

# FIFTY YEARS OF GOLF

The Seventh Installment of the Golfing Reminiscences of Great Britain's First Amateur Champion

By HORACE G. HUTCHINSON

I HAVE not said very much, or not as much as the subject deserves, about Johnny Ball as a golfer; have not attempted any appreciation of his game. He would not for a long while, as I have said before, do himself any kind of justice when he was off his native Hoylake heath, and this failure was a source of bitter disappointment to his friends at home. They began to be afraid whether he ever would make that mark which they knew his golfing talents ought to put within his achievement. They need not have feared.

So now that I have brought the course of this faithful history to the point at which he and the Scottish Johnny Laidlay—came together in the final of the Amateur Championship it seems as if both of them had at length "arrived." They have set their names on the scroll of Fame and will grave them ever deeper as the years go. The one, to be sure, was destined to perform many more deeds of glory than the other, but they were in constant competition with one another, and for four successive years at this time one or other of them was Amateur Champion. It was not indeed until after that great tournament had been going for six years that another name than theirs and my own was inscribed on the championship cup.

I may have suffered—probably I have—under many illusions with regard to my ability to play golf, but I never so deluded myself as to suppose I was as good a player as Johnny Ball. I believe I am right in thinking that Johnny Laidlay has just the same opinion of him, in comparison with himself. He too, I believe, would put Johnny Ball on a pedestal by himself, and leave him there, as the best match player that we ever have had among the amateurs. I say match-player with deliberation, for of all amateurs by far the best score-player that we have seen is, in my judgment (and I cannot believe that anyone is likely to think differently) Johnny Ball's younger school-fellow at Hoylake, Harold Hilton. But of course his is rather a younger story, and so too is that of Jack Graham, another Hoylake prodigy, of Freddy Tait, Bobby Maxwell and others. Still, I make no exception of any of these later ones when I claim that Johnny Ball is the best amateur that has ever been seen, for a match. It did not need that he should win the Open Championship and the Amateur Championship eight times, in order to prove this. I knew it well, even before he ever won either championship once.

It has always amused me, as it had amused Johnny Laidlay too (we have compared notes about it) to

hear people in some of these latter years saying, as Johnny Ball won championship after championship, that "he is as good as he ever was." But the one who has always been most of all amused by these statements is Johnny Ball himself. Perhaps the most humorous thing about it is that they are invariably statements made by those who never saw Johnny Ball at all when he really was at his best. Those who did see him then knew better than to make them.

I know that I never started out to play a match with Johnny Ball without the full consciousness that if we both played our game I was bound to be beaten, or, rather, that it would only be by an accident if I should win. It is a feeling I have never had, when I was playing tolerably well, with any other amateur, except when playing Bobby Maxwell over Muirfield. But then I cannot pretend that I was playing at all as strongly as I once might have played when I had to encounter that great man. Still I do not suppose I could ever have held him at Muirfield. He was not quite as terrible elsewhere.

Curiously enough I have had rather the better of the exchanges, in the so-called "big" matches, Amateur Championship matches, and the like, that I have played with Johnny Ball. He would sometimes miss a short putt—in fact I always rated him as good for a couple of missed short putts in the round—and that just gave one a chance to come in. But of "friendly" matches—though I am sorry to say I have had but few with him—I think he has beaten me every one. It is true they were always on his native Hoylake. With Johnny Laidlay on the other hand, of whom I never had the same consciousness of being in the hands of a stronger man as I had with the English Johnny, I have had the worst of it in the "big" matches. I beat him, I remember, in an international match, but he beat me at least twice in the Amateur Championship and I have not a win from him to my score in that encounter. Yet in the "friendly" matches—and we have played a great many, for I have very often been the guest of his hospitality, both at North Berwick and elsewhere—I do not think that I have come off at all the worse.

But Johnny Ball, at his best, and especially at Hoylake, was a terror. For one thing he was so very long. Generally driving with a hook, the ball carried very far and then set to work to run till it made you tired watching it. And then he had that wonderful long approach with his brassy, banging the ball right up to the hole, with a concave trajectory—you know what I mean, the ball starting low and rising

## GOLF ILLUSTRATED



THE FIRST FOUR GOLFERS TO WIN THE BRITISH AMATEUR CHAMPIONSHIP

Seated from left to right: J. E. Laidlay (1889, 1891), John Ball, Jr. (1888, 1890, 1892, 1894, 1899, 1907, 1910, 1912), Horace G. Hutchinson . (1886, 1887) and P. C. Anderson (1893)

towards the end of its flight, then dropping nearly perpendicularly, and with no run. It is a shot that I have seen played in any perfection only by three players, and all young ones—Johnny Ball, Hugh Kirkaldy and Jamie Allan. Only the first is still alive, and he does not, probably cannot, play the stroke now. I believe it is a stroke that was easier with the guttapercha balls than with these modern rubber-hearted things. At all events no one plays the stroke now. Perhaps that foolishly named "push-stroke" of Vardon's comes most near to it, and now and again Taylor gives us something of the sort: but this is with iron clubs, not with wood. In the old days Bob Ferguson had the stroke with his irons played up to the plateau greens at North Berwick with great accuracy; but he did not achieve it so well with the wood.

