



The Golf Chronicles

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



Number 56 • August 17, 2017

Picking an Open Winner

For his column From Tee to Green, the *Reading Eagle's* Tom Boland surveyed local golfers for their top picks.

- **Harry Markel**, Berkshire: Byron Nelson or Ralph Guldahl.
- **Carl Bauer**, Riverside: Guldahl, Dick Metz, Nelson and Sam Snead.
- **Stanley Giles**, Reading, and the man who hired Nelson: Guldahl, Metz, Nelson and Henry Picard.
- **Bob Middleton**, Galen Hall: Guldahl, Sam Byrd and Nelson.
- **Bob Dinsmore**, Berkshire: Guldahl, Metz, Nelson, Picard and Harry Cooper.
- **Wes Ford**, Rich Maiden: Guldahl, Snead and Nelson.
- **Chick Hart**, Riverside: Dick Metz.
- **Alex Kagen**, Berkleigh: Nelson, Guldahl, and Snead.
- **Bob Wallace**, Berkleigh: Guldahl, Picard, Nelson and Metz.
- **Rita Webster**, *Reading Eagle* proofreader: Byron Nelson.
- **Bill Reedy**, *Reading Eagle* sports editor: Cooper, Guldahl and Nelson.
- **Tom Boland**, *Reading Eagle* sports writer. Picard, Guldahl, Paul Runyan, Nelson and Byrd.

Why all the love for **Dick Metz**? At that point of the 1939 PGA tour, he was the leading money winner with \$5,745. Byron Nelson was fifth with \$4,633. Metz had finished second in the 1938 Open and would win four times in 1939. Although Metz notched 10 PGA tour event wins, he never captured a major championship. He had 11 top-10 finishes in the Open, five in the PGA and three in the Masters. He never played the British Open.

The purse for the 1939 Open was \$5,000. The winner's share was \$1,000.



Ralph Guldahl was favored to win his third consecutive Open.

Setting the Scene for the '39 Open

This is the second 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.

The *Reading Eagle* provided extensive pre-tournament coverage of the 1939 National Open. And why not? The event was to be played at the Philadelphia Country Club's Spring Mill course, only 45 miles distant. Plus, two of the favorites were local pros: **Byron Nelson** representing Reading Country Club and **Henry Picard** from Hershey Country Club.

Qualifying for the National Open in 1939 was more open than it is today. Only the low 30 scorers from the previous year's Open at Cherry Hills C.C., Denver, did not have to play in one of the 32, one-day, 36-hole qualifying tournaments around the country. **Byron Nelson** was exempt as a result of this fifth place finish in '38. Of the 30 exempt players, only 26 entered the 43rd championship. The U.S.G.A. gave an exemption to **Ed Dudley**, the home pro, and **Norman Von Nida**, an Australian professional. **Eric Cremin**, another Aussie pro given an exemption, did not make the trip.

The qualifying tournaments attracted 1,170 entries, a record number since the U.S.G.A. introduced the qualifying system in 1923. The qualifiers were vying for 143 spots in the 171-man field.

The Philadelphia qualifier attracted the most entrants, where 146 players were challenging for 19 places. The metropolitan New York tournament had 118 going for 16 spots and at Pittsburgh, 105 were seeking 12 places. Chicago had 112 players going for 12 berths.

Sam Snead was among the golfing luminaries who played their way into the Open through the sectional tournaments. Here are some of the low rounds shot in the qualifiers and where they played.

Sam Snead	74-65—139	Washington, D.C.
Clayton Heafner	66-71—137	Charlotte
Lloyd Mangrum	66-72—140	New York
Johnny Goodman (a)	73-70—143	Omaha
Ed "Porky" Oliver	75-69—144	Buffalo
Jimmy Demaret	70-75—145	Houston
Jack Burke	70-75—145	Houston
Bobby Cruickshank	71-76—147	Richmond
Chandler Harper	77-70—147	Richmond
Jim Turnesa	76-74—150	Providence

Johnny Goodman is an interesting story. He won the 1933 Open as an amateur, the last of the Simon-pures to do so. He won when **Ralph Guldahl** missed a four-foot putt on the final hole.

The low score was turned in by professional **Tommy Wright**, Knoxville, who carded 68-64—132 at East Lake, **Bobby Jones'** course in Atlanta. Among those failing to qualify were former champions **Walter Hagen** and **Chick Evans**, along with **Jimmy Thomson**, **Joe Kirkwood** and **Al Watrous**.

The low qualifiers at San Francisco, Los Angeles, Tulsa and Minneapolis said they would be unable to travel east for the Open because of the cost.



