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SOME SECOND THOUGHTS

BY HENRY LEACH

[In this article and the two others of a short series that have already been published, our British correspondent, who toured this country both in 1912 and 1913 and has certainly seen more of American golf than any other British writer, relates some of the new impressions formed in the United States in the Summer and Autumn of last year, and such modification as his first impressions then sustained. He will write about courses, players and prospects.—Editor, THE AMERICAN GOLFER.]

Part III.

A matter in American golf that impressed itself upon me in a new way when I visited the country for the second time and watched the players, in the light of a year's old experience and some intervening reflection, is that individualism and character have now begun to develop rapidly, and that the results are very reassuring. It is an important epoch in the career of any young player, whatever his promise and his pretensions may be, when he begins to feel a certain independence from the teaching that has been given to him, and to assert his own thought and feeling and ideas, without which assertion he could never go far on. Innumerable directions have been given in many books for the playing of all kinds of strokes in golf, and perhaps the basic principles are right enough, but nothing is so true as that golf after all is an intensely individualistic sort of game, and that nothing approaching the best results is to be gained unless this is recognized. As no two men are quite alike and no two shots that have ever been played

have been identical, so in detail the methods of no two players are just the same or could be.

Golf is really a very natural kind of game, hard as it may be to appreciate the fact when it is in its most tantalizing way. The movements, complicated as they are by the harmonious interactions of a thousand little muscles and nerves, are really quite natural movements when they are made properly and to suit the style and individuality of the man. We have a clear indication that this is so by the fact that a player may often make a shot which in the circumstances of the way in which the ball was struck, the peculiarities of flight that were imparted to it and the ultimate results, were all that could have been desired, but which gave no satisfaction to the subject for the simple reason that it had not felt right, as it were, inside him, was not natural, was not his own real stroke. Every golfer knows so well how this is so that no extended explanations of what to outsiders may appear to be a remarkable feature of this game, is necessary. The clear

inference and the proven fact then is, that every golfer has a particular game of his own, one special style and system born within him and fastened up in his physical construction. He can have no idea what the nature of that style and system are at the beginning of his golfing career; that is one of the great mysteries that is to take him the best part of a lifetime to solve, and perhaps he may die long enough before he has gone half way to the solution. But, first paying full regard to the basic principles, he has to experiment, and experiment again, and "find things out," as we say, continually, and from a hundred individual discoveries made in a year, one may be selected from them as one of the real things of nature to go to the building up of the golfing system, which slowly and with much labour and an infinity of patience is raised up in this way. Every man to his own system. I certainly do believe that this is the only way to achieve one's best and highest satisfaction in golf, and that those who attempt to disregard this way are losing most of the pleasure of the game, which is one of search and discovery from beginning to end. No book has ever been written or ever will be, which can explain to a golfer how to play his own game, and no professional or other tutor can teach him to play it either, even though so many of the peculiarities and tendencies of the case are plainly exhibited. The man must find his own game out for himself and he must have the courage of his convictions, and that is why we find the most amazing variations in the methods and systems of the great players.

And again on that point of its being a natural game I have always maintained that if you placed a young boy

who had never seen or heard of golf, on a desert island and left him there with means for his subsistence for a few years, together with a set of golf clubs and a few boxes of balls, the people who might be wrecked on those lonely shores soon afterwards would find him playing a good scratch game and in want of nothing but a caddie, for which part the arriving boatswain might be indicated. But these wrecked miserables, with their shiverings and their grumblings would jar unpleasantly upon the happy peace of this purely natural golfing youth, in all the ecstasy of the new discovery of his own world. Probably he would wish the others—all except the boatswain—to leave him there when the white sail of relief was seen upon the horizon. A pretty speculation arises instantly. Suppose at the same time we had placed on another desert island four thousand miles away another raw mere child, innocent of the simplest vaguest thought of what golf is or could be, and left him also with clubs and balls and directions for obtaining fresh meat and fresh water when the human desires in food were felt. He would surely take to the game in the same way as the other boy did, practise it and probe into its mysteries with just the same enthusiasm, would become a good scratch player also, and would probably make use of the same simple expression of condemnation when a shipload of people uncivilized to golf were wrecked that way. But here is the point: this second scratch desert island boy would probably be just as good as the first scratch desert island boy, no better and no worse, and if they were to play for the Championship of the Most Lonely Islands, nothing is more likely than that their excellent match would have

to go to the thirty-seventh hole or beyond it. They would, being good material to begin with, attain approximately equal results so far as doing the holes in a certain number of strokes is concerned, and each youth's system would be perfect for himself, but between the two there would be the very widest differences, and the basic principles that were common to the games of both players would be so encrusted with masses of individual detail and coloured with temperamental attitude that they would be scarcely discernable. Yet of course they could be, must be there.

