



The Golf Chronicles

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



Henry Clay Poe sports his PGA blazer in this undated photo. He served as president of the Philadelphia Section for four years, a national vice president for three and was president of the PGA in 1975-76.



The Gentleman from North Carolina Honoring RCC's longest-tenured professional

By way of **Pete Trenham** comes an artifact from RCC's past. In a letter dated November 7, 1956, **Henry Clay Poe** expresses his thanks to **Marty Lyons**. Poe, of course, is RCC's longest-tenured golf professional, holding the position from 1940 to 1966. Lyons is most likely unknown to today's generation of Philadelphia-area golfers. A shame, really, because he played a significant role in the history of the Professional Golfers Association of America. More to come.

You can read Poe's missive on page 4. The letter is historic on two fronts. First, it shows RCC's 1956 letterhead and logo. Second, it links relationships, both obvious and unseen, between Poe and RCC and Lyons and Llanerch Country Club.

PGA Honors. Poe wrote the letter following a dinner at RCC on November 1 attended by 130 guests that honored his three years as president of the Philadelphia Section of the PGA. Poe was moving up in the organization and would become one of ten national vice presidents in January 1957. **Leo Fraser**, owner and head professional at Atlantic City Country Club, succeeded Poe as section president.

Poe, a graduate of Duke University, where, in his own words he "majored in golf", turned pro November 1937. He was born to the game. His father, **William Henry Poe**, operated a public course in Durham, N.C. for 20 years.

After knocking around the game in the south for two years, Poe served as **Craig Wood's** assistant at Winged Foot Golf Club, Mamaroneck, N.Y., beginning in April 1939. It was Wood who, during the National Open in 1939, recommended Poe to **Byron Nelson** as his successor. Lord Byron was leaving Reading for Inverness Country Club in Ohio.

The 1939 Open was played at Philadelphia Country Club's Spring Mill course. Nelson won, defeating Wood in a playoff. But the win did not come easily. Nelson, Wood and **Denny Shute** tied after 72 holes at 284, 8 over par. After an 18-hole playoff, Nelson and Wood were still tied at 68; Shute was eliminated with a 76. That required another 18 hole playoff, which Nelson won, 70 to 73. For the six days of play, Byron won \$1,000 from the \$6,000 purse.

We're not quite ready to jettison Denny Shute. Marty Lyons, the recipient of Poe's letter, started in golf as a nine-year-old caddy at Bon Air Golf Club, which is now Llanerch Country Club. At age 16 he was the caddy master at Llanerch and two years later he was the assistant pro.

Lyons left Llanerch in 1928 for the Garden State, becoming head professional at the Valley Brook Country Club and then at the Spring Hill Country Club. He returned to Llanerch in 1934 as assistant to—here's the connection—Denny Shute. The next year Shute left Llanerch and Lyons succeeded him, holding the position until his death in 1966.

Denny Undaunted. Shute, by the by, was no slouch on the golf course. He won the British Open in 1933 and the PGA Championship in 1936 and '37. There wouldn't be another successful defense of the PGA Championship until **Tiger Woods** in 2000.

Back to RCC. Poe started on April 1, 1940, and didn't leave until 1966, when he was hired as director of golf by VF Corporation and moved to Monroeville, Ala. His service at RCC was interrupted during WW2 when he worked in defense plants. Interestingly, his father, William, assisted him for a period of time at RCC. The caddymaster was **Edgar Hoffman**.

The *Reading Eagle* covered the 1956 dinner, with an article published on Sunday, November 4 (see pages 5 and 6).

Cleaning and Fixing

Henry Poe was a stickler for the rules. In 1956, as reported in the *Reading Eagle* of November 4, Poe said only one rule in golf was unfair: the prohibition against cleaning the ball once it was on the green and fixing ball marks on the green.

"Years ago, greens were harder and players were more inclined to pitch and run. Today the greens are much softer—the players have demanded it—and I feel that, in time, a rule to permit the cleaning of the ball and the fixing of ball marks will be okayed."

Poe didn't have to wait long. In 1960, the United States Golf Association and the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews introduced a major revision by allowing players to mark, lift, clean and replace a ball on the green. Further, players were allowed to repair ball marks on the green.

