



The Golf Chronicles

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



Number 55 • August 10, 2017

A Fascinating Photo Find

A visit to Philadelphia Country Club on July 17 to watch the first round of the Philadelphia Open reminded *The Golf Chronicles* of that club's place in history and its connection to Reading Country Club. The common thread is **Byron Nelson**.

When the 1939 National Open was played at PCC, Nelson was the 27-year-old pro in his third year as the head man at Reading. Byron began his tenure at RCC by winning the 1937 Masters. He stocked the pro shop with his \$1,500 winner's check.

Byron won three other tournaments in '37, including the Central Pennsylvania Open played at RCC. He was 20th in the U.S. Open, 5th in the British Open and lost in the quarter-finals of the P.G.A. Championship. For the year, he won \$6959.50. **Harry Cooper** lead the tour with \$14,138.69.

In '38, he won twice, finished second in the Central Pennsy Open and fifth in both the Masters and U.S. Open. His winnings totaled \$5,489.16, well behind **Sam Snead's** leading total of \$19,534.49.

Nelson notched four wins in addition to the Open in '39. He was seventh in the Masters and lost the final match in the P.G.A. to **Henry Picard** in 37 holes. The \$1,000 he won for the Open boosted his 1939 total to \$9,734.25, which trailed Henry Picard's total of \$10,303.



A monument commemorates Byron Nelson's eagle in the 1939 U.S. Open played at Philadelphia Country Club's Spring Mill course.

Byron Nelson's Heroic 1-Iron

This is the first in a Golf Chronicles series telling the story of Byron Nelson's victory in the 1939 National Open played at Philadelphia Country Club's Spring Mill course.

Wanna start an argument? Name the greatest shot played in championship golf.

How about **Jordan Spieth's** eagle putt on the 15th hole as he marched to the 2017 Open Championship at Royal Birkdale? Sure to earn support because it is recent and has been burned into the golfing public's mind through countless TV replays.

Royal Birkdale brings out the best. In 2008, **Padraig Harrington's** eagle on Birkdale's 17th hole in the Open's final round deserves consideration. The Irishman laced a 5-wood to within three feet of the cup and was on his way to defending the Open title.

Perhaps you favor **Jack Nicklaus' 1-iron** shot that rattled the pin on the 17th green at Pebble Beach in the final round of the '72 Open? The Golden Bear's near-ace set up a birdie and the third of his four Open titles ('62, '67 and '80).

Tom Watson's miracle chip-in birdie on that same devilish par three at Pebble clinched his first and only Open win in 1982. Nicklaus was in at 284, thinking he had won yet another major championship. Tom's terrific birdie-birdie finish quashed Jack's jubilation.

Ben Hogan's 1-iron to the 18th green at Merion East in the 1950 Open deserves consideration. Bantam Ben battled back from a near-fatal auto accident in 1949 to take the second of his four Open titles ('48, '51 and '53). Hogan made the par he needed to force a playoff against Lloyd Mangrum and George Fazio, which he won the next day. The photo of his follow-through, holding the classic Hogan pose, is legendary.

Let's go way back to the 1935 Augusta National Invitational, now known as the Masters Tournament. **Gene Sarazen** hit "the shot heard 'round the world," a 230-yard spoon (4-wood) that propelled the ball into the hole on the 15th green for a double-eagle 2. Sarazen rode his miracle to a 5-stroke, 36-hole playoff win over Craig Wood. Interestingly, Sarazen's gallery included his playing partner, **Walter Hagen**, **Bobby Jones** and a young **Byron Nelson**, who had pushed his drive off the adjacent 17th tee, the ball coming to rest near Sarazen's ball.

Contenders all and all tied for second.





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In His Own Words

From *How I Played the Game*,
by Byron Nelson, page 92.

“The next hole [the third] I birdied while Craig parred, and on the fourth, I hit a good drive, then holed a 1-iron for and eagle, while Craig made another four. When I was lining up to play my second shot, I wasn’t thinking at all about holing out. But I’d been striking my irons so well, had just birdied the third hole, and I felt I could hit this one close and make birdie again. Sure enough, the ball went straight up to the green and straight into the hole like a rat. There were a lot of folks in the gallery, and they whooped and hollered quite a bit, though they were still quatter than fans are now [1993]. You know, when you’re on the golf course and hear the spectators cheering, you learn quickly that the applause for and eagle is different from a birdie, and of course it’s even louder for a hole-in-one. No matter where you are, you can tell by the applause just how good the shot was. What you don’t want to hear the gallery do is give a big groan—because that means you just missed a short putt.

“Anyway, as I walked off the green, I remember thinking very vividly, ‘Boy, I’m three shots ahead now!’ But I knew it was no time to turn negative or quit being aggressive. I knew I had to continue playing well. As it happened, I bogeyed the next couple of holes but so did Craig, and that three-stroke lead proved to be my winning margin, 70-73.”

