



# The Golf Chronicles

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



Number 63 • November 22, 2017

## The Winning Card

### First 18-hole playoff

Par out	434 444 344—34
Nelson	434 454 243—33
Wood	434 443 344—33
Shute	444 445 345—37
Par in	434 344 445—35—69
Nelson	443 444 354—35—68
Wood	534 344 435—35—68
Shute	434 444 457—39—76

### Second 18-hole playoff

Par out	434 444 344—34
Nelson	433 255 344—33
Wood	525 444 345—36
Par in	434 344 445—35—69
Nelson	535 443 445—37—70
Wood	545 353 435—37—73

## Open Ended

- **Byron Nelson** scored an eagle 3 on the 18<sup>th</sup> hole in his final practice round, played on June 7.
- The first-day gallery was estimated at 5,000.
- At the time of the '39 Open, **Bud Ward**, the amateur from Spokane, held the course record at St. Andrews, a 67.
- This may not be the equivalent of "Dewey Beats Truman", but the headline in the June 10 *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City) proclaimed "Snead Likely winner". The confidence in the Slammer's victory was based on an early AP report filed when Snead held a three-shot lead with five holes to play, just four holes before his disastrous triple-bogey 8 on the 18<sup>th</sup> hole. Snead played those holes in 4-4-4-5-8, four over par.
- **Byron Nelson's** first club job was at Texarkana Country Club. In 1935, **George Jacobus** hired him as assistant Ridgewood Country Club, New Jersey. Jacobus is credited with refining Nelson's game by getting his swing more upright and positioning his hands higher at the top of the back swing, correcting his tendency to hook the ball wildly.



**Byron Nelson**, left, Reading, Pa., **Craig Wood**, center, Mamaroneck, N.Y., and **Denny Shute**, Huntington, W.V., each laid claim to the National Open trophy. The trio, tied at 284 after 72 holes of competition, would meet in an 18-hole playoff to settle the Open's first three-way tie since 1913.

## Nelson Goes 36 to Beat Wood for the Open Title

This is the sixth 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.

This we know: **Byron Nelson** won the 1939 U.S. Open championship. He tied **Craig Wood** and **Denny Shute** at 284 after 72 holes. He and Wood matched scores of 68, one under par, in the first 18-hole playoff on Sunday, June 11. Nelson tied Wood with a pressure-packed 8-foot birdie putt on the 18<sup>th</sup> green, then held his breath as Wood missed from about a foot closer. Shute was eliminated with a 76. On Monday, Nelson defeated Wood in the second 18-hole playoff, 70-73, to take the title.

**Hot stuff.** The first 18-hole playoff was staged in conditions described as "...a temperature close to 100 and a strong wind that made the greens more treacherous..."

Sunday's drama unfolded on the final two holes. By then Shute had played himself out of contention with a front-nine 37, four behind Nelson and Wood. His bogey, double-bogey finish left him eight strokes in arrears. Shute looked back with regret at his final putt in the fourth round, a 25-footer for birdie that he left inches short. Had it dropped, Denny wins and there is no playoff. **Tom Boland**, Reading Eagle writer, noted that as the trio played the 17<sup>th</sup> hole, "Nobody is paying much attention to Shute now."

Nelson and Wood stepped to the 16<sup>th</sup> tee tied. They exited the green with Nelson one ahead following a birdie 3, set up by a magnificent second shot after he drove poorly into the right rough. Both putted for birdie 3 on the 17<sup>th</sup>. Nelson's first putt, as described by Boland, looked "...as though he hit it with a driver." Byron missed the eight-footer coming back for bogey 5. Wood's birdie propelled him to a one-stroke advantage with one to play.

**The stuff of legends.** For the 1939 Open, the final hole at Philadelphia Country Club played to 558 yards, the only par 5 on the course. A new clubhouse opened in 1957 forced a rerouting; the former 18<sup>th</sup> hole is now the third hole. Third or 18<sup>th</sup>, never mind; the hole is legendary in U.S. Open lore. **Sam Snead** insured its place in golf history with his closing 8, a triple-bogey that cost him his best chance to win the Open. Nelson and Wood added to the legend with their playoff duel.

Both had the length to get home in two. Neither did. Lord Byron faced an eight-foot putt for birdie after a drive, spoon and wedge to seven feet. Craig took a mighty swing with his brassie but hooked the ball wildly. The spheroid conked a spectator on the head. Wood overcame the sight of the bleeding spectator being carried away in a stretcher and hit his third shot a foot inside Nelson's ball. Byron canned his putt for a needed birdie, an opportune time for his first 4 of the tournament on the 18<sup>th</sup> hole. Craig left his birdie putt—a putt to win the Open—short; the AP reported by eight inches, Nelson, in his book *How I Played the Game*, called it an inch short. They tied at 68. See ya tomorrow.

