



# The Golf Chronicles

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



Byron Nelson (left) and Ed Dudley, sporting the natty golfing attire of the era, strike a pose at the 1939 National Open that Nelson won in a 36-hole playoff. Dudley, the home course pro, tied for 12<sup>th</sup> place.

## Par for this Course

The Spring Mill course, a par 71 for members, played to a par of 69, the only sub-par 70 course in Open history. The USGA decreed that two par 5 holes, the 479-yard 8<sup>th</sup> and 480-yard 12<sup>th</sup>, would play as par 4's.

The golf course measured 6,786 yards, with par 4 holes of 480, 479, 453, 450, 447, 425 and 421 yards.

The par 3 holes were also long. In his book, *How I Played the Game*, Nelson recalls hitting driver to the 234-yard uphill second hole.

The lone par 5, the 558-yard 18<sup>th</sup> hole, turned out to be Sam Snead's undoing.

Go to page 3 for a course map and scorecard.

## The Am, the Open and the Nelson Connection

The year 1939 was historic. Events in Europe and Asia were setting a course that would lead to world war. Although certainly not as momentous, golf history was also being made.

Let's start with the 1939 Berks Amateur Championship. This championship remains one of the most interesting in that event's long history. Interesting because the finalists, Lefty Faber and John Markel, would become stalwarts in Berks County golf for decades. And interesting because, well, read on.

**Not Phil.** But first, exercise your imagination. You are Jack Nicklaus. Or Arnold Palmer. Or Tiger Woods. Betsy King. Curtis Strange. But not Phil Mickelson. Definitely not Phil because he hasn't won the U.S. Open.

So in your mind, you are the Open champ. What do you do later that year? No, you don't visit the Mouse. You do what Byron Nelson did in 1939.

Lord Byron captured the National Open—that's what it was called back then—defeating Craig Wood and Denny Shute in a playoff at Philadelphia Country Club's Spring Mill course.

**A busy year.** After winning the Open, Nelson made the short drive from Gladwyne back to Reading to resume his duties as head professional at Reading Country Club. He gave lessons. He ran the golf shop. He played tournaments, winning the Western Open, the Massachusetts State Open, the Central Pennsylvania Open at RCC, and, with partner Johnny Giles, the Berkshire Country Club pro-am. He lost the 36-hole final of the PGA Championship, played at the now-defunct Pomonok Country Club in Queens, N.Y. on July 15, to Henry Picard on the first playoff hole.

And on September 4 of that year, Nelson served as the walking referee for the match to determine the Berks County amateur champion. A September 5 *Reading Eagle* article reports that Nelson led a sizeable gallery following the players. There is no indication that he was called upon to make any rulings.

Nelson, of course, is the connection between the Am and the Open. Let's first look at the Open.

- Ralph Guldahl was the favorite. He was the two-time defending champion, having won in 1937 and 1938.
- Nelson started the final round tied with Guldahl and Picard, five strokes behind Johnny Bulla. Sam Snead, Craig Wood and Denny Shute were one stroke off the lead. Nelson's final-round 68 was his only sub-par round. He, Wood and Shute tied at 284, +8.
- The tournament belonged to Snead, who needed a par 5 on the 18<sup>th</sup> hole to win. Believing a birdie was required, the Slammer played aggressively. His triple-bogey 8, including two shots from a fairway bunker and three putts, left him two strokes out of the playoff. Snead would never win the Open.
- Nelson and Wood each shot 68 in the Sunday playoff. Shute was eliminated after a 76.
- Nelson won with a 70 to Wood's 73 in the second 18-hole playoff on Monday.
- Nelson's victory on Monday featured an eagle 2 on the 453-yard 4<sup>th</sup> hole. He hit driver off the tee and holed out with a 1-iron from 215 yards.
- Nelson's share of the \$6,000 purse was \$1,000. Wood won \$800, Shute \$700. The top 35 finishers earned prize money. Four players tied for the last paying position. Each won \$12.



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Johnny Markel, dethroned 17-year-old Berks amateur golf champion, could still smile after his defeat by Wilmer (Lefty) Faber, new titlist, 1-up, at the Reading Country Club yesterday. Johnny is pictured on the left, above, in this friendly pose with the Riverside Club southpaw who earlier this season bagged the public links championship of the county.

—Reading Eagle, September 5, 1939

- Bud Ward, an amateur from Elma, Wash., entered the final round two strokes off the lead. His score of 285, +9 missed the playoff by a stroke. Ward won the U.S. Amateur championship in 1939 and 1941.
- The 1939 victory was Nelson's sole Open win.
- This was Nelson's last year at RCC. He moved to Inverness Club, Toledo, in 1940. Interestingly, his first tournament after the '39 Open was the Inverness Invitational Four-Ball. He and partner Jug McSpaden lost a playoff to the team of Henry Picard and Johnny Revolta. Byron and Jug each won \$425.

Now, let's look at the **1939 Berks Amateur**.

