MIDDLECOFF TO FORE

IN A NEW GOLDEN AGE

by

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GOLFERS being what they are, it would be surprising if the USGA did not receive surprising letters in a fairly steady flow. Somewhere near the top of the collection was one from a promising young amateur declining membership in the Walker Cup Team.

This was in 1947, and there were two points about the letter that were particularly revealing of what was going on inside Cary Middlecoff. The first point is well known—having made up his mind to turn professional, he refused to exploit the Walker Cup opportunity to enhance his reputation before actually leaving amateurism, at the expense of some other amateur who would be denied membership in the Team.

The second point is a timely one to recall just now. The young Memphis dentist wrote:

"I have planned to play the tournaments until I have proved to myself one way or the other if I am good enough to make golf playing a life work.

"Ever since I can remember I have wanted to play golf without being worried about one thing or another, but have never had the chance. I know that I would never be happy practicing dentistry without knowing for sure if I were a good player or a great one."

The vision which Cary Middlecoff had back there nine years ago may at the time have seemed a foolish springtime fancy. Here was a likeable, attractive young dentist who had excellent prospects in his vocation; in his hobby of amateur golf he was recognized nationally. His world seemed well-established, secure, pleasant.

Yet he chucked it for a vision of golfing greatness as a professional. Often the pro-

fessionals run the amateurs a close race in the spirit of amateurism, since amateurism essentially means doing a thing for sheer love of the thing.

Now that Cary Middlecoff is National Open Champion for the second time, it has become a great deal easier to appraise his stature. Certainly, in his own day, he is a great player. How about his position in the full sweep of golf history? It is probably too early to make an evaluation—Middlecoff is 35 years old and must have many years of first-class golf stored up. But he is surely on the way.

It is scarcely necessary to look beyond the USGA Open record to relate Middlecoff to the superlative players. Only nine have won the Open as much as twice, and Middlecoff is now one of them. Only Willie Anderson, Bob Jones and Ben Hogan, each with four victories, have surpassed him.

With some, the desire to achieve greatness is merely vainglorious. With others, it is the natural urge to test oneself and do one's best; and among these is Cary Middlecoff.

This is a golden age of competitive golf—an era of thrilling contests, brilliant performances, and, above all, a host of marvelous players. Some nostalgic souls have been waiting, with sighs, for days like the "good old days." They have them, right now, if they only have eyes to see. We have been in a golden age of competitive golf for some time now, with the great Ben Hogan as chief protagonist.

Cary Middlecoff's climb to a lead position in this era has not been an easy one. Although he was Open Champion in 1949, just two years after he became a professional, he has had to strive and wrestle with might and main. Not the least of

his struggles was that with himself, as is often so with keenly strung people like Cary.

He was the first to suggest that he "choked" a bit in the last few holes of the recent Open at the Oak Hill Country Club, Rochester, N. Y. But generally throughout the Championship he seemed a happy golfer—and yet he had two 7's in the first two rounds. He was cheerful, chatty on the course, and it was fun to watch him play.

The Finishing Holes

The Championship was blessed with another splendid course. Oak Hill's west course was a true test by any standard, and the contestants uniformly rated it as a fair test. Its par of 70 was broken occasionally, but for the four rounds Middlecoff's winning total of 281 was one above par. After an opening 71, Middlecoff had three 70's.

The last three holes are stout par 4's, requiring not only accuracy but some length, the shortest being 441 yards. Middlecoff had his Championship won by the time he reached the last three holes, as it turned out, but he almost frittered it away there with 5 on 16, and 5 on 17. Then he scrambled a 4 on the home hole, thanks to a brilliant pitch-and-run third which stopped a couple of feet from the hole.

He was an early starter on the final day, and he set up his 281 as the mark at which others fired.

Three fired very close indeed. First, Hogan came to the 16th needing three pars to tie. He missed by a stroke when a putt of perhaps 30 inches on the 17th failed to drop.

Then Julius Boros wanted one birdie in the last three to tie Middlecoff's 281. Julius had to be content with three straight pars and a second-place tie with Hogan at 282.

Finally, Ted Kroll, needing four pars to win, went 4-7-5-4 against par of 3-4-4-4. A hooked drive under a tree on No. 16 contributed to his undoing.

