

The AMERICAN GOLFER

VOL. XI
No. 9



JULY
1914

THE AMERICAN FAILURE IN BRITAIN

CIRCUMSTANCES, CAUSES, AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF THE FUTURE.

By HENRY LEACH.

British Correspondent of THE AMERICAN GOLFER.

It is not an easy matter for a British Golfer and writer to discuss with American readers the causes of what must clearly be regarded in America as a great and most unexpected disaster to the expedition to the amateur championship meeting at Sandwich, which set out with such high hopes of success. Americans with justice believed that their players had a fair chance of obtaining high honors at this meeting, instead of which their chief representatives collapsed in the most extraordinary fashion in its earliest stages. Their failure was sensational and to some extent mysterious, and perhaps I may take it that, coming after the great victory of Mr. Ouimet over Vardon and Ray at Brookline last September, it is regarded as humiliating.

Let me say at once that, while British golfers are naturally pleased that their own credit is so well vindicated, they would very much have preferred that the visitors should at all events have succeeded better than they did and have advanced further in the tournament. The appearance of an American in the semi-final, or even the final, would have been thor-

oughly agreeable to the British golf world, partly because the interests of international rivalry would have been advanced and partly because of the honest belief that the quality of American golf deserved so much success. Nobody in England makes the mistake of thinking that the early defeats of the two American champions fairly represents the quality of the best players in the United States, and there is considerable British sympathy with them and with all those who support and believe in American golf in consequence. To these preliminary observations let me add that, while this sympathy has been freely expressed both in conversation and in print, there has also been the utmost admiration shown for the splendid sporting way in which the Americans accepted defeats which in the circumstances of the case must have caused them the utmost chagrin. In no case did the loser advance any other cause for his failure than that on the day's play he was beaten by a better man, in each case the loser was free and open hearted in his congratulations to the winner, and the demeanor of the defeated players both

during the remainder of the time at Sandwich and afterwards was just what was to be expected of men who are good golfers and good sportsmen. If they lost and suffered much by their disasters, they gained something also. In the following considerations I trust it will not be taken that, in any way of presumption, I am attempting to explain what Americans may understand better than myself; but the case is clearly one of some mystery, and in the subsequent notes I am advancing not my own views so much as those of the American players, as they have expressed them to me, and of other authorities whose opinions are entitled to respect.

In the first place the cause of failure was entirely different in each case, or, as one should say, the suspected cause of failure. That is an important consideration. Now take Mr. Travers first. There cannot be any doubt that his collapse against Mr. Palmer was due to the cause first suspected, surprising as it was in his case—nerves. Mr. Travers, as every body knows, (and none better than myself, having seen so much of him in his own country), is one of the last players in the world to be suspected of this fault in a crisis. When there were evidences of it in the early stages of the match in which he was defeated, and everybody was remarking upon it, I could not possibly believe it, and did not, but the truth was forced on the uttermost unbelievers before the end of the match. What is more, I think it may be said now that after it was all over Mr. Travers admitted that this was his trouble, and that it was a strange and most nervous apprehen-

sion that prevented him from playing anything like his true game. As one of his own countrymen, who was also a competitor at Sandwich, and saw him beaten, remarked to me, the evidence of nerves in his play was overwhelming. When a man is not once but always short in his approaching and putting, as this player remarked to me, there is only one explanation, and it is the explanation of nerves. In ordinary circumstances there would not have been any reason for great surprise in the American amateur champion being beaten by Mr. Palmer, for, if the latter is much older and perhaps past his best, he is still a fine golfer with a great fighting capacity and one who was just the very man for a match of this kind. He was in fact longing for it. The odds would always have been in favor of Mr. Travers, but not to any very large extent. But the circumstances in this case were not normal. Mr. Palmer's malady was not by any means imaginary. His sufferings from lumbago were real and acute, and for the first part of the match at any rate he was in no fit state for play. In these circumstances he was really nothing to beat, and the figures of the match tell their own tale about the poor quality of the golf that was played and the easy task that was set Mr. Travers of passing into the next round, which, through the appearance of nerves in his golfing system, he could not avail himself.

Why then in such circumstances and on such a vastly important occasion should these nerves have made their appearance and with such disastrous results? Inexplicable as the problem may appear to those who know Mr. Travers, a fairly substan-

tial reason may be put forward. Most of us in America and England were agreed, and still think, that Mr. Travers did the right thing in coming over so well in advance of the meeting as he did, and that he gained great advantages in acclimatisation and in accustoming himself to the circumstances of British golf generally by doing so. But, a short time before the championship began, I was discussing the matter with Harry Vardon and he expressed grave doubts about the policy. He suggested then that the players would get tired of waiting for the big event coming on, having it on their minds all the time, that there was great danger of their striking a patch of staleness by overplay, and that there were also disadvantages in knowing a course too well in a short time. He thought it was better either to know it very thoroughly indeed as the result of long experience on it, or to know very little about it. The middle stage of education about its points and difficulties was, in his opinion, dangerous. Of course Mr. Travers did not spend very much time at Sandwich, and this remark does not apply with any force to him, or to Mr. Ouimet either. But, in regard to the first part of Vardon's statement, it is significant that Mr. Travers was at his very best form three or four weeks before the championship, when he was down at Westward Ho! and he was playing such golf while he was there that really no amateur could beat. If the championship had been held just then he must inevitably have gone a long way in the competition, and it was on the strength of his performances on the Devonshire course that