Boland describes the play at the 18<sup>th</sup> hole thusly: "Nelson cracks par and gets a birdie. Wood cracks a skull and gets the jitters. Shute just cracks up."

According to **Harry McLemore**, a syndicated sports columnist, "If Wood's shot had not hit the galleryite, he undoubtedly would have lost the tournament, because the ball, until it struck the human stymie, was headed for the wild and wooly rough near the 10<sup>th</sup> tee." In McLemore's view, a miracle would have been required for Wood to make a par 5.



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## Wood Can't Catch a Break

- **Craig Wood** was victimized more than once by miraculous shots in major championships. **Gene Sarazen** beat him in the '35 Masters when he holed a 4-wood shot for a double-eagle 2 on the 15<sup>th</sup> hole at Augusta National. Wood was in the clubhouse, believing he had the title.
- Sarazen made his double-eagle on April 7, the Wood's first anniversary; Craig had told his wife, Jacqueline, that the Master's victory was her gift. Instead, there was a playoff, which Sarazen won. Oops.
- Wood also lost playoffs to **Denny Shute** in the 1933 British Open and to **Paul Runyan** for the 1935 P.G.A. Championship. In 1934 he lost the P.G.A. when a shot, headed straight for the pin, struck an ice cream vendor and bounced into a trap.
- As **Jacqueline Wood** walked from the 18<sup>th</sup> green after the first playoff, and with the cheers for Nelson ringing in her ears, she said, "It hardly seems fair, does it? I mean, for a fellow to sink such a shot in a play-off for the national championship. And it is always Craig who suffers from such shots."
- **Louise Nelson** was in the press tent during the first playoff when she heard that her husband had three-putted the 17<sup>th</sup> green and trailed Wood by one stroke. Wood's missed putt on 18—he would have won had he holed it—was too much for Louise. Overcome by the heat, the strain and the excitement, she fainted but was quickly revived.
- Byron's reaction was different. "After I got mine in, I knew the pressure was on Craig," he said. "I was holding my breath, sure, but I figured the percentage was against Craig. He had been holing his right along. And I had three-putted twice on the back nine."

**Monday thunder.** Nelson won the Open with two glorious shots in Monday's second playoff. He nearly holed his wedge shot on the 334-yard third hole, spinning the ball to within a foot for an easy birdie. Wood spun his ball too much, pulling it some 35 feet below the hole. Three putts later, he was in with a bogey and a two-shot deficit.

Nelson left no doubt about the outcome with his play on number 4, a 453-yard nightmare. Outdriven by 40 yards, Lord Byron struck a thunderous 1-iron shot that, in his words, "...went straight into the hole like a rat." This time, he bagged his eagle 2 and another two-shot gain on the unfortunate Wood. (See *The Golf Chronicles* #55.)

Spotting **Byron Nelson** a four-stroke lead with 14 to play is not conducive to winning. Wood gained a stroke to trail by three at the turn, but could get no closer.

Nelson started the back 9 poorly, with bogies on three of the first four holes. Wood couldn't take advantage; he also scored three bogies. Nelson took a four-stroke lead with a par on 14. Both played their third shots from a green-side bunker. Their balls stopped on the green so close together that they had to measure to determine who was away. Nelson, playing first, made his putt. Wood followed with a miss. Nelson later told Boland that this was the key moment in the playoff because the two-shot swing could have gone in Wood's favor.

Wood thought otherwise. "I don't know about a turning point," he said. "But if there was any, it was those shots Byron fired at me on the third and fourth holes. If I had to be beaten, I'm glad it was by Nelson. He's a fine player. His iron shots were excellent."

Wood's birdie 2 on the 17<sup>th</sup> only made Nelson's victory three rather than four strokes, as the competitors matched par on the final hole. The players each shot 37, two over par, for the inward nine. After 108 holes, Byron Nelson was the National Open champion.

**Open chatter.** Before reaching the green on the final hole, Nelson handed his wallet to **Jug McSpaden**, his good friend who was following the match.

When Byron holed his final putt, clinching the championship, 20 state troopers surrounded him to "...protect him from the mob."

**J. Stanley Giles**, chairman of RCC's Greens Committee, was one of the first to greet Nelson on the 18<sup>th</sup> green.

**Louise Nelson** was waiting for her husband at the finishing hole. She spoke a few words on the radio with Byron and then accompanied him to the clubhouse.

"Tom, I'm really tired," Nelson said to **Tom Boland**, *Reading Eagle* reporter. "I felt good while playing, but now that it's all over you sometimes wonder if it's worth it. It's a tremendous strain and it will be good to get some rest."

**Ralph Guldahl**, the dethroned defender, was among the 2,000 spectators following Nelson and Wood for the 18-hole playoff.

