



The Golf Chronicles

Golf Stories from the Pennsylvania Heartland



The Peripatetic Pencil Pusher Golfs His Ball in Berks

The previous entry into the *Golf Chronicles*, No. 65—Listen: Scorecards Can Talk, included a card from Berkshire Country Club dated August 15, 1944. As noted in GC 65, the round was played by **Ralph Kennedy** (1889-1961), a 62-year-old New Yorker, who was on an historic quest. By the time he put down his clubs in 1953, Kennedy had played 3,165 different courses around the world, a record that is unmatched and likely to stay unmatched. Ralph was fortunate to combine his quest with his profession: he traveled the country as a salesman for the Eagle Pencil Company. Although **Mary Alice**, Ralph's wife, traveled with him only occasionally, she did engrave an estimated 600 courses on her playing resume.

Ralph chronicled his golfing feat in six scrapbooks. Kennedy played in all 48 states (look it up), all nine Canadian provinces and 12 other countries. By his own estimate, he walked 15,000 miles in 42 years on the links. **Alexander Findlay**, the Scot who designed RCC, may have the highest course count after Ralph. A United Press article from October 1939 credited Findlay with 2,388 courses played and membership in 229 clubs. Findlay, 72 at the time and who brought the game of golf to America 52 years prior, said that he still shoots "well below the 90s."

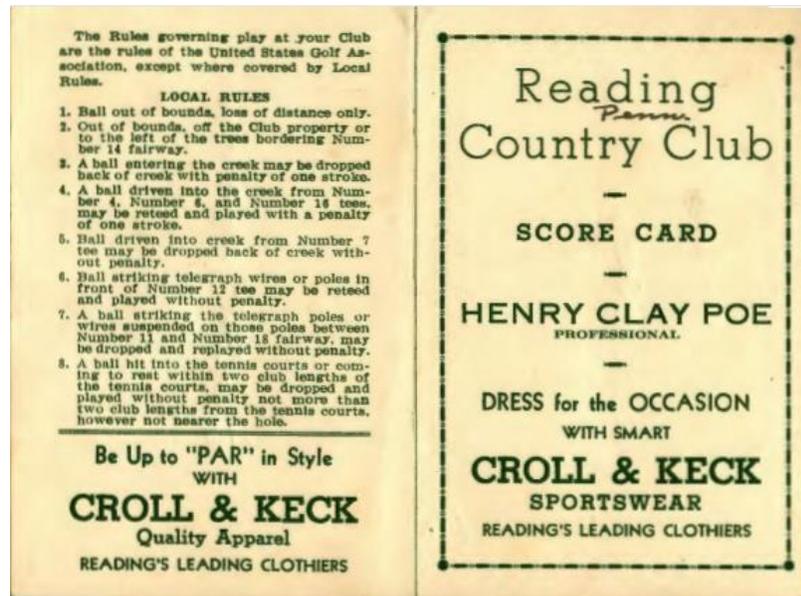
If not for the *Reading Eagle*, Ralph's visit would have gone unnoticed and would have been lost to the arcane world of golf history. As reported in GC 65, Kennedy's scorecard from Berkshire lives on at the U.S.G.A. museum. That's where the GC Research Team found it during a visit in August.

Striking gold. A follow-up query to the U.S.G.A.'s librarian struck gold: Ralph's Reading card! Look to the right. →

The *Eagle* reported that Kennedy shot 35 at Reading, which would indicate that he played nine holes. As can be seen, Ralph went the full 18, posting a respectable 84. Ralph used a single club, a 3-iron, to conquer Berkshire and Reading.

This was no ordinary 3-iron. During the war years, caddies were in short supply so Kennedy toted his own bag. As Ralph aged, he found the bag a burden difficult to bear. His solution: the Novak adjustable club. Patented by **Joe Novak** in 1929, the adjustable iron allowed the player to set the club's loft angle to putter, 1-, 3-, 5-, 7- or 9-iron (photos on page 3). For some reason, Ralph found the 3-iron loft to his liking. Ralph 3-ironed his way to eight pars at Berkshire and five at RCC.