he was made one of the first favorites. A man does not generally retain his very best form if, after attaining it, he keeps on playing his two rounds a day, and again it is significant that signs of getting tired and a little stale came into his game soon afterwards. It was because he felt them that he avoided the Gold Vase competition at Sunningdale, and he was evidently getting a little anxious when, instead of going there as he had intended, he went straight off to Sandwich. At the latter he was playing well to begin with, though not so well as at Westward Ho! Then, as the competitors began to come along, and the excitement round about the championship headquarters began to increase, it was only natural that, after so much waiting, the great responsibility that was on him should begin to make itself felt, even if, as one might say, subconsciously. All those thousands of miles of travel had been done, all that great preparation had been made, all that waiting and thinking for months and weeks had been endured, and now at last the time had come and everything might depend on a single shot. If at the first glance this might seem a somewhat sentimental view to take, it is at all events a sensible one and pre-eminently a human one. The sense of responsibility is undoubtedly infinitely greater as the result of all the travelling and the waiting and the thinking than in other circumstances, and it comes on the man with violent suddenness when the day of the competition arrives. It is no use saying that it ought not to do. Mr. Travers is a master at controlling the tendencies of human nature, but the said human nature has

always a little in hand at the finish, and can exert it in special circumstances. Mr. Travers knew also, a day or two beforehand, that Mr. Palmer was desperately keen on beating him, and it was nothing in his favor thus to have what seemed a hard nut to crack in his very first round.

If all this should prove to be the truth, what is the moral and what is the remedy? Harry Vardon says that even six weeks' play and prac-

seem to be a question, in the case of a long preliminary sojourn in the country, as to how the time is spent, and undoubtedly it appears that there is the utmost danger in playing all the time. There would seem to be a great advantage in coming early, playing as much as possible to begin with, and then giving the game a complete rest until two or three weeks at most before the championship, keeping away from golf and golf courses all the time. It is easy to be wise after



The scene at the "Maiden" putting-green on the day of the final of the British amateur championship.

tice in the strange country is too long; but there are others who say that three months is not more than enough. Mr. "Chick" Evans was only over for a few days beforehand, and, though his putting was bad most of the time, perhaps it was no worse than it often is in America, and the rest of his game was mostly very good indeed. He assured me that in less than a week after his arrival he was driving a better ball than he had ever done in his life before. It would

the event, but there does seem to be enormous amount of sense in this idea. Mr. Travers was not at his best, and he was tired of waiting, and those are facts which suggest a cause. When it was all over he was a little inclined to think that, despite the fact that he was putting well with an ordinary aluminum putter just before the championship and that at that time he did no feel any loss through being deprived of his favorite Schenectady, he would have done better if the lat-

ter had not been barred in England. But no putter in the world would have cured Mr. Travers from the faults from which he suffered in his match with Mr. Palmer. It was a sad failure, and he had the sympathy of the whole golfing public in it.

With Mr. Ouimet the case was quite different. He was not stale, neither was he nervous. The simple fact with him was that, never up to the time of the championship had he struck anything like his real form, while in the championship itself he played rather below the average of his games in England. He had an opponent who was a sound, steady player and who set about him vigorously and gave him no peace. So far from being nervous, Mr. Ouimet finished the match in which he was beaten very pluckily indeed, and was a hard fighter at the end. He was having some bad luck with his putts towards the finish also. But why did he not play better while in England? He acclimatised all right. I cannot help thinking that he did not quite appreciate the severity of the task that was before him, and that he was a little inclined to underrate the possible strength of the British "unknown," who is often a very dangerous man. I am not suggesting that this was his attitude in the match in which he was beaten, but it may have been his general attitude beforehand, and it may have got into his system. Such an attitude was to some extent encouraged by his early experiences and his plan of campaign. Instead of pottering about at courses of no account and meeting players to whom he ought to have been able to give a third with ease, he ought to have gone to the big places and got the very

hardest opponents he could find to play with him, and it would have done him a world of good if he had been soundly beaten over and over again at the beginning. Instead of that he had no taste of what was before him until he had been here quite a long time and played in the Gold Vase Competition at Sunningdale, and then his poor display must have had a very dispiriting effect upon him. However it may be, there is the fact that Mr. Ouimet has not so far in England (and I am now writing within a few days of the beginning of the Open Championship at Prestwick) come within several strokes of the game I saw him play at in the U. S. Open Championship at Brookline last September.

