

THE GREATEST GOLFER 100 YEARS AGO

By

LESTER RICE

This, you might say, is a museum piece. Once upon a long, long time ago, more than 100 years to be sure, there was a Scot, Allan Robertson, who played at golf so extraordinarily with crude implements and leather balls stuffed with boiled feathers as to be acclaimed "the greatest linksman that ever lived." And "who alone in the annals of the pastime it can be said that he was never beaten in an individual stake match."

The quotations are extracts from a tribute to Robertson published by the "Dundee Advertiser" in September of 1859, the year of his death at the age of 44.

To appreciate better his capabilities it should be realized that conditions under which he played were as primitive as the clubs he used. There was no mechanized equipment to keep the course neatly barbered, the cutting of the grass being entrusted to flocks of rambling sheep. There was no distinction between fairway and rough as of now since the whole of the playing area was in a sense rough of varying degrees.

Retragressing from this day to a century ago the most thoroughly skilled golfers have been Ben Hogan, Bob Jones, Walter Hagen, Harry Vardon, young Tom Morris and Robertson. The six had that indefinable something which set them apart.

Since he predated the advent of British Open, Robertson's deeds are known only to those who have delved into musty tomes.

"At that period," says the 'Dundee Advertiser,' speaking of those few short

years during which he was a paragon of style and deportment, "golfing was quite another thing from what it is now or at least its accessories were. Gutta percha was unknown and golf balls were composed of stout leather cases stuffed hard with boiled feathers. Their manufacture, indeed, was both a difficult and arduous matter; and their expense when finished was such as to restrict the practice of the game to the more wealthy of the community. The Links of St. Andrews, in consequence, were less frequented than now; the course was rougher; the sport had an aristocratic and portly mien; and the matches of professionals were as pregnant with interest as any public event. It is not so now; the St. Andrews Links are crowded with careless multitudes luxuriating in the pastime cheapened to them by the discovery of gutta percha; and the game is popularized at the expense of its stately traditions.

"Allan, however, commenced his golfing career in what, despite the dearness of leather and the paucity of players, we must still call the palmy days of golf . . . His success was abundant. Allan improved in his day on the old theories of golf and to him are owing many of the improved methods and styles of the present day.

"In the Spring of 1848, Mr. Campbell, of Saddell, (we believe), brought a few experimental gutta percha balls from London to St. Andrews. They were not very first rate, to be sure; were not hammered and flew heavily. Still the material was unquestionably good, and adaptable; and consternation stood on every face, Allan's included. And no wonder. The leather ball trade was the only one St. Andrews could boast. In Allan's shop alone there were made, for example, in 1840, 1021 balls; in 1841, 1392; in 1844, 2456; and so on. Tom Morris, senior, worked in Allan's shop as a ball maker.

"The introduction of gutta percha which anyone could make into a sphere,

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was a dreadful prospect for Allan and dire was his alarm. It is even related that Allan would gladly buy up all the gutta percha balls found among the whins, etc., and actually attempted to destroy the interlopers by fire! However, the influx was too great for this system to be pursued any longer, and about 1850 Allan entered regularly in golf ball making from gutta percha . . .

"Who that has once seen the champion golfer can ever forget him? He is, you will recollect, oh! golfer, not of much stature, compact, rather robust indeed, with a short stoop and short-necked . . .



Allan Robertson

But it was in a grand match that the figure of Allan should live in memory of all. Who shall describe his elegant and beautifully correct style of play? The champion was remarkable for his easy style, depending on a long cool swing, and never on sheer strength. His clubs were of the toy description, as the slang of the links hath it, possessing no weight or mis-proportion of wood. Indeed, in a word, Allan's game throughout was pure unadulterated science. Pretty driver as he was, we still stake our belief on Allan's short game, especially in quarter shots. He it was that introduced the

deadly use of the cleek in playing up to the hole. Previous to about 1848 short wooden clubs, the baffing or short spoons, were used for this important stroke—both difficult and frequently inaccurate. But Allan employed the cleek to jerk up his ball; however badly it might lie, it was all the same; and this killing game, destructive to a certain extent to the green, is now all but universal.

"We find it impossible to give a consecutive or full account of the champion's feats but we subjoin a few, in hopes that this meagre outline may testify, in some small way, to the merit, as a man and golfer, of Allan Robertson:

"On the fifteenth of September, 1858, Allan accomplished the round of the St. Andrews Links at 79 strokes, a number altogether unparalleled and likely to remain so.

"Out—444 556 444—40

In—435 645 543—39—79

"At various times Allan holed the St. Andrews course at the following numbers, selecting his best holes:

"Out—333 443 313—27

In—323 443 343—29—56

"In comparing the above scores, it must be kept in mind that the St. Andrews Links are not now nearly so difficult to play as they were in Allan's time.

"1842—Allan played a match in December with Tom Morris, beating him by two holes and holing the links at 93.

"1843—Allan played during the month of June, over the St. Andrews Links, a great match of twenty rounds, two each day, against William Dunn of Musselburgh. Allan gained on the tenth, or last day, by two rounds and one to play.

"1843—Allan played a great match of 36 holes with William Dunn of Musselburgh, beating him by 8 holes, and holing the second round at 88 strokes.

"1846—Allan played with a single driving club against Captain Broughton, and holed St. Andrews in 95.

"1848—Allan played a threesome with William Dunn and Tom Morris over Dubbeside Links. Allan holed 18 holes (two rounds) at 80, Morris at 89 and Dunn at 91 strokes."

What testifies most tellingly to his greatness perhaps is the "ringer score" of 56 composed with feather-stuffed and gutta percha balls and which included a hole-in-one.