Chapter XII.  

My Own Game

Mr. Darwin asks me to say a little about my own game, and I will go back as far as the time when I first started to swing an ancient wooden club on the old links in Aberdeen. In those days any one could play free of charge; now I believe there is a fee of three pence per round. We were better off than, say, the North Berwick or St. Andrews boys for the reason that we had plenty of space. We could learn to drive without interfering with any one playing a round, and we were always driving. As a matter of fact a wooden club was the only club I had for three or four years. Then I was fortunate enough to be given an old-fashioned mid-iron which I used when hanging around the club-house waiting for a caddying job. Here the ground was dead flat, and I got into the way of knocking the ball down. We had about six holes, the longest about thirty yards, and we would play for hours at them for pennies.

I must have played quite a time with my left hand below the right, and I was a very ordinary player then, but one day I received a lecture from a very good player which I took to heart. I changed my grip to the orthodox one, and very soon showed great promise. Like a lot more of my countrymen I crossed
the Border. I've been back often since, though not for very long at a time. My game when I came south nineteen years ago had three main characteristics: hitting the ball down as often as I could, hitting it hard, and taking about forty-two putts per round. I may add that I would 'go up in the air' at any moment. I was not so likely to have a fight with myself when I had a flesh-and-blood opponent. My trouble was medal play, in which I often got annoyed when everything was not going just right, and so beat myself. In those days I had a half-finger, half-palm grip, an open stance and a flat swing. I could hit the ball further than I do now. My grip was stronger on account of my holding the club more in the palm, and my swing was more powerful: it was a flat one, and so there was more pivoting. And another thing perhaps made me longer then. I had not the experience to realise that half a dozen times off the line meant the loss of a few shots in the course of a round. I was always prepared to go on to the tee and try to knock the ball as far as I possibly could, but this will not do. If you will carefully watch golfers of experience, you will see that every now and again they pull out an extra twenty-five yards when it is required; at the other holes they are hitting well within themselves. All this kind of knowledge only comes with experience.

My first sight of the cracks was when I took a day off and went to Hoylake to see the Championship of 1902, which Sandy Herd won, using a Haskell ball. I had heard so much of Vardon, Braid, Taylor, and Herd that I went straight away and found Vardon,
Present-Day Golf

I must say he made a great impression on me, as he played in so totally different a manner from any one I had ever seen: I mean in regard to his style. Up to then I had never seen any one able to balance himself with a swing as upright as Vardon’s, and he did it so easily. There was no slogging about it: just perfect timing.

I was anxious to see how my brother Scots were doing; so I went after Braid, whom I found crashing into a ‘gutty.’ His caddie besides carrying a bag of clubs carried a box of balls. It appeared that Jimmy hit them so hard that he had them out of shape in a few holes. It was Braid’s hard hitting that appealed to me more than anything in his game. Next I found J. H. Taylor playing with Tommy Renouf, and I certainly liked his style. Like Vardon he got to the green by the ‘All air route,’ and this was the great difference between the Scottish and English methods of playing. I saw Sandy Herd win with a ball of which the inside rubber could be seen; but though it was nearly split in half it was an easier ball with which to get the figures for the holes than a brand-new ‘gutty.’

I came away from that Championship with lots of hopes, and at the same time convinced that my methods were not so good as I had thought they were. First of all I had to learn to make my ball do more of its work in the air. Then all these champions, with the exception of that year’s winner, adopted the overlapping grip. I had to learn that, and it so happened that this was made easier for me by the accident of my sticking a gouge half-way into the centre of my
left hand. With this grip it took me at least six months to hit a ball without cut on it. With the adoption of the new grip my swing had become more upright; my left wrist was consequently more under the shaft at the top, and I was keeping the ball in the air all right, but it did not stay there long enough. I gradually—it really took years—got rid of all the cut, but it was not until I adopted a square stance that I got back to my place on the course from the tee.

My next two lessons were from Mr. Hilton, who advised me to take a practice swing before playing a shot. I certainly was not in the habit of wasting much time. Indeed one gentleman said of me, 'Duncan won't miss his train through his putting.' Mr. Hilton also advised me to keep my body still when I was putting, and to emphasise his good advice he instanced Jimmy Braid, pointing out that he used to sway his body in the days when he couldn't putt, but had become a good putter since keeping his body still. His putting 'tip' I learned inside three years, but it took me until last year—that is to say about fifteen years—to carry out his first bit of advice.

During the Championship which Taylor won at Deal in 1909 I was staying with Vardon, and I happened to ask him what chances he had. He reckoned that if he struck a patch of decent putting he would have a chance, and he also said that I played too quickly to win. And he was quite right; but what he really meant, though he wouldn't say it, was that I would never win a championship until I became a lot more stable. All the same, two 80's on one day and 'one under fours' on the next do not say much
for my stability yet. He was a wise man who said, 'It was not my good play that won, it was my opponent's bad play.'

I said something just now of my preference for the 'All air route' up to the hole. This is to be made easier this year, as I believe that most of the popular brands of balls are to be wound at a higher tension, which will make them more resilient and cause them to stay longer in the air. At the same time, a golfer who buys a ball for its durability, and incidentally its bunker-jumping properties, will still be able to get the soft ball. The good player has been handicapped for years by the construction of the ball, as naturally the manufacturers have catered for the majority who prefer a ball that does not cut readily, and a ball of this type must not be hard wound. But even with a little more help from the ball there will still be art in hitting one two hundred yards on to a green and making it stay there.