The three-way playoff was the first since 1913 when the unheralded amateur **Francis Ouimet** defeated England's famed and heavily favored **Harry Vardon** and **Ted Ray**.

It was the first playoff since 1931, when **Billy Burke** defeated **George von Elm** at Inverness Country Club. Ironically, Nelson left RCC for Inverness at the end of the 1939 golf season.

The gallery for the second 18-hole playoff was estimated at 3,500.

**Woods, Jacobus washed up.** Following the playoff, Wood got into a spat with George Jacobus, president of the PGA. The dispute was triggered by comments Jacobus made on a radio program, when he said he hoped Nelson would win. In 1935, Jacobus had hired Nelson as his assistant at Ridgewood Country Club.

Wood took exception to Jacobus' comment. He believed that the president of the PGA should represent all members and not show favoritism.

"Things can never be the same between us after that, George, after you said on the radio that Nelson would win the playoff," Wood said to Jacobus. "As president of our association, I am disappointed that you spoke out of turn, regardless of your affection for Nelson. This washes us up."



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## Openings

- **Byron Nelson** was the first U.S. Open winner who did not wear a neck tie. Lord Byron sported an open-neck, short-sleeve shirt similar to what golfers of today wear.
- Nelson's eagle 2 on the 4<sup>th</sup> hole in the second playoff was his second of the tournament. In the third round, he scored an eagle on the par 4 third hole, sinking a 9-iron shot from 100 yards.
- Nelson commuted to the course every day from his home on Douglass Street in Reading. On Saturday, after playing 36 holes, he skipped a party for the players and drove back to Reading so he could rest.
- Had Nelson gotten his ball up and in from the fringe of the 18<sup>th</sup> green in the fourth round, he would have posted 283 and avoided the 36 playoff holes. His chip shot rolled past the hole by four feet. His birdie putt rolled around the rim of the cup and refused to fall in.
- In the fourth round, **Craig Wood** reached the green on the par 5, 558-yard 18<sup>th</sup> hole in two, his ball resting only 12 feet from the hole and a winning eagle. He couldn't drop the putt and finished at 284, tied with Nelson and Shute.
- Many of the Open contenders prepared by playing tournaments the previous week. Nelson did not, preferring to work on his game at RCC. **Stanley Giles**, chairman of RCC's Greens Committee and the Berks County Golf Association, estimated that Byron hit 300 balls every day.
- **Harry Ferguson**, the United Press sports editor, reported that an overnight rain had softened the course for the Nelson-Wood playoff, which made the course play longer because drives were not running out as they had on the previously hard fairways.

Commentary from **Henry McLemore**, Associated Press sports writer:

**Walter Hagen**, a mentor to **Sam Snead**, said his closing 8 was inexcusable. "When Sammy stepped on the final tee, the tournament was over. Behind him were all the holes that required any shot making. All he had to do was get a five on a hole so easy that a 10 handicap golfer could miss three shots and still bag a par. He was punch drunk from the pressure. Whatever he was, he elected to play the only shots that could have ruined him."

Hagen said only time would tell if the eight will make or break Snead. "If he is made of the right golfing stuff, it will help him. If he isn't, well, he's done as a competitor." [Note: Snead had the right stuff. He captured 67 of his tour-record 84 wins after his Open collapse, including seven major championships, but, alas, he never won the Open.]

**Byron Nelson's** putt on the final hole in the play-off yesterday was one of the greatest exhibitions of nerve in all the history of golf. Needing a birdie for a tie, Nelson rose above the strain of 17 incredible holes, a temperature close to 100, a strong wind that made the slippery greens more treacherous and the dismal sight of a seriously injured spectator being lifted toward an ambulance. He knocked it in, rolling the ball across the grass flecked with blood from the spectator struck on the head by **Craig Wood's** zooming second shot.

There is one thing about golf—no one ever makes a shot that doesn't distribute happiness and grief at the same time. Mrs. Nelson almost fainted with joy when Wood missed the short putt that would have given him the championship. [Note: the *Reading Eagle* reported that she did faint.] And even through she [Mrs. Nelson] swooned with delight, Mrs. Wood broke into tears of disappointment.

If **Ralph Guldhal** would have been putting only half as well as he usually does, he would have won this tournament by a stroke or two.

**Bud Ward** will dominate the amateurs of this country just as completely as did **Bob Jones** and **Lawson Little**. If Bud had only taken fours instead of fives on the two short holes, he would have won the title by a shot. [Note: McLemore was correct. Ward dominated amateur events between 1938 and 1949, when he turned professional. He won the U.S. Amateur championship in 1939 and 1941 and played on the U.S. Walker Cup team in 1938 and 1947. He won 15 non-tour professional events.]

