



# The Golf Chronicles

## Golf Stories from the Pennsylvania Heartland



Number 79 • February 2, 2019

### The Birth of Lord Byron

When **O.B. Keeler**, sportswriter for the *Atlanta Journal* and the Associated Press, covered golf, he walked the course to watch the play. He wasn't content to sit in the clubhouse and interview the players when they finished their round. He had to be on the scene. He had to see for himself.

According to **Byron Nelson** in his book *How I played the Game* (page 68), Keeler was on the course when Byron won the 1937 Masters. The scribe interviewed the new champion afterward. From that conversation came Lord Byron.

Keeler said: "Byron, I watched you play the back nine today, and it reminded me of a piece of poetry that was written by Lord Byron when Napoleon was defeated at the battle of Waterloo."

No surprise that Keeler summoned Lord Byron. He had an eidetic memory and was known to recite classical lines of literature.

Next day, the nickname took flight in the Keeler's headline: "Lord Byron Wins the Masters."

According to Nelson, his name was influenced by his grandmother's appreciation of Lord Byron's writing. She named her son John Byron, who named his son John Byron, Jr. Nelson said Lord Byron was a great writer but not an admirable man as he drank himself to death at an early age. He dropped the John and Junior when he was 20. It worked out.

**Oscar Bane Keeler** wrote for *The Atlanta Journal* from 1913 to 1950. It was there he began to cover a young golfer named **Bobby Jones**, and became Jones' Boswell.

Keeler covered Jones' entire career and was his constant travelin companion. He co-wrote a book with Jones titled *Down the Fairway*.

Jones acknowledged their relationship was special.

"What measure of fame I have enjoyed has been due in large part to Keeler and his gifted typewriter," Jones wrote.

Keeler was born June 4, 1882, in Chicago. He died October 15, 1950 in Atlanta.



*Byron Nelson's publicity photo appeared frequently in Reading newspapers.*

## Byron's Big Breakout

### *Nelson goes Low*

**Byron Nelson** burst forth on the golfing scene in a big way in 1937.

- He won the Augusta National Invitational, now known as the Masters.
- He earned \$1,500 for the Masters win and the nickname Lord Byron.
- He won the Central Pennsylvania Open played at Reading Country Club.
- He won the Belmont Match Play championship played at Belmont Country Club, Boston.
- He won the qualifying medal for the PGA championship at Pittsburgh Field Club, shooting 68-71—139, five under par.
- He qualified for the Ryder Cup Team. Byron won his four-ball and singles matches as the U.S. took the Cup 8-4, their first win in Britain.

- He finished fifth in the British Open at Carnoustie.
- He posted six top-10 finishes in tour events.
- Oh, and Byron was named head golf professional at Reading Country Club.

In the next few chapters of *The Golf Chronicles*, we'll examine the year that launched Lord Byron into international prominence. The launching pad was Reading Country Club.

**First pro win.** Of all Byron's accomplishments in 1937, securing the RCC position may be the most significant. Byron was 24 at the time, having served as the assistant to **George Jacobus** at Ridgewood, N.J. Country Club in 1935 and '36. His salary was \$400 for the season, April 1 to Labor Day. He also earned \$2.50 for each lesson, which he figured added about \$100 per week to his bank account. In 1935, he won the New Jersey State Open, his first professional victory, and \$3,246.40 in tournament play. He won the Metropolitan Open in 1936, which led to his best year on tour with winnings of \$5,798.75.

Byron viewed the Ridgewood job as a stepping stone. Being in northern New Jersey would make travel to tournaments easier than it had been from his previous base in Texas. Further, he could make a wider array of contacts in the golf business.

Nelson got the Reading job the old-fashioned way: through a personal contact. **Stanley Giles**, president of RCC, called George Jacobus and asked for a recommendation for a head professional. RCC did not renew its contract with NAME. Jacobus recommended Nelson, Giles interviewed Byron in February and made an offer that Nelson accepted. He would earn a salary of \$3,750 and could keep the profits from golf shop sales and lessons.

