

WHY GOLF HAS IMPROVED

By HAROLD HILTON

I TRUST I will be forgiven the title of this article, as I feel assured that it will awaken in the breasts of many disciples of the old school of golfers certain feelings of resentment; for in the past, when improvement in the game has been discussed, those associated with the golf of the 'sixties and the 'seventies have shown almost more than a decided disinclination to believe that there has been an improvement since the days of Allan Robertson, young Tom Morris, and Davie Strath.

To what the improvement is indebted is the subject which I am about to discuss, and for the necessary scaffolding around which I am trying to build my beliefs, it must be taken for granted that the game has improved; that is why I ask to be forgiven my title.

With an ever increasing demand, it stands to reason that the wood as now supplied to the golfing trade cannot be so carefully selected as it was in the old days, when the supply was large and the demand comparatively small.

I think nearly every clubmaker of even twenty to thirty years' experience will readily assent that the wood supplied nowadays is not of the same picked quality that it was in the days when they first joined the trade. I can remember myself when the majority of wooden club heads were made of apple, but as the demand increased apple became difficult to obtain and increasingly dearer, so substitutes had to be obtained. It may be that apple was not a better wood for the purpose than beach or dogwood, which are the standard materials at present. Personally, my experience leads me to the belief that the wooden club heads supplied in the present day are quite as efficacious as the old time apple heads. There are naturally more indifferent pieces to be met with, as the clubmaker cannot pick and choose as he was able to do in the days

of old, but I may mention that I have now in my set two club heads which have been in continual use for over six years, and to prove that they were not specially picked wood, it is a fact that they were both bought from the stock in the clubmaker's shop.

But if we take it that there is not much difference in the driving powers of the wood, the same cannot be said of the alterations and modifications in shape, which have taken place during the past twelve years. It was about that long ago that the bulger was introduced, and I think its introduction is, in a certain measure, responsible for the extra length, combined with accuracy, attained

by the leading players of the present day. It was some time before the bulger forced its way into the affections of the golfing public. By the older school of golfers it was looked upon with disfavor. They would have none of it, and one can appreciate the spirit of the ancients when I quote a passage culled from an article, which has as its author a worthy div-

vine, who looks not with favoring eye upon the continuous innovations in connection with the game, and is far from loath to express his opinions. The article was written in 1890, on the occasion of a professional meeting at North Berwick, and after Sayers had received some sound advice as to how to play his home green, the author proceeds to say:

Again it was most strange to see Simpson, who is, perhaps, on the whole, the best driver in the field, using that ugly club called the bulger. Fortunately, the other players used the old historical shape of head. The bulger is so small headed and unseemly to the eye that we of the old school would be afraid of missing with it.

Probably this was the opinion of many who, had been accustomed to the long and narrow headed club. The bulger did not ap-



Fig. 1. A Modern Set of Clubs.

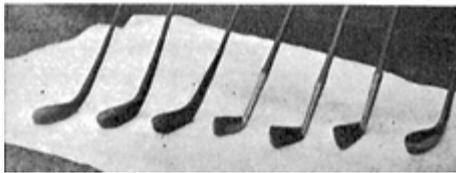


Fig. 2. A Typical Set of Clubs Used Between 1880 and 1890.

pear at all an elegant substitute, and, what is more, the fact of the face of the club being in front of the shaft, made the balance quite different.

I shall never forget my first attempt with a bulger. It was not my own club. It was the result of an experiment made by Mr. John Ball, Jr., on the advice of the late Henry Lamb, who is generally accorded the honor of being its inventor. The attempt was quite a disastrous failure, as neither would I strike a ball anywhere near the line I intended to, but, in addition, they seemed to travel no distance, and the only consolation I derived from the experiment was the fact that my old comrade in arms was even more hopeless with it than I. In consequence I dismissed the club as an impossibility. Great was my surprise, however, when some time after I met Mr. Ball driving with this self-same club, very far and very sure. I promptly came to the conclusion that my initial judgment must have been hasty, and I commenced the task of mastering the peculiarities of the bulger, with the result that I have never deserted it. It may be that the initial samples of the invention were carried almost to excess in the matter of the bulge; and, in consequence, the ball was apt to slip off the face, but time and experience have tempered this defect, and although many of the clubs used in the present day may be said to be almost straight in face, they are still, however, the children of this useful invention, in that the face is invariably in front of the shaft, and the head is cut down to workmanlike proportions. The old-fashioned club was certainly an elegant construction, but it was more elegant than effective. And it was almost impossible to strike with it in the same forceful manner that the leading players do nowadays with the newer implements.

