Twenty Years of Golf
An Autobiography
First Period, 1896-1900 The Gutta-Percha Ball

By WALTER J. TRAVIS

I

COMMENCED playing golf in October, 1896, when 35 years of age. It may be said I took up the game in self-defense. I was in London in 1895-6 and learned that the Niantic Club, a social organization in Flushing, L.I., intended starting a golf club. I was living in Streatham at the time and it was no uncommon thing to see bunches of golfers playing at Tooting Bec and Mitcham and Wimbledon, but the game made no appeal to me; on the contrary, I am free to confess that I had a mild contempt for it, inspired possibly by the garb of the players, for in those days men's togs ran to rather "foul" check in knickers and flamboyant stockings and red coats. However, I realized that I would have to sink toy prejudices and start in with the rest of the Niantic boys, so I equipped myself with a set of clubs and, with anything but pride, brought them over on my return. In the early part of '96 the Oakland Golf Club of Bayside, L.I., was formed and in October I first knelt at the shrine of the Goddess of Golf . . . and ever since have been a devout worshipper of the "Royal and Ancient" game. Full as my cup has been, I shall never cease to regret the many prior years which were wasted.

PREFACE.—When I look upon what I have written I am somehow reminded of the little girl who was kissed by the little boy, and who begged that he wouldn't say anything about it. He assured her he wouldn't, as he was as much ashamed of it as she was.

... with this, in a way. When it was suggested that I write the story of my golfing life I demurred, on the ground that it would smack too strongly of apparent egotism and that the personal pronoun would be distastefully too much in evidence. It was pointed out that this was merely fanciful and that the Memoirs would possess a certain historical value. I surrendered, weakly, I think. However, "the die is cast" and I can only beg the reader's indulgence for any unintended attempt at self-glorification in the circumstances.

At the Start

At this stage my experiments were confined almost exclusively to driving and iron play generally, the gentle art of putting being left to take care of itself, with the result that for the first two or three years I was quite weak on the putting-green. But when I later recognized the extreme importance of putting I made a special study of the subject . . . of which more anon.

On Lincoln's Day, in February, 1897, I took part in my first open competition, 18 holes handicap medal play, at the inaugural tournament of the Ocean County Hunt and Country Club, at Lakewood, N.J. There were two inches of snow on the ground and when the first pair, James Park, Richmond County, and F. A. Walthew, Lakewood, drove off it was snowing heavily, followed by alternate bursts of sleet, rain and snow. "Snow rules" were obtained. What are "snow rules"? one competitor asked another. "Snow rules" are "no rules" was the reply. And some of the players governed themselves accordingly, teeing the ball after every shot and chopping grooves with irons through the snow and ice on the putting-greens—a practice which became pretty general after a time. Harry Toler made the first round in 45, when he caught on to the green cleaning privilege and came home in 38, equaling the record made by Jasper Lynch, also over that same course three weeks previously. Mr. Toler's 83 won the prize for the best gross score, the net going to Herbert L. Pratt, Dyker Meadow, with 89-9—80. The other scratch man, James A. Tyng, Morris County, returned a 47-52—99, while I had a 47-46—93-4—89. Of course anyone can win a handicap affair if his handicap is big enough, but it is worth recording that I never won a handicap event at any time when I did not have the best gross score.
feller for a private course. About that time his life was despaired of and his physicians urged him to take up golf. He did so, and is still alive. In the concluding part of the tournament under notice Mr. Rockefeller was playing and back of him was a match in which Simeon Ford was one of the partici¬pants. Mr. Rockefeller does not move very fast at all. Ford was kept waiting quite a good deal. Repeated cries of "Fore!" failing to expeditate things, Mr. Ford finally let go and his ball struck Mr. Rockefeller on the leg. "Do you know who that is?" asked Mr. Ford's partner, somewhat horrified. "No, and I don't care!" "That's John D. Rockefeller!" "Well," calmly re¬orted Sim, "I can claim the distinc¬tion of being the only man to hit John D. on the golden calf."

