

GOLF IN AUSTRALIA

By

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Where there's golf there's a Scot.

John Reid, a transplanted Scot started golf on a permanent basis in the United States in 1888.

Likewise, the Honorable James Graham pioneered the game in Australia in 1847.

From that early beginning in Australia, interest in the game there has so grown, except for a temporary lull, that the number of players exceeds that in the United States on a per capita basis. And well it might be because Australia is geographically located to provide pleasant all-year playing conditions.

In point of fact the National Championships and other important events are held during the Australian winter, which is simultaneous with our summer.

To appreciate the favorable golfing circumstances, it should be known that the main centers of population for the most part are along or quite near the shores of the semi-tropical continent so that even in mid-summer heat the ocean breezes make the playing of out-door sports comfortable.

The proximity of the principal cities to the sea further enhances golfing pleasure in that the terrain is to a considerable extent made up of linksland so very desirable for developing the skills of the game.

As an example of what golf is like in Australia, there are ten courses near Melbourne on the eastern shore of Port Phillip Bay. Metropolitan, within an easy fifteen minute motor drive from the city, adjoins the next course and the other eight come in pretty close succession. Of the ten, five are of championship calibre.

Perhaps there's no other place in the world where the natural conditions contain so much excellent golfing terrain. The nearest comparable golfing condition known to me in the United States is the Monterey Peninsula, on the Pacific Coast, upon which, of the fine courses there, is the famous Pebble Beach Links.

The foregoing comment upon similarity between places north and south of the

equator is intended to convey the impression that golf is very much alike in both places. Any difference could well be said to come from the relative closeness of Australia to the Antarctic, the windy influence of which makes playing a bit more rugged at times.

Since it is my purpose to give the reader a fairly general knowledge of Australian golf, that is, how and when it started, what has happened since or what has made it tick, it should be set down that the administration of the game lies with the Australian Golf Union, which functions quite like the United States Golf Association does in governing the game in the United States.

Perhaps it would be amiss for me—with constructive intent—to point out that one of the courses in New South Wales, currently classified as of Open Championship standard, was when I carefully went over it about seven years ago quite out-moded because of failure to recognize the increased carrying capacity of the modern ball and the companion advancements in clubs. Having the immediate foregoing in mind it would be my suggestion the Australian Golf Union make sure the championship course specifications be kept abreast of the International Standard, for if not, it could be that their Open Championships, from time to time, will fall below outside competitive levels.

The Australian Golf Union is supplemented by the Ladies Golf Union which has for ever so long been a strong supporting influence for the general betterment, as has also the Professional Golfers Association of Australia.

Harmony and complete co operation between the Australian Golf Union and the professionals were only arrived at after the formation in 1906 of the Professional Golfers Association. The earlier circumstances were not dissimilar to those which then applied in Great Britain, in that when professionals competed with ama-

teurs, the off-the-course facilities for personal hygiene were far from equal. This inequality was so keenly resented by the professionals, they banded together, set up their own association and informed the amateur body that a change was desirable and expected.

So much for the early background of Australian golf.

From here on it will be my endeavor to explain something about how the mechanical techniques of stroke making have evolved to the point of where Australian players have come into prominence in international golf, notable in winning the Eisenhower Trophy, emblematic of the World Team Championship, at St. Andrews, Scotland, last year.

The early pattern of stroke making in Australia was set by two British professionals, Richard Taylor, of Hoylake, and James Scott, of Elie. The former had been brought out in 1891 by the Melbourne Golf Club, and shortly thereafter Scott was engaged by the Sydney Golf Club.

The next influence was that of the great triumvirate, Taylor, Vardon and Braid, who in more or less that order for the period of 1894 to 1914 dominated the British Open Championship.

The last and present influence is American.

Just how these separate influences worked could first be described by stating that James Scott by having a natural, easy-to-acquire swing brought on a rapid efficiency in the converts to the then new game, and it should perhaps be pointed out the ball of the time was the solid gutty which, unlike its successor, the rubber core, had to be struck quite truly in getting it to fly far and sure. Scott's swing contributed greatly to the thrill of getting the gutty up and away to good distance as it did to simplifying the control for direction.

As just one example of the Scott stroke making and teaching technique, one of his pupils, E. P. Simpson, broke the Royal Sydney Golf Club record within the first year after starting to play and during his third season won the New South Wales State Amateur Championship.

Although many other British professionals followed Taylor and Scott to Australia, they were almost universally disciples of the triumvirate and principally of Vardon. Unfortunately, they taught the

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techniques attributed to him, as had been erroneously interpreted from the high-speed pictures taken about the turn of the century.

Briefly put, the errors in description of these early high speed shots came from the selection of key positions, such as the address, half-way up, top of backswing and so forth. A leading British writer stated, for example, that, in getting the club started from the ball, certain localized actions were responsible. They were followed by other local movements in getting to the top of the back swing, while other independent actions returned the club to and on through the ball to the finish.

By actual fact Vardon had a united and spontaneously complete movement of his whole figure. The pictures showed this, but the interpreters not only described it as being composed of separate parts but asserted it included movements which did not fit into the whole pattern.

This was a decadent period for Australian golf, and it was not until the so-called synthetic swing was replaced by the one-piece swing that Australia came out of its slump. The leading exponents of the change were Joe Kirkwood, followed by Jim Ferrier and later Peter Thomson.

With particular reference to Peter Thomson, as a very young boy he was coached by Jimmy Grace, who was in the United States for eight years (1922-1930) and played with many of America's greatest players, including Walter Hagen and Bob Jones, before returning to his native land.

Jimmy himself was a highly proficient player and though troubled with epilepsy, which kept him out of competitive events,

was the record holder on every course wherever he had played. He had, shall I say, a "fluid" swing, and luckily came into the game after Australians had experimented with and discarded the "synthetic" one.

Since the coming of Joe Kirkwood and other leading Australian players there have been other things which have helped to communicate the American simplified technique of stroke making, notably the visit by the first American team of professionals in 1934, the tours of Walter Hagen, and Gene Sarazen, (he; Gene, won the Australian Open Championship in 1936). Additionally many leading tournament professionals, including Ryder Cup players, have accepted invitations from the great promoter of Australian Golf, Mr. George Wakeley, to take part in the annual Ampol Tournament.

The impact of the form displayed by the visiting professionals upon Australian golfers, especially the up-and-coming ones, has been of great help in understanding and acquiring the simplified technique of stroke making.

In passing it might be noted modern travel by air between countries is a great help to athletes in maintaining physical condition, previously ocean travel to or from Australia was about 3 weeks—lots of time to go stale at sea, besides the added ashore problem of getting one's "land legs." Now-a-days, the time for such a trip is reduced to less than 2 days.

As seen by me the foregoing, though sketchily put together, represents much of the background of golf in Australia. As to the future, I would say that this great land under the Southern Cross, blessed as it is with an all year out-of-doors climate, with much in the way of natural facilities for play, and ample material wealth to support participation in recreational activities will produce golfers who will be found worthy in the international field and they will not be unlike some of their people who hitherto became world champions in boxing, sculling, cycling, track, etc; and more recently have set new world's records in swimming and running as well as achieving considerable success in Davis Cup Tennis.

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