

THE NEW GLORY OF THE MONGREL CLUB

BY HENRY LEACH

The interesting fact that Harry Vardon won his sixth Open Championship not merely with fewer clubs in his bag than this great event has ever been won with in modern times, but with a more peculiarly constituted bag than is customary, two mongrels being among the collection, has raised some interesting points and may provoke some new tendencies.

I remember that upon a wet and unhappy afternoon James Braid and I were considering the set of clubs of a most distinguished player which by a chance were stacked with fifty other idle bags, and after admiring the points of the driver, passing a compliment upon the cleek, and uttering a faint doubt upon the mashie we came to a strange club that immediately set up an aversion in our minds. It belonged to no definite class; it could not possibly be named, and it had the same most courageous originalities. It seemed to be an open and palpable defiance to all the conventions and proprieties in clubs, and with something in the way of derision and imprecation we tumbled it back into the bag again, wiped our hands, and took out one of the two excellent putters that this champion possessed.

"It is a mongrel!" said Braid, referring to the article we had put away, and I quietly murmured that I knew it was—murmured it in the manner of a man who suggests that the conversation on such a subject ought not to be encouraged. But what hypocrites are all of us! I have known Braid himself to play with a mongrel and rejoice in doing so, and for some years past the most priceless club in

my own set, that is so much more potential to its owner's capacity, is a mongrel, too, one that I purchased many long years ago. It was supposed at the time to be a mid-iron, but shortly after it had been taken into my service an inquiry was held at which various associates assisted and it was declared indubitably to be a mongrel, a club that was almost unclean and from which no good could result. At that time golfers in general were narrower in their ideas than they are today. It was not admitted that a man's own personality and ideas counted for anything and that from his own inner self and his consciousness he was to evolve a game which might defy all the minor laws of golf but which should be his very own, and the best for him. There were distances and there were shots and there were clubs for those shots, and that was the sum of it all. My poor mongrel, though I had begun to like it for it seemed a reliable club, appeared to have no special place in this narrow little world and so in a mean shame I put it away, and it lay in idleness and darkness for seven or eight years. Then one day by a chance I came to handle it again; something about it pleased me, I took it out and tried it, and from that day to this it has been as the captain of the bag, and often have I spoken and written about it. More than that it has been admired by multitudes, and several times has it been copied. Yes, it is a mongrel, and a mongrel still, for there are certain mongrels that, after being much played with by distinguished players, and keeping up what might

be called some high society, seem to acquire a status; they are copied extensively, they are given special names of their own, and at that it is discreetly agreed to forget their doubtful parentage. It has a little of the mid-iron, a little of a cleek and a little of a jigger in its composition, its balance is exquisite, and for a full variety of iron shots it is a glorious club. So they tell me who have admired it.

And that somehow seems to be a way with mongrels. Sometimes when I look on this club and remember all the things that have been said of it and other mongrel clubs, I think of the animals to which the term has been most frequently applied and reflect upon my own sad experience. For once I paid many guineas for a fine little puppy of the most brilliant lineage, like that of an ancient dukedom, and he has been in the doctor's hands nearly all his life, while I have a relative who was followed home one night by a queer looking little thing to which he gave lodging, and the next day gave half a crown in full payment for him to a rough looking person who claimed it. In this animal you may discover traces of most other kinds of dogs. I can see a glimpse of a Russian boar hound in him, and there is a touch of a Pomeranian. But for health, affection, the protective instinct and all the other qualities of a good doggie he is quite incomparable and I wish he were mine.

So it may be with the mongrel clubs. They may very well have quality and do their duty well, and we are too apt still in these half revolutionary days when golfers are showing a restless disposition to break away from the old conventions—witness the championships and their con-

ditions—to be unduly faithful to old custom in the matter of forms of clubs. It is time that a word should be said for the mongrels, and that in a spirit of utter socialism they should be given their places in society. That word has been spoken by the greatest and most distinguished golfer in the land, the six times champion, Harry Vardon, and he has said that he is proud of his mongrel clubs and that they have done him the best service. He won his sixth championship with fewer clubs than champion has ever won with in modern times. I remember old Bob Martin, who won the open championship in 1876 and 1885, telling me once that in his great days he never played with more than four or five clubs and only two of them were made of iron, one being a cleek and the other a niblick. But it is different now. James Braid has won championships with thirteen clubs in his kit and when Ray gained his gold medal he had thirteen also. Vardon with ten or eleven at Prestwick, gives at least an advertisement to the virtues of fewness and simplicity. The other day when we were in France we talked of the tools with which he had achieved his famous victory, and, making a verbal inventory, he said that he had two drivers, one which was not an old favourite; two brassies, one being kept in the bag specially for the purpose of forcing the ball out of bad lies; a cleek, sometimes a mid-iron which is occasionally missing, as it appears to have been at Prestwick, two mongrels, a mashie, a niblick and two putters. This brings the strength of the championship set up to ten, or eleven with the mid-iron, essential to any kind of golf as it is generally conceded to be.

