

GOLF AND THE OLYMPIC GAMES

by Bill Mallon

On 2 October 1900, twelve gentlemen gathered to play 36 holes of golf at the Compiègne Club, about 30 miles north of Paris. Though only a few of them may have realized it at the time, they were the participants in the first Olympic golf tournament. Even many of the best golf historians will tell you that golf has never been held in the Olympics but, in fact, twice the sport has been on the modern Olympic program.

The modern Olympic Games began in 1896 thru the efforts of a Frenchman, Baron Pierre de Coubertin. Coubertin chose Athens as the site of the first Olympics and the Games were a resounding success. Golf was not on the program, certainly one reason being that, in 1896, there were no golf courses in Greece.

The 2nd and 3rd Olympic Games have been termed the farcical Olympics. Both were sideshows to World's Fairs - the 2nd in Paris in 1900 to the *Fifth Exposition Universelle*, and the 3rd to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis in 1904. In both cases, the Olympic events suffered from a lack of interest relative to the fairs. One other thing both Olympics shared was the inclusion of golf as a sport.

The 1900 Olympic Games were not even called that by the organizers of the sporting events; they preferred the name "Championnats Internationaux." The events were spread out over six months time and years later, many of the victors did not even know that they had competed in the Olympics. Amidst this setting, it was decided to stage a golf event in October at Compiègne, organized by the mayor of Compiègne, Monsieur Robert Fournier-Sarlovèze.

There were two golf events in 1900 - one for gentlemen and one for ladies, using the vernacular of the time. Charles Sands, of the St. Andrews Golf Club in Yonkers, played the Compiègne course in rounds of 82-85 to win the gentlemen's event by one shot over Walter Rutherford of Jedburgh, Scotland. The next day, October 3, the ladies' event took place and was won by Margaret Abbott of the Chicago Golf Club, who played her requisite nine holes in 47 strokes. A third competition was held on the final day. However, this was a handicap event for the men, and cannot be considered of Olympic caliber. It was, however, won by an American, Albert Lambert, (a ten handicap) about whom more will be said later.

The events were a success well attended by the society elite as evidenced by a description of the time from *Golf Illustrated*, "The entries were numerous, the play good, the weather admirable and the company (by which I mean spectators, officials, and others connected with or responsible for the meeting) distinguished and enthusiastic. Amongst others were present - Prince and Princess R. du Lucinge, Mme. Vagliano, Comte and Comtesse Robert de Breda, Vicomte and Vicomtesse d'Hautpoul, Comte and Comtesse de Moussac, Lord Sudeley, . . ."

Charles Sands took up golf in 1895 and only three months later went to the final of the first Amateur Championship of the USGA. There he met the redoubtable Charles Blair MacDonal, and Sands' lack of experience showed as MacDonal won easily, 12 and 11. Sands never again played in the U.S. Amateur, and that and his Olympic triumph constitute his entire golfing laurels.

Sands was a well-known athlete, though. Primarily a tennis player, he was the United States' champion in 1905 in court tennis, the original form of the game. He is one of only two American athletes to have competed in the Olympics in three sports - 1900 in golf, 1900 in lawn tennis, and 1908 in jeu de paume (the original name of court tennis).

Behind Margaret Abbott in the women's tournament came Polly Whittier and a lady listed in the past as Mrs. J. Huger Pratt of Dinard, France. The three women were mysteries until research by Dr. Paula Welch, a sports historian at the University of Florida, unearthed their identities.

Margaret Abbott was born in Calcutta, India in 1878 to wealthy parents. She learned her golf at the Chicago Golf Club but in 1900 was studying art in Paris, accompanied by her mother, who also played in the Olympic golf tournament (she finished seventh). By winning the Olympic golf tournament she became the first American woman to win an Olympic event (and only the second overall).

"Polly" Whittier, listed in older records of the International Olympic Committee as being from Switzerland, was actually Pauline Whittier of Boston. Also from a wealthy family, Whittier was a descendent of the famous poet, John Greenleaf Whittier, and in 1900 was studying in St. Moritz, hence the mistaken affiliation.

Mrs. J. Huger Pratt of Dinard was the former Daria Pankhurst. Vacationing in France in 1900, she played her golf at the Dinard Club. A short time after the Olympics, Daria Pratt divorced her husband, later marrying Prince Alexis Karageorgevitch of Serbia, thus becoming the Princess Alexis Karageorgevitch of Serbia.

Albert Lambert, the winner of the handicap event, also competed in the Olympic competition, finishing eighth with rounds of 94-95. Lambert was from St. Louis and when Olympic golf returned to St. Louis in 1904, Lambert would again compete, making him the only person to play in both Olympic golf tournaments. In fact, Lambert was the man responsible for the 1904 Olympic golf event.

