

HAS GOLF IMPROVED?

By HAROLD H. HILTON

THERE are those who maintain that during the past half century the playing of the game has not actually improved, and back up their assertion with many and varied arguments—some of which do not savour of sufficient common sense to be worthy of serious discussion. On the other hand, there is a certain sweet reasonableness in the arguments they propound to show that Allan Robertson and young Tommy Morris were quite as great golfers as, say, Harry Vardon, Taylor, and Braid. When it comes to a mere question of statistics and figures, however, the devotees of the old days are simply not in the running; the giants of the present being infinitely more successful in wielding their clubs than were Robertson and Tommy Morris, and, as we all know, figures cannot lie.

Whether Allan Robertson in his day was what might be termed in a class by himself is a question which has often been argued and there are many who aver that he was not. The opinion of old Tom Morris was that he and Allan used to win games round and round about and there are players who are willing to confirm this opinion of old Tom that there was literally nothing in it between the two. But for some reason or other, it is Allan Robertson more than Tom Morris who lives in the memory of the public and he is always quoted as the finest player of his day. There is no doubt that he was a wonderfully successful match player, possibly a part of this success being due to his genius in the art of match-making—as one perfervid admirer once remarked,—“In the art of match-making he was as sly as a fox and cunning as a weasel.” Such attributes may have been very much admired in those days; nowadays a player with such a reputation would be a marked man, and approached with a certain degree of caution.

There is a different tale to tell in connection with the history of young Tom Morris. He stood clear and defined as the finest player of his day. Davie Strath was probably the one who trod most closely on his heels, but young Tommy Morris was undoubtedly in a class by himself—admittedly a golfing genius. After the death of young Tom (he had just previously won the Championship for four consecutive years)—there seems to have been no player who stood far enough away from his fellows to suggest that his genius for the game was sufficiently great to place him on a pedestal by himself. Jamie Anderson won the Championship on three consecutive occasions as did Bob Ferguson immediately afterwards, but their successes were probably as much due to their gift of temperament for the playing of important competitions, as to any marked superiority in their game. They

were both dour fighters and it was not until 1893, twelve years after the last success of Ferguson, that there seemed to arrive any marked improvement in the game. In that year Sandy Herd and Taylor exhibited signs of leaving the ruck and making a place for themselves. Taylor, in particular, was responsible for many of the old well-worn traditions which seemed ingrained into all classes of players going by the board. He disdained any devious way of arriving at the hole; he simply plugged straight at the pin with every manner of club. It was a species of game which did not exactly appeal to those whose golfing minds had been traditionally steeped in the art of finesse, and who loved to arrive at the hole in some out of the way, fanciful manner. It was a too direct and forceful way to suit their delicate palates. Taylor took the short cut for home and rammed his putts at the back of the hole, trusting chiefly to hitting the ball truly, and it was a method that paid as he proved by winning the Championship in 1894 and 1895 and tying again in 1896.

In my opinion he set a fashion which has had much to do with the improvement in play during the past fifteen years, and that the game has steadily improved in these years there can be but little doubt. Great player as Taylor proved himself in the years 1894-1895 and 1896, he is nowadays even greater, having lost nothing of his old accuracy, and in addition added power to his play and also many years of wide experience. On this simple assumption that his game has improved since 1894 and 1895, years when he was carrying all before him, it seems somewhat peculiar to state that, successful as he has always been, he has never since been quite so successful as at that period of his career. It would naturally be thought that the ability he had then at command, much improved and polished in the meanwhile, would have been sufficient to keep his place clear of his brother professionals. But whilst none may be said to have really surpassed him, the fact remains that for periods of two or three years both Vardon and Braid have at times eclipsed him. They had not been idle in the meanwhile, and on account of possessing a more powerful long game, and the continual and successful furnishing up of the raw material at command, sufficed to leave Taylor toiling just a little behind them. But it was Taylor who set the pace for them. He supplied a standard which had never quite been reached and players realizing this strove to come up to it and even surpass it, though as yet only Harry Vardon and James Braid have successfully surmounted the task.

