

FIFTY YEARS OF GOLF

The Sixth Installment of the Golfing Reminiscences of Great Britain's First Amateur Champion
The Second and Third British Amateur Championships

By HORACE G. HUTCHINSON

IN 1887 we were back, for the Amateur Championship, on that Hoylake course which was the arena of the preliminary trial trip that Macfie won in 1885. I see that Arthur Molesworth was in that tournament of 1887, and survived until the fourth round, wherein he was beaten by J. G. Tait, eldest brother of poor Freddy. Another name of note is that of a small boy, appearing in such big company for the first time, Harold Hilton. He was beaten in the third round by Mr. John Ball, "old John Ball," as we called him for many years, although when I first went to Hoylake he was only John Ball the second, his father and Johnny's grandfather being still alive. One of the most remarkable points in that championship was the game that Johnny's father put up all through it. It never was a showy affair at all, that game of his, but it was wonderful how effective it was on that Hoylake course which he knew as well as the inside of his own pocket. He beat Hilton, as noted, then he knocked out J.G. Gibson, the Blackheathian, who had been going strongly and had defeated Henry Lamb the round before; and in the fifth round, which was the semi-final, I came up against him. I had only survived the previous round by the skin of my teeth, and remember all about it well. It was against Mr. Gregor Macgregor, a sound player, and a Scot, as his

name suggests. I was getting on fairly comfortably with him with a hole or two in hand when he played a stroke in which I was morally sure that he hit the ball twice. I did not know whether to claim the point or not, and, not being possessed of the ideally equable temperament, was upset by the incident and played the last holes very badly, halving the round and being rather lucky to win the nineteenth hole. I forget whether, in fact, I did claim that foul, which I knew that Mr. Macgregor was quite unconscious of making, but what I do know is that I received from him afterwards one of the very nicest letters ever written, saying how sorry he was that anything of the kind should have happened, and that I should have been upset at all. So that conclusion of the nineteenth hole left me with John Ball the elder to play in the semi-final, and meanwhile that other John Ball, whom we distinguished as Johnny, was knocking Jack Tait out in the other semi-final. They were playing ahead of us, and as we went to the seventeenth (now the sixteenth) hole old John Ball was 1 up on me. And I had not played at all badly: only he had played in the most gallant way and had really hardly made a mistake. He was 1 up sheerly on his merits.

Then he said to me, as we walked after our second shots to the seventeenth hole and an emissary came

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back to say that Johnny had beaten Jack Tait, "It would be a funny thing if father and son had to play it off together." It was an innocent remark enough, and yet it nettled me a little and I said in answer, "Wait a bit Mr. Ball: you haven't done with me yet." Perhaps I ought not to have said it: it was rather a boastful answer. I can only plead the excuse of comparative youth. I sincerely hope it was not that reply which put him off his next stroke, but something bothered him as he played it. I saw him look up once, as he addressed the ball, at the legs of the people standing (or not standing as still as they should have been) opposite him. Anyone who knows Hoylake will know the stroke he had to play—to pop the ball over the cross bunker before the green. What happened was that he took his eye off and popped the ball into the bunker instead. I lofted mine over all right and won that hole. Then, by a lucky approach and a good putt I got the last in 3, and that was a stroke better than the hole ought to be done in and one too good for Mr. Ball.

So then the next, and the final, problem was the worst—Johnny. I daresay I was a little lucky in that match: I know I had one rather lucky shot. I got into the bunker just before the green, going to the short hole, called the Cop. I dug the ball out pretty near the hole and holed the putt. It was fortunate, but I have always contended that, with practice, the judgment of the strength with this dig shot is not nearly as difficult as it seems to the uninitiated, and at Westward Ho! there was every opportunity for initiation, in the shape of bunkers close to the hole. Moreover in those days there was no rule forbidding you to test the consistency of the sand by a trial dig into it before the real spot. I have always thought the rule which forbids that test shot a very bad one, because a clever bunker player ought to have the advantage of his cleverness, and this prohibition takes away much of the advantage, and puts him more nearly on a level with the man who has no idea of judging strength with this shot. Then, two holes from home Johnny broke his brasse. I see that Mr. Everard, speaking of this incident in the Badminton Book, describes it as "the very bad luck to break his favorite brasse." That is interesting to note now, as a sign of the times. It indicates an importance belonging to a brasse which it certainly would not have now, when a full second shot with a wooden club is hardly ever wanted. But of course it was hard luck then, and perhaps it was due to that that I got dormy 1 up. Then Johnny obligingly topped his tee-shot going to the last hole. I did not play the hole very bravely, and had to hole rather a good putt to get a 4. I do not think Johnny troubled to putt out. He was a little nearer than I was, but not stoney. Anyhow, that was the conclusion of a lucky championship for me.