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Rating the Field

In his Open preview column printed in the *Reading Eagle* on Thursday, June 8, syndicated sportswriter **Grantland Rice** opened with this snappy lead:

“Led by 16-year-old **Stockton Rodgers**, of Florida, shortly after the dewy dawn, the Open golf parade gets underway. Who are the members of this big cast facing the 6,800 yards of rolling sweep? They cover the water hazards of the map from California to Massachusetts—from Maine to Texas—from Florida to Oregon.”

Rice named **Ralph Guldahl** the 6-to-1 favorite to capture his third successive Open. Guldahl was in championship form. In March, he won the Greensboro Open by three strokes over **Clayton Heafner** and **Lawson Little** and in April he won the Masters by one over **Sam Snead**. According to Rice, the 6’1” Texan had “...no weak shots from drive to putter in his bag.”

Sam Snead, **Harry Cooper** and **Byron Nelson** were next at 8 to 1. In Rice’s world, **Henry Picard** warranted a 10 to 1 pick and **Ben Hogan** rated 12 to 1. Rice pegged **Craig Wood** at 15 to 1. His 40-to-1 longshots were **Billy Burke** (the 1931 champion) and **Wee Bobby Cruickshank**. **Denny Shute** did not make the Rice list.

Here is Rice’s evaluation of Nelson:

Byron Nelson—age 27—height 6 feet—weight 176—another Texan—sandy-haired—aggressive mood under fire—one of the best wooden club players—could use more calmness or philosophy after bad shots—the marines couldn’t make him quit—always dangerous. Watch him handle driver, brassie or spoon. One of the top birdie shooters. Odds 8 to 1.

Thunder bolts and lightening

The Philadelphia qualifier proved eventful. The field consisted of 113 professionals and 34 amateurs. The most noteworthy entrant was **Walter Hagen**, the game’s most colorful figure. Hagen won 45 PGA tour events, including five PGA Championships—four in succession—four British Opens and two U.S. Opens. Also competing were three Berks County entrants: **Harry Markel**, Berkshire C.C., **Bob Venables**, Manor G.C., and **Chick Hart**, Riverside G.C.

Two courses hosted the May 22 event: Overbrook C.C. and St. David’s CC. A violent thunder storm that swept the St. David’s course during the afternoon created a near disaster. **Max Cross** and **Dick Allman** were lucky to escape injury—or worse—from a lightning strike. Berks County pros **Harry Markel** and **Bob Venables** were playing behind the pair and witnessed the strike. **Tom Boland**, *Reading Eagle* sports writer, captured Markel’s reaction in his column of May 28: “I played with **Bub Campbell** and was one under par until the 15th when the rain came down in torrents. I ended up with a 45 for the back nine.

“When we were walking up to the 8th tee, Campbell had his umbrella knocked out of his hand by a bolt. I was standing next to a steel tee marker and felt a twinge in my leg. Did I jump! When the rain started you couldn’t hold a club. You hit the ball and it disappeared in the rain. I was going to quit and beat it for the clubhouse, but I thought if I held out for the last few holes maybe I would have a chance.”

Very, very frightening

The storm put an end to Markel’s qualifying hopes. He shot 78-82—160, eight shots shy of the 152 that made a playoff for the final spots.

Venables gave the afternoon storm as the reason for not turning in an afternoon card after shooting 79 in the morning. Venables played with **Tom O’Connor**, Yardley, Pa.

“It was after 3 o’clock when I got started and the rain hit us early. We played in the rain starting around the 8th hole and finally on the 16th I quit. I couldn’t hold a club and couldn’t putt. When it didn’t show any signs of a letup I went to the clubhouse.

“It was just one of those things. They couldn’t call it off because too many had completed their afternoon round. It was tough on those who were caught but what could you do about it?”

Chick Hart missed qualifying with rounds of 80-78—158.

“I played 27 good holes,” said Hart, “after getting off to a bad start in the morning round. I got down there a little late when I couldn’t find the course and had only a few minutes to practice before I had to tee off. I went out on the putting green and the first ball I hit almost rolled off the green. They were fast as lightening. I had a little trouble on the first couple greens, but after that I got rolling.”

Hagen’s failure to qualify was explained by **Tom Boland** in his May 23 column: “Fans who followed Hagen around yesterday attributed his poor showing to his physical condition more than any fault in his game. ‘The Haig’ showed up fatter than ever and was in no shape to compete with some of the more youthful stars.”

Storm warning

The dangerous storm did have a positive effect on the Open. U.S.G.A. officials installed a fire siren on the Philadelphia C.C. clubhouse roof that they would have used to call the players off the course in the bad weather. According to **Pete Trenham**, writing on his golf history web site <http://trenhambgolfhistory.org/>, the USGA had previously banged a hammer against a tire rim to call a play stoppage.



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The Way

According to the *Reading Eagle's* **Tom Boland**, many readers asked the best way to drive to the Spring Mill course. In 1939, there was no Rte. 422 expressway, no I-176 to Morgantown, no Pennsylvania Turnpike and, for better or worse, no Schuylkill Expressway. There were maps, but no MapQuest. Here are Boland's directions.