From the 1960 rule book:

Rule 35-1 c. REPAIR OF BALL MARKS
The player may repair damage to the putting green caused by the impact of a ball, but he may not step on the damaged area. The ball may be lifted to permit repair and shall be replaced on the spot from which it was lifted. If a ball be moved during such repair, it shall be replaced, without penalty.

Rule 35-1 c. CLEANING BALL A ball lying on the putting green may be lifted and cleaned, without penalty, and replaced on the spot from which it was lifted; in match play the ball must be replaced immediately if the opponent so requests.



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Marty Lyons was head professional at Llanerch Country Club for 31 years. He was instrumental in changing the PGA Championship from match to stroke play in 1958.

Champion of Change. Lyons it was who put the wheels of change in motion. He attended the 1957 championship in Dayton to prepare for hosting the tournament. Although the \$42,100 purse exceeded the \$30,000 offered at the U.S. Open, some of the big names skipped the PGA because they disliked match play. The tournament, played at Miami Valley Golf Club, lost money

Lyons returned home determined to host a stroke-play event at Llanerch. At the PGA's national meeting that fall, and with Lyons the champion of change, the delegates approved stroke play. Because of the format change and Lyons sales efforts to his friends at CBS-TV in Philadelphia, the tournament was televised for the first time. It was a huge success and turned a healthy profit for the PGA and Llanerch C.C. **Dow Finsterwald** won the championship with a score of 276, four-under par for 72 holes, two better than the runner-up, **Billy Casper**.

And there's another RCC-Llanerch connection. Billy Casper Golf managed RCC in its first three years as a public golf course.

Just to add spice to the story, in 1958 the PGA Championship marked the tournament debut for a young pro from Pennsylvania. Chap by the name of **Arnold Palmer**. Arnie tied for 40th place, barely four months after winning his first Masters championship

Lyons was the Philadelphia Section's PGA Professional of the Year in 1955. In 1966 Lyons was a national vice president representing District II for a second time. Two years later, having just given his report on the national association at the Section's spring meeting he suffered a heart attack and died while seated at the head table. He was elected to the Section's Hall of Fame in 1994.

Lyons Prized Pupil. Lyons had a passion to teach the game and was especially interested in young golfers. His prize pupil and graduate from the Llanerch junior golf program was **Dorothy Germain**, later to become Dorothy Porter, who won the U.S. Women's Amateur in 1949 at Merion Golf Club.

Dorothy Germain Porter was a champion golfer many times over. She won the Pennsylvania Women's Amateur in 1946, '52 and '55; the Philadelphia Women's Amateur in 1946, '56, '59, '62, '69, '70, '73, '83 and '92; the Women's Western Amateur in 1943, '44 and '67; the U.S. Women's Senior Amateur in 1977 (the first U.S. Women's Amateur champion to win the Senior Amateur championship), '80, '81 and '83; the New Jersey Women's Amateur in 1967; and the Women's Eastern Amateur in 1969. She played on the victorious U.S. Curtis Cup team in 1950 and was non-playing captain of the winning 1966 team.

Alas, she did not compete when the Pennsylvania women's amateur championship was contested at RCC in 1956.

The Findlay Connection. Llanerch Country Club has been operating under its present name since 1919 and its current location since 1901. The club was founded as the Delaware County Country Club, later to become the Delaware County Field club in 1904 and, in 1914, was re named Bon Air country Club. The club made a major improvement in 1916 when it changed the greens from sand to grass.

In 1928, the club hired **Alexander H. Findlay**, a noted golf architect who designed and built RCC in 1922-23, to redesign the course and expand it to 27 holes.

In 1946, the club's new owner purchased 119 acres, enough land to keep 18 holes, and proceeded to reconstruct the golf course.

The Nelson-RCC-Llanerch Connections. Over the years, Llanerch has hosted several professional tournaments. One event that may never be eclipsed for its historic significance—and an RCC-Llanerch connection—is Byron Nelson's 11 consecutive tournament wins in 1945. Lord Byron's seventh win was in the Philadelphia Inquirer Invitation Tournament at Llanerch, June 14-17. Nelson won with an 11-under-par score of 269, defeating **Jug McSpaden** by two. McSpaden closed with a 66.



