

PLAIN TRUTHS

By "SAM SOLOMON"

"If an offence come out of the truth, better it is that the offence come than that the truth be concealed."

IT IS ONE of the peculiarities of human nature, so strange as we know it, and the golfing part no less than the rest, that it will always try to improve on perfection, or what, when it has become possessed of it, it conceives to be perfection. There are few things in the world that answer to that supreme description; the game of golf is one of them.

If you should say that golf is not perfect, find us the meeting of experienced golfers in any numbers who would ever pass a resolution for any material change in it. At the end of the meeting ask those present who have complaints against the game in any respect whatsoever, except that it is usually too difficult and aggravating for them and that they cannot play it as well as they would like to do, to hold up their hands and state those complaints, that about the difficulty of the game and the cussedness of the whole thing not being recognized as one of them. You will find that there will be no hands raised. In weak moments golfers may hurl epithets against the most splendid of sports, but when reason is in possession of them, they feel somewhat ashamed of themselves and they know they were wrong.

And yet there are people who are continually trying to find fault with golf. They are not as the regular and devoted players though sometimes a few of these are temporarily tempted to the miserable cause, but as professional cranks, mischief-makers, writers, pessimists, men and women who in the ordinary paths of their lives most likely lead miserable and soured existences. So now and then, not reflecting the temper and happiness of the general community, these people begin with their complaints.

They make them loudly; they invite the heathen who are outside the game to listen to them, though they do not understand; they fill the papers with them, and they do something to convey the notion to the public that the golfers are a discontented lot. It is not so. In these matters we are not thinking of the stymie, that is another thing, though aforetime we have been to the defence of the stymie, and believe that in sport and character-provoking propensities there is much to be said even for this old stymie, and it is put forward here that the existence of the stymie does not in reality detract from the perfection of the game, even though there may be sound arguments to be urged against it But that is another question.

ONE IS BROUGHT to these thoughts by the revival of an old question that ages back in the history of the game held the attention of the people for, as it

seemed, a few minutes, not more, and was then for ever dismissed as being stupid and having no reason in it. It is the question or complaint that was first propounded by the earliest grumblers, the oldest and most stupid of all questions. It is that of the size of the hole. The misguided aver that it would be a better game if the hole were bigger. The world, as we are told, is in a state of great unrest; it is very excitable at present; it hardly knows what it is doing, or how. It has strange tendencies. It develops curious ideas, and they spread enormously.

Now we find that this idea about the size of the hole, and the proposition to change it, has spread everywhere. The sun does not set on the land of golf, and we, so we have heard, that while this question has been mentioned a little in the United States, or tried a little as one might say, it flamed considerably in England and Scotland earlier in the season; we perceive that it is occupying much attention in South Africa, and lo! we have been told that it has been considered at one of the few golf resorts in Japan, where it appears to have been taken somewhat more seriously than elsewhere. The Japanese are a wonderful and most enterprising nation; they represent an old civilization, and no doubt they will get on in the world; but golf perhaps, is not just what they think it is, and they do not feel the same about it as the older golfing nations do. Therefore, we do not consider it to be much to the credit of the proposition that it finds favour in the lands where the game is least "felt."

But in England and Scotland it is a different matter, and it is a strange thing to find that so much attention has been given to the subject there, although we appreciate the warning that is conveyed to us that it has been largely the result of a stunt agitation in the newspapers, and has not any real foundation among the wiser and more thoughtful part of the golfing community. But it has dragged many of these people into the discussion, and it is of interest and importance to hear what they have to say.

GEORGE DUNCAN was the leader in the agitation, and it is not a new thought with him. He started it even before the great war, though the golf people were not then in that unbalanced and restless state when they would listen patiently to such things. Duncan's theory in brief is that the number of strokes that are needed on the putting green, at the average, say, of two per hole, is out of proportion to those wanted in the rest of the play, and that so much luck enters into the question that the first-class player is no better off than a middle-handicap man. He propounds the idea, then, that if the hole were made bigger, more putts would be holed, there would be fewer strokes on the green, the proportion would be properly adjusted, and the luck element would be reduced.

But Duncan is forgetting something, and all his argument falls to pieces at the remembrance of it. If by enlarging the hole, the putts up to ten yards say, would be more frequently holed, and luck would be reduced—this part of the argument is sound enough—would it not be the case that more also would be holed at thirty and forty yards, that the luck of that distance would be greatly

increased, that golfers would begin to look for holing with these long run-ups as they did not once before, and that, in effect, the result of enlarging the hole would merely be that the area of putting itself, or its equivalent, was enlarged?