To give a further notion of how things went on the last three holes:

(a) For all four rounds, the top six finishers all lost their bouts with par on 16, 17 and 18; to wit:

Cary Middlecoff — 8 over
Ben Hogan — 4 over
Julius Boros — 1 over
Peter Thomson — 6 over
Ted Kroll — 6 over
Ed Furgol — 4 over

(b) The 51 players who qualified for the last 36 holes had a total of 306 chances at birdies on those last three holes in the last two rounds. They made eight.

The holes were fair; they just constituted a heroic finish. Some time before the Championship there was sentiment in Rochester that the rotation of holes on the course should be altered so that the regular 13th would become the 18th and thus provide a large natural amphitheatre for the spectators at the finish. Other counsel prevailed and, as matters developed, the Championship was in a sense decided by the strong finishing holes.

As evidence of how fine courses reward fine players, note that of the first six scorers, four have won the Open—Hogan, Boros, Ed Furgol and Middlecoff—and a fifth, Peter Thomson of Australia, was British Open Champion in 1954-1955-1956. He was the 36-hole leader at Oak Hill, with 70-69—139. Peter must be regarded as an all-time "great."

The Championship brought another frustration to Ben Hogan in his aim to become the only player to win the Open five times. Last year it was Jack Fleck who thwarted Ben—Jack came from obscurity with two birdies in the last four holes to tie Hogan and then won a play-off. This year, if Middlecoff had missed his two-foot putt on 18 and Hogan had made his 30-incher on 17, Hogan probably would have been Champion. It is on such fine lines that the Open is often decided.

Jack Fleck, defending, had 150 for the first two rounds and failed by one shot of qualifying for Saturday's 36 holes.

Here is how the leaders stood at various stages:

18 holes		36 holes	
Bob Rosburg	68	Peter Thomson	139
Peter Thomson	70	Ben Hogan	140
Errie Ball	71	Jerry Barber	141
Julius Boros	71	Wesley Ellis	141
Wesley Ellis	71	Ed Furgol	141
Doug Ford	71	Cary Middlecoff	141
Ed Furgol	71	Julius Boros	142
Jay Hebert	71	Ted Kroll	142
Cary Middlecoff	71	Arnold Palmer	142

54 holes		72 holes	
Cary Middlecoff	211	Cary Middlecoff	281
Wesley Ellis	212	Julius Boros	282
Ben Hogan	212	Ben Hogan	282
Ted Kroll	212	Ed Furgol	285
Julius Boros	213	Ted Kroll	285
Ed Furgol	214	Peter Thomson	285
Arnold Palmer	214	Arnold Palmer	287
Peter Thomson	214	(A) Ken Venturi	289
		(A) Amateur	