Then Johnny could drive that guttapercha ball most ferociously with his cleek. I remember Colonel Hegan Kennard saying to him, as he and I were playing a match at Hoylake, "I wish you could teach me to drive as far with my driver as you can with your

cleek." Johnny had just driven a huge cleek shot to the end hole. And Kennard was a very fair scratch player of the day. Johnny was full of resource too. When you had him, as you thought, in a tight place, he would bring off some *tour de force*, with a great hook or slice, and lose very little. He delighted, too, in an evil and windy day: the harder it blew the better he could play and the more he enjoyed controlling his ball through the storm.

The short game was where he gave you your chances. If you could live with him at all through the green and up to the hole you need not despair of stealing a shot or two back from him, now and then on, and from just off, the putting green.

And that was the very last point at which you might think to have any advantage over that other, the Scottish, Johnny. He never could quite trust his wooden clubs. The occasional hook or slice was apt to put in a sudden appearance, after he had been playing perfectly straight for a number of holes. On the putting green he improved very much after I had known him for a year or two. But always, from first

## GOLF ILLUSTRATED

to last in a golfing career which has been crammed full of glorious achievement, once he came within ironing reach of the green there was no man, till Taylor came, that was his equal. That is my humble opinion. Bob Ferguson, who was really his teacher, on that fine old nine-hole course at Musselburgh, may have been even better at the full iron bangs up to the hole: he had the concave flight and the straight drop which are worth anything in the approach; but Johnny Laidlay was better than his master at the little chip shots. He learned them, no doubt, at North Berwick where you are undone if you cannot play them and where the other man is undone if you can. And then Johnny Laidlay was a very fine finisher in a tight match. How many times I have known him do that last hole at North Berwick in three—a hole hardly to be reached from the tee and guarded by a very tricky valley—when the match depended on it I should be sorry to say. I always thought his stance, as he addressed his ball all "off the left leg" an ungraceful one, and am inclined to think it the cause of the occasional uncertainty of his driving, but his manipulation, by which I mean his hand and finger work, of his iron clubs was beautifully delicate. I do not think he had given much thought to the way in which the different strokes were played—the slice and the pull and the rest of them—but there was not, so far as I know, a stroke or a subtlety with the iron clubs that he was not master of. His clubs were all curiously thin in the grip and one of his great theories was that the club should be held as lightly as possible. There is not a doubt that most men can put more cut on the ball with a lightly than with a tightly held club, but further than that there is not so far as I know, any very general recognition of a virtue in the light grip.

After I lost the Amateur Championship at Prestwick in 1888, these two Johnnies, the English and the Scottish, held it between them, winning two apiece, for four years, so that it was not until Mr. Peter Anderson won, in the seventh year of its institution, that we let it go out of the hands of one of the three. Neither Johnny Laidlay nor I were fated to win again, but as for the other Johnny there seems to be no saying when he will be done with it. To be sure he has a few years' advantage.

### MR. ARTHUR BALFOUR AND HIS INFLUENCE IN GOLF

It is not on first sight very obvious how the appointment of a statesman to the Chief Secretaryship for Ireland can have an intimate bearing on the history of the game of golf. Nevertheless that appointment, in the year 1886, of Mr. Arthur Balfour, had, in my humble judgment, an important influence and bearing on the game. It so happened that about this time an eminent weekly journal had propounded the statement that none but stupid people played golf,

and even that the successful playing of golf demanded, as an essential condition, that the player should be stupid and destitute of all imagination or other interests. It was rather an extravagant statement. At the same time also the office of the Irish Secretary was invested with a peculiar importance in the public eye. It was not long after the tragic affair in the Phoenix Park. Ireland was seething with murderous discontent. The man who accepted the secretaryship took his life in his hand with that acceptance, and this risk Mr. Balfour took with all his characteristic coolness and courage. He became at once, both on this account and because of his record as a still rather untried statesman, as a "philosophic doubter" and as a distinguished figure in a certain set of society to which the name of "Souls" had been rather foolishly given, perhaps the most popular figure in politics. The public eye was upon him and it was known that this man of so many and so varied gifts was an enthusiastic golfer. He went round the links as an object lesson to contradict the unfortunate pronouncement of the aforesaid respectable paper about the stupidity required of the man who would confess himself a golfer.