- The winner, Lefty Faber, became the first player to win the Berks Publinks and Amateur championships. He won the Publinks earlier that year.
- Faber defeated 17-year-old Johnny Markel, the defending Berks Amateur Champion. Markel is still the youngest Berks Am champ at age 16.
- Faber won 1-up. The match turned on the 15<sup>th</sup>, the downhill par 3 with Antietam Creek a mere 15 feet from the green. Faber reached with a 5-iron. Markel's tee shot hit a tree and caromed into the hazard. He wedged out, but missed his 20-foot par putt to go one down. The players halved 16 with pars, 17 with bogey 5's and 18 with par 4's.
- The players cards, from the *Reading Eagle*, September 5, 1939.

Par, out	444	353	434	34
Faber, out	444	373	544	38
Markel, out	443	454	444	36
Par, in	445	453	441	37-71
Faber, in	464	353	454	38-76
Markel, in	544	554	454	40-76

- Faber began his golf career as a caddy at RCC. In 1939, he was playing out of the now-defunct Riverside Golf Club in Muhlenberg Township.
- Faber turned the tables on Markel, who beat Lefty 3 and 2 at Berkleigh in the 1938 Berks Amateur championship. Markel also won the Berks Junior Championship in '38, making him the only golfer to hold the titles simultaneously.
- The 1939 win was Faber's only Berks Amateur championship. He was Berks County publinks champion in 1939, 1940 and 1945; RCC champion in 1946; Manor Golf Club champion in 1940 and 1942; Green Hills Golf Club champion in 1942; and Riverside Golf Club champion in 1940 and 1943. Faber won the 1929 RCC caddy championship and tied for the 1940 state publinks title.
- In 1947, Henry Clay Poe hired Faber as assistant pro and caddymaster at RCC.
- Markel won seven Berks Amateur championships: 1938, 1940, 1941, 1947, 1953, 1954 and 1960. He also won three consecutive PIAA high school state championships (1939, '40, '41), the 1941 Philadelphia Junior, the 1946 Philadelphia Amateur, the 1964 Philadelphia Section PGA Assistants championship and the 1983 Philadelphia PGA Seniors championship.
- Markel retired as head pro at Berkshire in 1987, having served for 25 years after succeeding his father, Harry, who retired in 1969. Harry was hired as assistant pro in 1922 and became head pro in 1931.

## Back in the Day

The 1939 event marked the 11<sup>th</sup> playing of the Berks County Amateur Golf Championship.

Hawley Quier won the first event in 1929, defeating Ralph Jennison, 2 up at Berkshire Country Club.

The tournament rotated between Berkshire CC, Berkleigh CC and Reading CC.

The 150 entrants were placed in 10 flights based on a qualifying round at RCC. Bob Dinsmore, winner in 1934, '35 and '37, won the qualifying medal with a 72. Faber was second at 75 while Markel shot 77.

Matches for the first six flights were played at Reading. The remaining flights were played at Berkshire.



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Byron Nelson scored an eagle 2 on the 453-yard fourth hole in the playoff against Craig Wood. The course map is from the *Reading Eagle*, June 6, 1939. The scorecard was found on Pinterest.



Hole	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Out	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	In	TOTAL
Yards	450	234	384	453	425	447	191	479	350	3413	454	169	480	206	394	421	328	363	558	3373	6786
Par	4	3	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	34	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	4	5	35	69



In the photo above, Byron Nelson (right) shakes hands with J. Stanley Giles, Reading Country Club's Greens Committee Chairman, following Nelson's National Open win on June 12. Giles recruited Nelson for the RCC head professional job in 1937. Nelson's Open scorecard is to the right. Note that he made only one 6 in his six rounds. From the *Reading Eagle*, June 13, 1939.

### Figures That Won Crown for Nelson

Cards for Regulation 72 Holes  
(Eighteen holes were played Thursday, 18 Friday and 36 Saturday.)

**Nelson**

Out	5	4	4	5	4	5	3	5	3	38
In	4	2	5	3	4	4	3	4	5	34-72
Out	4	3	4	5	4	4	3	4	5	36
In	4	4	5	4	3	4	4	4	5	37-73
Out	4	3	2	5	4	5	2	5	6	36
In	4	3	5	3	5	4	3	3	5	35-71
Out	3	3	5	4	4	3	4	4	4	34
In	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	5	34-68-284

**First 18-Hole Playoff**

**Nelson**

Out	4	3	4	4	5	4	2	4	3
In	4	4	3	4	4	4	3	5	4-68

**Wood**

Out	4	3	4	4	4	5	3	4	5
In	5	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	5-68

**Shute**

Out	4	4	4	4	4	5	3	4	5
In	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	5	7-76

(Shute eliminated)

**Second 18-Hole Playoff**

**Nelson**

Out	4	3	3	2	5	5	3	4	4-33
In	5	3	5	4	4	3	4	4	5-37-70

**Wood**

Out	5	2	5	4	4	4	3	4	5-36
In	5	4	5	3	5	3	4	3	5-37-73