Oak Hill not only provided a grand test of golf but warm hospitality and a highly efficient tournament organization under William C. Chapin, General Chairman and President of the Club.
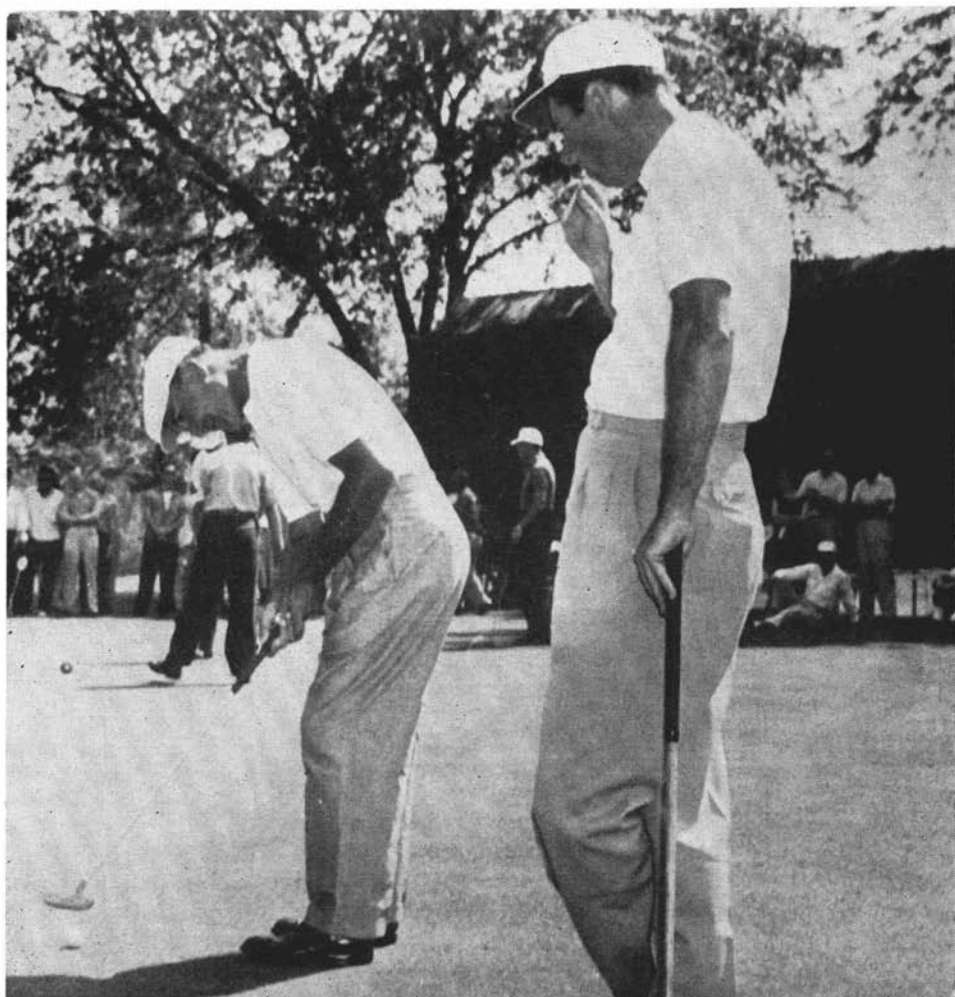
Attendance on the last day was larger than at any previous USGA Open of which we have record, with a crowd estimated at 13,914. The three-day attendance, estimated at 38,767, closely crowded the total at Baltusrol in 1954. Following are figures for Oak Hill, subject to final check, compared with those of 1954:

		1956		1954	
Thursday:	Paid	10,705		11,249	
	Free	1,200		1,200	
	Total		11,905		12,449
Friday:	Paid	11,748		12,218	
	Free	1,200		1,200	
	Total		12,948		13,418
Saturday:	Paid	12,714		12,465	
	Free	1,200		1,200	
	Total		13,914		13,665
GRAND TOTAL			38,767		39,532

Free attendance estimated at 1,200 daily covers all working personnel (such as club staff, press, radio, television) and guests.

Prize money totaled $24,000, with Middlecoff receiving $6,000. The entry list, after withdrawals for sickness, was 1,921, just seven under the all-time record of 1,928 set in 1954. There was a two-hour nationwide telecast on the last afternoon by NBC, sponsored by Eastman Kodak Co.

Several unusual cases arose under the Rules of Golf, almost all on the first day. Some of them raised new questions, and the decisions given by a five-man USGA Committee at the Open are being reviewed by the USGA Rules of Golf Committee and the USGA Executive Committee. Pursuant to current practice, the views of

the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews will be invited; the USGA and the R. & A. try to agree on uniform interpretations under the world-wide code. After full consideration of the most unusual aspects, it is hoped to issue formal decisions for the guidance of other committees.

These are some of the cases which were presented:

Late Start

CASE 1: On the first day, Walker Inman, Jr., was due to start at 9:04 A.M. He did not report when his name was called. His playing companions started without him. The next group also started before young Inman came running to the starter, twelve minutes late. He had been on the grounds for almost an hour before his scheduled time of 9:04, but had misread the time to be 9:40!

Rule 37-5 provides that "Players shall start at the times and in the order arranged by the Committee," and the penalty for breach is disqualification. But Rule 37-7, which requires players to play without undue delay, calls for a two-stroke penalty in stroke play (unless there is repeated offense, in which case disqualification may be imposed).

Decision: Walker Inman was penalized two strokes, under Rule 37-7. He was not permitted to start until the entire field had started, at about 3:10 P.M., and he played alone, with a marker.

This does not mean that Rule 37-5 is not still effective. Players who are seriously late will be disqualified. Young Inman's case was judged by the Committee to be almost at the border-line between a penalty of two strokes and disqualification.

Water Hazard Complication

CASE 2: Not long later, Doug Ford's second shot on the par-4 tenth hole was seen to splash into a creek crossing the fairway. Without seeking to locate his ball, the national PGA Champion dropped a ball behind the water hazard, as if to proceed under Rule 33-2.