Byron Nelson struck the greatest shot in championship golf, a 1-iron—There’s that club again and what is it about the 1-iron that inspires such heroic shot-making?—from 200 yards for an eagle 2 on the 4th hole of the second 18-hole playoff in the ’39 Open. Lord Byron rode the eagle to a victory over the luckless **Craig Wood**. Wood came up big in 1941. He won the Masters by three shots over Lord Byron and notched a three-shot victory over **Denny Shute** in the U.S. Open.

Here’s the description of Nelson’s eagle, from the *Reading Eagle*, June 12, 1939.

Hole No. 4—453 yards. Par 4—Nelson went four shots in front here. Wood outdrive him by about 40 yards, but the Texan, from 205 yards out, walloped a beautiful second with a No. 2 iron that landed on the green, about 15 feet short, and rolled right against the pin. Wood’s second stopped 12 feet away. When they walked onto the green and lifted the flag, Nelson’s ball dropped in for an eagle 2. Wood’s first putt went a foot past, and he sank the short one for his 4. Nelson 2; Wood 4.

This summary incorrectly states that Nelson used a 2-iron for his eagle. Elsewhere in this same edition of the *Reading Eagle*, the shot is credited to a 1-iron, a fact that Nelson confirms in his book, *How I Played the Game*.

Here is *Reading Eagle* sports writer **Tom Boland’s** take on Nelson’s shot:

Nelson’s eagle is something to remember. He hit a long, rising ball which hooked slightly, struck on the right edge of the green and rolled over to the pin. I wedged between the rim and the flag, and when Nelson removed the pin, it dropped down. He gave it a fond kiss and smiled broadly as he watched Wood putt. Nelson was then leading by four strokes.

Bill Boni, writing for the Associated Press, described the action thusly:

“On No. 3, Nelson used his sand wedge on a downhill lie and lofted a shot that almost rolled into the cup for an eagle 2. On the fourth, outdriven a good 40 yards and 200 yards short of the green, Byron laced a 1-iron and saw his ball light onto the green, 15 feet short of the cup, roll up and nestle against the pin.

“When he and Wood walked onto the green and the pin was lifted out, the ball plopped into the cup for a deuce, Nelson’s second eagle of the tournament. Right there, the 27-year-old pro from Reading, Pa., who shortly will take over a new job at Inverness in Toledo, had the playoff won. He was four shots in front, and that was too much for Wood ever to make up.”

A few comments are in order. The Spring Mill course today is pretty much the same course played in 1939. The most significant difference is the course routing, which changed in 1957 when the new clubhouse on Spring Mill road was opened. The fourth hole that Lord Byron famously eagled in 1939 is now the 17th hole. Number 4 played 453 yards in the ’39 Open; today it can be stretched to 472 yards.

As **Harry McLemore**, writing for the United Press syndicate, noted, “Byron Nelson could stand on the fourth fairway of the Philadelphia Country Club and hit No. 1 irons for the rest of his life without sinking one for an eagle two.”

True enough. But when Nelson needed a great shot on golf’s grandest stage, he did it.



A plaque in the fairway marks the spot where Byron Nelson struck his historic 1-iron shot on his way to victory in the 1939 U.S. Open. The green is some 200 yards in the distance. In Nelson’s words, the ball went “...straight into the hole like a rat.”

