



The Golf Chronicles

Golf Stories from the Pennsylvania Heartland



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Floyd Battles the Mex

According to Kevin Cook, Titanic met **Lee Trevino** when the Mex was working at a driving range in Dallas. This is when he developed his trademark hustle, using a 32-ounce Dr Pepper bottle as his only club. "It was win or don't eat," he explained.

Like all good hustlers, Trevino developed his craft over time; he practiced for a year with the bottle. Once he perfected the bottle game, he played it for three years and never lost. His winnings improved when Titanic got involved. With Trevino's skill and Titanic's ability to lure the suckers, both prospered. Trevino eventually moved to Horizon Hills Country Club in El Paso as assistant pro for \$30 per week. He wanted to play the PGA tour, not be known as the soda bottle hustler. Even though the Mex left Dallas, he wasn't done with Titanic.

In 1965, **Ray Floyd**, fresh off a win at the St. Paul Open, travelled to Dallas looking for action. He tells the story in *Golf Digest*, June 2018.

Floyd was playing at Tenison Park Golf Course. "As I played, I noticed this old man watching in the background. It was **Titanic Thompson**, the legendary gambler."

Floyd reports that Titanic tried to recruit him to go on the road, with him as a backer, promising the young pro more money than he could make on tour. The flattered Floyd declined.

Titanic then asked Floyd if he had heard of **Lee Trevino**. He had not. Two days later, Floyd met Trevino in an 18-hole match at Horizon Hills. Floyd put up \$1,000 of his own money. Titanic and his friend, who drove Floyd to El Paso, each matched it. Trevino's backers put up \$3,000. The Mex didn't put up anything; he was playing for a percentage if he won.

On day 1, Floyd shot an impressive 65, not bad for a course he never saw. The home-standing Trevino shot 63. Raymond, Titanic and friend were each out \$1,000.

On day 2, Floyd bettered his score by one stroke. Trevino held steady with another 63. Team Floyd is now down \$2,000 each.

(continued on next page)

TITANIC THOMPSON

by KEVIN COOK

The
MAN WHO BET
on
EVERYTHING



Titanic Thompson (1893—1974) set the gold standard for gamblers. In a career spanning the Jazz Age, the Roaring '20s, Prohibition, the Great Depression, World War 2, the post-war boom and the Cold War, nobody bet more, won more and lost more than Titanic.

less well known outside the circle of hustlers and grifters. Born **Alvin Thomas** in Missouri in 1893, Thompson won and lost millions playing cards, dice, pool, golf, horseshoes, bowling and any contest he could stack in his favor to separate the rubes from their money. **Damon Runyon** based the character Sky Masterson, the hero of *Guys and Dolls*, on Thompson.

He did what? The truth and the legend of Titanic are inseparable. Did he con **Al Capone** out of \$500? Did he double-cross **Arnold Rothstein**, the mob boss who fixed the 1919 "Black Sox" World Series? Did he beat **Byron Nelson** playing left-handed? Did he play right-handed to beat **Ben Hogan**? Did he get his name by sneaking into a life boat dressed as a woman to survive the *Titanic* sinking? Did he drive a golf ball 500 yards? Maybe he did some of these things, maybe not. That's hardly the point. The colorful stories with their bedazzling implausibility that define Titanic's personality keep him alive to this day.

For certain, Titanic did not sail on the *Titanic*, although his name is derived from the ill-fated White Star liner. In his book *Titanic Thompson: The Man Who Bet on Everything*, (W.H. Norton and Company, New York, © 2011), **Kevin Cook** tells the story. Months after the iceberg encounter, a young Alvin Thomas won a \$200 bet by jumping over a 9-foot billiard table in Joplin, Missouri. **Snow Clark**, the pool hall owner, paid out the cash for the jump and took a \$500 thrashing on the felt. When asked the stranger's name, he replied, "I don't rightly know, but it ought to be Titanic. He sinks everybody." Maybe that's true, maybe not, but it sure is a good story.

Titanic traveled the country in a nickel-plated two-ton Pierce-Arrow looking for action. Along the way, he crossed paths with the era's leading personalities: **Harry Houdini**, **Howard Hughes**, **Minnesota Fats**, **Al Capone**, **Arnold Rothstein**, **Nick the Greek** and **Jean Harlow**. He married five times. He killed five men. "But they'd all tell you they had it coming," he explained.

He was a consummate golf hustler. He knew how to lose a small bet to set-up a large, winning bet. He usually won by a single stroke. He wanted to beat his mark, not humiliate him. That's the best way to get a rematch.

Lord Byron Sinks Titanic, But Titanic Wins the Match

As we approach the 50th anniversary of the *Byron Nelson Classic*, to be played May 17 – 20 at Trinity Forest Golf Course, Dallas, The Golf Chronicles takes a look Lord Byron's record-shattering, hall-of-fame career. This is the third and final article in a series.

With the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision striking down the ban on legal sports betting, let's take a look at gambling and golf. Our focus, just a sliver of the huge golf gambling pie, is on two men: **Byron Nelson** and **Titanic Thompson**.

Readers of *The Golf Chronicles*, most golfers and even some non-golfers know Byron Nelson. Suffice to say that the *GC's* interest in Lord Byron is tied to his tenure as Reading Country Club's head professional in 1937, '38 and '39. While at RCC, he won two major championships: The Masters in '37 and the National Open in '39.