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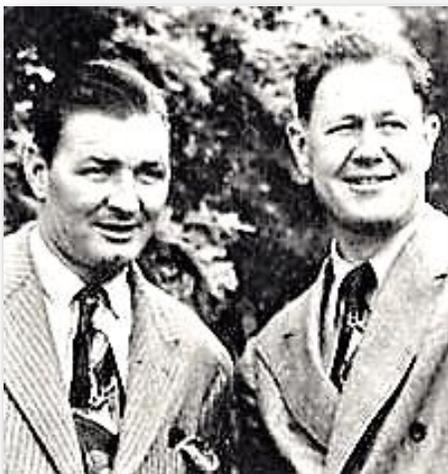
The art of Diegeling.



Were it not for a comment from his friend **Leo Diegel**, **Byron Nelson's** 1945 winning streak may have ended at six. Diegel was a major champion himself, having won the PGA in 1928 and '29.

Because he struggled with short putts, Diegel developed a stiff-wristed, elbows-out, bent over putting style that was so distinctive it became known as Diegeling. You can Diegel today, but you can't jam the butt of the putter into your naval as Leo did 90 years ago. The rules of golf no longer permit an anchored putter.

You can see him Diegel in this [quaint movie](#) posted to YouTube.



Harold "Jug" McSpaden, left, and Byron Nelson.

The win didn't come easy. Nelson trailed McSpaden by three strokes with six holes to play. Nelson merely closed with five birdies in six holes for a 63, defeating the luckless McSpaden, who finished with a 66, by two strokes. Nelson would win 18 of the 30 tournaments he played in 1945.

The Rest of the Story. Here's the story behind the story. **Thomas Bonk**, writing for The Los Angeles Times, reported the following on March 11, 1995:

On the last day at Philadelphia, Nelson was four under par through 12 holes when a friend told him McSpaden was about to finish with a 66. (GC editor's note: According to Nelson's book *How I played the Game*, page 142, the friend was **Leo Diegel**, a 30-time winner on the PGA tour who won the PGA Championship in 1928 and '29, was a member of the first four United States Ryder Cup teams and was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 2002.)

"I did a quick calculation and said, 'My goodness, that means I've got to shoot five under from here in,' " Nelson said. "That's what happened. If I hadn't found out the score, I would have lost. That was a good break, accidentally."

In contrast, Nelson had won the previous week, the Montreal Open, by 10 strokes. He followed the victory in Philadelphia with a seven-stroke win in the Chicago Victory Open.

Here's an interesting sidebar on the Nelson-McSpaden friendship. The two were great friends, so much so that, according to a note in Bill Reedy's *Reading Eagle* column of April 19, 1939, Jug and his wife, **Betty**, christened their son, born March 6, **Jay Byron McSpaden**. In his book, *How I Played the Game*, Nelson writes fondly of traveling the golf circuit with his wife, **Louise**, and the McSpadens. He and Jug played as a team in nine four-ball events, winning two: the 1944 Minneapolis Four-Ball and the 1945 Miami Four-Ball, the first of Nelson's 11 consecutive wins. McSpaden holds a tour record that may stand the test of time: In 1945, he finished second 13 times. In '45, McSpaden played Phil to Nelson's Tiger, finishing second to Lord Byron seven times.

A Major Victory. Nelson's most difficult win was the PGA Championship, played at Moraine Golf Club, Dayton, Ohio. He played 204 holes, which included a 36-hole qualifying tournament. Although he was exempt because of his status as a past champion, Nelson played because the low score won \$125. Byron needed that money to buy additional acreage for his Texas ranch. He won, of course.

The tournament was a grind; the 32 quantifiers played 36 holes each day. On day one, Nelson defeated the legendary **Gene Sarazen**, 3 and 2. Lord Byron subsequently beat **Mike Turnesa**, one-up, after trailing 2-down with four to play. Nelson finished birdie-birdie-eagle-par. Turnesa's brother, **Jim**, would win the 1951 Reading Open at Berkleigh Country Club and the 1952 PGA Championship, where he didn't have to face Nelson. Lord Byron retired from competitive golf after the 1946 season at the age of 34.

Back to the '45 PGA. Nelson defeated **Denny Shute**, 3 and 2, in the quarter finals, and got by **Claude Harmon**, 5 and 4, in the semi-final round. In the final round played Sunday, July 15, Nelson beat **Sam Byrd**, 4 and 3, to win his second PGA Championship. This was the last of Nelson's five major championship wins.

By Nelson's count, he was 37 under par for 204 holes played over seven days and won his five matches by a cumulative 17 up. And for this, he won \$5,000 in war bonds.