Before he had opportunity to play a stroke with the second ball, his attention

Cary Middlecoff, right, relaxes for a moment on the practice putting green at Oak Hill Country Club, as Ben Hogan tries a practice putt. Hogan's failure to hole a 30-inch putt on the 17th cost him a tie.

was called to the fact that the original ball had skipped across the water and lodged on the bank of the hazard on the far side, in a playable position. Ford thereupon abandoned the ball he had dropped behind the water hazard, and finished the hole with the ball he had driven from the tee. It should be noted that he did not play a stroke with the ball dropped behind the hazard; he dropped it, and then abandoned it.

This presented a new question. The USGA Committee ruled that Ford had violated Rule 22-2, which provides in part that "A ball is in play when dropped." For removing the second ball from play, Ford suffered a two-stroke penalty prescribed for violation of Rule 22-2.

Although Rule 22-2 was originally written for reasons other than those in the Ford case, it seemed pertinent. Ford had given himself the advantage of choosing between the original ball as it lay in the hazard and the second ball he dropped behind the hazard; a two-stroke penalty seemed adequate.

It could have been held, with some logic, that once Ford dropped the second ball, it became the ball in play, the first ball was out of play, and when he resumed play with the first ball he was in fact playing a wrong ball. He holed out with that first ball. Rule 21-3 not only prescribes a two-stroke penalty for playing a wrong ball outside a hazard but requires that the player rectify his mistake by holing out his own ball (in this case, the second ball, which Ford dropped behind the water hazard). Failure to do so calls for disqualification. Rule 23-3 provides that if a ball is illegally lifted before holed out, it may be replaced under a two-stroke penalty, and that failure to do so before teeing off on the next hole entails disqualification.

Ford thought he had disqualified himself. But the USGA Committee felt that the two-stroke penalty for violation of Rule 22-2 adequately covered the matter, especially since the only strokes Ford made on the hole were with the ball he drove from the tee.

There was some public misunderstanding because some press reports referred to Ford's second ball as "provisional" under Rule 30. It was not a provisional ball, and Rule 30 did not enter into consideration.

Wrong Scores

CASE 3: Jackie Burke and his marker both reported his score for Hole 18 as 4. Actually, he played five strokes. Jack had not checked his score hole by hole when he finished but had signed his card without looking at the details.

A little later in the day Burke noted on the scoreboard that he was credited with a 4 on 18. He reported the error to the USGA, knowing full well that Rule 38-3 says in part:

"If the competitor return a score for any hole lower than actually played, he shall be disqualified."

The USGA Committee invoked Rule 36-5 and modified the penalty to two strokes. This Rule gives a Committee certain discretionary powers and provides as follows:

"The Committee has no power to waive a Rule of Golf. A penalty of disqualification, however, may, in exceptional individual cases, be waived or be modified under Rule 1 if the Committee considers such action warranted."

This was the first time within memory that the USGA had not applied disqualification for violation of Rule 38-3.

Next morning Gil Cavanaugh, a Long Island professional, reported to the USGA that on the previous day he, too, had returned a lower score than actually played on one hole. He, too, was penalized two strokes.

The decisions in these two cases have caused natural concern among some golfers. They wonder when, if ever, the disqualification penalty should be applied for breach of Rule 38-3.

The USGA is reviewing its policy and intends to issue a clarifying decision. Meanwhile, committees would be well advised not to modify the penalty when the intention of the player is in serious question, or when the player does not correct his error promptly, or when the interests of other players may have been affected, as, for example, in a qualifying round.

The decision in the Burke and Cavanaugh cases was based on the existing facts of these cases, and cannot be construed as a decision that a violation of Rule 38-3, for returning a score for any hole lower than actually played, has a two-stroke penalty instead of disqualification.

OTHER CASES: At the time the Jack Burke case came up, the USGA Committee was considering a question raised as to the correctness of Henry Cotton's score on Hole 17. The three-time British Open Champion and his marker both reported his score as 5. Independent reports volunteered to the USGA stated that Cotton had made an extra stroke at the ball when it lay near the lip of the hole. Cotton twice reviewed the case for the USGA Committee, as did his marker. Since the Rules assign the scoring to the marker and the player, the Committee accepted Cotton's score as posted.