You make a larger hole; you increase the holing-out at every distance and not merely at one, the luck area is extended, and as usual becomes most acute at the longer distances.

This is really the plain, simple, and conclusive argument, and it clinches a point upon which golfers, when they come to exert their minds and philosophies on the question, seem often to be in difficulties about and not to be able to fit with logic and clear argument. The point they have been groping for in their minds is that which here we have just expressed, and it is strange that none of the eminent golfers who have considered the question have come upon it, though some of the most eminent like Harry Vardon and Mr. John Low were evidently on the track of it when they said that, rather than enlarge the hole it would be better to make it smaller. By thus doing evidently they would decrease the holing and the luck area.

THESE ARE THE WORDS of Harry Vardon: "Truly the putting has too great an effect on the results of the matches that are played. If the hole were made smaller it would not give the inferior player such a chance as he has now to beat the better player on the greens. It often happens that you gain a clear stroke upon your opponent on the way to the green. This man knows then that he will lose the hole unless he can run down his putt. So he makes a bold bid for it, he plays daringly, even recklessly, different from what he would if he were not gambling for the hole in this way. And it sometimes happens then that the ball hits the back of the tin and drops in."

Now this truly is a parlous state of things. What in such quandary would such as Harry Vardon do, were they legislators? Let us listen to what they say. Thus Harry again: "I would make the hole four inches in diameter instead of four and a quarter. To reduce it by a quarter of an inch would make a big difference. It would then be as much as anyone could do to lay the ball so close to the hole as to make the holing of it the next time practically a certainty. But, if we are to have a larger hole, then the inferior player will be better off than ever, inasmuch as, having had the worst of it on the way to the green, he will gobble putts more frequently than is the case at the present time. I am sure it is the view of the leading professionals that the hole should thus be made smaller so that this lucky gobbling by inferior players might be reduced."

Now, with the question thus set on its legs as it were—and for argument and unravelling it is really the prettiest question in all golf—we should go back to Duncan who has been set forth as a sort of original agitator, and see what further he has to say. The player who more than any other, perhaps, is looked forward to as being, from the practical and playing point of view, likely to be the leader of the game tomorrow, says: "Beyond all shadow of doubt there is in golf far too much of the game on the greens. Whatever may be done through the green, one fact remains, and that is that the first-class golfer has no advan-

tage over the 12 man when the two arrive on the green. I have a friend who is rated at 12. When we play I concede a stroke a hole to him. He putts just as well as I do, so that it is essential for me to wipe off that stroke between the tee and the shot that lands the ball on the green. If I do not do that I lose the hole. Take for instance, a one-shot hole, say, 150 yards. We are both on the green with our first shots. For the sake of argument suppose that I am ten yards nearer to the hole than he is. What happens? He holes out in two more shots, making three in all, and I, twenty-seven times out of thirty, take two putts also.

"If the hole were bigger, the chances are that I would get a 2 twenty times out of thirty, and that my opponent, being further away from the hole with his first shot, would get a 2 twenty-seven times out of thirty." This is the printed statement, but Duncan in the heat of an argument that is a very complex thing seems, as is natural, to run a risk of getting his figures wrong; probably he means that twenty times out of thirty he himself would be down in one putt from his shorter distance, and that his opponent from the longer one would need two putts (making nine strokes in all) twenty-seven times out of thirty. Even so the proportion does not seem right.

He goes on like this: "A reasonable enlargement of the hole would mean a lessening of the importance of putting luck, and it is on the green where the element of luck enters into the game with far more force than is good for the game. . . . Take two men who are fairly level with their drives, two men who can be said to be about equal in their long game. They play at a two-shot hole. One takes his brassie and reaches the green; the other takes his cleek and is short of the pin by, say, thirty yards. If the man who took his brassie has a downhill putt, he is just as likely to take three more shots as the man who has to run his ball up to the hole. This is not mere theory. It happens frequently in practice."

NOW THERE COMES to our present forum, as it were, the sage, Taylor. John Henry Taylor is a man of thought and logic, besides being a person of much golfing experience and a marvellous abundance of championships. Taylor also thinks deeply on the great questions of the day; we recall the strong attitude he adopted at the time that the rubber-cored ball was introduced. Taylor then saw much trouble ahead. He was right in many of his ideas, but he saw rather more trouble ahead than in actual fact has materialized. He has given some thought to this present question, and he deals with it in an original way.