Lambert was a wealthy man (this seemed to be a common affliction among Olympic golfers). He founded Lambert Pharmacal Co., later Warner-Lambert, best-known as the makers of Listerine. His avocation in later years became flying and he was the primary benefactor for Charles Lindbergh's trans-atlantic flight. For his contributions to aviation, the St. Louis airport was named Lambert International Field.

In 1900 Lambert played the Olympic golf event while on a business trip to his Paris office. On his return he mentioned the Olympic golf event to his father-in-law, Colonel George McGrew. McGrew was the founder of Glen Echo Golf Club in St. Louis and with the Olympics coming to St. Louis in 1904, Lambert and McGrew put forth plans to conduct an Olympic golf tournament at Glen Echo.

Seventy-four Americans and three Canadians came to Glen Echo to contest the Olympic championship. They were greeted by a plethora of golf events - driving contests, putting contests at night under the lights, handicap events, flights for non-qualifiers and match-play losers, and team Nassau competitions. Just two of the many events can be considered to be Olympic championships - a team event of 36 holes stroke play on Saturday, September 17, and an individual match-play event which ran the week of September 19-24.

Of the six ten-man teams which had entered, only two showed up on September 17, the Western Golf Association and the Trans-Mississippi Golf Association. A third team was organized at the last minute from among the golfers present and it represented, very loosely, the USGA. The Western GA, led by current U.S. and Western Amateur champion, H. Chandler Egan, won fairly easily. (The previous week, Egan had defeated Walter Travis to win the U.S. Amateur. Travis entered the Olympic tournament but declined to compete, citing illness.)

On Monday, September 19, 75 golfers teed off for the match play qualifying. First player off the tee was Raymond Havemeyer, donor of the Havemeyer Trophy given to the U.S. Amateur champion. Qualifying medalists were Stuart Stickney and Ralph McKittrick of the St. Louis Country Club, with a 36-hole total of 163. A score of 183 was sufficient to move on to match play. Only one of the three Canadians survived the qualifying, George Lyon of the Lambton Golf & Country Club in Toronto.

Match play began Tuesday and consisted of daily 36-hole matches. Advancing to the semi-finals were Egan, Lyon, Frank Newton of the Seattle CC, and Burt McKinnie of the Normandie Park Golf Club in St. Louis. McKinnie, a music teacher, was the current St. Louis city champion, while Newton was Pacific Northwest champion in 1902 and would win, in 1926, the first New England Amateur at the age of 52. Egan easily defeated McKinnie while Lyon bested Newton to move to the finals.

Egan, based on his summer record, was the favorite in the final, but Lyon was a fine player. Before Lyon's career was done he would win the Canadian Amateur eight times and finish second in both the U.S. Amateur and Canadian Open. Lyon was known as one of Canada's great all-round athletes, having been in the 1890's their top cricket batsman. After five straight days of 36 holes, one factor against him in the final, it was thought, was his age, 46.

The day of the finals dawned cold and gloomy and both contestants would fight the rain for the entire day. When the battle was over, George Lyon was Olympic champion by 3 and 2. His body, hardened by years of athletic endeavour, had pulled him through. While Egan was a classic stylist, Lyon had an ungainly, flat swing, relying on his natural coordination and great strength, which made him easily the longest driver in the tournament. After the match, Egan went to bed exhausted. Lyon went to the awards dinner and further showed his stamina by walking the length of the dining room - on his hands!

And thus ends the history of golf competition in the Olympics, though there have been a few attempts to revive the sport as an Olympic event. Golf-mad Britain was to host the 1908 Olympics and it seemed natural for the London organizers to include golf on the program. They planned a 108-hole stroke play event at three courses - Royal St. George's and Prince's GC, both in Sandwich, and Cinqueports GC in nearby Deal.

The Royal & Ancient, however, became embroiled in a dispute over eligibility with the Olympic organizing committee and all the British entrants withdrew. Some measure of how the Royal and Ancient felt about golf in the Olympics can be gleaned from their original response to the letter sent by the London Olympic organizers. They did not reply. Eventually, however, the organizing committee gained some support and planned the Olympic golf event. W. Ryder Richardson, Esq., secretary of Royal St. George's, was on the Council of the British Olympic Association in 1908, and was placed in charge of the golf event. The event then had to be cancelled due to lack of entries. George Lyon sailed for Britain to defend his Olympic title prior to the event's cancellation. He was offered a symbolic gold medal but declined.

Golf was not included in the 1912 Olympics at Stockholm. Although a few Swedish courses existed at that time, the sport was not very popular in Scandinavia. In 1920 the Olympics were held in Antwerp, Belgium, and a golf event was scheduled to be held at the Golf Club of Cappelen but again a lack of entries prevented its being held.

