

# The Golf Chronicles

## Golf Stories from the Pennsylvania Heartland

Byron Nelson  
Reading CC Pro  
1937-39



Number 107 • December 10, 2023

### The Balloon Ball Open

The 1931 U.S. Open at Inverness Country Club, Toledo, Ohio, marked a turning point in golf.

Bobby Jones, the defending champion, did not play, having retired after winning the “Grand Slam” in 1930. It was the first championship since 1916 played without Jones.

The championship was decided after a 72-hole playoff, the longest in Open history. At the conclusion of regulation play, Billy Burke and George Von Elm were tied at 292, eight over par. After a 36-hole playoff, they were still tied at 149. Von Elm tied the match with a birdie on the 36th hole. Back they came the next day for another 36-hole playoff that Burke won by a stroke, 148 to 149.

The *Golf Chronicles* reporter, Wiffy Cox, finished fourth, three strokes out of the playoff.

Burke became the first player to win the Open using steel shafted clubs. Jones, with his win in 1930, was the last to use hickory shafts. Steel shafts were not permitted until 1924, when the United States Golf Association made them legal. The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews followed suit in 1929.

Burke is also the only golfer to win the Open with the “balloon ball”, the larger and lighter ball mandated by the USGA as of January 1, 1931, to make the game more challenging. The ball was 1.68 inches in diameter as opposed to the previous ball’s 1.62 inches but lighter at 1.55 ounces as opposed to 1.62 ounces.

## When Golf Was All Balled Up

Golf balls are in the news. That’s of little importance in the great cosmic scheme of things, but golfers might want to take notice. Here’s the skinny.

Golf’s ruling bodies, the United States Golf Association and the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, have decreed new ball standards so they don’t fly the incredible distances today’s players have achieved. If you’re into boredom, you can [go here](#) to read the USGA’s statement.

There was talk of bifurcating the rules, a position backed by Tiger Woods and Rory McIlroy. Bifurcation would create two golf ball specifications. Professionals would use a new ball that would not fly as far as the current balls. Amateurs would continue using today’s ball.

In the end, the rules makers have determined that all players will comply with the new, less-lively ball. Professionals must comply by January 1, 2028. Recreational golfers can continue using the current ball but will be expected to use the new ball by January 1, 2030.

This is far from golf’s first ball controversy. In 1929, the USGA announced new standards designed to—Guess what?—reduce the distances golfers had achieved. The new ball was larger in diameter and lighter. The R and A did not follow suit; the British ruling authority kept the smaller, heavier ball until 1990.

Once again, *The Golf Chronicles* turns to our reporter, the late Wiffy Cox, for the inside story on the balloon ball controversy. Wiffy’s report begins on the next page.



*Wiffy Cox, our correspondent, was one of seven pros participating in a series of articles published in newspapers across the country.*



### The Feathers were Flying

The feathery golf ball was developed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The ball consisted of a leather sack filled with boiled goose feathers. Feathery golf balls were hand made, which made them expensive, which put them out of reach for the common golfers. They were also easily damaged.

The feathery golf balls were manufactured while the leather and feathers were wet. As the leather shrunk while drying, the feathers expanded to create a hardened, compact ball. The ball was painted and sold, often for more than the price of a golf club.

The feathery was the standard for 300 years, only to be replaced with in the 1840s with balls made from gutta percha, a natural rubber compound.

#### Feathery Facts

- It took a bucket of boiled goose feathers to make a single feathery golf ball.
- A skilled feathery golf ball maker could produce about four of them in a day.
- It was virtually impossible to make a truly round feathery golf ball.
- A player may have gotten as few as two rounds out of a feathery.
- If a feathery ball got wet, it would come apart.



*The feathery was the golf ball standard for 300 years.*

The folks who govern the game of golf are changing rules related to the ball. Not for the first time.

In Wiffy's day, we're talking 1929, the USGA decreed new standards that would make the ball larger and lighter. The new ball would measure 1.68 inches in diameter and weigh 1.55 ounces. The previous ball had been 1.62 inches and 1.62 ounces. The new ball would be mandatory beginning January 1, 1931.

By Wiffy's calculations, the new ball was three percent larger and two percent lighter. That's not a big difference but judging by the carrying on among golfers and the sporting press, you would have thought the rules-makers had mandated a return to the feathery golf ball.

The new spheroid became known as the balloon ball not only because of its larger size but also because the ball was lighter than its predecessor. Some players were bitterly opposed to the new ball, while others spoke out in favor of it. I suspect there were quite a few who were indifferent.

The USGA backed up its decision with five years of testing and development. Here's a comment from Prescott Bush, secretary of the USGA. His son, George W., and grandson, George H.W., both became president of the United States.

"Play with the new ball demonstrated that it increased size makes it easy to hit and that it lies better under all conditions. For the long hitters there is a slight reduction in yardage, but approaching and putting qualities are proved to be far superior to that of the ball now in use."

Herbert Jacques, chairman of the USGA implementation and ball committee, said tests proved that drives of 240 to 250 yards would be reduced by about six yards with the new ball: two yards lost to carry and four to roll.