Although Titanic Thompson set the gold standard for itinerant gamblers, he is



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The third match, for double or nothing, was even going to the final hole. Both reached the par 5 in two. The memory is fresh in Floyd's mind.

"[Trevino's putt] hits the hole, spins more than 300 degrees and sits on the edge. If you know common Bermuda greens, you know balls never sit on the edge. They fall in. Trevino went up to the hole and waited a little longer than allowed. He put his shadow over the putt to make the grass lie down so the ball would drop." It didn't.

Floyd drilled his putt dead center to win the match and pull even for the three days.

Cook tells the story slightly differently. In his account, Floyd and Titanic flew from Dallas to El Paso. He also stated that Titanic and another gambler, **Ace Darnell**, each bet \$9,000 and that Floyd threw down \$1,000. Trevino's backers put up \$18,000.

His report of the first two rounds matches Floyd's *Golf Digest* recollection. Day three, according to Cook, was played for \$20,000. And the 18th hole drama unfolded in reverse order of Floyd's recollection. According to Cook, Floyd putted first, holing a 20-footer for eagle. Trevino's 15-footer did the horseshoe, as Floyd recalled.

What motivated Floyd? By Cook's account, it was pride more than money. When he arrived at Horizon Hills, with Titanic at the wheel of a rented car, Floyd sleepily climbed out and surveyed the fairways.

"Welcome to Horizon Hills, Mr. Floyd," said the attendant. "Let me get your clubs."

Floyd asked who he was playing.

"Me. I'm Lee Trevino."

Floyd couldn't have handled the shame of losing to the player he described as the "locker room boy." Never mind that Trevino was ahead by three strokes for 53 holes. The eagle on 18 and one-stroke win was enough to assuage Floyd's shattered ego and chase him back to the tour.

[Go here](#) for Trevino's telling of the story.

Meeting the Legend. In 1933—or 1934—Byron and Titanic crossed paths. Many golf pros of the era supplemented their meager tournament winnings and club salaries by playing big-money matches. Nelson was the exception.

In Nelson's book, *How I played the Game*, pages 37 and 38, Byron stated his aversion to gambling. His fellow pros knew this all too well. In *Byron Nelson: The Little Black Book* (The Summit Publishing Group, Arlington, Texas © 1995) **Sam Snead** had this to say: "You know, Byron didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't play around, didn't dance and I wondered just what the hell *does* he do?"

Well, Sam, Nelson did play a money match against Titanic, just not with his own money.

Here's how Cook explained Titanic's golf hustle:

Titanic often arranged matches with promising young golfers as his partner. **Lee Elder, Ray Floyd, Ben Hogan, Sam Snead, Byron Nelson, Herman Keiser, Harvey Penick, Bob Hamilton.** Ti put up the money, sometimes as much as \$100,000. The golfers weren't told how much they were playing for. According to Titanic, straight-arrow golfers like Nelson felt that playing in blissful ignorance kept their hands clean. Others got nervous if they knew the stakes were high. All the golfers had to know was that they would be well-paid if they won, and tipped just a few hundred if they lost.

Byron and Ben. In the early 1930s, Titanic headed to Fort Worth, Texas, because he heard two youngsters named Hogan and Nelson might make good golf partners. Both had been caddies at Glen Garden Country Club, one of the few courses in Texas with grass greens. Others featured sand greens. Nelson a six-footer with an effortless swing, came from a churchgoing family. Hogan was short and skinny. He often slept at the golf course so he could be first in line in the morning to get a bag. In 1927, Nelson beat Hogan in the annual caddy tournament by holing a long putt on the last green. Nelson won a junior membership to Glen Garden; Hogan got fired.

According to Cook, in 1934, members of Fort Worth's Ridgelea Country Club put up \$2,000 to back Nelson in a match against Titanic. "I told them I wasn't a gambler," said Nelson. "They said, 'We'll do the gambling. You just play.'" Nelson, 22, shot 69 to Titanic's 71. Nelson figured he won. He found out later that Titanic had convinced Byron's backer's to give him three strokes.

Byron's Story. In *How I played the Game*, Byron tells a slightly different story. He remembered the match as occurring in the summer of 1933. Byron was born February 4, 1912. If Cook is correct that Byron was 22 at the time he played Titanic, he is also correct stating the match was played in 1934.

Nelson described Thompson as "...a very nice person, a handsome man, and he could play almost as well right-handed as left."

Nelson recounts that friends from Fort Worth asked him to play a money match against Thompson. They would bet on Byron. Nelson told them he didn't care for "betting-type matches." They told Nelson that they would do the betting. All he had to do was play.

And play he did, shooting 69 to Titanic's 71. According to Byron, "They gave Titanic three strokes, which I wouldn't have done, but since I didn't have any money on it, I didn't have anything to say about it." So Byron sunk Titanic but lost the match.

Forewarned. Nelson knew what he was up against because Titanic's reputation had proceeded him. According to Byron, "I knew Titanic was a better player than most people gave him credit for. He had the ability to do whatever he had to do to win, and he always know the percentages. But he was never quite good enough to play on the tour, and really, he only played where he knew he had the advantage, like most good gamblers.

"Several years before that, when I played the Southwestern Armature at Nichols Hills, Titanic bet he could throw a grapefruit over the Skirven Hotel, and someone was silly enough to take the bet. The hotel was about six stories high, but there was a building right next to it the same height, so Titanic got up on top of that building and, sure enough, he threw the grapefruit right over the hotel. So I was wise to Titanic before that match with him ever took place."