This reference to the far greater importance, in

those days, of the brasse reminds me of a queer notion that Johnny Laidlay had. If he had a big match to play he always bought a new brasse for it. His theory was that he could always play better with one that was strange to his hand. If this paradox is at all to be explained it must be by psychic, rather than physical reasons. I take it to mean that just because the club was strange to his hand, the strangeness subconsciously suggested to him a closer keeping of the eye on the ball. And the subconscious suggestions are always the best. I may be quite wrong, but that is the only explanation I can find for it. But in this again we see the vastly greater importance of the brasse when the guttapercha balls were used. It was equally important with those eclipses with which I won both those championships. Johnny Ball and Johnny Laidlay always stuck to the gutties, I think. Certainly the latter did, and so would I too had the old short course at North Berwick been my chief golfing haunt, for there the value of the pitch shot was out of all proportion greater than on the larger courses elsewhere. But as for the reason why the brasse was so much more in vogue then, it has been rather misunderstood. It was not because you drive so much further off the tee with the rubber-cored balls than with the gutties. If both are hit dead true there is not a mighty difference in this. But it is because you can drive the rubber-cored balls so very much further with the iron club than you could the gutties. That is the great difference. Ironing range means a considerably longer distance with the rubber-cores than with the solid balls, and the distance gained by taking a brasse instead of a driving mashie or a cleek is as nothing compared with what it used to be.

It is very difficult to draw a correct comparison between those courses of St. Andrews and Hoylake then and now, in respect of the difficulties that each presented to the golfer. The whins at St. Andrews encroached on what is now either the clear ground of the course, or is dotted only with occasional trappy bunkers amongst which the ball often finds quite a good lie, in such a dense mass that a wandering ball was hardly worth the trouble of looking for among them. At Hoylake the little rushes which are now scarcely to be regarded as a hazard at all used to be very dense too, and in the summer and autumn a tough long grass grew among them, so that your ball lay as if in a plover's nest, and sometimes it took you several strokes to get out. It was a horrid hazard. Then at some of the earlier and later holes of the course the remaining posts and rails of the disused race course were very vexing. To find yourself tight up against a post was only a little less annoying than to hit it with a full shot and to find your ball coming dancing back to you or flying past your head as if it meant to brain you. All these things happened. Then the rabbit holes were more numerous and came

further out on the course. It was about this time that I was moved to much fury in course of a match by seeing my ball lying at the bottom of a burrow, where I could not reach it, and when I was on the point of dropping another ball with loss of stroke, as permitted by the local rule regarding rabbit holes, being told "You mayn't do that—it's a lost ball." "Lost, be d——d," I said. "What d'you mean by that? Why there it is: you can see it for yourself." "Yes," said the other, "but a ball is lost unless you can garther it"—he was a Scot, with a patriotic accent, and he spoke of the ball as if it were a flower. I concluded the round under protest and a cloud of wrath; and what made the cloud blacker—the committee upheld the view of the "gartherer." Possibly they may have been right, but certainly I did not think so at the time.

In 1888 I lost the Amateur Championship at Prestwick, and I lost it badly. I do not mean by that that I lost it to a bad player. It was Andy Stuart who knocked me out, and for his game I have always had a high respect. But I do not think that either of us played very well in that match. I know that I did not. For one thing (or for two things) I topped two tee-shots running, and one of those was going to the "Himalayas Coming In," which, as all who know Prestwick will realise, is not a good place to choose for a tee-shot "along the carpet." He was 3 up and 5 to play, and I worried him down to 1 up and 2 to play, but he did the seventeenth hole better than I and finished by laying me a stimy. But I do not think I should have holed the putt anyhow—I was by no means dead—and at all events he won the hole and so the match.

And then the next morning when he was stropping his razor he cut his hand so severely that it was against the doctor's advice that he played at all, but play he did, and seeing that he was far from his best by reason of this damaged hand and that it was Johnny Ball that he had to play, it is no great wonder that he was defeated, and he had all my sympathy. He had my sympathy by reason both of his damaged hand and of his defeat, but still I did think that if he were going to cut his hand at all it would have been as well that he should have done so the morning before. In that case I, and not he, might have been up against Johnny on the morrow.

I have no reason to look back on that match with pride, but I remember it with special interest, because it had one of the most extraordinary incidents in it that ever did happen in any match at golf. And this notable incident was as follows. Going to the hole after the Himalayas Going Out, which was much the same then as it is now, save that the green was not levelled up and that the tee-shot probably did not run as far, I sliced my second very badly, right over the hillocks on the right of the green. I went over the ridge, with my caddie, to play the ball, and

pitched it over, with a loft, to the place where I thought the green to be. Then I ran up to the top of the ridge, and looked, but could see no ball. I asked then, as I came down over the ridge, where the ball was. There was a small concourse of perhaps a score of spectators. "Oh," they said, "the ball has not come over." "Not come over!" I repeated, filled with astonishment. "Why I know it has!" As a matter of fact it had been lofted high into the air and both I and the caddie had seen it with the most perfect distinctness. Still, it appeared that it was not there: it almost seemed as if the ordinary operations of Nature's laws had been suspended and the solid gutty had been dissolved into thin air in mid flight.