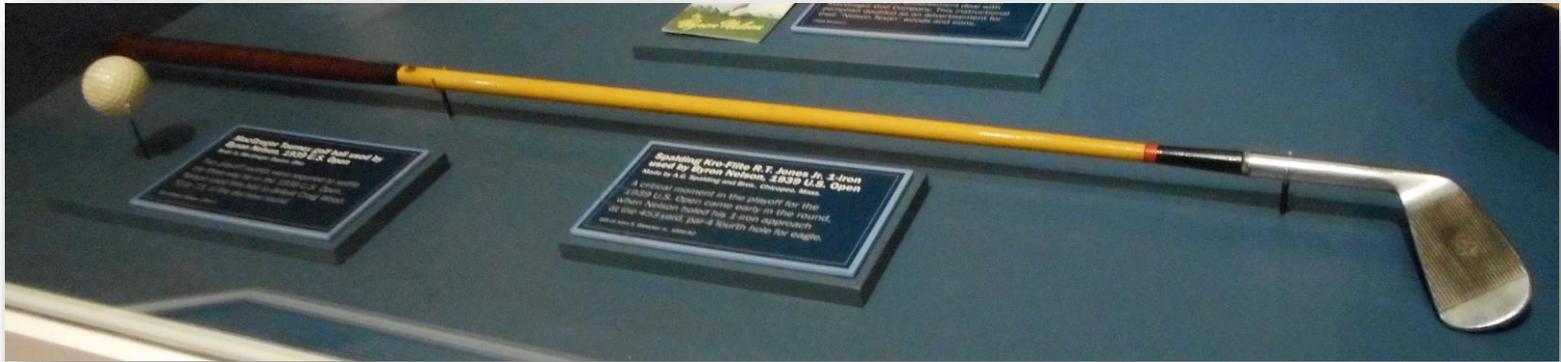


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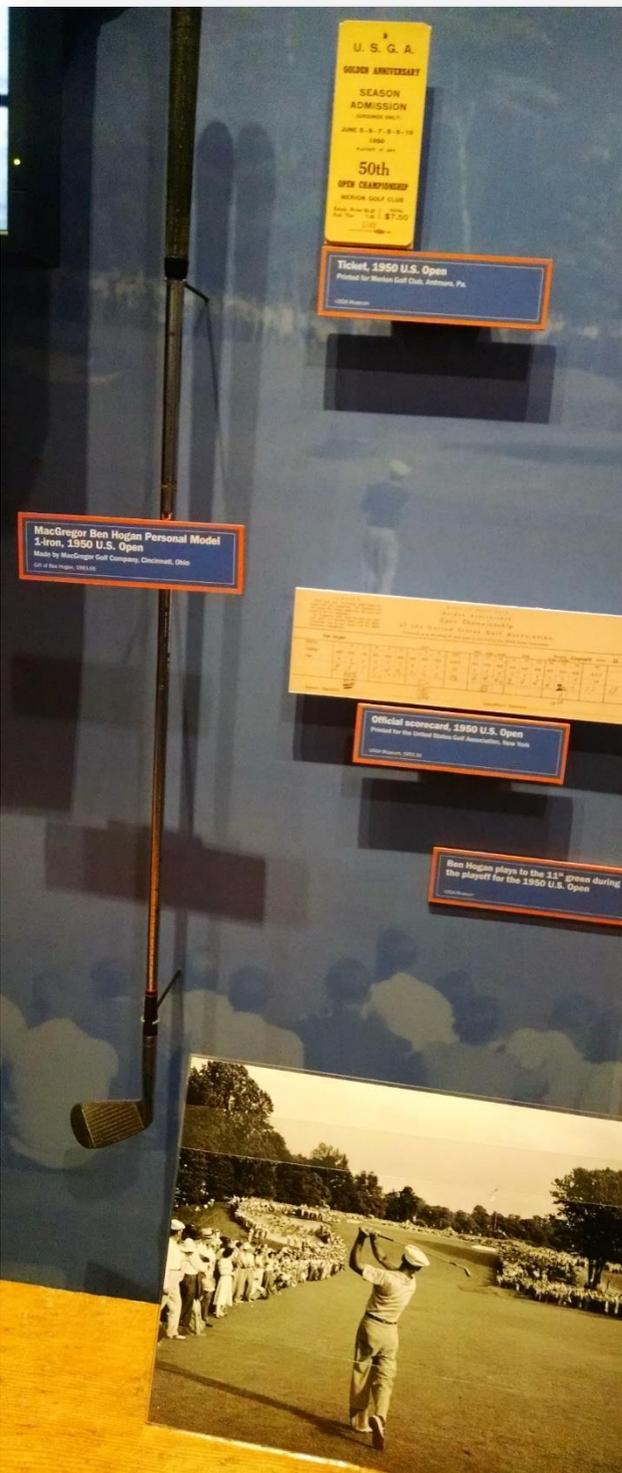
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The 1-iron and ball **Byron Nelson** used to eagle the 4th hole in the 1939 U.S. Open playoff is on display at the U.S.G.A museum in Far Hills, N.J. **Lee Trevino**, who was once struck by lightning, was asked how to avoid such a fate. He said, "Stand in the middle of the fairway and hold up a 1-iron. Even God can't hit a 1-iron." Maybe not, but Nelson and Hogan could



Nelson's 1-iron, a Spalding Kro-Flite R.T. Jones model, manufactured by A.G. Spalding and Bros., Chicopee, Mass. In 1939, metal shafts were often finished to emulate the traditional wooden shaft..



Ben Hogan's 1-iron is displayed with golf's most famous photograph that shows Hogan's perfect follow-through after hitting his second shot to the 18th hole in the final round of 1950 Open at Merion Cricket Club. The shot was snapped by **Hy Peskin**, who was the only photographer standing behind Hogan. As they say, anticipation is everything. The club, a Ben Hogan Personal Model manufactured by the MacGregor Golf Company, Cincinnati, was subsequently stolen. A sharp-eyed golf club dealer recognized the 1-iron among a gaggle of old clubs and returned it to Hogan in 1983.