He also went round the links accompanied at a decent interval by two detectives. I used to play a good deal with him at North Berwick at that time and it was rather curious to know that we were being stalked every step of the way by these guardians skirmishing among the sandhills and the fringes of the course. It did not in the least interfere with Arthur Balfour's equanimity and concentration on the game. Of course he was not a great golfer, though he had that faculty which was so invaluable to him in politics of rising to an occasion. You were in good hands if he were your partner and you left him with a putt of just the doubtful distance to win the match at the last hole. But though he was not a great golfer, he was a very great figure in golf, and because it is very human to be influenced by an example the effect of his example was to make many a man play golf, on the principle that "there must be something in a game if a fellow like Arthur Balfour played it." He had been a fine tennis player at Cambridge, and was an extraordinary good shot at a stag. I used to stalk in the splendid forest of Strathconan which he sold to Mr. Combe the father of Christian Combe, the present owner, and the stalkers there have spoken to me with bated breath of his deadliness of aim with those old-fashioned rifles which tossed the bullet along in a high curve, and with black powder that made all nature invisible for a minute after the shot. Twenty-six stags without a miss was his record, as reported to me by one of these stalkers, for one season, and it is a wonderful record in the conditions, especially as he was short-sighted. But then he had, by compensation, not only an accurate vision, but a coolness of nerve which made any idea of "stag-fever" an impossibility

## GOLF ILLUSTRATED

to conceive in connection with him. And "putt fever" at golf was equally far from him.

I am very far indeed from saying that if golf had not been at this moment just ready for a "boom" the example of Arthur Balfour would have set the boom going, but as a matter of fact it was just ready. Courses were being made and clubs founded all over the country, the Amateur Championship was both a cause and an effect of the new impulse, and then came the beat of the Balfour drum and the note of "Ca ira" came from it triumphantly. I date it from that year, and principally as arising from the sources indicated — that "boom" which has never ceased to march and which is marching still. So much for what the incentive of one man's example may be in a race still generously capable of hero-worship.

For a while at North Berwick Arthur Balfour's chief henchman was Crawford, Big Crawford, as he was most appropriately called, about whom many a legend clings in North Berwick tradition. The big Crawford was also the caddie of little Sayers in any of the important matches played by that great little man. The Crawford legend might run to far lengths, farther than I care to spin it now, but of all the instances of his wit and repartee the best I think is that which he produced, perfectly impromptu, so far as I know, when there arose a great discussion as to the precise nature of a toadstool in course of a match which Sayers, his little man, played against Andrew Kirkaldy at St. Andrews. It was lifted, the lifter saying that it was a dead and loose lying toadstool, the objector that it had been rooted in the ground and therefore was not legally liftable. The discussion instantly raised numerous side-issues, as to one of which Crawford, having delivered his opinion, heavily, of course, in favor of the view of the case that would assist Ben Sayers, pro-