Despite the USGA's zeal for the new ball, the R and A stuck to the old ball, which left the sport in the awkward position of having its two ruling bodies sanctioning differing equipment.

Spoiler alert, as they say these days. Before continuing, I'm going to take you to the end of the story. Reports began circulating in the summer of 1931 that the USGA was considering a revision to the ball's weight. Some manufacturers had already begun producing balls to a new standard and some "bootleg balls" were in play in the mid-west. In November 1931, the USGA announced a new specification starting the following January 1. From that point forward, the golf ball could not weigh more than 1.62 ounces. The minimum diameter of 1.68 inches was retained. These specifications remain to this day.

But before we reached that point, golfers and the sporting press expended an inordinate amount of time talking about the new ball, writing about the new ball and playing the new ball.

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The introduction of the balloon ball stirred such emotions that sports editors across the country invited readers to send their opinions to their newspaper. In Brooklyn, my home, the *Times Union* not only invited opinions, the sports editor pledged that the writer of the “best letter” would be rewarded with three new woods: a driver, a spoon and a brassie.

The final tally was 2,622 votes for the old ball and 1,996 for the balloon ball.

By October 1, 1930, all the ball manufacturers had changed over to the new specifications.

On October 7, 1930, H.H. Ramsey, vice president of the USGA, appeared on a 15-minute national broadcast over the CBS radio network. He was on air for one reason, and that was to sell the balloon ball. His major selling point were the endorsements of the leading lights of golf: Bobby Jones, Walter Hagen, Horton Smith and Glenna Collett.

Jones was quoted thusly: “If it is hit like a golf ball, it will act like a golf ball.” I’m not sure what that means, but Bob Jones didn’t hit a golf ball like anyone else so I suspect this is Bob’s way of saying “deal with it.”

This was the USGA’s show. No dissent was heard.

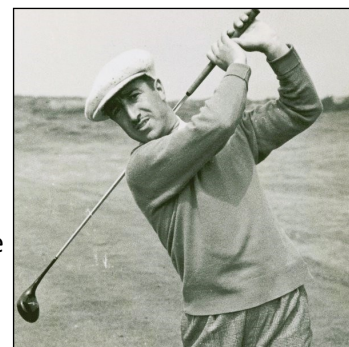
The proof was in the playing. The balloon ball was first used in a professional tournament at the Pasadena Open in December 1930. Wiffy was there and so was the cream of the professional golf crop. Wood. Manero. Hagen. Cooper. Armour. Smith. Kirkwood. Gul-dahl. Von Elm. Both Dutras. Espinosa.

Craig Wood opened with 69, the day’s only sub-par round, to lead by two. Wood said he was satisfied with the new ball, and why would he complain? His round featured an eagle 3 on the par 5 sixth hole.

I started out okay with 74-73, which left me just four behind the leader, Ernest Martin, a local pro. I really got it rolling in the third round, shooting 70, one of only seven under par rounds for the event. But I ballooned, if you’ll pardon the expression, to 77 in the fourth round. As usual, we played 36 holes on the final day.

Wiffy played well enough to cash but not well enough to cash well. I won \$50 for my work.

Tony Manero, with a closing 69, won the tournament at 287, three over par, two ahead of Mortie Dutra. Tony’s score was seven strokes more than Horton Smith’s winning 280 in 1929, played with the old ball. Smith lapped the field, with Ed Dudley, Eddie Loos, John Golden and George Von Elm tied second at 286. Horton Smith it was who won the first and third Masters Tournaments in 1934 and ‘36.



**Tony Manero won the first pro tournament played with the balloon ball.**

Scores in 1930 were generally higher compared to the previous year’s tournament played on the same golf course. In 1929, 14 players shot 290 or under compared to only four in 1930. Despite that, most of the pros found the new ball to be satisfactory.

Following the tournament, George Kirkesy of the United Press syndicate found that the prominent players approved of the new spheroid.

- Tony Manero: I prefer the new ball. If weather conditions are good I think the scoring will be just as low.
- Craig Wood: I like the new ball except for putting. It seems to float around the cup.
- Horton Smith: I didn’t find a great deal of difference except the new ball is harder to putt.
- George Von Elm: I haven’t found anything wrong with the new ball.
- Johnny Dawson: The new ball sits pretty on the fairway, is easier to play out of a sand trap and stops quicker.
- Mortie Dutra: I can drive the new ball as far as the old one under normal conditions.
- Olin Dutra: Putting is about the only difference I can find between the two balls
- Al Espinosa: The new ball is a marvelous putting ball. I think we will have to use longer clubs on most shots.
- Willie Hunter: The new ball will bring out a great variety of shots. The only reason the scores were high was because the boys were afraid of the new ball.



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Brian Bell of the Associated Press wrangled the following responses from the players.

- Water Hagen: I don't see that the new ball is any harder to play than the old one. Anyway, it's here and it doesn't make any difference what we think about it.
- Lighthouse Harry Cooper: I was short with my putts but I don't know if the fault is with the ball or my putter.
- Tommy Armour: I like it. My shots through the fairway are better especially the irons.
- Charlie Seaver, amateur: I don't see that the ball makes any difference. It's my game that's wrong. [Editor's note: Charlie Seaver's son, Tom, is a member of the baseball Hall of Fame.]