Follow the Philadelphia Pike (Rte. 422) to Norristown. Continue through to the Butler Pike or Fayette Street and turn right at the traffic light in Harmons ville to Conshohocken and turn right again. From this point on the road will be well posted with signs and the highway is also known as Conshohocken state road (Rte. 23). It is about 45 miles to the course and can be made with ease in one hour and 20 minutes.

An eagle on 18

Nelson shot 75 and 72 in his practice rounds and declared himself was ready to start, especially after capping off his second practice round with an eagle 3 on the 558-yard 18th hole.

"I played well during the winter and I'm hitting the ball well now. I have much more confidence than I did last year at Denver, and then I managed to tie for fifth after starting with a 77," said Nelson.

"To me, this is a second-shot course. You have to hit your tee shots well, of course, but they'll pay off on the irons to the greens," he said.

The course

Philadelphia Country Club was founded in 1890 in Bala Cynwyd as a riding club, which explains the horsehead logo. The club added a 9-hole golf course in 1892. PCC was one of the six founding members of the United States Golf Association and the club hosted the 1899 U.S. Women's amateur golf championship.

As golf became popular, PCC purchased land on Spring Mill Road, Gladwyne, for an 18-hole course. PCC continued to operate the Bala course even after the Spring Mill course opened.

The Spring Mill course was designed in 1927 by the architect **William Flynn**, whose designs include Rolling Green C.C., Huntington Valley C.C., Cherry Hills C.C. (Denver), the Seaview Pines course (New Jersey), Shinnecock Hills and Lancaster C.C.

The Bala course was eventually sold to Bala Golf Club, which used the additional land to expand its golf course to a full 18 holes.

The course that hosted the 1939 Open is essentially the same course in use today. In 1939, the course played to 6,736 yards at a par of 69, the only Open course with a par less than 70. Today's championship course is a 6,976-yard par 71 layout. The most significant difference between then and now is the routing, which, changed in 1957 when the new clubhouse was opened. The old clubhouse near the 14th tee, formerly the first tee, is now used as the club's maintenance building.

The course map on the following page is from the *Reading Eagle*, June 6, 1939. The course routing at that time is indicated by the numbers inside the yellow circles; today's routing is shown by the red numbers.

The field is set

The 171-man field included 29 amateurs. The players went off in pairs and all started from the first tee. Pace of play was evidently not a concern to the U.S.G.A. in 1939. Nelson was paired with **Ed Dudley**, the home-course pro, for the first two rounds, starting at 9:25 a.m. on Thursday and 1:00 p.m. on Friday. The Nelson-Dudley group was sure to be a crowd pleaser, what with Byron's Reading following and Dudley's Philadelphia fans.

The players, officials, reporters and fans no doubt looked forward to an exciting finish on Saturday when the champion would be crowned. Would Guldahl withstand the pressure of defending his title for second time? Or would a new golf hero emerge? Who would wither and who would soar in Saturday's 36-hole finale?

Little did they know that the tournament would consume 108 holes and would require a Monday finish to determine the 1939 National Open champion.

Byron Nelson plays from the sand in this wire service photo from the Reading Eagle, June 8, 1939. Nelson was playing his final practice round at Philadelphia C.C.