Mr. "Chick" Evans's case is, of course, much simpler to explain. Of him at all events it can be said without any qualification that he was beaten by downright bad luck. The golf that he played in the round in which he was defeated would have got him through a majority of matches in the championship, and he played magnificently towards the end against overwhelming odds. He never cracked though the circumstances were such as one might have expected almost any player to crack up completely, and especially one of his highly strung temperament. He had been playing an in-and-out sort of game until he came to this round, his putting being mostly at fault, but he had got through all right, and if he had passed this ordeal he would not have been badly situated in the draw and might reasonably have expected to have gone much further, especially as his game was showing signs of steadying very considerably.

Mr. Macfarlane who went to the turn in 31 against him, as no man has ever done in a championship at Sandwich before, is a fine player and one who at times can do great things, but he could not come anywhere near to this form again if he lived and played for another hundred years. As it was, no player in the world could have lived against him in that match, and Mr. Evans, when he sailed for home, had the consolation of knowing that he had done his best, and because he had failed it was not by any means his own fault.

He was naturally crestfallen at what occurred, but he took it splendidly. "Somebody has got to have it," he said, "and why not I? They are always uncorking these things on me. There was Jerry Travers doing it at Wheaton two years ago, and now there is Macfarlane. But one is always liable to this sort of thing in Britain. There are hundreds of players here, as there are not in America who may do this sort of thing, or something rather like it at any time in a championship, and that is what the American golf public does not quite understand. The average quality of game in England and Scotland is far higher than it is in America and the number of good players is much greater."

Mr. Herreshoff was playing better during the championship than he had been doing most times before, and he also was a little unlucky in being beaten on the home green in the circumstances in which he was after the magnificent fight which he made against the Hon. Michael Scott, which in its uphill character very forcibly reminded me of the final for the American amateur championship at Apa-

wamis, when he took Mr. Hilton to the thirty-seventh hole after appearing hopelessly beaten. Mr. Scott appeared to have him absolutely at his mercy a long way from home, but Mr. Herreshoff is peculiarly adapted by temperament to a situation of this kind, and one is tempted to say that he has the best chance of winning when he looks a certain loser. In his case he was rather careless in playing that last shot from the rough near the wire fence at the back of the home green. He told me that he did swing his club back to see if he had room, but he certainly did not swing it anything like as much as was necessary or he would have discovered the danger, and when playing the stroke the existence of the wire had passed completely out of his mind. One can excuse anything after the disappointment he had in the shot that failed to hit the ball, but if he had only kept his head and played a careful one afterwards he might still have saved the situation and taken the match to the nineteenth hole. However, there is not much satisfaction in considering these "ifs" of golf, and Mr. Herreshoff is not likely to forget that fence for a long time to come.

But here one may remark that a certain deficiency in American iron play was continually in evidence at that last hole. The green slopes upwards a little towards the middle to begin with, and there is this bad rough just beyond. It is necessary in playing a long approach to give the ball enough to get it up the incline, and to give it something also that will make it stop when it gets there. The American players almost without exception were in continual difficulties with this problem, and over and over again they overran the green.

Mr. Harold Weber was playing well at the beginning of the championship, and for a little while before, but the game in which he was beaten was the worst, at the start at all events, of all that he played. Captain Hutchison had been playing some good golf previously, but if Mr. Weber had tackled him seriously at the beginning of the match the result might have been different. He made a great and largely successful attempt to grapple with the peculiar conditions of play in England and improved his iron play considerably, but was somewhat baffled by a sudden change of wind on the day on which he was beaten, calling for different play at every hole from that to which he had become accustomed, and on which he had based his plans. About the defeats of Mr. Lockwood and Mr. Hale no more need be said than has been already.

The American golfers with whom I have discussed the subject have no complaint to make against the course, the climate, the conditions of the championship or anything else, but they say the American golf public do not realize the difficulty of the task of coming over here and making a great show in the championship. Mr. Weber thinks it would serve to show the comparative strength of British and American golf much better, and be a good thing for stimulating international rivalry, if something in the nature of a cup like the Davis Cup in tennis was put up for international competition, to be competed for by teams of five a side, thirty-six holes singles and four-ball matches being played.

This suggestion is undoubtedly a good one, and it has been made before, but I doubt if it will be taken up

for a little while. The authorities here are rather slow to move in these matters, and I think they will feel that American golfers must do better here than they have done before any such step is taken.

And now what will be the effect of this American disaster at Sandwich? The extent that the American attack next year will assume, whether it will be greater or less, is a question that must be left to the future, and which only Americans can answer. So far as this side is concerned I fear that, however unjustifiably, the effect must be to reduce to some considerable extent the interest in international rivalry for the time being, and until Americans score some signal success. There is no disposition at present on the part of British amateurs to go to America for the amateur championship there, as there might have been if the Americans had done well at Sandwich, and I fear also that our public now feels less concerned than it was with the question of gaining a British success in the American open event. Perhaps these moods are only temporary, and they can readily be understood in the circumstances. But, as one who understands golf in both countries, I feel that a very false appearance has been given to the respective merits of British and American golf, and that the rivalry ought to be good and close, and I should like to see the Americans doing something as soon as possible to set the matter right, as I think they will. I do not, as a British golfer, want them to win any of our championships, and I believe that the odds are greatly against them doing so for a long time to come, but they ought to do far better than they have done.