This is not an idle story with no meaning or moral in it. The case as between British and American golf is suggested. I have made it my business in different parts of the United States to consider the origin and growth of the game in those parts and the circumstances attending it. I know exactly how it started and went on, at Yonkers, at Shinnecock Hills, in Massachusetts and other places just as the Americans who are concerned know these things, and it has seemed to me from thoughts upon past and present circumstances that American golf now and only just now begins to assert its own proper individuality and independence. The American "school" as one might call it has been begun. There are many different types in it; they are strong and self assertive, and by no means all of a kind, and those types are already beginning to have an influence in the country, and a big one. The rising American golfers are beginning to believe thoroughly and deep down in their consciences as never before that there is no right way and no wrong way of playing this baffling game; but that the best way is one's own if it answers well. There

you have it; that is the enormous truth, and with its discovery by the Americans a new era begins.

I do not build these suggestions on too slender foundations. Yet at the same time I do not put it forward that the Americans have been slavishly adherent to the methods and advice of players across the waters, and too much overcome by their own unworthiness. That is not the American way in anything, and there never was any necessity for it to be the American way in golf. But there are two suggestive points in this consideration. There is at any rate the overwhelming fact that in Great Britain so far, the very best players have been produced in a majority that is beyond reckoning, and whatever views America might have for the future, a matter of this kind is not to be disregarded. Such successful examples have to be studied to some extent. Then again, hardly anything about American life and ways strikes the foreign visitor so much as the passion of the people for systems and standards. Most of life is one great system with grooves and slots and all sorts of standardizations. The people have applied this general idea to their games as well as their other occupations, and usually with very marked effect for good, so far as mere results are concerned. See what a precisely standardized game is baseball, and how you revel—or are supposed to revel—in the schedules that are provided afterwards showing analysis of all that happened in every game, precisely how everybody blundered and how success was scored, and I will dare to say that these tables mean nothing after all, for they tell nothing of Chance and Mood, and no game ever was worth the playing that was not

largely dominated by these features as even baseball is. Then when the world's series comes along the critics will analyse all the performers as if they were automobiles or some other exactly adjusted machinery, and award them so much of a percentage of perfection. Thus, you understand, everybody knows in advance everything that is going to happen, or should do. But commonly it does not happen after all—and it is a good thing that it does not. The critics do not allow sufficient discount for the sordid fallibility of human flesh and blood. I remember too that one day I went to Harvard University just at the beginning of a term and watched the students practising as only American students would, for the beginning of their football campaign, and there again the application of their systems and their codes was a most remarkably impressive thing to the British visitor. It is part of the principle of open elevation which is supposed to be putting America ahead in all matters of sport and athletics.

Now there has been in the past most certainly a disposition on the part of American players to standardize too much in golf, and to give too little scope to their own individuality, and to explore too little into the recesses of their own capacity. I do not care whether they deny this standardization or not; it has been there and I am sure of it. There is the most remarkable similarity in the style with wooden clubs of good American players. There is the full round swing, a long sweep and a good follow through. I do not say that this is anything but an excellent style; as a national model it would serve most splendidly, but it is so common that it suggests lack of independence of thought, too much

disregard of one's own resources and inclinations.

There is much nonsense written in these days about this round flat swing. It has become the fashion for great professionals to condemn it and say that the only good way to drive is by the straight downwards kind of blow which they themselves employ. If it is not the prettiest style, this one has advantages, more especially in the matter of controlling the ball, that it had not in earlier times when the round flat swing was more generally advocated and always regarded as the proper thing. Properly done, the round swing is a finer thing to see than the other one; it is, as one might say, more golflike; and anyone who has anything to say about its effectiveness, may have pointed out to him the case of J. H. Taylor, the British Open Champion, who is a round flat swinger and a determined advocate of this style, and one who, when he won his fifth championship at Hoylake last June, did so mainly as the result of such a superb exhibition of magnificent driving under the most difficult conditions conceivable, as had never been witnessed in a championship before and may never be again. But what the Americans clearly need to do is to cultivate more care and control with this swing than they have exercised in the past, and they will be better assisted towards doing so when the American courses are more strictly bunkered for the shots than they have been.

It has been in iron play, however, that the subconscious American standardization has been most noticeable. The average American player is clearly deficient in variety of iron strokes; he certainly cannot compare with the British players in this re-

spect. The Americans' iron shots are plain simple things, and they vary only in the extent of the swing. In this matter there are advantages and disadvantages. Variety in the strokes of iron play is easily overdone; men are tempted to try a fancy shot of some kind when a much plainer one would serve their purpose far better and with much more certainty. Iron play when treated thoughtfully and scientifically, is so very alluring that this temptation is a constant menace, and men are always attempting the fancy shots and completely forget the simple ones. The cardinal virtue of the American's simple iron play is its splendid accuracy and certainty. With a flat dry piece of ground, good turf, and no wind between a ball and the hole, anything up to 170 yards away, I would back the American player to do as well as anyone in approaching, and his most sensitive touch and excellent judgment of strength and distance, in which qualities he excels very much indeed, are greatly in his favour. But I think he will be a better golfer when he has more strokes at his command for exceptional conditions of courses and weathers, and he needs them when he comes to Britain as he may not so much in America.