The RCC scorecard is of great interest. **Henry Clay Poe** is indicated as the professional, having succeeded **Byron Nelson** in 1940. In 1944, Poe worked in a defense plant. During this time, **Henry Williams** served as RCC's pro. This is the same Henry Williams who was at Berkleigh Country Club from 1951 to 1975 and Moselem Springs Golf Club from 1975 to 1993. It's also the same Henry Williams who lost the 1950 PGA Championship to **Claude Harmon**, father of the renowned teaching pros, 4 and 3.



Replace Turf						Insert Pencil					
DATE 8/15/44						Level Footprints in pits					
HANDICAP STROKES						EVENT					
HOLE	YARDS	MEN'S PAR	LADIES PAR			HOLE	YARDS	MEN'S PAR	LADIES PAR		
1	382	4	4	5	9	10	294	4	4	5	14
2	368	4	4	5	12	11	422	4	5	5	5
3	327	4	4	5	13	12	462	5	5	5	4
4	186	3	3	5	18	13	369	4	4	5	8
5	509	5	5	5	1	14	519	5	5	5	2
6	151	3	3	5	17	15	178	3	3	5	16
7	433	4	5	5	3	16	300	4	4	5	7
8	201	3	3	5	15	17	424	4	5	5	6
9	316	4	4	5	11	18	356	4	4	5	10
OUT	2873	34	35	39		IN	3324	37	39		
PLAYER						Total					
ATTENDED H.C. Williams Pro.						6197 71 74 84					
HANDICAP						NET SCORE					
STYMIE						MEASURE					

Henry Williams signed **Ralph Kennedy's** 1944 scorecard. The figure 2,420 indicates the number course Ralph had played to date.

Check out the local rules:

- A ball driven into the creek from Number 7 tee may be dripped back of the creek without penalty. Note: During the Filippini years of ownership, the creek was moved to be farther from the tee.
- A ball hit into the tennis courts or coming to rest within two club lengths of the tennis courts may be dropped an played without penalty not more than two club lengths from the tennis courts, however not nearer the hole.

The length of some holes varies slightly from today's course.

- Number one was 382 yards, compared to the current 371 yards.
- Number 10 was a 294-yard par 4; today it is a par 3. What had been the 10th fairway is now the practice range.
- Number 12 was a 462-yard par 5. Today it plays to a par 4 at 360 yards, a change made when Gibraltar Road was re-routed in the 1980s.
- Number 17 was a 424-yard par 4. It is now a 510-yard par 5.
- The closing hole played 356 yards, compared to 345 yards today.
- The total 1944 yardage of 6,197 is only 35 yards more than today.

The scorecard includes a stymie measure and a slot to hold a pencil.



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Golf Globe Trotter Plays Courses Here

Ralph A. Kennedy, globe-trotting golfer, who makes his home in New York when not on tour, played the 2,419th and 2,420th course of his career yesterday when he carded an 84 at the Berkshire Country Club and later an 85 on the Reading Country Club layout. Kennedy's hobby for the past 34 years has been touring golf courses, having played in 41 states, eight provinces in Canada and in nine foreign countries.

Kennedy, who uses only a No. 3 iron, commented favorably on the fine condition of the courses at both the Berkshire and Reading clubs, considering the effect the long drouth has had on the grass. A member of the New York A. C., Kennedy was disappointed in not being able to contact Gene Venzke, Reading miler, and a fellow club member, before departing for his home. He is 62 and estimates that he has walked 10,000 miles in his golf pursuits.

The Reading Eagle, August 16, 1944, reported on Ralph's visit to Berks County. The same paper included an ad, seen below, for golf balls. During the war years, golf ball production was problematic because rubber was in limited supply. In January 1942, an Associated Press article quoted Alexander Findlay, who believed there would be a sufficient supply of golf balls. Findlay was more concerned about the availability of steel to make clubs. "Those who have them (clubs) should protect them," he said. Findlay was described as the country's first golf equipment retailer.

