



The Golf Chronicles

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



Number 58 • September 12, 2017

The Open

The '39 Open was **Byron Nelson's** sixth. In his previous five tournaments, his best finish was tied fifth in 1938.

Sam Snead was in his third Open in 1939. He finished second in 1937 at 283, two strokes behind **Ralph Guldahl's** winning seven under par. In '38, his 309 total placed him 39th, far behind Guldahl's winning score of 284, even par.

After two rounds, Nelson was tied with **Tommy Armour**, the Silver Scot himself. Armour had already won three majors: the 1927 U.S. Open, the 1930 P.G.A. Championship and the 1931 British Open. He went on to win 25 tour events.

Armour is also known for achieving the tour's first ever archaeopteryx (a bird-like dinosaur), defined as a score of 15 or more over par on a single hole. The Silver Scot's infamous accomplishment came at the Shawnee Open in 1927, just one week after he won the U.S. Open. Armour hit 10 balls out of bounds on his way to a 23, 18 over par, on the par 5 17th hole.

Or did he?

Pete Trenham, the Philadelphia PGA Section historian, uncovered an article in *PGA Magazine* from July 1927 that reports the Silver Scot made a sextuple bogey 11. The story is confirmed in *The Golf Hall of Shame*, by Bruce Nash and Allen Zullo (Pocket Books, 1989)

Ray Ainsley, a club pro from Ojai, Calif., posted the highest single-hole score in Open history when he made a 19 on the par 4, 397-yard 16th hole at Cherry Hills in Denver. In the second round of the '38 Open, Ainsley played from a creek, taking multiple slashes and splashes to extract his ball from the running water. He posted rounds of 76 and 96.



Laverne Guldahl and son Ralph, Jr., age 4, take in second-round action.

Snead Holds Fast After 36 Holes as Nelson Fades

*This is the fourth 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 sub-headline in the Reading Eagle, June 10, 1939, set the stage after two rounds of the National Open golf championship: Nelson Six Strokes In Rear of Sam.

Sam, of course, is **Sam Snead**. Slammin' Sammy was the only golfer to break par in the first round, carding a one-under 68. Snead's second-round 71 left him a stroke ahead of **Horton Smith**, who backed up his opening 72 with a splendid 68.

Byron Nelson not only had to make up the six strokes between himself and the lead, he had to do so playing the backbreaking final-day 36 hole grind that the U.S.G.A. deemed necessary to crown an Open champion.

A further roadblock to Nelson's chances were the players ahead of him. Among the golfing royalty scoring better than Byron—in addition to Snead and Smith—were **Craig Wood** (141), **Denny Shute** (142), **Lawson Little** (142), **Jug McSpadden** (143), **Johnny Bulla** (143), **Lighthouse Harry Cooper** (143), **Vic Ghezzi** (144), **Olin Dutra** (144), **Henry Picard** (144), **Lloyd Mangrum** (144) and **Ralph Guldahl** (144), the two-time defending champion. At 145, Nelson was tied with **Tommy Armour**. This group would amass 332 PGA Tour wins and 31 major championships in their storied careers. They could play.

Putting woes. Nelson's second-round 73 left him on the fringe of respectability. He bogied five holes, the 4th, 9th, 11th, 12th and 13th, all the result of three putting. His only birdie came on the 14th hole, a 394-yard par 4.

Said Lord Byron, "I was in the middle of the green of the long 18th in two, then took another three putts for a par five. That's the only trouble I had. Altogether, I took 38 putts."

Here is Nelson's second-round card.

Par out	434	444	344—34
Nelson out	434	544	345—36
Par in	434	344	445—35—69
Nelson in	445	434	445—37—73

The Beast Bites Back. The pivotal shots of the day, and maybe of the tournament, were struck by Snead on number 12. In the first round, Sammy was facing a bogey or worse as he waggled over his ball in the sand. But he holed the shot for an improbable birdie 3 on the monstrous 480-yarder.

Number 12 wasn't so kind to Sam in the second round. On a hole that many had trouble reaching in two shots and bogies were gladly accepted, Sam was on the green with a drive and a 5-iron. Eyeing a 30-footer, Sam must have thought he could tame this beast of a par 4 for a second consecutive birdie.