In May, 1897, I won the Hempstead Handicap Cup, 18 holes, medal play, at the Meadowbrook Hunt Club's Spring Tournament, after tie¬ing with J. C. Rennard, of Tuxedo Golf Club. I had the best gross score as well, 50—40—90, the latter establish¬ing a new amateur record for nine holes. With a handicap of 7 I tied with Mr. Rennard at 91—8—83. I played with J. B. Coles Tappan, neither of us having seen the course before. When the score was posted there was no little comment on the disparity between 50 and 40 and much shaking of heads over such a perfor¬mance by a "dark horse", more espe¬cially when the scratch men's scores were: H. P. Toler, Baltusrol, 93; J. A. Tyng, Morris County (the winner of the tournament), 96; F. W. Men¬zies, St. Andrews, 98, and O. W. Bird, Meadowbrook (runner-up), 101.

The score;

Out. . . . 5 5 7 4 4 5 5 8 7—50—90
In. . . . . 6 3 5 3 5 5 4 5 4—40
In the play-off another tie resulted, the scores being exactly the same as before. Going to the last hole Mr. Rennard led by three strokes but ran up a 7 against my 4. An extra round of nine holes settled the affair in my favor by a margin of four strokes.

At the Knollwood Country Club tournament the following week I again made the best gross score and also won the Knollwood Handicap Cup with 84, 83—167—6—161, the 167 making a new 36 holes record, I played with Lawrence C. Embree and neither of us had played the course before. Other gross scores were: H. M. Harriman, Knollwood 91, 84—175; S. D. Bowers, St. Andrews, 87, 89—176; H. P. Toler, Baltusrol, 93; J. B. Tyng, Baltusrol, 93; H. Fenn, Palmetto, 93, 86—179, both of the latter having a han¬dicap rating of plus 4.

In July, 1897, at Shinnecock Hills, I failed in my good fortune up to this time had been confined to petty successes at medal play. My good fortune has taught you a little beyond your limitations. Do not, whatever you do, try to improve upon your regular game. That way actually lies the danger of allowing yourself to become depressed by a bad shot, or elated by a good one. Treat everything as it comes as part of the game and strive to maintain a serene mind no matter what be¬falls. That, after all, is the mark of a well-achieved game— is one of the real, worthwhile lessons golf teaches one as applied to all things out¬side the province of the game itself—to be philosophical and calmly swal¬low the bitter and sweet alike.

Now, all this applies in a large measure to one's procedure in match play, with some slight modifications. Never underrate an opponent. Many a match has been lost by this. On the other hand, do not start a beaten man by allowing yourself to think the other fellow is a bit too good for you. Never beat yourself by trying to beat your¬self—by attempting shots a little be¬yond your capacity. Play your own game. There is only one exception to this, when you have to be hazarded on a single shot, when play¬ing "safe" is simply useless, when it's a case of "Pike's Peak or Bust", go for it... but with relaxed muscles and determination to do or die. The trouble is, ordinarily, that this do or die mental attitude usually induces a death-like grip, tense muscles and gen¬eral rigidity—which spell failure. How many times have we decided to play short of a bunker which we know very well is too far off to be carried and with a loose, easy grip and swing made the shot... only to find, to our infinite astonishment, that the ball has carried right into the middle of it! Yet we learn nothing from it. We are stupid enough to believe that had we hit it only a little harder we would have been safely over. One more sug¬ gestion: if you have two for the hole half a dozen yards away, or are two up and three to play, or even dormie, at any stage, never, never play for a half, unless there are risky shots involved. As a general thing, the best policy is to try and win the hole.

Always be on the aggressive. Act as if you are quite sure of yourself and never give an opponent the psycho¬logical advantage of imagining you are the least afraid of him. Many a man is beaten before he starts by admitting to him¬self the other fellow's ability to out¬class him, unconsciously conveying it in his general bear¬ing. It only gives the opponent that slight encouragement which enables him to pull out a winner in a tight match. Do not allow yourself to be driven into any unusual or adverse weather conditions. Remember it is just as bad for the other fellow.

Now, I am not going to weary my readers with many more recitals of my doings in the kindergarten stage of my earlier experiences. I have deemed it not necessary as far as I have with the idea of showing that in the early days there was a sufficiently sound style to build hopes of improvement upon, and every effort was made, by assiduous practice, to develop and improve the game I had. And that has always been...

My good fortune up to this time had been confined to petty successes at medal play (Continued on page 42)
only. The time now came when I was to see what sort of stuff I was made of at match play, in open competition, the occasion being an open tournament at the first meeting of the Norwood Park Field Club, at Long Branch, N. J., in August, 1897. The qualifying round was won by W. Girtdwood Stewart, a Troon player on C. H. Murphy, Norwood, 7 and 6.