That's a wrap.

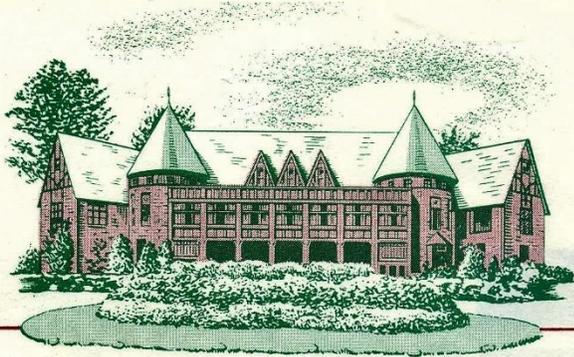


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Reading
Country
Club

READING, PENNSYLVANIA

November 7, 1956

Mr. Marty Lyons,
Llanerch Country Club,
Havertown, Pa.

Dear Marty:

I was so very happy to have you and Mrs. Lyons attend the affair here at the Reading Country Club last Thursday night. The memories of that night will live with my family and I forever. We are most grateful to you and the other professionals for the honors and lovely gifts showered upon me.

Marty, you will never realize what a great support you were to me during my tenure as President. Had it not been for you I'm sure I would never have served more than one term. Your keen interest in the P. G. A. and the game of golf was a great inspiration to me. Your genuine friendship over the years made my job with the P. G. A. a most enjoyable one.

If I have deserved any of the honors bestowed upon me, it's only because of the wonderful cooperation and great support which I have received from fellows like you. Now that I have been nominated for National Vice-President I shall be calling on you more than ever; seeking your counsel.

With kindest personal regards to both you and Mrs. Lyons, I remain,

Sincerely yours,

Henry C. Boe





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Henry Poe Honored by Philadelphia Section



Reading Eagle

Friday, November 2, 1956

Henry Poe (center), for 16 years professional at the Reading Country Club, is shown here with gifts he received last night at a banquet in his honor at the club. At the left is Harlan Will, pro at the Lebanon Country Club and first vice president of the Philadelphia Section of the PGA, while on the right is Leo Fraser, of Atlantic City, the new president of the section succeeding Poe. Poe is moving up and will be elected as a vice president of the national PGA.

Reading Eagle

Sunday, November 4, 1956

Mighty Happy Family—Henry Poe (third from right) poses with members of his family and parents with gifts he received at a banquet in his honor Thursday night at the Reading Country Club where he is the golf professional. The banquet was given by the Philadelphia Section of the PGA, a group Poe served as president for three years. From the left are: Jimmy Poe, 11; Poe's wife, Lillian, and mother, Annie; Poe; his oldest son, Bill, and his father, William Henry Poe.





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Henry Poe, Golf Pro, Makes Grade With His Administrative Ability

By BOB RIEGNER
Eagle Sports Writer

Sixteen years ago the Reading Country Club tapped a tall, slender North Carolinian for the unenviable task of filling the shoes of the great Byron Nelson, a performer who had reached golfdom's highest plateau.

That man was soft-spoken Henry Clay Poe, a graduate of Duke University and a fellow with a knack of getting things done.

Where Nelson put Reading on the map with his fine play in tournaments around the country and with his victory in the 1939 National Open, Poe displayed a remarkable administrative ability and for three years (1953-1956) served as president of the Philadelphia Section of the PGA.

And there are still new fields opening up for the 41-year-old native of Durham who in December will become one of the 10 vice-presidents of the National PGA.

Poe's fine work and untiring efforts in the Philadelphia Section, second largest in the country, earned for him the national post with its greater responsibilities.

Poe's term as vice president will last for three years and he will be officially elected to the post early next month at Clearwater, Fla.

"I don't know just what my duties will be," Poe explained, pointing out that "the president will pass out the assignments and I would imagine that I'll be chairman of one of the lesser committees during my first year."

"That Henry Poe became a golf pro certainly was no surprise. It would have been more of a surprise if he hadn't."

For the early environment was made to order for golf. Poe's father, William Henry, operated a public course at Durham for more than 20 years until World War II and Henry got in his first golficks at the age of nine.

The elder Poe, who now assists his son at the club, had to give up the game because of a broken wrist some years ago and that left Henry the only surviving linkman in the family.