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST



Ralph's likeness appeared on the cover of The Saturday Evening Post, August 31, 1935. Below is his scorecard from Berkshire Country Club.

GOLFERS!

Just Received Our
Last Shipment of
GOLF BALLS

U. S. ROYALS . . . doz. 9.00
U. S. FAIRWAY . . . doz. 7.20
KNOBBY . . . doz. 5.40

London Shop
of Reading
549 PENN ST.
MORRIS GOODMAN

8/16/44 STYMIE MEASURE Course #2419

HOLES	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Out	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	In	TOTAL	Hand- No
DISTANCE Ladies' Yd's	482	318	386	508	481	153	325	300	105	3058	430	206	534	448	310	450	180	517	384	3338	6417	84
A	5	4	5	6	5	3	4	4	3	41	5	3	5	4	5	6	5	3	8			
B																						
Man's Par	5	4	4	5	5	3	4	4	3	37	4	3	5	4	4	3	5	4	3	36	73	
Ladies' Par	5	4	4	5	4	3	4	4	3	36	5	3	5	5	4	4	3	5	4	38	74	
C																						
D																						
Handicap Strokes	6	12	8	2	4	17	10	13	18		7	16	1	5	11	9	15	3	14			

Handwritten: *Harry M. Mead* Do not hold your score on the putting-green. 8/15/44 Date
REPLACE TURF LEVEL FOOTPRINTS IN BUNKERS

The Man Himself. Kennedy, a solid 200 pound six-footer, was described as a short hitter whose handicap oscillated between 8 and 19. He did not wear a glove. He frequently played in a white dress shirt, a plaid neck tie, a Tam O'Shanter hat and plus-fours. Resplendent in his golf attire, Ralph graced the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* on August 31, 1935. He is clutching a pencil in his right hand and a scorecard and golf club in his left. The illustration accentuates his ruddy complexion and red hair.

Ralph played his first round of golf in July 9, 1911, at Van Cortland Park in the Bronx, shooting 113. Van Cortland is the country's first municipal golf course, opened in 1895. The original nine-hole layout featured a 700-yard hole, one of the longest ever built. By the time the 28-year-old Kennedy stepped to the first tee, the course had been expanded to 18 holes, playing to a bogey of 75 and a par of 68 at 5,340 yards. The 700-yard behemoth had been cut down to size. The Van, as it is known, remains open. Kennedy played 58 courses within Gotham's five boroughs. As the city grew, so did the demand for land. Only 12 of those courses remain.

Ralph teed it up at golf's Sistine Chapels: Pebble Beach, Merion, Shinnecock Hills, Oakmont, Cypress Point and Winged Foot, where he was a founding member. He played Augusta National just months after the course opened in 1933.

Sand man. He also played courses where a patch of fairway grass was a rare find. In the mid- and southwest, he putted on compacted sand. Sand greens existed where growing grass was difficult. The putting surface consisted of sand saturated in used crank case oil then rolled to create a hard, smooth surface. Today, keepers of sand greens use soybean oil on the surfaces.

A few courses in Texas featured greens made of compacted cotton seed hulls; sand greens could not stand up to the Lone Star State's winds. On the down side, the cotton seed greens were no smoking zones because the hulls could catch fire and burn for days.