Here is an outside account of the final: "In their final round Travis and Stewart played very fast golf. The winning holes of each man were made in bogie figures, and Travis beat his redoubtable rival on the second hole by a stroke. Travis won the two starting holes in fours; Stewart won the third in five, and the fourth was halved in four. The two following holes fell to Stewart, but Travis then won three straight, so that the Oak-land man finished the first half two holes in the lead. Each scored 46 by strokes. Beginning the second half the tenth was halved, and Stewart won the eleventh in four. Then came two halved holes, and, as Travis won the fourteenth, he was again two up. Both the fifteenth and sixteenth holes were halved in four, the bogie mark. On the seventeenth Travis drove short and into the road, Stewart winning the hole. He still had a chance to halve the match, but on the home hole his long drive was punished by getting close to a tree, and as it was impossible for Stewart to make a long iron shot from the lie, Travis won the hole and match. He was two up." Incidentally, it may be mentioned that during the tournament I made new records for nine and eighteen holes of 41 and 46. The course was one of holes, in 1896.

In the Meadowbrook Hunt Club tournament a couple of weeks later, after beating W. H. Dixon, Rockaway Hunt, by 8 and 6 in the first round and M. P. Wright, Philadelphia, 5 and 4 in the second, I tasted defeat in the semi-final at the hands of Quincy A. Shaw, Myopia Hunt, by 3 and 2, in what was described by a contemporaneous writer as "one of the best matches ever played in the country."

Then, in September, came the West- brook tournament. The qualifying round of thirty-six holes went to H. H. Hollins, Jr., of the home club with 41, 40—81; 46, 51—97—178, my score being second with 43, 47—90, 44, 49—93—183. Mr. Hollins, Sr., also qualified with 197, being the first time on record on this side with father and son achieved such prominence. W. Bayard Cutting, Jr., who a week previously had beaten H. M. Harriman for the first prize at Newport, was tied for third place with George C. Clark, Jr., Shinnecock Hills, and George E. Armstrong, St. Andrews, at 187, while Joseph H. Choate, Jr., and Dr. H. Holloway Curtis each turned in a score of 191. One of the best known scribes at the time wrote: "The course has been enlarged since last year and it is now one of the best nine-hole courses in the country. The scores were very good, many making rounds lower than 90. The general aspect of the West- brook links is most picturesque. The level turf is crossed by a series of the highest earth bunker ever built in this country. They were laid out by Willie Dunn four years ago. The links were well calculated to bring out the best golf there was in the player."

The finalists were W. B. Cutting, Jr., and the present writer, the former beating in turn Harold Tappin, West- brook, by 6 and 5; H. B. Hollins, Sr., 3 and 2; and Geo. C. Clark, Jr., the Shinnecock Hills champion, at the nineteenth hole; while I accounted for W. H. Dixon, Rockaway, by 5 and 3; Dr. H. C. Curtis, by one hole; and H. B. Hollins, Jr., the local cham- pion, and medaled for the second time.

In the thirty-six holes final “both had a strong following, Cutting’s ad- herents being slightly in the ascen- dant. The heat was almost insuffer- able, and the caddies for the two rivals for the Westbrook cup, to keep the balls from becoming a sticky mass, had to carry half a dozen on ice, with the result that a start was made from every tee with a well frapped guatta. This expedient has not been found necessary in any game since Willie Park and Willie Dunn played their memorable match at Ardsley many more than a year ago.”

I recall that my opponent was much perturbed by the presence of a re- porter, who got on his nerves to such an extent that he declared he could not play while he was around, and who finally, at young Cutting’s re- quest, was asked to beat it to the club-house until the match was over, which he did! Both the local player and his opponent for the West- brook cup definitely decided to improve matters. The match went my way 7 up and 6 to play. "As for the real distinction between the two men, Cutting can clearly oat- drive Travis, and is his superior on the putting-green. Again, Cutting is more brilliant with his brassie, Travis, on the other hand, being more reliable. In the use of the iron clubs Travis outclasses the Harvard exponent, who lacks the knack of pitching his ball. In this respect Travis has few superiors, as he has evidently been devoting his attention recently to the art of pitching his ball high on the approach, and on Saturday he never failed once with his mashie to reach the green when properly played."

(To Be Continued in Early Issue)