
A Quest for Justice

by
Tracy Mehr
Amherst College

On December 22, 1894 delegates from five of the nation's leading country clubs met over dinner in New York. Officers were elected and the United States Golf Association was officially formed. The function of the U.S.G.A. was, and is, "to protect and promote interest in the game in this country, establish a final authority in all matters pertaining to the game and to organize and run national championships."

Golf had the organization it needed for growth. The results of the organization went far beyond anyone's expectations. By the summer of 1900 it was estimated that close to 1000 golf clubs had been constructed in the United States . . . and that "golf in America had developed a buying power and spending fund that excelled any other branch of sport." However, most of this growth was in the private sector. Sectional or national competitions were limited to members of these exclusive clubs. During its first 27 years "public play" was never mentioned in the executive minutes of the U.S.G.A.

Suddenly, on February 3, 1922, after 27 years of protecting the private sector of golf

and isolating it from public interests, the Executive Committee of the U.S.G.A. quietly met and created the public and municipal golf course committee, which would act as a subsection of the Executive Committee. On May 22 of the same year the following headlines went across the wire services throughout the country: "U.S.G.A. Completes Preliminary Arrangements for First Annual Public Links Championship."

Why did a small elite body of men whose primary function had been to protect and promote the game of golf for the private sector suddenly create not only a body within the Executive Committee to promote municipal and public play in the United States, but also promote a national championship which necessitated the bending of previously inflexible rules on amateurism? Historians of golf offer little in explanation.

A reasonable explanation is suggested by study of golf history between 1900 and 1923. Study of the intertwining nature of various separate incidents suggests that the public links championship was the symbolic climax of a long struggle for social justice and political reform within the administration of the game. The celebrated controversy over the amateur status of Francis Ouimet awakened midwestern dissatisfaction with the arbitrary and sectional interest of the U.S.G.A. Buoyed by their success in supporting Ouimet, the Western Golf Association sought an Americanization of the rules of golf and greater representation on the U.S.G.A. Executive Committee. Dissatisfied with the U.S.G.A.'s initial efforts to compromise, the Western Association proposed a consolidation of smaller associations, called the American Golf Association, which would invade the east and wrest control of the game from the U.S.G.A. Included in the new association's objectives of 1921 was a desire to foster the public aspect of the game. It was this specific threat by a new generation of golfers who desired a return to the basic tradition of the game, the tradition that golf as a social and recreational activity is a game of the people and that the people should be represented on the governing body, that led to further compromise and conciliation, a revision of the executive structure within the U.S.G.A. and resulted in the promotion of the public links championship.



NASSH members were housed at Collier Dormitory