To do full justice to the old club it was almost necessary to trust to the swing of the club. The *bitter* was all over the place, for, on account of the balance of the club, any extra pressure invariably resulted in the hands being in front of the head of the club and a horrible slice was the result.

Nowadays the leading player hits very hard; the head of the club shortened and more concentrated allows him to do so, and men like Braid habitually press with wonderful accuracy. Could they have done it with the old-fashioned club? I think not. Let any one try and see; then I think they

will agree with me. I cannot help thinking that the alteration in the shape of wooden clubs has had more to do with the very apparent improvement in golf than anything else, and when one considers the time when the improvement began to make itself evident, about 1890 or 1891, it only confirms my opinion, as it was then that the bulger came into general use. Between the years 1880 and 1890 there was little difference in the winning scores in big competitions. They were somewhat on a par with those of the 'sixties and 'seventies, when the condition of the links was nothing like so good. But from 1890 the play of the game was improved by leaps and bounds; that unerring guide, statistics proves it, and cannot be gainsaid. It may be that the links nowadays are kept in much better order, but, on the other hand, the material from which the implements are made is not superior; the present great demand precludes that; but I candidly think that more than a fair proportion of the improvement is due to the alteration in the shape of wooden clubs, which, in the hands of an expert, allows hard hitting with accuracy; which, in addition, allows balls to be played successfully out of lies that were impossible with the old-fashioned clubs.

Again, we find a similar state of affairs in connection with iron implements. I can remember the time when an iron made by Wilson, of St. Andrews, was considered a "pearl beyond price." Nowadays they may be said to represent "old iron." It has been a most rapid change, as Wilson irons were much esteemed only seven or eight years ago; but, as with the wooden clubs, it was generally found that a shorter head was more serviceable; not only did it drive farther, but it was an implement with which it was easier to play from indifferent or heavy lies, as when lying in such a position it is necessary to hit the ball, not swing at it; and the old-fashioned iron, long-headed and comparatively cumbersome, was a difficult weapon to wield in this fashion. So the iron club of the 'seventies and the 'eighties had to give way to the modern invention. The driving mashie superseded the cleek; and the lofting iron, with its broad, homely face, had to give way to the pitching mashie. They are old friends relegated to the portion of relics of the past, but, nevertheless, not forgotten. Certainly the cleek still survives, but its outward appearance is little in keeping with the weapon of old, as its head is short, and its

face narrow. It is probably the outgrowth of the fact that in the craze for short-headed clubs the striking space became so limited that the balance of the club was destroyed, and the center of gravity was far too near the socket.

I commenced my golfing career with a wooden putter. It is not an extraordinary fact, as it is fast approaching thirty years since I first handled a golf club; in those days wood was the principal material for the instruments with which we were expected to put the ball into the hole. Then came the era of metal. It was slow but sure, very sure, as eventually, in the affections of golfers, it ousted the implement of wood; but it was a long time before iron putters became universally popular. I am one among many

who are great believers in the efficacy of the wooden putter, but it is a weapon which not only requires great confidence, but in addition "touch," a combination which is vouchsafed to few; nothing could be more delightful than the manner in which the John Crow literally sweeps the ball into the hole with his "putter of wood." It is a delightful combination of touch and intellect, backed up by implicit confidence.

But in my humble opinion Mr. Crow stands by himself as a manipulator of the old-fashioned wooden putter. How many are gifted with the same touch? And of the few so gifted, how many have the confidence to swing or sweep the club as Mr. Crow does. It is an art granted to few. But while the wooden putter cannot be said to be a relic of the past, it has had to give way to the putter of metal. There is, however, an innovation in putters which has done much to resuscitate the waning glories of the old wooden instrument. In shape, it is the implement used in the old clays; but the material of the head is not a complication of wood and lead. It is solid aluminum, and, judging by the popularity it has, attained, it has supplied the happy medi-

um between the iron putter and the putter of wood. In reality, it is the latter in a new guise; but, on the other hand, in the matter of balance there is a slight kinship to the iron putter, as the balance is more forward on account of the fact that the club is all of one material. Personally, I am a great believer in this patent of Mr. Mills, as I think that while it can claim all the virtues of a wooden putter, it is not liable to many of the defects of the latter, as moisture has no effect on it whatever. But I hardly think there can be any material difference in the quality of the putting of the present day and that of the 'sixties and 'seventies. There is certainly more choice in the selection of weapons, but a really good wooden putter, in my opinion, cannot be beaten. It is

said that the making of a wooden putter is now a lost art, and I can quite believe this to be true, as in the present days the demand for clubs is so great that the clubmaker has neither the inclination nor the time to waste precious hours over one single instrument.