In 1936, a golf tournament was contested at Baden-Baden, Germany as an exhibition just prior to the Olympics. Adolf Hitler donated a trophy and hoped to present it to a winning German team. With one round remaining, the German duo led, and Count von Ribbentrop, foreign minister to the Third Reich, sent a message to Der Führer about the German lead, and Hitler began the trek from Berlin to Baden-Baden. The next day, when Hitler arrived, von Ribbentrop informed him that the British pair of Tony Thirsk and Arnold Bentley had broken a course record and won the tournament over the Germans. Hitler got back in his car and returned to Berlin, leaving the trophy presentation to the president of the German golf federation.

In 1921, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), at the annual meeting of their executive committee, drew up stricter guidelines for a sport's inclusion in the Olympics. Over the years the guidelines have changed gradually but they have effectively eliminated golf from consideration as an Olympic sport because, until recently, the sport's ruling bodies have never tried to follow them.

In the alphabet soup of the Olympic hierarchy, the IOC controls a series of National Olympic Committees (NOCs) such as the United States Olympic Committee (USOC), and a series of sporting international federations (IFs), such as the International Tennis Federation (ITF). Within each country, individual sports are usually controlled by a National Governing Body (NGB), which falls under the umbrella of both an IF and an NOC. An example of an NGB is U.S.A. Track & Field (USATF), which governs track & field in the United States and falls under the aegis of both the USOC and the IAAF (International Amateur Athletic Federation).

The Olympic Charter today delineates the rules for a sport's inclusion in the Olympic Games. To be considered for the Olympic program a sport must be widely practised internationally by at least forty countries on three continents - no problem for golf. However, the sport must be controlled by an International Federation (IF) which governed the sport world-wide, and until recently, that has been a problem. The USGA did not qualify, as it truly only governs the sport in the United States. The Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, Scotland, came closer but its sphere of influence was probably also not catholic enough. In the late 1980's, the World Amateur Golf Council (WAGC), which had been formed in 1958, was given recognition by the IOC as the International Federation governing golf. The WAGC is basically formed from officials of the USGA and the Royal & Ancient.

In October 1992, the Atlanta Olympic Organizing Committee announced that it would seek recognition of golf as an official sport for the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games and that it planned to hold the event, for men and women, at the Augusta National Golf Club in Augusta, Georgia. Many members of the United States' media assumed this was a "done deal" and the Atlanta Committee also intimated that they had been given approval. Juan Antonio Samaranch hinted once or twice in the press that golf would be approved as an Olympic sport again, although IOC Vice-President Kevan Gosper was quoted in the media several times as saying that the plan was far from approved.

The basis for this was laid during the Atlanta bid for the 1996 Olympics. Atlanta Organizing Committee Chairman Billy Payne was permitted to entertain several IOC members at the Augusta National Golf Club, courtesy of club chairman, Jack Stephens. Payne and Stephens decided that golf should become an Olympic sport in 1996 with Augusta as the venue. The idea was sold to Samaranch when Payne told him that he could deliver the Augusta National as well as the top professional players in the world.

It never came to pass. Multiple problems existed, among them, the Augusta National Golf Club, the traditional home of the Masters. Augusta National has no female members and only one black member. Black and female activists in Atlanta protested the selection of Augusta National. In addition, Anita DeFrantz, the only current United States' member of the IOC, who is on the IOC Executive Committee and is a black female, was not consulted by Payne and apparently seethed at the entire plan. Other Atlanta businessmen also questioned sending the golf tournament 150 miles out of Atlanta.

Samaranch began to back off when it became obvious that few of golf's governing bodies had much enthusiasm for the idea and that there was no guarantee of the top professional players being present, à la the "Dream Team" of golf. Neither the United States Golf Association, the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, nor the U.S. PGA Tour were big supporters of the idea. The USGA and the R & A both feel that the Olympic idea may overshadow some of their international events, and U.S. PGA Tour commissioner Deane Beman holds to the view that golf in the Olympics should be contested by amateurs, not the world's top professionals. After several months of controversy, the Atlanta Organizing Committee announced on 29 January 1993 that they were withdrawing their proposal, and that golf would not be on the 1996 Olympic program.

What would be gained by having golf an Olympic sport in today's world? It is difficult to know if anything given the expensive nature of the game. Most sports do benefit

from their inclusion in the Olympics, because the exposure causes an interest in the sport in the former Soviet Bloc and Third World countries. Witness baseball, which became a medal sport at Barcelona and was becoming popular in the former Soviet Union. However, it is unlikely that golf will ever be terribly popular to the masses in places such as Djibouti or Albania, as their economic status probably precludes that.

It seems that golf buffs with an Olympic interest may have to make do with the stories of two small tournaments that took place at the turn-of-the-century. It is possible that Charles Sands, Margaret Abbott, George Lyon, and the Western Golf Association will forever be known as the only Olympic golf champions.