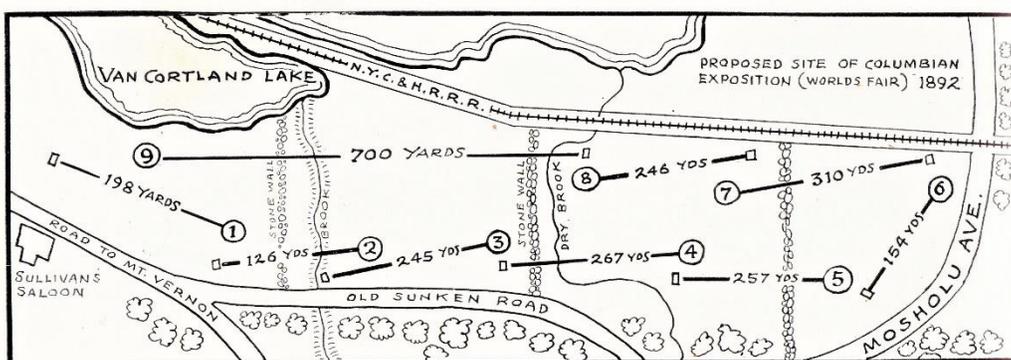
And Ralph did enjoy a smoke. Cigars, in particular. When he visited Cuba, he found not only excellent golf, but the elegance of the island's tobacco. He favored bourbon with his smoke and did not let the prohibition years stifle his enjoyment. He never, however, smoked or drank alcohol on the golf course.

The Auld Sod. In 1951, he traveled to the British Isles where he played the best of Scotland (St Andrews, his 3,000th course, Troon, Carnoustie, Muirfield and Montrose Links, where **Alex Findlay** learned the game), Ireland (Royal Dublin and Portmarnock) and England (Wentworth, Sunningdale and Berkshire Red and Blue).

Ralph played his final round on September 27, 1953, at the Hamilton Inn Golf Club, Lake Pleasant, N.Y. a nine-hole course that no longer exists. Ralph was 71 when he played his 3,165th unique golf course.

This illustration from *Fifty Years of American Golf* (by H.B. Martin, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1936) shows Van Cortland Park in the Bronx, the country's first municipal golf course.

Note the 700-yard ninth hole. The golfers had to hit over two stone walls and a brook. When Ralph played his first round of golf there in 1911, the course was a full 18 holes. The Van remains a favorite of Met area golfers.





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Pushing Pencils. Although Kennedy was affable and not prone to braggadocios behavior, he was not shy about letting reporters know he was in town. The result was numerous newspaper articles about his adventures. Ralph was variously referred to as the Pencil Pusher, the Pencil Man, Golf's Nomad King, and the Champion Golf Rambler. He also pushed his connection with the Eagle Pencil Company, recognizing that good public relations and promotion was sure to keep the boss happy. He was associated with Eagle more than 40 years.

He befriended the era's most well-known and widely read sports reporters, **O.B. Keeler** of the Atlanta Constitution, and **Grantland Rice**, a syndicated columnist. Keeler introduced Ralph to **Bobby Jones** and other sports luminaries. He also was Ralph's passport to private clubs such as Augusta National. Keeler served as Jones' de facto press agent, an arrangement of questionable journalistic ethics. Keeler and Rice both wrote of Ralph's odyssey on occasion.

The Connection. Then there is the Kennedy—Findlay—Kennedy connection. That is, Ralph Kennedy, Alex Findlay and the JFK- Hyannisport Kennedys. In 1940, Ralph and Mary Alice hopped a ferry and crossed over to Nantucket Island where they enjoyed Martha's Vineyard Country Club. They next ventured back to the Hyannisport Club on the south side of Cape Cod where Ralph notched course number 2,008. The Hyannis course is a Findlay design from 1901 that was remodeled by **Donald Ross** in 1936.

The club lies adjacent to the other Kennedy family's compound. The Kennedys have a long tradition of Hyannisport Club membership. There is no indication that the disparate Kennedy clans ever met, nor did Ralph meet Alex Findlay.



The Novak adjustable golf club was patented in 1929. Ralph Kennedy used a club like this in the war years when caddies were frequently not available. Carrying a single club was much easier for travel and eased the burden of carrying a set of clubs in a golf bag. The calibration marks for lofts from P (putter) to 1, 3, 5, 7 and 9 can be seen on the hosel. Ralph kept the club set to 3-iron loft. The Novak irons were available with both hickory and steel shafts. Ralph's shaft choice was not reported.

