starters, and lack of light was a serious handicap in the play-off for last place. Contrary to Mr. Blaney's opinion, it would not be possible to admit as many players as for the Open, because there is less available daylight at the time of the Amateur, in August-September, than for the Open, in June, and time would have to be allowed for a last-place play-off, which is not true of the Open.

2. Stroke play should not be overemphasized for a match play Championship. When a player qualifies in his section, he should be able to start play for the Championship and not be required to qualify again. In the 1933 Amateur at Kenwood Country Club, in Cincinnati, the finalists, who ostensibly were the two best match players of the week, George Dunlap and Max Marston, both had won their places in a play-off. That was putting a heavy premium on stroke play.

3. Admittedly there is greater likelihood of upsets at eighteen holes than at thirty-six holes match play. But eighteen holes is a game of golf. There is no known method of avoiding upsets even if that were desirable, which is very doubtful. Golf is a game of both unusual skill and unusual uncertainty. Play does not follow form with the same fidelity as in many other games. Almost any four-handicapper can, upon occasion, outplay the best player

for a spell. Therein lies much of the attraction in golf, much of its come-on quality. It is a game for the hopeful. Golf is no respecter of persons.

4. As far as lustre is concerned, 36-hole stroke play qualifying among amateurs is rather dull for spectators.

Players' Opinions

What do the players think? After all, the Championship is for their enjoyment and benefit.

The USGA has twice polled players on the form of the Amateur Championship. Following the 1946 Championship, in which there was qualifying at the Championship site, the contestants voted 81 to 21 in favor of all match play. Another poll of those who played in the 1950 Championship resulted in a vote of 94 to 45 for the all match play.

There were some interesting comments in the latter poll. Among those favoring all match play were the following:

"I traveled 800 miles once and 1,000 miles another time and failed to qualify for match play. I'd much rather lose a match than not play one at all."—James A. Wittenberg, Memphis, Tenn.

"The present plan means more players at the tournament, more interest, more color."—Dan Carmichael, Columbus, Ohio.

"I think it is hard enough to qualify in your own section without going to another state to qualify again."—Ray Palmer, Wyandotte, Mich.

"In order that the Championship be thoroughly national, it is essential that as many players be on hand as it is possible to handle. With reduced places in sectional qualifying areas, it is obvious that some good players may not secure a spot."—Jack Malloy, Oklahoma City.

Jerry Cole, of Mount Vernon, N. Y., made this analysis: "I favor the present plan because of the broader scope of national representation. By this I do not mean that poorer players are given a chance to knock off a star. Quite the contrary, more good players get into the matches. The

difference between 150 and 200 men competing can be very great.

"Take the 1950 Championship, for instance. Four out of the eight quarter-finalists finished last or next to last in their sectional trials. If only 150 sectional places were allotted, these four may never have gone to Minneapolis. On the other hand, of the other four quarter-finalists, three led their sectional qualifying and one was exempt. This contrast is striking—the sectional leaders and those who squeaked through might very well have had their positions reversed.

"The point is this: that even though a good player suffers an off-day in his sectional trial, he still has a chance to show his stuff in the long pull of the Championship proper."

Solid Champions

Finally, whatever the merits and the demerits of all match play, it has invariably produced a solid Champion.

Here are the winners of the all-match-play tournaments:

1895—CHARLES B. MACDONALD

1903—WALTER J. TRAVIS

1934—W. LAWSON LITTLE, JR.

1935—W. LAWSON LITTLE, JR. (Little won the British Amateur also at all match play in both 1934-35)

1936—JOHN W. FISCHER

1947—ROBERT H. (SKEE) RIEGEL

1948—WILLIAM P. TURNESA

1949—CHARLES R. COE

1950—SAM URZETTA

1951—BILLY MAXWELL

1952—JACK WESTLAND

1953—GENE LITTLER

That is an imposing roll. Every one a thorough Champion. Some of them rank among the all-time great players of golf.

Whether or not another super-golfer emerges from the new generation is not now important. The thing to cheer about is that amateur competitive golf is healthy and vigorous.