

OPEN HISTORY REplete WITH "IT-MIGHT-HAVE-BEEN"

By
JOSEPH C. DEY, JR.
USGA Executive Director

A poet-philosopher put it this way:
"Of all sad words of tongue or
pen,

"The saddest are these: — 'It
might have been!'"

A golfer-philosopher named Sam Snead
said it more eloquently if less elegantly:
"What a game! One day you're a
Champion. Next day, you're a
turkey."

Whatever the language used, the
United States Open Championship has
been a fertile field for It-Might-Have-
Been. The near-misses sometimes are
more appealing than the deeds of the
Champions.

Sam Snead's deathless words about
Champions and turkeys sprang from a
full heart. The time was 1947, the place
was the St. Louis Country Club, and the
occasion was the presentation of prizes
for the Open. Sam was the reigning Bri-
tish Open Champion, but in the United
States Open he had just lost a play-off
to Lew Worsham.

Snead had entered the play-off by roll-
ing in an 18-foot putt on the 72nd green.
Next day he led Worsham by two strokes
with three holes to go. Worsham's bird
2 and par 4 on the next two holes evened
things.

At the home hole, Worsham was just
over the green in 2. Snead was nicely on,
at about the same position from which he
had holed to tie the day before. Worsham
chipped beautifully below the cup. Snead
putted short. Sam was addressing the ball
for his next putt when Worsham, evi-
dently feeling he might be away, called
for a measurement. Snead was 30½
inches from the hole, Worsham 29½.

Snead stepped up to putt again, missed.
Worsham holed, and was the Champion.

This was one of four occasions on
which Snead was second in the Open.
Another time, 1939, he had 8 on the par-5
home hole and missed the play-off by
two shots.

Only two players have been runner-up
as many as four times, and the other is
Robert T. Jones, Jr. Twice he lost in
play-offs. One of the play-offs might not
have been necessary if Bob had not seen
his ball move as he addressed it during
the Championship proper.

It was in the last round of the 1925
Open at the Worcester Country Club in
Massachusetts. On the 16th hole Jones
drove into the rough. He took his stance
for his second shot, was just about to hit
the ball, then suddenly backed away
from it. No one but he knew just what
had happened.

After Bob had holed out, his scorer
checked with him, said he had had 4,
and was told by Jones then he had had
5. His ball had turned over while he was
addressing it. The self-imposed penalty
stroke probably kept Jones from winning
the Championship. He tied with Willie
Macfarlane, who won after two separate
18-hole play-offs.

Jones is one of three who share the
record of four victories for the Open. The
others are Ben Hogan and Willie Ander-
son.

Hogan looked very much as if he had
fractured the record when, in 1955, he
holed out in 287 after four arduous
rounds over the Olympic Country Club's
Lake course in San Francisco. The ball
with which he completed the last round
was presented to the USGA for "Golf
House."

But Jack Fleck made two birdies in the
last four holes, downing an eight-footer
on the home green for 3, and so created
a tie which Fleck successfully broke in
a play-off.

Again the next year, 1956, Hogan came
tantalizingly close to the elusive fifth
Open victory. A missed putt from 30
inches on the 71st hole kept him from
tying Cary Middlecoff at Oak Hill Coun-
try Club in Rochester, N. Y.



Mr. and Mrs. Lew Worsham hold Open Championship Cup he won in 1947. Sam Snead wears It-Might-Have-Been smile.

The family championship for It-Might-Have-Been is held by the Smith brothers. Alex Smith was runner-up three times, as well as twice Open Champion. Willie Smith ran second twice, and won once. Macdonald Smith, one of the great uncrowned swingers of all time, never could win the Open but twice was runner-up, 20 years apart—1910 and 1930. The latter was Bob Jones' Grand Slam year and Mac Smith's closing round of 70 left the Scot just two strokes shy of a tie.

The first American home bred to win the Open was young John J. McDermott. As a very young man, in three straight Opens he won twice and was second once after a play-off, 1910 through 1912. Had an illness not forced McDermott to drop out of golf, there is no telling how the history of the Championship might have been affected.

Delightful little Bobby Cruickshank knew the pangs of the runner-up when he lost the 1923 Open in a play-off to Bob Jones at Inwood, N.Y. Eleven years later, at Merion, Cruicky led all the way until he lost seven strokes to par in the last five holes and ended two shots behind Olin Dutra, in a tie for third.

Jimmy Demaret twice came very close indeed. At Riviera in Los Angeles (1948) he broke the all-time Open record with

278. Later that day Ben Hogan beat even that with 276, which still is the record. Then in 1957 at Inverness in Toledo, Demaret was a likely winner until Dick Mayer and Cary Middlecoff both edged him by a stroke.

There was never a sadder It-Might-Have-Been than in 1940 at Canterbury, Cleveland. With a storm brewing, six players in two groups started the final round on their own initiative, in the absence of the USGA official starter, between 32 and 40 minutes ahead of their scheduled times. They played out the round provisionally.

One of them, Ed Oliver, made an unofficial 287. The score never entered the records: all six players were disqualified for violating a Rule which provides that competitors shall start at the times arranged by the Committee. And what was the best score in the Championship?—287 by both Lawson Little and Gene Sarazen, and Little won the play-off.

Ed Oliver passed away last year. Without any effort at all, he had come to be known as one of the jolliest of players. He met the adversity of a lingering illness with marked courage.

Who is to say, then, that there are not deep treasures in the Land of It-Might-Have-Been?