All three days were played in calm conditions. Us pros were all awaiting the ultimate test, which was seeing how the ball would react in the wind.

**O**n June 11, 1931, I played a match at Royal Pines Golf Club, Pinewald, N.J., for the sole purpose of testing the old ball against the new ball. My partner was George Voigt, one of the country's leading amateurs. Three days prior, I played with George in the U.S. Open qualifying tournament at Westchester Country Club. Not to brag, but Wiffy shot a course record 64 in the first 18. I came back with a 74 to win medalist honors by seven strokes over Bobby Cruickshank. George did not qualify for the Open.

George and I went up against Wild Bill Mehlhorn and Phil Perkins, the 1928 British Amateur champion. Perkins had defeated Voigt in the semi-final round of the 1928 U.S. Amateur championship. I am pleased to tell you that my side defeated Phil and Wild Bill by 5 and 4.

But the ball was the story. George and I played the old ball on the front nine and the new ball on the back. Phil and Wild Bill did just the opposite.

I wouldn't call the findings scientific, but there were some trends. The old ball traveled farther off the tee. I averaged 233 yards with the old, 223 with the new. Wild Bill was longer with the new ball, averaging 241 yards compared with 239 with the old. Phil cracked the longest drive of the day, a 273 yard blast on number 12, just two yards ahead of Wild Bill. George got the last laugh on that hole, however. After driving the new ball a puny 205 yards, he fashioned a fine second shot with a brassie, knocking the ball dead to the pin. He canned the putt for a birdie 3. Us chumps each made bogey 5.

George had the shortest driving average, 213 with the new ball and 226 with the old, but his 70 was the best score. It was also a new course record on the par 71 layout. Phil, Wild Bill and Wiffy each shot 73.

In my mind, this outing proved that golf is not about the longest drive, it's about having an all-around game. It's the clubs, not the ball, that do the talking.

**T**he Ryder Cup was on tap for 1931 as Scioto Country Club in Columbus, Ohio. The new ball introduced an intriguing element into the competition. Would the British pros use the balloon ball or would they dig in their heels and insist on playing the smaller ball or not at all. George Sergeant, Scioto's pro, put fears to rest when, during a trip to England, he secured an agreement with the British side that they would use the new ball.

Good thing because Wiffy played his way on to the Ryder Cup team in '31, which as it turned out was my only Cup appearance. The American team consisted of six players who qualified through tournament play. That left four open spots. To make the team I had to play in a two-day, 72-hole event against 11 others at Scioto. Billy Burke led the qualifiers with 289, I was next at 294 and Craig Wood



*Selling the balloon ball.*

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placed third at 299. Denny Schute, Henry Cuici and Frank Walsh tied fourth at 302 so they had to return the next day for an 18-hole playoff. Schute won.

The Ryder Cup matches started on June 26, a Friday. We played four foursome (alternate stroke) matches the first day. Billy Burke and I defeated Syd Easterbrook and Ernest Whitcombe, 3 and 2. In singles, I defeated Abe Mitchell, 3 and 1, the clincher coming on the 35<sup>th</sup> hole when Wiffy canned a 50-foot putt for a birdie. Abe was a fine player with 29 professional wins, including the 1924 Miami Open.

The U.S. won the cup, 9 – 3.

**B**y June, the USGA was feeling the heat of harsh criticism. Newspapers reported that the USGA was undertaking a survey to compare handicaps from 1930 to those of 1931. The Association was testing the balloon ball's performance. Scores made in professional and significant amateur tournaments were also to be scrutinized. The fact that the USGA acknowledged the survey showed an open mind on the subject.

Finally, on November 21, the USGA announced that, as of January 1, 1932, the size of the golf ball could be no more than 1.68 inches in diameter and weigh no more than 1.68 ounces.

The balloon ball was dead.

**S**o, what did Wiffy think of the balloon ball? I Here are my thoughts published in the nation's newspapers.

Perhaps I may be a trifle prejudiced about the new ball because since its official adoption I have happened to enjoy more tournament success than ever before.

My victory in the four-ball matches at Miami last winter was due entirely to the superb play of Willie Macfarlane, my partner, who found the ball much to his liking.

Following that I managed to win the North and South Open at Pinehurst and later the Massachusetts Open to break my record of being only in the running.

I find the larger ball gives me better control and I think the average player, in the long run and after he has gotten over some false ideas about it, will agree with me.

My suggestion to ordinary players is to take an easier swing and, in general, use a club-length more than they would have done with the old ball. By that I mean take a No. 3 iron where a No. 4 might be called for a spoon instead of a No. 2 iron.

This is a good rule for the average player, anyway, whenever he is in doubt as to the right club. More players are short of the green or pin than are too strong.

The better players will find if they "hit down" on their long irons or wood shots, the results will be uniformly better with the new ball.



*Wiffy was among the players who commented on the balloon ball at the conclusion of the 1931 Ryder Cup matches. All spoke favorably about the new ball. George Duncan and Abe Mitchell represented the British team.*