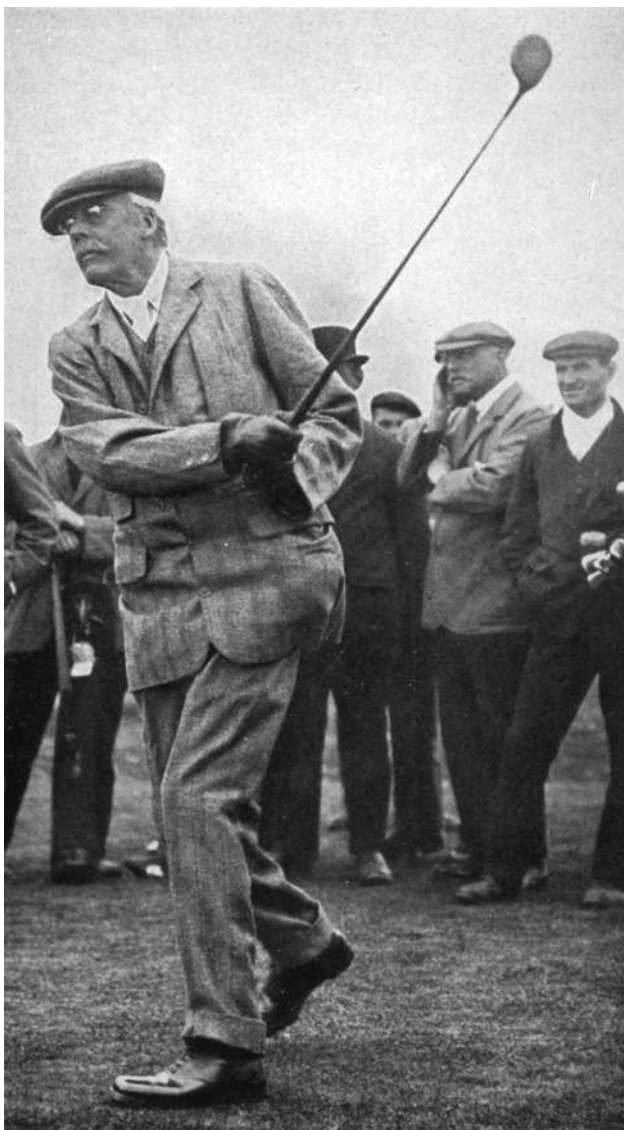
nounced, finally "Weel, het's the rule o' the game, an'—" at this point he paused an instant and lifted an enormous fist, "an'," he repeated, indicating his leg-of-mutton bunch of knuckles, "there's the referee." It is not the first time, nor the seventh time, that I have told this story; nor do I care if I repeat it

seventy times seven. It is good enough to bear it. At the conclusion of that home and home foursome in which Sayers and David Grant defeated Andrew and Hugh Kirkaldy, Crawford would demand of any whom he could get to listen, who it was, in their opinion, that had won that match, and when they professed a doubt he would draw himself up with enormous dignity to his immense height, and striking himself dramatically on the chest would exclaim with conviction, if not with grammar - "Me!" and really it was not altogether too large a claim. His overmastering size and the fearsome aggressiveness of his manner might very well give pause to any tactics of an aggressive nature on the other side. He was a tower of moral support to little Sayers, and his presence at the hole when a hostile putter was attempting to approach it had the effect of a black cloud overshadowing the atmosphere. But beneath all his dourness, and his sardonic air, he had a kindly nature, and

of his loyalty to him whom he regarded as his chief, and incidentally the greatest man that ever lived, Arthur Balfour, these is not the slightest question.

With his rugged independence, he might stand as the type of the old Scottish caddie, now practically extinct. In later years he set up a booth at the far end of the North Berwick links where he would dispense gingerbeer and the like innocent refreshment, though it was said that for the initiate few a more generous and cordial liquid might be preferred.

(Continued on page 48)



THE HON. ARTHUR BALFOUR  
Whose playing in the middle eighties of last century did much to popularize the game in England

## FIFTY YEARS OF GOLF

*(Continued from page 29)*

I do not know. What I do know is that when we went out, of a morning, and came to Crawford at his booth he would often ask us "Is Ar-rthur oot the day?" rolling the "r's" upon his tongue as if he loved to prolong the sound of his hero's name. It is thus that he would put the question, for all his worship making use of the familiar first name. And then, if we were able to comfort his soul by the assurance that the great man would soon appear, he would hoist a little flag on the booth's peak, for honor's sake. And one day it happened that the Grand Duke Michael of Russia, coming to the tent and seeing the flag, enquired of Crawford in whose honor it was flying. I do not know whether the Grand Duke had been put up to making the enquiry, and asked it humorously, to see what Crawford would say. At all events he had his satisfaction, for in answer to the query "Whom is your flag flying for?" the uncompromising reply was given, "A better mon than you." No doubt loyalty here leaped over the bound of courtesy, but there is sign of a better quality than mere rudeness in the reply. Very well must Crawford have known that if he had chosen to reply to the foreign prince that it was in his honor the bunting waved, it might have meant a piece of gold transferred from the princely pocket to Crawford's, but he did not hesitate. Partly perhaps the native disdain of the foreigner rang in the reply, but chiefly I think a very rugged honesty, which, in spite of the lamentably rude form of the speech, has its dignity.

We had great fun on the short North Berwick course in those days, when nothing really paid you but accuracy in the pitch, developed to a nicety by Johnny Laidlay, who was always there. And besides were Walter de Zoete, poor John Penn and many good golfers besides. I think it was with me as partner that Arthur Balfour first played that four-some against de Zoete and Penn which afterwards, with John Laidlay taking my place, was played times without number. "Mike" Mitchell was one of the regular frequenters, in the Eton holidays, and with him as partner I once did three holes running in two each on the old short course.