

RECOLLECTIONS OF MY EARLY GOLF

With Some Hints on the Playing Out of Bunkers

By HARRY VARDON

GOLF shots sometimes meet with strange fates, and I think that the queerest I ever played was at St. Andrews. I was doing a good round until I came to the last hole. On the right of the course at this hole is a row of houses, but they are so far away as usually to be safe. On this occasion, however, I imparted so terrific a slice to my ball that it landed on top of one of the buildings, bounced down and finished its career in a drain pipe.

An errant shot that had a happier ending was one which I saw played at Ganton, England, when I was professional there. A golfer hit a tee-shot which struck a caddie on the head, whence it rebounded on to the clubhouse, and from there on to the green, where it lay within easy holing distance. We all expected to see the caddie drop in a stunned condition, but he stood his ground, and on being presented with a sovereign by the relieved player, he said with a grin: "Have another try."

They were interesting days at Ganton. We had time for a variety of sports, and an event in which golfers played no small part was an annual Christmas Day football match between Ganton and the neighboring village of Sherburn. I captained Ganton for two years, but it was not during my period in that responsible position that a local plasterer was drafted into our side in order to fill an eleventh-hour vacancy. He was a huge fellow and he was placed at full-back with instructions to allow no opponent to pass him. He was entirely innocent of the rules of football, but he carried out his commission with a vengeance. He never went for the ball; he simply hurled himself pell-mell at any rival who came his way and the results were alarming. Two of our opponents had to be assisted off the field, the most of the others were more or less injured.



Photographs by International

MAKE THE CLUB-HEAD LEAD

From the top of the swing, with the wrists, and the arms will follow

For those of us who had the playing of golf to consider, it was fortunate that he was on our side and not against it.

A singular incident occurred once when I was playing Willie Fernie. Open Champion in his day, on the Timperley course, Manchester. Fernie hit his ball close to a spot at which a horse was feeding. The animal looked curiously at the white sphere, then the demon of mischief seemed suddenly to take possession of it. Grabbing the ball in his mouth, the horse galloped off with it at top speed a full half mile. If ever the spirit of practical joking was reflected on the countenance of an animal, it was depicted on the horse's face as it dashed off with the ball.

Nobody knew what ought to be done, and in the end, Fernie dropped another ball as near as possible to the spot from which the original one was purloined, and continued the game as though nothing had happened. That would be the correct procedure under the present rules. I rather fancy it was contrary to the law of those days, but it was equitable.

From time to time, one sees some extraordinary golfing styles, and a player who used to fascinate me by the weirdness of his methods was a man who could only hit the ball with the top of the club head, that is to say, on the part where the maker's name is inscribed on a driver. That may sound incredible, but it is true. How he did it I do not know, but the fact remains that he was incapable of striking the ball with the face of the instrument or even the hole, which would have produced a topped shot. He hit it every time right on the top surface of the head, and the

consequence was that he could not use iron clubs. There was not enough striking surface—on top.

Even when he was under a hedge, he would call for a spoon and in some wonderful manner, scoop the ball up by making the impact with the top part of the head. He wore the name off his clubs in a few weeks, for he was a regular and enthusiastic player and he never varied in his methods.

There were times when, in playing for a green, he would strike out in such unexpected directions as to work his way all 'round the place at which he was aiming before he finally reached it. He would invade the fairways of four or five other holes in the vicinity and pursue his chequered career by way of bunkers, ponds, and a dozen other places of punishment intended for errant shots at holes some distance away. I saw him once work his way round all four sides of a green before finally he got onto it. His patience was monumental, and, in some of his rounds, he must have walked quite double the normal distance. He was a real enthusiast.

Sometimes it is said that success on the links is impossible to the person who has neglected the game in his or her early youth. I am not so sure of that. The value of a training in schooldays is unquestionable; but it is possible to make up for a great deal of lost time if you set about the task in the right way—the way that I have endeavored to indicate.