Didn't happen.

His first putt rolled eight feet past the cup. He went 18 inches past with this second putt, and missed the shot one coming back. Sam walked off the green with a 6, having taken four whacks with his putter to hole the ball.



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Almost Never on Sunday

The first U.S. Open was played on October 4, 1895, on a nine-hole course at Newport Country Club, Rhode Island. It was a 36-hole competition played on a single day. Ten professionals and one amateur entered. Horace Rawlins, a 21-year-old Englishman who was pro at the home club, won.

The first 72-hole championship was played in 1898 with 36 holes on two successive days. The Open became a three-day tournament in 1926. The first two rounds were played on Thursday and Friday, with the third and fourth rounds played on Saturday.

Ken Venturi won the last 36-hole final day in 1964 at Congressional Country Club. He played the final 18 holes in oppressive afternoon heat and humidity. According to the U.S.G.A., the temperature reached 108 degrees with 90 percent humidity.

Doctors advised Venturi to withdraw after the morning round because of life-threatening dehydration. Venturi played on, visibly shaking. He was so sapped of strength that his playing partner, a 21-year-old **Ray Floyd** in his first Open, picked Venturi's ball out of the cup on the 18th green.

Venturi and **Byron Nelson** frequently worked on their games together. Venturi thought so much of Nelson that he asked Lord Byron to be godfather to his son, Matt.

In 1965 the Open was played over four days for the first time. The site was Bellerive Country Club, outside of St. Louis. **Gary Player** won his only U.S. Open championship, defeating Australian **Kel Nagel** in an 18-hole playoff, 71-74. The players had tied at 282, two over par.

This putting debacle left him at four over par for the day and, as one scribe commented, "...playing a wobbly game." But Sam righted himself with pars on the next three holes. He then birdied the next two, canning putts of 10 and seven feet. His par 5 on the 18th hole for a 71 left him in the lead at 139, one over par for 36 holes. The score tied the Open 36-hole record, set in 1916 by **Chick Evans**.

Horton Smith birdied the par 5 18th hole for a flawless 68, the day's only sub-par round. He carded four 3's and 14 4's, with two birdies, one bogey and required only 26 putts. **Henry McLemore**, writing for the United Press syndicate, described Smith thusly: "It's hard to believe, watching Smith, that he was the same man who couldn't hit his hat with a handful of rice last week in the Goodall tournament." That, my friends, is sports writing.

Guldahl shot 73 with three three-putts. His misses came from three feet, two feet and 18 inches. He capped his round with a 40-foot birdie putt on number 18; with a last gasp of inertia, the ball tumbled slowly into the cup.

Bud Ward, an amateur from Seattle, showed great form with rounds of 69-73 for a 142 total, three off the lead. Ward was weather-wilted, as he was not accustomed to playing in the Northeast's heat and humidity. He persisted in his march to the 18th green but did require medical attention following his round.

According to McLemore, an accepted belief in golf is that any man within seven strokes of the lead with 36 holes to play has a chance to win. That would add the players in at 146 to the mix of possible winners. This would include **Gene Sarazen**, **Sam Parks**, **Sam Byrd**, **Clayton Heffner**, **Paul Runyan** and **Ky Laffoon**.

Sixty-six players made the cut at 152, 14 over par. Among those sent home were two Open champions, the amateur **Johnny Goodman** (1933, no amateur has won since, and '37 U.S. Amateur champion) and **Johnny Farrell** (1928 and 21 other tour wins), along with Jack Burke, Sr., **Chandler Harper** (seven tour wins, including the 1950 P.G.A. championship), and **Wiffy Cox** (nine tour wins), who, if nothing else, had the most colorful name.



*This photo from the Reading Eagle shows, from the left, **Byron Nelson**, **Louise Nelson**, **Betty McSpaden** and **Harold "Jug" McSpaden** at the Nelson's home, 419 Douglas Street, Reading. The McSpadens, residents of Winchester, Mass., stayed with the Nelsons during the playing of the 1939 Open, commuting to the Spring Mill course each day. McSpaden finished tied ninth with rounds of 70-73-71-75—289. Nelson and McSpaden frequently traveled together to tour events. McSpaden won 17 PGA tournaments, but no major championships.*