"Certainly putting should be made easier," says J. H. Taylor. "It happens at the present time that, it decides most matches and competitions, and sometimes it decides them very badly, considering that the player who makes hardly anything of a mistake in the strokes that call for power and judgment fails in consequence of the worry of putting on tricky greens. To my mind the fault lies not in size of the hole, but in the freakish way in which holes are cut on eccentric slopes or pinnacles, or ridges or other odd places on the greens. Unless you are

playing so very badly that nothing seems to matter, it is a sound policy nowadays to attempt boldly to hole a putt of even six yards. If you miss, the chances are that the ball will scuttle down one side or other of the slope and you will have another difficult putt to play."

Taylor brings us to some very pretty considerations now: "The inferior golfer," says he, "risks these things because he has nothing to lose. It is a very different case with the first-class player who has not wasted a fraction of a stroke up to the green, and who is intent on wasting nothing there. The modern craze for cutting the hole on a "knuckle" or slope, or near to a bunker makes him play craftily. He realizes what it means to lose a whole shot through trying to fluke a putt. I am not in favour of having the hole made larger, because then the worse the player the more would he try to fluke and the greater would be his success. But I would be in favour of putting being made a great deal easier than it is at the present time, and then it would be given its proper place in the game."

This many-times champion goes on to say that there can be no objection to ordinary undulations which call for judgment in the selection of the line to the hole, but he would like to see the hole cut in a depression so that there should be encouragement to a bold attempt to get into it without the probability of running right out of holing distance in the event of the effort being a failure. He thinks that modern putting is farcical in the difficulties that are introduced on the putting greens, and he is strongly of opinion that what he calls "the spirit of revolt" is rising against this kind of golf. He considers that it is opposed to one of the fundamental principles of the game, which is the principle of encouraging the man to take risks with his strokes.

"Let us by all means have reasonable difficulties," says Taylor, "and as many of them as are fair between the teeing ground and the putting green, but let the putting err on the side of being easy rather than a mental torture, such as causes people to go round with a sense of grievance, either because they are having no luck in dealing with those tricky slopes or because their opponents are having too much of it. I am certain that all ranks of golfers would be of opinion that the game would be more pleasurable if the putting were reasonably simple. If you cut the holes in proper and reasonable places, their present size is all right."

THAT IS THE wisdom of Taylor; it is good wisdom. Here, some will say there is sound sense, and what might be called obvious truths, and yet they have never appeared obvious until he has mentioned them and said that they were. On a general consideration of the principles of the game it does probably seem to a majority of players that in occupying half the game, with the other half left for driving, brassie play, cleek play, iron play, mashie play, bunker play and all the rest, putting occupies too much.

When scientifically conducted, and as a test of not only skill but courage, temperament and many of the major virtues, there is vastly more in putting

than many people seem to fancy. To be a good putter does indeed mean that a player must have the most admirable and valuable qualities of a good golfer. It may be a different game from the rest, and some men may putt well who do not play the other strokes well, but yet how seldom do you find a really good putter who is at all a bad golfer, and on the other hand how often is the fine golfer also at least a good putter?

There are classic examples of champions and their like who moan bitterly all their days about their putting failures, and it is recorded against some of them that they are "bad putters" and that they have lost championships through their "bad putting." But the "bad" in cases of this kind is after all a comparative term, and the comparison is with the best, for no man who in the real sense was a thoroughly bad putter could ever rise to the championship class at all. These men are after all almost invariably better putters than the best of the next class immediately below them. They may have rather more of bad days, but on their good days they rise to the heights like the best.

But all this being so, and putting being a good golfing thing, still it has too much of the game for itself, has it not? And yet while this is a general lamentation, and while golfers bemoan that half the game should have to be given up to this business, and that too much of a premium is placed on this putting, the tendency and practice everywhere is to make it more difficult in the way that Taylor speaks of, and consequently to make it occupy a greater and greater share of the game, when by making it easier it would obviously take a smaller share. This is good and simple sense, and the old British champion will find many to agree with him when he says that for the majority at all events the game would be more pleasurable if the putting were easier.

There are few pleasures so good as the sinking of a long one, but how rarely this is tasted by the average golfer! Perhaps he experiences it on an average once or twice in a round, hardly more. On his best joy days he may sink three or four long ones. Of course, if the conditions were such that he could do it oftener, then the quality of the pleasure would naturally be somewhat diminished, but still it would be good. This proposition by Taylor is one to be thought about.

WHO DETERMINES the size of the golf hole? The answer is that time and tradition and generations of golfers have settled it, and when a thing has been arranged like that it is a difficult and dangerous thing for any one generation to meddle with. The Rules of Golf Committee is the power that confirms tradition and practice, or determines to make a revolutionary change if it has to be. Let us see what members of the Committee think upon this matter. They are not, it appears, in unanimity.