I have just expressed that sentiment aloud and somebody has said: "What about yourself? You must have been playing every day when you were a boy." I most certainly was not playing anything like every day or even once a week when I was a boy. It is a very good thing for a youngster to learn the swing at the time when the imitative faculty of the young mind is at its best; but I am sure that an exaggerated importance is attributed to the assiduous pursuit of the game in childhood.

I realize that, in saying this, I am guilty of something akin to heresy. It is customary in discussing the beginnings of famous golfers to produce evidence that, as soon as they could toddle, they went out and practised with a diligence worthy of veterans. We have been told repeatedly how they stuck to the game through their 'teens until at length they could be said to have grown up with it—the only way, according to tradition, to master golf.

So many people have told us that the one royal road to success is to take up the game in childhood and play it until it becomes ingrained in the constitution—to be "teethed on a golf club handle," as it had been put—that I see no reason to withhold evidence to the contrary with a piece of autobiography.

Up to the time I was twenty years of age, I played so little golf that even now I can remember almost every round as a red-letter event of my youthful days. We were a big family of six boys and two girls, and at the age of twelve I went out to work to do my bit in the maintenance of the home. At that time, I had not the slightest thought of taking seriously to golf. To be sure, the formation of the Royal Jersey Golf Club five years previously at our little village of Grouville had prompted most of the boys in the village to dabble in the game; we had a little course of our own and some home-made clubs of a primitive kind in which a stick from a blackthorn served as the shaft and a piece of oak as the head, the two



YOU HAVE NOTHING TO HIT

Until you come down, but be sure and follow through when you do

being fastened together by boring a hole in the "head" with a red-hot poker, inserting the blackthorn stick and tightening the joint with the aid of wedges. Of iron clubs we had none.

Truth to tell, however, I was not particularly keen on the game and played very seldom. I used to busy myself at the beach, collecting seaweed which sold for a sum that brought a nice few pounds a year into the family exchequer. I think that, whatever may have been my faults, I can claim to have been a boy who wasted little time. One of my little passions was to collect all the nails I could find by extracting them from discarded pieces of wood, straightening them with a hammer when they were bent, and assembling them in a box which I had made with eight compartments for the different sizes of nails. I obtained a truly imposing array and was glad to learn from my mother a few years ago that she was still keeping the box of nails that came of my boyish idea of industrial economy.

When I was thirteen, I entered a doctor's service to act as page-boy and wait at table. For four years I had virtually no golf at all. To be sure, I would go out occasionally with other boys on moonlight nights for a game, but I do not know that my spasmodic appearances on the links in these circumstances can be held to have constituted very serious practice. In later days, people often said to me: "I used to know you when you were playing golf as a boy at Jersey." In point of fact, it was my brother Tom they knew, for he obtained a good deal of golf, whereas I was not far from being a stranger to the game. Apart from my duties as page-boy, I helped to make the butter and performed various other duties, so that there was not much time for golf.

When I was seventeen, I went as gardener to Major Spofforth—a brother of F. R. Spofforth, the famous Australian cricketer, who was known in two hemispheres as "The Demon Bowler." Major Spofforth was keen on golf and every now and again he took me out to play. He also gave me some of his old clubs, which seemed very wonderful after the clumsy, home-made things that I had been using. All the same, I was not at this period a diligent seeker of success on the links. I liked cricket and football, and went in a good deal for running, winning ten prizes as a sprinter. I remember during a holiday taking part in six races in two days.

One of my duties was to scare the crows from an area of ground under cultivation and to render the job as interesting as possible, I made a practice of playing an improvised kind of golf 'round the field. I had my own marks that ranked as holes, and was always trying to beat my own "record"—it was my own because nobody else ever attacked it. No doubt this experience was useful, although I never regarded it as anything but a means of relieving the dullness of a slow job.

Apart from an occasional round with Major Spofforth—which invariably made me feel very nervous—my golf was limited to Christmas, Easter, Whitsun and August Bank Holidays. On these occasions, I played mostly with Willie Gaudin, who subsequently went to America. Major Spofforth once said to me: "Henry, if I were you I would not give up my golf; it may be useful to you some day." I remembered the words, but at that

time I had not the remotest idea of developing into a champion.