His wife, Lillian, also a native North Carolinian, and his two sons, Bill, and Jim, II, have shown little inclination toward the game.

"Bill likes shooting and archery and Jimmy likes anything just as long as he is doing something," Henry explained.

Henry's early golfing days included action on a caddy-made

pitch and putt course near the regular course operated by his father and one of his closest companions was Stewart (Skip) Alexander, a man who appeared destined for big things until he was seriously injured in an airplane accident.

Poe was playing regularly by the time he reached Durham High School and continued on through Duke. Henry took a general academic course at Duke but jokingly insists he "majored in golf." He had early thoughts of an engineering career but golf spiked those aspirations.

Before turning pro in November of 1937 he won the Eastern Carolinas tournament twice and many club tournaments "but you couldn't say that I really won anything big."

In his first pro tournament at Pinehurst, Poe tied for first place at the end of 72 holes but lost in a playoff to Dutch Harrison. He toured the South until April of 1939 when he took over as Craig Wood's assistant at the Winged Foot Golf Club in Mamaroneck, New York.

That same year, Wood and Nelson tied for the National Open championship at the Spring Mill Country Club in Philadelphia and during the added time made necessary by the playoff, Nelson began looking for a successor. He had already made up his mind to switch from Reading to the Inverness Club in Toledo and sought Wood's aid in finding a replacement.

Wood suggested Poe and Henry landed the job. He went to work April 1, 1940 and the ensuing years have tightened the bonds between himself and his club.

As an indication of the high regard in which Henry is held, O. D. Bechtel, president of the Reading Country Club, drove all the way from Florida (coming home a month before he had planned) to be on hand Thursday night when the Philadelphia Section of the PGA honored Poe at a banquet at the club.

"I was very thrilled by the entire affair," he said, "and the fact that Mr. Bechtel drove all the way from Florida to be here simply flabbergasted me."

Poe said that succeeding Nelson "was quite an honor for me." The club today feels that it is an "honor" to have Poe as its representative.

Poe has a warm charm and it's a plain and simple fact that people like him. Among his brother professionals, he is held in the highest esteem, and one of them put it this way: "No matter who

you are or what you want, if Henry can help you, he will."

During his first two years at the club, Henry made the Southern tour in the winter but later gave it up in order to devote full time to his duties here in Reading.

How does a transplanted Southerner feel after 16 years in the North?

"I like it very much in this section and my most fruitful years have been here. I have made many fine friends and I'm more at home here than I am in North Carolina."

He pointed out that "the best way to answer your question is to tell you that if I didn't like it here I wouldn't have stayed here as long as I have."

Poe's service at the club was interrupted during the war when he worked for the Army in Burlington, N.C., and for the Navy in York.

Henry's time on the course has been cut drastically. "As your responsibilities become greater, you just have to cut down on the amount of golf you play. There is a great deal of paper work and travel involved in the Philadelphia Section and you have to devote time to public relations.

His duties with the PGA generally consume his "day off" (Mondays) and he has passed up nearly all of the Monday tournaments for professionals.

He has no hobbies to speak of and delights in spending whatever time he can with his family. "I just like to do whatever they like to do," he said.

Poe's job is a year-round one but naturally gets much more hectic during the summer. Each year he figures he instructs from 75 to 100 persons and believes beginners are given too many breaks "because they are just learning" and that after a time, they feel as though they should have those same breaks each day they play.

"The rules — good or bad — must be obeyed. Golf is a game of honor and if you play it according to the book, the breaks will even out over the long run."

On the subject of rules, Poe feels there is really only one unjust regulation on the books — the one which prohibits cleaning the ball on the green and fixing ball marks. "Years ago, greens were harder and players were more inclined to pitch and run. Today the greens are much softer — the players have demanded it — and I feel that, in time, a rule to permit the cleaning of a ball and the fixing of ball marks will be okayed."

The banquet in his honor was one of the high-spots of Poe's career. Some 130 persons attend-

Reading Eagle

Sunday, November 4, 1956

ed the affair on a rainy night and Henry called it "the toughest job I've ever had in trying to thank them." Aside from his father, Poe is assisted at the club by caddy-master Edgar Hoffman, and feels that his job has been made more pleasant because of the "fine people I work with and come in contact with." If you sat down and made out a list of all the nice things you could say about a person, the chances are someone already has said them about Henry Poe.