Now, to jump to another subject, there has recently been a competition running in a trade paper, the 'P. G.,' competitors being asked to vote as to who are the best players with driver, brassy, spoon, cleek, iron, mashie, niblick (the latter club being specially put in for Ray), and putter. Mitchell was voted the best from the tee, Braid with the brassy; Sandy Herd and myself had a fight for honours with the spoon, but I won by a vote. Vardon was the best with cleek and iron, Taylor the mashie, Ray the niblick, and Jack White the putter. If I had had a shot at the competition, I should have voted driver, Mitchell; wooden-club seconds up to the hole, Ray; cleek, Vardon; iron
and mashie, Taylor; and Jack White, the putter. I think Mitchell the most consistently long driver to-day. Ray's long seconds up to the hole are best because of the distances he gets out of all sorts of lies, and he is also able to stop them nearly where they drop. Vardon is the man for the cleek, because he has always stuck to it and has seldom used a spoon. Taylor is best with iron and mashie, because he can make the ball travel faster to its goal and stop as quickly as would a slower flying ball. I should choose White for the putter, because of his sound methods. I am such a great believer in the 'All air route' that I have left out Braid and Herd. My reason is that every now and again they play shots in which, though the ball may go near its object, it is doing too much on the ground, and that makes for an element of luck. Naturally, when either of these players plays a run-up shot, the shot must be a possible one, otherwise he would pitch it; but I believe in keeping the ball clear of the ground if you can possibly do so.

I often shut the club-face off the tee when I wish to keep the ball down or get a little 'draw,' but nearly all my other shots are hit with the club-face open. A part of my game that has improved since 1913 is my mashie and mashie-niblick play. By that year I had come to the conclusion that there was less chance of error in Vardon's method of taking up the club, which is a two-handed business with very little turning or bending of the wrist. It is the nearest thing to a lift that a swing can be. At the same time I like the way in which Taylor comes down on the ball, and I think a combination of the two is the 'super method' of
approaching. When I can 'get it' I can put the ball pretty close to the hole. But it cannot always be done, for I often instinctively go back to my old style, using a lot of wristwork on the up-swing, and allowing the right hand to climb over the left at impact, the natural way to one who has been reared on a course where the run-up shot is encouraged. A mashie and putter were the last two clubs to complete my set when I was a boy. I remember one of our local cracks going to a Championship which Taylor won, and coming back full of Taylor's wonderful 'cut' mashie shots. Well, all us boys who had been running them up to the hole with an iron must now of course get a mashie. I got hold of an old-fashioned lofting iron, and we started to develop this 'cut' shot. We could toss them up all right and make the ball break to the right; but like every one else we exaggerated, so that we got a bit of cut into every shot we played, and after a while went back to our old methods.

The truth of the matter is that Taylor does not hit the ball an inward glancing blow, which is the only way in which what we understand as the 'cut' shot can be played. When Taylor plays an ordinary approach and the ball breaks to the right, he has not played a good one. He would much rather see that ball go straight on. The whole secret of Taylor's approaching is that he is always hitting the ball a straight descending blow with the blade as open as it is possible to have it. By hitting the ball down, and by having this open blade, he secures the maximum amount of under-spin. Now the man who hits the ball a straight descending blow, and at impact allows
the right hand to turn over, cannot get as much stop on as Taylor does; for the turning over of the right hand tends to shut the blade, and the ball is hit nearer its centre instead of at the bottom.

A favourite shot of mine is a wooden-club shot up to the hole, or a full iron where it is possible to bang the ball up to the hole and make it stay there. I play this shot with the left wrist more under the shaft than it is in my tee shot: this opens the club-face, and so helps to get just a suspicion of cut on. I have also to be lighter on my left foot at the top of the swing so that I can strike the ball an ascending blow. By doing this and using the full amount of loft on the club-face, I can hit the ball as far below its centre as possible and so get height. Vardon and Ray both play this shot well, as their natural way of hitting a ball is to be light on the left foot at the top of the swing.

I was playing at Bournemouth the other day, and on the whole playing quite well. Going to the tenth my partner’s caddie said to him, after I had put my drive just off the course on the right, ‘This gentleman would be a good player, sir, if he could only ’it ’em straight.’ When off the line I used generally to be so on the right-hand side, but lately it has been the other way. At the P.G.A. exhibition I picked up a driver made by Frank Frostick, and I have used it ever since. It has had a peculiar effect on my game in this one respect. The club has a decided hook, and though I drive well with it, I find myself in consequence of this hook standing too much in front of my ball for long seconds, whether it be with a wooden
club or an iron. I have the greatest difficulty in getting my stance. Over and over again I feel myself too much in front of the ball. Sometimes I have time to adjust my stance; at other times it is too late, and I find my ball on the left of the green. For many years now I have habitually used wooden clubs that tend to 'lie away,' with the result that, as I said, my ball when off the line used to be on the right of the course. To-day I find it more often on the left. Now this hooking is all against my idea of how to play golf, which is the 'All air route,' because a pulled ball tends to come down quickly, not having been hit as near the bottom as possible. Here I have been struggling with a dilemma, hoping to be able to get an extra few yards from the tee with the hooked driver and still be able to 'hold up' my seconds; but I have come to the conclusion that I cannot do what I want often enough to make it pay. I make too many wide seconds, often dropping a shot or two by them, in the course of a round. Incidentally, there was another and very curious result of my standing a little more in front of the ball off the tee. Abe Mitchell, with whom I have played a lot of golf, very often found himself aiming at the right-hand side of the fairway just because I was doing it. It is an extraordinary game.