What Taylor commenced, Harry Vardon may be said to have completed, and in doing so, in the years

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1898 to 1901, he set up a new standard of excellence which the others had to try and live up to. But Vardon created this standard so quickly, one might almost say so unexpectedly, that for the time being his rivals appeared to be dumbfounded. In their efforts to keep pace with him they lost their old-time accuracy and confidence, and Taylor's game in particular seemed to suffer from the arrival of the new Star. Vardon was undoubtedly playing finer golf than any of them, finer golf than had ever been played by mortal man before; but the truth must be told, this extraordinary sudden development of his abilities had a disastrous effect upon the play of his opponents. They could not do so well in stroke competitions in which he took part, and when they had to meet him in single combat, they simply fell down like a house of cards before him. But Vardon went to America, and the fact that this visit undoubtedly took the edge off his game, seemed to give them heart again, and since then he has had none the best of either Taylor or Braid. When Vardon was at the top of his game it must be said for James Braid that he was then a comparatively unfinished player. His game represented a big overgrown puppy which wanted time to mature. The power was there, the determination was there, but the application of the power was a doubtful quantity. But he set about the task more thoroughly than perhaps any player living; by degrees he strengthened the weaknesses in his armour, and is now a finer player than ever he was. Indeed there are many who consider that his game has now reached the high water mark; that in fact he is just as good as Harry Vardon ever was, if not even better, but that he does not gain his victories with the consummate ease that Vardon did on account of the standard of the game having improved all round; and also that the development of his game has been so gradual that his rivals have had time to become used to the improvement, and in consequence do not commence the battle in a spirit of anxious dejection, which they undoubtedly did when meeting Vardon at his zenith.

Another sign of the improvement which has taken place in the play of the professionals during the past ten years is evidenced by the almost complete elimination of the danger the paid players had to consider from the amateur talent in the open event. For some years previous to 1899 nearly each succeeding year they had one amateur or another making things extremely unpleasant for them, and one actually beat them all in 1897. After 1898, however, the pace set by the professionals was too warm for the amateurs to live with, and except for two spasmodic efforts, one on the part of Mr. Maxwell in 1902 and the other by Mr. Graham in 1906, the amateurs have never since been in the hunt. Not that it may be said that the class of amateur golf had fallen away in any marked degree,—it remained much as it was,—but the standard had risen, and their game was not equal to the

strain of living up to it. Vardon set that standard and others have followed steadily in his footsteps, until the possibility of an amateur winning the open Championship seems almost more than remote.

Where does the improvement lie? That is the problem, and a difficult one for anyone to find a solution to, at least by the feat of dissecting details. With Vardon it was his unflinching accuracy with all manner of clubs, backed up by very reliable putting. With Taylor it was probably due to the evidence of more dash and length in his game. In James Braid's case it was decidedly greater accuracy and his work near the hole improved out of recognition. It is not often that a man is found who has learned to putt comparatively late in his career, but Braid did and spent infinite pains in the task.

In all professional golf there is one great improvement evident, and that is in the long approaching to the hole side. The majority of the professionals have developed a certain "flick" shot with the wrists which is very deadly. So far as I can gather, Harry Vardon was the originator and perfecter of the shot, but James Braid and many others play it with deadly effect. On the other hand, it is a species of stroke remarkable for its absence in the amateur ranks, Mr. Graham being probably the only first-class amateur who plays an iron stroke near resembling the stroke played by Vardon and Braid.

Of course there must be practical reasons to be considered as contributing to the evident improvement in the playing of the game. One is, the improvement in the upkeep of courses, probably quite neutralized by the added length of all courses of note,—and whatever the critics say, length does make a difference. Again the club makers of the present day, with the advantage of experience, should be able to turn out a more serviceable weapon than their predecessors, and there can be but little doubt that the shape of the present day club head lends itself much more to hard hitting than the old-fashioned long headed instrument of twenty years ago. But as against this, the sawn hickory of the present day is decidedly inferior to the split hickory of the old times. Now we come to an invention which admittedly has tended to lower the scores, and that is the introduction of the rubber-cored ball. Mr. Hutchinson only a short time ago made an experiment which served to give him a certain knowledge of the respective value of a solid gutty and a rubber-cored ball, and his experience tended to the view that the advantages obtained by the use of the rubber core were not so great as is generally acclaimed. But there can be no doubt that on the average, the rubber cored ball is worth from one to two strokes per round to the very best players and infinitely more to players of indifferent calibre, and it has certainly had the effect of moving up many players to within measurable distance of the very elite, who, had they still to use the old solid ball, would only rank as mediocre players.



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