Then, as we all were looking about, in much surprise, a man spoke up. He was a Mr. Kirk, a townsman of St. Andrews and a fine golfer. He took part in the first Amateur Championship, when it was played at St. Andrews, but he had come to this as a spectator only. He said "Well—I did think I felt a tug at my pocket." (By this time we all were very much intrigued to inquire what could have happened to the ball.) And at that he looked into the outside breast pocket of his coat, and there the ball lay, on his handkerchief, like an egg in a nest.

Has a more wonderful thing ever happened at golf? I, at all events, have never heard of any more extraordinary series of small marvels ever taking place. In the first instance it was wonderful enough that the ball should thus plump down so clearly and neatly into the pocket at all: then that none of the score or so of watchers should have seen it: that not even the man into whose pocket it thus plumped should have noticed it as it came down, imperilling his very nose and eyes: and then that it should have landed so gently that he did not actually realize that anything had struck him—only "fancied he felt something tug at his pocket." Naturally, if it were not for the crowd of witnesses, I should never have ventured to tell the tale. My own character for veracity is not nearly high enough to stand such a strain.

These are the facts: and then of course arose the question as to what should be done with the ball. As it happened, it did not arise in a form very acute, because Andy Stuart was well on the green in two and I, in Mr. Kirk's pocket, standing on the edge of the green, in three. We agreed finally that the pocket should be emptied where the pocketeer stood, and from there I played out the hole and lost it. It is almost a question whether such a shot as this did not deserve to win the hole.

Curiously enough the only other golfer I ever knew who played a ball into a man's pocket is Andy Stuart himself. He hit a full drive right into the coat-tail pocket of Lord Lee, the Scottish Lord of Session. But his lordship was very far from being unaware, like Mr. Kirk, of the pocketing. He was

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quite painfully aware of it. As Andy was at that time at the Scottish Bar it seems to me that it was a very injudicious stroke for him, as a rising young advocate, to play.

The curiosities of that great shot of mine are not exhausted yet. For a full quarter of a century I told that story saying that not a soul had seen the ball come over the hill and that, but for Mr. Kirk bethinking himself of the fancied tug at his pocket, I should have had to treat that ball as lost. And then, one day when I was waiting before the Club-house at Biarritz, there came up to me one whom I knew by sight only, Colonel Von Donop, of the Royal Engineers. He introduced himself, using as the medium of introduction that stroke and that ball. It appears that he, though I had not known it all those years, had been standing further along the ridge at a point whence he could see both me as I played the shot on the one side and the little crowd of spectators on the other. He saw the ball rise into the air, and also saw it drop, as he thought even at the time, into a spectator's pocket. He also saw the discussion and the search which took place when I came over the hill and replied with some indignation to the statement that the ball had not come over also. He was just about to come forward to explain what he had seen when Mr. Kirk found the ball and the incident terminated. It was the last act in the curious comedy, that I should discover, twenty-five years later, and in the South of France, that there had been an unsuspected spectator of that funny little episode in the West of Scotland.

Johnny Ball, thus defeating Andy Stuart, found himself in the final face to face to that very frequent foe in this and after years, Johnny Laidlay. The latter had been playing very finely: he had won a tournament with a good entry at Carnoustie, and had picked up some medals in the Lothians, but he could not hold Johnny Ball in that final. The Sassenach seemed to have the better of the match all the way and won quite comfortably. The Hoylake folk had comfort at length in the long deferred fulfilment

of their great hopes for the local hero, and certainly they have not to complain that he has disappointed them since.

There was something very attractive about the Prestwick golf of that time. Nor has it lost that special attraction since. The West of Scotland did not then, nor perhaps does it now, take the same general interest in golf as the East, but there was a very zealous and very friendly society of golfers belonging to the Prestwick club. It was the country of the Houldsworths, the iron people, who took the keenest interest in golf. Mr. William Houldsworth, known as Big Bill, was most kind to me when I was a boy at Westward Ho! He made frequent pilgrimages to that green. He was my first host at Prestwick, at his house of Mount Charles, some miles out, and I think looked on it as some disgrace that, coming from his house, I should lose the championship. At Prestwick itself too, looking out on the fourteenth green, lived Mr. Whigham, the father of a family of great golfers, both the brothers and the sisters. And about the whole course there was, and still is, an air of friendliness. It is not great golf, as I think, but it is exceedingly pleasant golf and also it is exceedingly difficult golf. In the days of the "guttie" ball it was great, as well as good golf; but the golf there has never, to me, worn the very business-like aspect of the East Coast golf. I do not say that it is any the worse for that—or the contrary. It lies in a district of more kindly climate and more rich pasturage than the East and I remember one Open Championship there when Willie Fernie, always a fellow with a ready jest, came in humorously lamenting that he had lost his ball twice "on the putting green." It was a sad grassy year that season, and if you might not actually lose the ball on the putting green itself you might, and you did, spend many a minute in search for it only just off the green. No mowing could overtake the growth. And of course Prestwick has all the picturesqueness of the Clyde estuary, the Kyles of Bute, Arran and the rest of the professional natural beauties of that coast, for its setting.