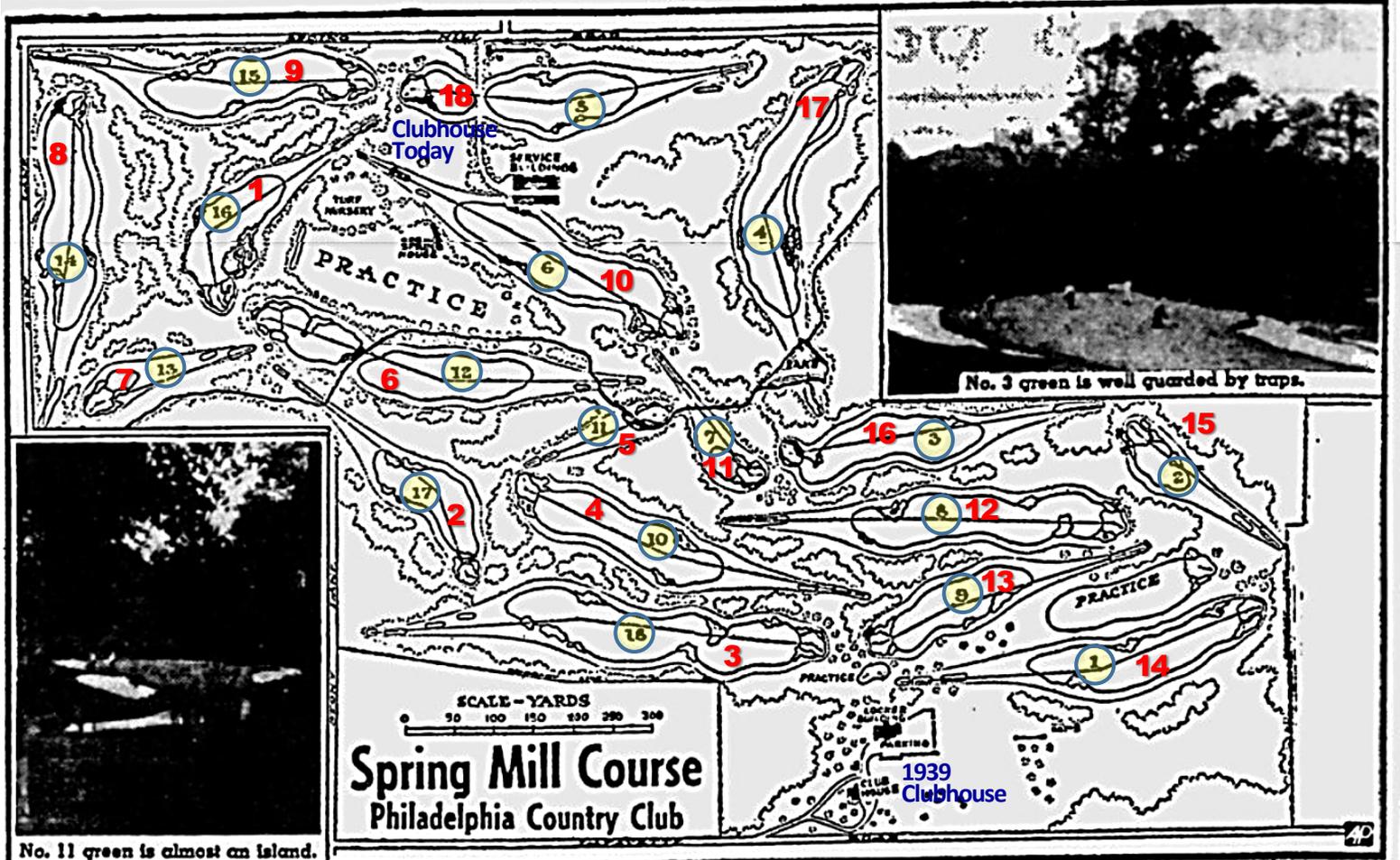
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Scene of National Open Golf Championship Tourney This Week



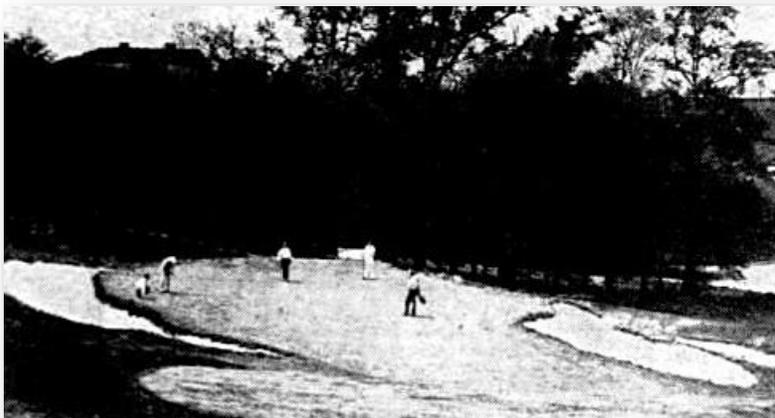
The course routing in 1939 is shown by the numbers inside the yellow circles. The red numbers indicate today's routing.

From Trenham's Golf History: William Flynn, who had designed the course in 1927, revamped the 6,786-yard course with the help of Ed Dudley and his two assistants, George B. Smith and Sam Byrd, who finished 16th in the '39 Open.

More than 20 new bunkers were built and many more were enlarged to tighten the approaches to the greens. Par for the Open course was 69. Two par 5 holes, the 8th and the 12th, were played from the forward tees as par 4s.

The 1939 U.S. Open Course

Hole 1	450	par 4	Hole 10	454	par 4
Hole 2	234	par 3	Hole 11	169	par 3
Hole 3	384	par 4	Hole 12	480	par 4
Hole 4	453	par 4	Hole 13	206	par 3
Hole 5	425	par 4	Hole 14	394	par 4
Hole 6	447	par 4	Hole 15	421	par 4
Hole 7	191	par 3	Hole 16	328	par 4
Hole 8	479	par 4	Hole 17	363	par 4
Hole 9	350	par 4	Hole 18	558	par 5
Out	3,413	par 34	In	3,373	par 35
			Total	6,786	par 69



This Associated Press photo from June 4, 1939, shows the green on Philadelphia C.C.'s third hole, a 384-yard par 4. The hole features a blind tee shot and out-of-bounds to the right.