Chapter XIII. American Golf and Golfers

It is scarcely necessary for me to say that American golfers are now very good indeed. We have the best possible reason for knowing it from their successful invasion over here, and I know it very well from my two tours in their country.

If they have one particularly valuable quality I should say it was their power and eagerness to observe. They are really wonderful observers. Over here when a young player does well in a tournament he is apt to accept every one's congratulations and to think that he now knows all about it. In America the young player at a big tournament is watching all the time to pick up every scrap of useful knowledge he can about the best methods, to see how Hagen plays this shot or Sarazen that, and it pays him well. This is just as true of the amateurs as of the professionals. There seems to me this difference between the American amateurs and ours. The American will never mind an all-night journey if he can get a chance of playing with the best professionals. The result is that he not only learns a lot about the game but he learns also not to be afraid of the professionals. He discovers that the professional is human and can be beaten. Our amateurs in my opinion do not play nearly enough with professionals, and so, when they
do play with them, they are frightened of them. I feel sure, too, that they would be all the better for the hints that professionals could give them. Mr. 'Bobby' Jones has been with professionals all his life.

I do not know that there is any very noticeable or characteristic difference between the golfing methods of the two nations. Americans are inclined to swing their irons more than we do, but I fancy this is accounted for by the difference in the nature of the turf. In America the ball is not right down on the ground but seems to be lifted a little off it. There is therefore nothing to resist that downward stroke which we call the 'push shot.' The ball has rather to be hit on the upward swing. I remember that when Kirkwood first played in America he found that he could not get on with his ordinary push shot and had to alter his methods.

The only other characteristic I can think of concerns not the swing but the preliminary address. When the American is standing behind his ball to look where he is going he reminds me a little of a baseball player waiting to hit the ball. Hagen, who would have been a great baseball player if he had not been a golfer, has this mannerism strongly marked, and when I was playing with him I found myself inclined to imitate it on the putting green. I should be quite glad to do so if by means of it I could putt the ball into the hole like he does.

Now let me say a little about individual players and their methods. In doing so I do not want to seem in any way impertinent or too critical. It is
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simply that analysing and criticising other players' methods is to me a most interesting study.

First of all I will put the present Open Champion, Mr. 'Bobby' Jones, whose record has proved him, I think, to be the best golfer in America. I have played a lot with him and have a great admiration for him. I never saw any one hit a golf ball with greater ease. His swing is a perfect example of how to swing the club, if I may so express it, by means of the body. His body starts to swing the club sooner than in the case of any other golfer. He has, too, a beautiful gift of balance. In his perfectly natural turning movement of the body he reminds me of Mr. John Ball, and, like Mr. Ball, he plays every shot, whatever the length, by means of this natural turn, in proportion of course to the length of the shot. He never, I think, makes any effort to alter the angle of the face at the top of the swing, but if he wants to 'hold up' a shot does so by means of his weight. Probably as he grows older he will acquire this art of slightly—very slightly—altering the angle of the face according as he wants to hold up the ball to the left or the right. It is one that I knew nothing about at his age, by the way. If he does he will be, if possible, a better player even than he is now.

Mr. Jones has a fine temperament for the game. People have laid far too much stress on the fact that he could occasionally, when very young, get rather too excited. He is a fine fighter or he could not have done what he has. His only trace of weakness is that sometimes he gets, so to say, afraid of his own brilliancy and so loses himself for a moment. It is
very difficult now and then not to be frightened of your own score.

Next I should put Gene Sarazen, a very fine player indeed. He has earned a place in front of Hagen now by his victories, in matches, over him. I told him the other day—and he was pleased to be told it—that he had Harry Vardon’s body work, as it was at its best. That is, he first sways back a little to the right and then with a second movement comes forward on to the left foot. As long as he keeps the timing of this body movement he will be a great player. Like nearly all the American players he stands with his right knee rather turned inwards.