There is Captain C. K. Hutchison, one of the foremost amateur golfers in Great Britain, and a member of that all-important committee. He is of the same mind as George Duncan in this matter, and he thinks it would be a good thing if the hole had a diameter of five inches. If it were so big as that, then he says

rightly there would be a quickening of operations on the putting green and the game would be better both to play and to watch. It does not seem to me that it matters at all whether it were made better to watch, anyhow. The play is the thing in golf, and not the watching of it even though there be many who on great occasions watch.

"There is surely something wrong," says this Captain Hutchison, "with the present situation when first-class golfers who hit perfect shots up to the putting greens lose stroke after stroke when the ball is near to the hole, often through no fault of their own. The crux of the whole question is the short putt, which under the conditions that obtain at the present time is not so much a golfing stroke as a matter of nerves. It is largely a game of chance. The good player knows only too well its uncontrollable uncertainties. Sometimes from a distance of only three or four feet the ball slips round the side of the hole and stays outside; at other times it goes down. It is not by any means always a faulty putt of this length that fails. If the diameter of the hole were increased to five inches, short putts would lose their terrors. Most of them would be holed with confidence as they should be."

This eminent player considers that the disadvantage of Vardon's suggestion about making the hole smaller is that people would take longer than ever in the study of the line and in trying to master the anxiety that these strokes provoke. Even, as it is, says he, one sees players squatting about inspecting the line and endeavouring apprehensively to hatch their putts. That makes the game slow.

"I am entirely opposed," he says, "to the cutting of holes on peaks and ridges and on tricky slopes, as that only accentuates the element of luck. On all important occasions I think that instead of the greenkeeper or the local green committee being left to select the place for the holes, the duty ought to be carried out by a properly constituted and representative committee, and this committee should include a professional when professionals are taking part in the competition that is to be played. I have had to choose the places for the holes in connection with some tournaments, and have always selected spots where putts up to a distance of two yards would have a fair chance of being holed.

"It is a wretched business trying to hole a short putt across a steep gradient or on a peak. It is not even golf. After watching great golfers attempting it, one hears spectators talking about the putting being very poor stuff, forgetful of what the players have done in the other parts of the game. A hole of five inches would help considerably to solve the difficulty. Whoever heard of anyone trying to get amusement out of trying to hole a yard putt in existing circumstances?" That is what Captain Hutchison says and asks.

BUT IN ALL matters concerning the true inwardness of this extraordinary game and the philosophy thereof, there is one player whose views are generally respected more than those of others, and that is Mr. John Laing Low, the famous Scottish amateur, whose writings and wisdom have so much delighted this generation of players. And Mr. Low is also the chairman of the Rules of Golf Committee, and has the reputation of being one of the finest putters that the

game has known, and one who has most studied the science and practice of putting in all its intricacies. Mr. Low has something very interesting to say on this important question, and he is an anti-Duncanite and a firm upholder of the existing order, as one would expect him to be.

"It has been decided by generations of golfers," says Mr. Low, "that the proper diameter of the golf hole is four and a quarter inches, and I have yet to see that a good case has been made out for changing it. But I think there is more value in the suggestion of Vardon in favour of a smaller hole than there is in that of Duncan for a larger one. The real art of putting is the ability to run the ball up from fifteen or twenty yards to within an inch or two of the hole, and from a few inches the player would get the ball as readily into a small hole as into a large one. A bigger hole would result in more long putts being holed, but that would not necessarily operate in favour of the better player.

"Before the present size was nominated in the St. Andrews code of rules the measurements were approximate. My early books of reference—one published more than sixty years ago for instance—state that the diameter of the hole shall be about four inches. This appears to have been the standard size so far as there could have been any standard at a time when everything depended upon the size of the hole cutter, and when tins to keep the hole in shape were unknown.

"If we were going to make any change at all with the object of eliminating luck from putting, I would prefer to return to the smaller size, which gave a full reward to well-judged approach putting. I think that at times the cutting of the holes in awkward places, such as on slopes or peaks, may be slightly overdone, but I do not agree with Taylor that putting ought to be made easy. I decline to believe that amateurs want it so...

"To the man who plays purely for the love of the game it does not matter whether he goes round in 72 or 92. He gets more out of the game when the greens are of the kind with which Taylor finds fault. In the early nineties it was the custom to make putting greens easy, and people grew weary of them. The only game analagous to golf is billiards, and in professional billiards the players are called upon to get into pockets much more difficult than those usually presented to amateurs. Similarly I think that putting ought to be made difficult for professional golfers, and that would not be achieved either by enlarging the holes or cutting them in easy places." The good sense of all this is evident, even if the analogy of the golf hole and the billiard pocket seems far from good. The note of sport rings true.