Where the individuality of the American players is most strongly asserting itself, so much to their advantage and betterment of future prospects as I have suggested, is not so much in methods yet as in general attitude towards the game. They are certainly getting away from the standardization tendency and will do so more quickly in the future, realizing now that golf is not in the least like any other game and that the way to build up a special American success is to establish a

special American variety. That is now begun. In 1912 I thought that the American players were too much inclined to speed in their play. They careered over the links like race horses, and seemed to imagine that golf is or ought to be a form of moderately violent athletics. That was just an impression and it may have been wrong in general application, but I certainly saw many examples. I retain some most disturbing memories of the speed at which some rounds were done in the championship at Wheaton, when the thermometer was bubbling near the century mark.

This is not the proper game. Whatever is to be said in favour of the general American principle of hustle and getting there quickly, there is nothing whatever to be uttered in favour of real hustle on the golf links. It will not do. Golf is a contemplative game, or it is nothing. As a speed game it would not be worth playing. Thought, reflection, deliberation, are everything to this extraordinary diversion. It lives and succeeds by them. Occasionally a phenomenon of speed like George Duncan is produced, but it proves nothing except that others are not Duncans and never will be. Hurry of action induces hurry of thought and a jangling unsteadiness of the nerves, and I have often thought that one of the very best hints of a general kind that can be given is to walk as slowly as can be done within reason, from the putting green to the next tee and make many contemporaneous movements of the limbs and muscles as gently as may be, for there is a certain influence and a strong one then towards smoothness and steadiness in the ensuing swing. Try it

and you will find how surprisingly this is so; above all let the multitude who are too much addicted to fast backswinging try it, at the same time addressing their ball with more slowness and deliberation than has been their habit.

I was so sure of these American speed tendencies in 1912, that I cannot quite understand how they almost completely disappeared in 1913. They certainly did so, and in their place there appeared a tendency in some quarters in the opposite direction. If an explanation had to be suggested it would be in the way of such a strong development of character and individuality having set in as I have spoken of, and it must be remembered that it needs greater strength of will and self assertion to be very slow in golf than very quick. This new phase then is so much to the good with the Americans. I noticed the slowing down of the game in America; I noticed it more on the part of the Americans in England and Scotland last year; and most of all in the case of the Americans who took part in the French amateur championship at Versailles. In the last mentioned instance the slowing down was very badly overdone and far more was lost by it than was gained. The guiding principle in these matters must be that there should be no hurry, but full leisure and abundant contemplation; but directly those are protracted beyond a certain point hesitation comes in, and immediately upon hesitation there follows doubt and then fear. The golfer who is too slow is always afraid and he has constantly a doubt when making his stroke as to whether another way that he has just thought of is not a better one. No good can ever come of such men-

tal meanderings as this. While they are to be congratulated on their new tendency to greater thoughtfulness and contemplation, and a little slowing of their game that may result, the new and young American school is to be warned for its own sake against acquiring the reputation for being the slowest golfers on earth, just as they have now to their satisfaction had that of being the fastest.

So far I have only to a very small extent made the point at which I aim, about the development of individuality and character in American golf, and I must leave a consideration of personalities, which has been intensely interesting and instructive to me, to my next paper of this short series. But just let me indicate in the briefest possible summary what is in my mind. Until only three or four years ago America had never possessed any but one golfer with marked individuality, independence and strength of golfing character, a man who played his own game from within him as it were, and developed himself upon his own lines, being, of course, properly regardful of all good examples that were set him. He was the first American golfer to be observant, contemplative and independent, and he succeeded as no American golfer had done before him or has done since. The reference, of course, is to Mr. Travis. America has not profited by this example as well as she should have done; but now at last, a long while after the United States scored its first great victory in golfing England, more new strong characters and individualities arise, and a very promising lot they are. Particularly Mr. Jerome Travers, Mr. "Chick" Evans, and Mr. Francis Ouimet. Here we have three young players as unlike each other in methods

as they probably can be, each intensely individualistic and independent and each of them enormously interesting. There is strength of golfing character here as it has never been displayed in America before, and I believe that these three young players are destined to be a very great force in the development of American golf. They stand for a new beginning. Each has his own special points of interest. I shall write of them in detail hereafter as they have been presented to me. Individually and as a trio they have become an extremely interesting study to me. Perhaps Mr. Travers fasci-

nates the most, for here is a golfer with faults indeed, openly unblushingly admitted and exhibited, a man with an amazing temperament in its soarings and in its capacity for concentration and, with it all, one who is I verily believe one of the two or three finest amateur match players living in the world of golf today. In this respect he belongs to an extremely small class in which I place Mr. John Ball as president in chief. Of Mr. Travers and others I will submit some impressions in my next contribution.

(To be continued.)

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