There is, however, one little item to which the improvement during the past ten or twelve years may,

in a manner, be attributable, and that is that golfers nowadays are not bound down by the precepts and principles of their forefathers. They have found out that it is better to work out their own salvation and form their style according to the endowments of nature. I can remember the time when it was considered quite the correct thing to play every wooden club stroke what is termed "off the left leg," and that eminent judge, Mr. Hutchinson, advocated this procedure in "Badminton." But increased experience has taught us that the coat must be cut according to the cloth, and, in consequence, many of the old traditions are but memories of the past.

Now I am afraid I must commence to wander down the old trodden path for a



Fig. 3. Wooden Clubs. Numbering from the Left, 1, 3, and 5 Are Modern; 2, 4, and 6 Were in Use from 1880 to 1890.



Fig. 4. Iron Clubs. 1, 3, and 5 Were Used from 1880 to 1890; 2, 4, and 6 Are Modern.

short period. When did the decided improvement in play really commence? In my opinion, about 1893. It is certainly a little difficult to account for the fact that between 1880 and 1890, golf, as regards improvement, was in a comparative state of stagnation. But records prove that it is so; and from 1890 to 1900, feats which were considered almost beyond the bounds of possibility were accomplished with comparative ease. Was it due to the improvement in clubs? I give a decided affirmative to this query, as the gradual shortening of club heads allowed players to strike hard and, in addition, strike with accuracy. But at first the improvement was very gradual, as the sentiment and tradition of many years could not be rudely brushed aside. A score of eighty or under on any of the first-class courses was considered very great work, and players in competition instinctively played up to the standard. If they completed the first nine holes in a phenomenally low number, the home half was played in a safe and "pawky" manner; in fact, that was the spirit of the game—slow and sure. But at Prestwick, in 1893, there came a player named J. H. Taylor, who opened the eyes of our worthy Scottish friends. In his ignorance of precept and tradition he thought not of possibilities. "Excelsior" was his motto, and he played at the hole with putter, iron, and driver with the same determination and *sang-froid*. And

the manner in which he placed his full iron and brasseys shots was a revelation to all. Certainly he did not win that particular championship, but at the very first attempt he created a new medal record. Even if he did fail in the subsequent rounds, it must be remembered that this was his initial effort in the championship, and that possibly he was just a little overawed by his phenomenal success in the first round; in consequence, playing too much on the safe side, and not meeting with success, eventually lost confidence. That he was the best player in the world at that time I have never had the slightest doubt. He had unconsciously realized the possibilities of the game with the short headed clubs, and not being bound down by any traditions, had been able to work out his own salvation, a happy state of affairs, which culminated in his winning the championship later on.

But to the more workmanlike shape of the present club heads I attribute, in the main, the improvement in the game, an improvement which might not have been quite so marked had not the professionals had opportunity of meeting so often in serious combat, which has served to develop the latent talent of the leading players, and provided that spirit of emulation which is the secret of the success of certain schools of amateur golf, like St. Andrews and Haylake, and others of the same class.

RECORDS AND NOTABLE PERFORMANCES

By JAMES E. SULLIVAN

IN TAKING charge of the department of Records and Notable Performances for OUTING, I shall recognize all valuable performances, but it will be my plan to carefully scrutinize and investigate all claims for records, before they are allowed by OUTING. American records are not authentic until the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States passes on them at the annual meeting in November.

Many unauthentic claims are now before me; for instance, in the 40-yard race of Duffy, at Philadelphia, on Saturday, February 1, the time was recorded as $4\frac{3}{5}$ sec-

onds, and every paper proclaimed it as a world's record. It could not be a world's record, as it was not made in open competition; and Duffy's own claim that the starter was careless, as he shot one man off his mark in Duffy's heat, and the agreement of the officials to have Amesler, of Pennsylvania, and Duffy run over again, shows that the starter was careless. Therefore it is not a record; though it certainly was a notable performance. Likewise at the B. A. A. games, E. L. Thompson, of Amherst, was timed at $4\frac{3}{5}$ seconds, for 40 yards. Every thing pointed to something wrong in the