My first attempt to play golf in a really earnest frame of mind was when, at the age of twenty, I entered a competition for a vase given by the local working men's club. We had to play one round a month for six months, and I won pretty easily. Alas! the prize—my most cherished trophy because it was my first, although it had

no great monetary value—was destroyed when a German airman dropped a bomb at the back door of my home at Totteridge and brought the building tumbling about the ears of myself and my family.

Just before my first competition concluded, the news reached me that my brother Tom, who had gone to England to launch out as a professional golfer, had won second prize in an open professional tournament at Musselburgh. The award was 20 pounds. It seemed an enormous amount to me, and I pondered long and intently over it. I knew that, little as I had played, I was as good as Tom. If he could win that vast fortune, why shouldn't I?

My father—himself a golfer—was not enamored of my ambition to become a professional. He had never seen me play; there had been very few opportunities for him to do so. It was not until I had won three championships that he saw my golf for the first time.

He had watched Tom on a good many occasions and was satisfied that he would make a golfer, but he could not reconcile himself to the belief that a person who took such a dilettantish interest in the game as myself would ever excel at it. Happy and sacred his memory! Even in later years he declined to abandon his early convictions and was wont to say: "Harry wins the prizes but Tom plays the golf."

I have said enough to show that a boy need not grow up from babyhood "teethed on a golf club handle" and play the game diligently in his young days in order to excel at it.

If I had a son I would not attempt to force the golfing pace upon him. Until he attained at least the age of fourteen, I would tell him simply to watch good players and to copy them.

Children cannot be taught golf but they are born mimics and if you put them into good company, they will grow up in the right way. You must let them do as they will for a time—at any rate, on the links—and then, when they rise to such discretion as the age of fourteen or fifteen engenders in them, you can give them hints that will make them advance rapidly.

At home I studied the styles of the golfers I saw because it seemed natural to do so, but I cannot say that I moulded my methods on those of anybody in particular. I never had a lesson and cannot recall anybody who impressed me as being a model who should be copied.

There is some mystery about the consistency with which the Jersey golfers have adapted themselves to the upright swing—that compact manner of wielding the club which came as a shock to the

people who for years had worshiped the longer and flatter method, known as the St. Andrew's swing. My own brother and Edward Ray, the Gaudins, the Becks, and the Renoufs all drifted involuntarily into the habit of taking the club to the top of the swing by the shortest route, whereas the popular way before was to swing the club (Continued on page 46)



A POT BUNKER AT THE NINTH GREEN, ST. GEORGE'S, ENGLAND
Where the explosion shot is the satisfactory solution of the difficulty



Photographs by P. I. C.

THE BIG BUNKER GUARDING THE FIFTEENTH GREEN
At St. George's, England, where the British Open championship is to be held this month

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flat at the start and make a very full flourish of the swing. Why we hit upon the other way we do not know.

Personally, I never thought about the matter until I obtained my first professional post at Ripon, Yorkshire. And it was when I was twenty-one and in my second appointment at Bury, Lancashire, that I began to study and learn golf in real earnest. So you can see that there is every chance for you, and the niblick is one of the most useful clubs to master.

No doubt every golfer has suffered the annoyance of getting into somebody else's divot or bunker mark. It might not be a bad idea to make it the honorable obligation of a partner or opponent to draw attention to his companion's delinquencies in forgetting to repair the scarred earth.

I dare say that it often happens that the golfer blames the heel-mark in the bunker when none actually exists. Most of us have witnessed unfortunate heroes hammering away in places of retribution for so long a period as to suggest the possibility of their having acquired a lease of the unhappy spot, just as some morbidly disposed individuals like to live in houses in which murders have been committed. When this type of golfer does at length emerge from the hazard, he generally says that his ball was buried in a hole made by somebody else. On a London course, I once saw a player make a drive from the first tee which landed in a pot bunker on the left. He entered this simple-looking resort of the erring, and to the people who were awaiting his pleasure, it seemed to be an age before he came out again.