Vardon's philosophy in this matter of fewness of clubs is excellent, and most satisfying. He says that he had in his bag clubs that with proper skill and power of manipulation, of which he rightly considered himself possessed, he could do anything that in the golfing way was humanly possible, and the fewness of clubs tended to make his task simpler than it might otherwise have been and to reduce the problems of victory and how it might be achieved. In a multitude of clubs there is confusion. It is refreshing thus to find a champion, and the one of much success, thus practising what all champions continually preach, for they tell us all the time that five or six clubs are enough for anyone, and yet we find them with more than the dozen in their own bags and it is the cold truth that a player who once reached the final of the amateur championship had nineteen in his kit. If the champions with all their special skill need so many clubs, how many more shall we of poor pretence need for the playing of our game?

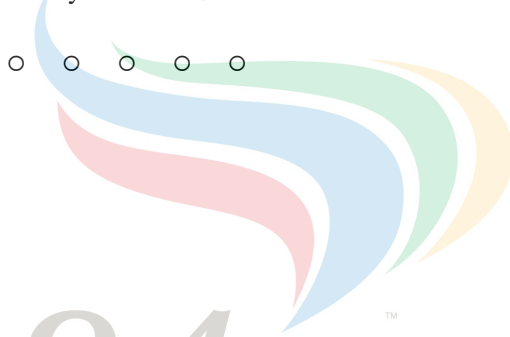
Yet when we are giving praise in this matter we should not forget that when Ray won his championship at Muirfield and had thirteen clubs in his collection there were five of them that were never unbagged during the whole of the meeting, and two others were only very rarely used, and then more by way of momentary fancy than because they were essential to the occasion. That virtually brings the working set down to six, and such is the power of Ray with his driver and his cleek and his mashie niblick that I verily believe he could play his best game with these three and his putter to round off his work at each hole. It might not be a beautiful game, but

yet it would be effective, as the play of Ray so commonly is. But championships, if not of the quality of open championships have been won with fewer clubs than that long since the days of Bob Martin, for there is an Irish player who has won the amateur event that is confined to his countrymen with three clubs only, and he never played with more—a driver, an iron and a putter.

But for the moment those mongrels of Vardon are the thing, and we should make the most of them now, for soon they will be mongrels no longer. Others will want clubs like them, they will be copied, they will be marketed, they will be standardised, thousands will be using them, they will be given special names and then they will be considered not as mongrel clubs at all, but as fine specialties, and they will be accepted graciously and cordially in the best society. That is the way with mongrels that have good in them, for this is a forgiving world after all. Think how many of the accepted clubs of the period were nothing but mongrels, though their doubtful origin, their impure breeding is long since forgotten. What of the mashie niblick? It is one of the most useful, the most dependable of all the clubs that are employed in the short game and one of the very easiest to use, but, of course it is nothing but a blend between the mashie and niblick, though latterly with its sharp nose and its long face it is developing points of its own. There is the jigger, which is obviously a hybrid, with something of the cleek, the iron, and the mashie in it, and there is the mashie iron also. And what is the "Sammy" but a cross between a cleek and a jigger, and an excellent club too is this Sammy

which would be more used if it were better known. One of Vardon's mongrels is a cross between a cleek and a mid-iron, and the other is a cross between a mid-iron and a jigger. It took him a long time to make use of one of them, for he had it in his bag in America last year but rarely employed it. An American gave it to him. Then suddenly he took a fancy to it, and that club played its part in the great victory at Prestwick. The iron-jigger blended article, so the story goes, was first used by Ben Sayers

who woke the champion up one night when they were travelling together between Scotland and England to ask him something about his grip and handed him this club for demonstration purposes. Sleepy Vardon, always a very human golfer, became much awake as he fingered it for he liked the feel and the balance and the look of the thing, and he told Sayers to send him one like it with all possible haste. So that club also did its duty at Prestwick, and Vardon and his mongrels are exalted above all others.



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