**Bill Boni**, Associated Press sports writer, penned these comments for his June 12 column. Wood's booming brassie hit **Bob Mossman**, a driving range operator from Ardmore, Pa., just above the right temple. Mossman dropped into an unconscious heap with blood flowing from the wound. Wood's ball bounded 40 feet into the middle of the fairway, only 15 yards from the green. [Note: In his book, Nelson states that Wood's ball stayed in the rough, about 30 yards from the green.] Nelson had already played his second shot just short of the green. Before either could play three, a stretcher was rushed from the club house and the fallen spectator, after medical attention, was carried across the corner of the green, down a long flight of steps and into an ambulance that drove him to the hospital.

This is from an uncredited Associated Press article on June 13:

"I was in a fog on that last hole," Nelson said as he stood in his living room after returning to Reading, having won the Open earlier in the day.

His living room was packed with friends, autograph hunters, salesmen and sundry others. **Stanley Giles** said Nelson would get a business manager so he could focus on his golf, especially the upcoming Ryder Cup matches. In 1939, the Open champion automatically qualified for the team unless he was not an American citizen or a member of the PGA.

Nelson played the third and fourth rounds with **Olin Dutra**. Dutra posted a fine 70 in round three, but skied to a 78 in the fourth round to finish at 292, eight strokes out of the playoff. Dutra won \$67.66. In his book, Nelson wrote that Dutra ate a "heavy" roast beef lunch between rounds, which may have accounted for his poor play in the oppressive heat.

Nelson's comment on the weather: "This heat is melting me at a rate of a pound a minute. One more round and I'll be just an X that marks the spot."



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**Craig Wood**, left, congratulates **Byron Nelson** following the second 18-hole playoff.

The leaderboard displayed at the golf course designated amateurs with an X. At one time, the names of the amateurs, but not the pros, were preceded with the word Mister.

The first-round gallery following **Ralph Guldahl**, the two-time defending champion, was estimated at 1,800.

**Lawson Little** concluded his second round by hitting a screaming spoon on to the putting surface of the 558-yard par 5. He canned the 40-foot eagle putt, the day's only 3 on 18. He played with a brace on his injured left wrist, which caused him to fight a hook all day.

After firing a one-under par 68 in the first round, **Sam Snead** told reporters that a score of 284, eight over, would take the prize. Prophetic.

Snead rescued his first round by holing his third shot from a greenside trap on the 480-yard 12th hole for a birdie 3. He was three over par through 11 holes. In the second round, the 12th got its revenge on the Slammer; Sammy required four putts from 25 feet for his double-bogey 6.

In a preview of things to come, **Gayle Talbot** of the Associated Press reported that Snead topped his first-round drive on the 18th hole but recovered to make a par 5. Snead also parred the 18th hole in the second and third rounds.

**Horton Smith** used only 26 putts for his second-round 68, one under par.

Putting woes held back **Ralph Guldahl** in the second round. He missed a three-footer, a two-footer and one charitably described as 18 inches in his round of 73. He finished by holing a 40-foot birdie putt on the 18th green.

**Bud Ward**, the Spokane amateur, was so bothered by the heat that he required medical attention after completing his second round in 73 strokes.

**Denny Shute**, the last player on the course with a chance to post a winning score of 283, left an Open-winning 25-foot birdie putt five inches short on the final hole of regulation play. Shute, knowing a score of 283 would win, had bogied the par 4 17th hole.

**Bill Reedy**, *Reading Eagle* sports editor, wrote in his June 13 column: According to **Bill Romanski**, *Eagle* photographer, 19-year-old **Michael Ochnich**, a Philadelphia Country Club caddy, possesses the ball Nelson used on his final hole. The lad beat a rushing crowd to the prize as soon as Byron canned the final putt. He was also the first to shake the new champion's hand. Ochnich went into the locker room and had Nelson sign the ball.



A *Reading Eagle* photographer took this picture of, from the left, **Byron Nelson**, **Louise Nelson**, **Betty McSpaden** and **Jug McSpaden** in front of the Nelson's Douglas Street home. The McSpadens were guests of the Nelsons during the 1939 U.S. Open. The photo was taken the morning of June 12 as the foursome was leaving for Nelson's 18-hole playoff against Craig Wood. This must have been quite early, because the playoff began at 8:30 a.m.

The photos to the right are from the June 13 *Reading Eagle*.

Upper left: **Byron** and **Louise Nelson** admire the trophy.

Upper right: A large number of the *Reading* golf fans who followed the playoff pose with the Nelsons.

Lower left: **Stanley Giles**, chairman of RCC's Greens Committee, congratulates Nelson.

Lower right: **Tom Boland**, the *Reading Eagle's* golf columnist, interviews Nelson in the locker room.