He worked his way 'round and 'round the walls of his prison, ever hitting the ball and never quite extricating it. He was like a bird of the forest suddenly trapped and fluttering its wings with feverish excitement at the bars of its goal in a frenzied effort to regain its freedom. At the finish, he explained that he was in a deep heel-mark. Judging by the time he spent in getting out, he must have been in something like a coal mine.

In the ordinary way, there is little excuse for anybody taking more than one shot in a hazard. I suppose that, in the majority of instances, it is either lack of forethought or excess of ambition that leads to disaster in bunkers. Except where the ball lies in an obviously hopeless position, the temptation to attempt a *tour de force* is nowhere stronger than in a hazard. Yet the lesson that is learnt by studying the doings of successful players is that unless the lie is particularly favorable, it is sound policy to resign oneself on the spot to the loss of a stroke as punishment for a mistake and to trust to recovering.

A long shot from a hazard is a thrilling piece of self-satisfaction and a fine spectacle. The wise man is he who tries it only when it can be done, and that is not often. Just once in a while, you see the chance of bringing it off. Almost my last personal experience of it was on a Brighton course. The ball was lying on the sloping face of a bunker, and it had to come up quickly in order to escape the top. Fortunately, the face of the hazard was by no means precipitous, and with a brassie, I managed to get the ball away and deposit it on the green, 200 yards ahead.

At Prestwick, in the British open championship of 1914, Taylor took

his brassie in a bunker at the ninth hole and hit almost as long a shot as he would have accomplished from the fairway. That sort of thing is possible on occasion, and certain it is that it is considerably easier to the crack golfer who is tolerably sure of controlling the elevation of the ball than to the mediocre player, whose every shot is a dash into the great unknown. Yet the latter is far more disposed than the top-sawyer to essay a long shot from a bunker.

In point of fact, it is comparatively seldom that one sees a first-class performer obtain considerable distance from a hazard. Very often his restraint must seem disappointing. He merely howks the ball out, 20 or 30 or 40 yards up the course. Yet it is not always that a shot of hair-raising brilliancy is outside the range of possibility. It is simply that in normal circumstances the effort is not worth the risk that it involves.

When there is no alternative to a death-or-glory endeavor, people sometimes do amazing things. One of the best bunker shots I have ever seen was that by Edward Ray when, in the final of the "News of the World" tournament at Walton Heath in 1911 his chance seemed gone beyond recall. Standing two down with three to go, Ray was about as badly bunkered at the sixteenth hole as any but the most cruel-hearted person could conceive. His ball was lying half-buried close to the face of a hazard three feet high, with the green 100 yards ahead. By making the ball rise quickly, aiming to the left so as to give it a chance to get up before reaching the face of the bunker, and imparting a tremendous amount of slice to the shot, he actually got on to the green and halved in 4. Most of the people had walked away, convinced that he could not possibly prolong the match.

There are times when there is nothing for it but to trust to one's instinct and adaptability to secure the best possible position for playing an unusual shot. I remember on one occasion at Muirfield having to go down on to both knees in order to get at a ball which was lying close up to the deep face of a bunker running parallel with the course. In this case, however, perhaps it would have been better if I had stood in the bunker and recovered by playing back. Sometimes, in a hazard, it is worth while remembering that one is entitled to retrace one's steps; nobody likes it, but occasionally it is the easiest and safest way out of trouble, especially when there is a good chance of reaching the green with the next shot.

A ditch is another painful place of retribution. You may have to stand with one foot in it and one out or in some other uncomfortable way. There is only one golden rule to observe when the ball is badly in a ditch; it is to bring the niblick down with a crash about an inch behind the object—just as one does in the sand when particularly horribly bunkered—so that the upheaval of soil will make the ball jump up and escape. Unless you have plenty of room in which to swing and the chance of making the ball fly straight—a privilege that is not often forthcoming in a ditch—it is not much use trying to take the ball cleanly.

We have reached the end of these lessons. I hope that, here and there, the hints that I have given may be helpful to the golfer who, loving the game as a hobby and a recreation, wants to play it well. More than any other pastime that I know—and I have tried most forms of sport—does it fan the flames of emulation.