Sarazen’s method of playing his pitches is interesting. He holds his elbows close to his sides and thus compels himself to use his trunk in playing them and not to fall into that very common fault of leaving the body out of it. He uses his body a good deal in putting too and can have bad days, but generally he is a very good putter.

It amuses me to remember that just before the Open Championship which he won at Skokie, Gene said he was playing his irons badly and asked me to come out and look at him and give him a lesson. I had already been out trying to do this for Mr. Guilford: and it was a very hot day and I was tired, and so asked to be let off. Probably that was very lucky for Gene. I might have wanted him to change his grip and so got him into a muddle, and then, I expect, he would not have won that Championship.

Hagen is a great player and a great fighter. I think he has lately had a little too much golf and so
is not quite so brilliant as he was, from overwork. One could not call his methods the soundest possible. He is apt to make bad shots and he has a trick of letting the left elbow come out too much in the upswing; he had a bad fit of it at Troon. I fancy that this may come from a baseball upbringing. But Hagen has a great temperament for the game. He has, if I may use the word, tremendous 'guts' and can bring out wonderful shots when they are most needed, and this will always make him a terribly dangerous adversary.

Jim Barnes is a fine player but has not quite so much pugnacity as Hagen. He knows all about playing in a wind from his seaside bringing up in Cornwall. His golf when he won at Washington was wonderfully brilliant. When it comes to brilliancy, however, the palm should go to Jock Hutchison. He is perhaps the most brilliant player in America. I hold that he is a better player to-day than when he won our Open Championship at St. Andrews. His methods are sounder. His swing is more of a 'one-piece' swing with rather less pivoting and altogether more harmonious.

There are several more professionals of whom I should like to say a word. There is McDonald Smith for one, who did so well at Troon, a pretty player and one of a great golfing family. One of the most characteristic things about him is the pronounced pause he makes at the end of his back swing in putting. Then there is Bob Macdonald, a very fine hitter with a beautiful style. He has big hands and great power but not a very delicate touch for the shorter shots.
Melhorn is a thoroughly good player, so is Klein among the young ones and so is Farrell, though there is one point in his style that I don't quite like: he seems to turn his left wrist a little too much. However, he is undoubtedly a good player.

Now a word as to some of the amateurs apart from Mr. Jones. I have not seen much, I am sorry to say, either of Mr. Sweetser or Mr. Marston. Mr. Sweetser is unquestionably a splendid match player and I was unlucky in not seeing him at his best. His is a rather curious style with that very stiff left arm and all his shots coming round a little from the right. Mr. Marston, when I played with him at Merion, putted wonderfully. So did Mr. Travers who was his partner; indeed I grew tired of seeing them hole putts. Mr. Travers I thought the best putter of all. His method is perfect.

Mr. 'Chick' Evans has to my mind sacrificed length a little too much for accuracy. No man makes fewer bad shots and his iron play up to the hole is very fine. He practises religiously with nobody to look at him. I know where but I must not tell.

Mr. Guilford is a very fine player. I am not sure that he knows very accurately how he gets his results. At Skokie before the Championship I found him pulling his iron shots and socketing with his mashie. However, he certainly gets results and he is a great putter. Mr. Knepper I played with twice and found on the second occasion that he had improved a great deal. He is a good player. I like Mr. Gardner's style and he is a grand hitter. He is, too, a natural
athlete who would hit any sort of ball well. His weakness, if he has one, appears to me that sometimes he plays his iron shots too much with his arms and leaves the body out of it.

Finally there is Mr. Francis Ouimet, a beautiful golfer. Personally I should like to see him start his shots with more of what I call a 'sling.' There seems sometimes a little something wooden about the beginning of the swing, but apart from that I have nothing to say. He is a great player and, of course, a wonderful putter. I think Mr. Wethered did a great thing last summer when he beat him at Deal and then halved with him over thirty-six holes at St. Andrews.