**Third time charm.** Before taking over at RCC, Byron had one final event on the winter tour: the Masters. In the final round, he played the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> holes in five strokes, going birdie-eagle on what is now two-thirds of Amen Corner. He gained six strokes on **Ralph Guldahl**, who led going to the 11<sup>th</sup> hole. The 1937 Masters was Byron's third professional win.

Nelson won his second Masters in 1942, defeating **Ben Hogan** in a playoff, 69-70. Hogan led by three shots after five holes. Over the next 11 holes, Nelson gained five strokes on Hogan, who played one-under par golf through that stretch.

In *How I played the Game*, page 64, Nelson credits the confidence boost from getting his own club as a key to winning the 1937 Masters. He went into the tournament in a positive frame of mind. As he states in his book, there was a practical reason for wanting to play



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### Becoming a Cupper

**Byron Nelson's** tie for 20<sup>th</sup> in the 1937 National Open, June 10 through 12 at Oakland Hills Country Club, Birmingham, Mich., was not rewarding; he earned only \$50. He did, however, capture a grand prize: a spot on the U.S. Ryder Cup.

Going in to the PGA Championship, May 24 to 30 at the Pittsburgh Field Club, six players had been selected for the Ryder Cup team: **Gene Sarazen, Tony Manero, Denny Shute, Henry Picard, Horton Smith** and **Johnny Revolta**.

The Ryder Cup committee determined that four more places would be filled based on the cumulative scores in a 108-hole test: the PGA Championship qualifying rounds, played May 24 and 25, and the National Open scores.

**Walter Hagen** was the non-playing captain. At the time of the Open, The Haig was in Europe playing exhibition matches. He would join the team in Scotland.

Eleven players were eligible for the four spots. A player not among the eligible qualifiers could have made the team by winning either the PGA championship or the National Open.

Here's how the players fared:

#### Qualifiers

<b>Sam Snead</b>	147-283—430
<b>Ralph Guldahl</b>	151-281—432
<b>Ed Dudley</b>	145-287—432
<b>Byron Nelson</b>	139-295—434

#### Non-Qualifiers

<b>Paul Runyan</b>	143-293—436
<b>Jug McSpaden</b>	143-295—438
<b>Ky Laffoon</b>	143-295—438
<b>Vic Ghezzi</b>	145-295—440
<b>Jimmy Hines</b>	147-295—442
<b>Craig Wood</b>	148-298—446
<b>Olin Dutra</b>	148-304—452

Oddly, in his book *How I Played the Game*, Byron writes only that he was selected to the '37 Ryder Cup team (page 74). He makes no mention of the qualifying scheme that linked the PGA and the National Open.

well. He needed money to buy merchandise for the golf shop. **Ralph Trout**, his assistant, would have the shop open when Byron arrived from Augusta and he needed stock quickly.

**Twice is nice.** Byron served notice of his superior game early in his RCC tenure. On April 18, 1937, just two weeks after winning the Masters tournament, Nelson broke the Reading course record two times in a single day.

The record was on his mind back in February during a stop in Reading. **Gordon Williams**, writing in the *Reading Times* on February 18, reports that Byron asked about the scoring record when he visited the course for the first time the previous day. When told that **George Low's** 68 prevailed, Byron said, "There must be some reason why the pros haven't cracked 70 with consistency. I'll find out when I get here. It may take a week or so before I get below 74 or 75, but I will show you some scoring after that. Looks like a mighty interesting layout."

**Lower than Low.** On April 18, he shot 67, four under par, in the morning to break Low's record 68, shot in the 1936 Central Pennsylvania Open. Byron's record round included birdies at 7, 10, 12, 13 and 14. He surrendered a shot only at 18 with a bogey 5. Byron played with **C.R. Smith, John Snyder** and **Marshall Holt**.

Nelson bettered his hours-old record by two strokes that same afternoon with a sizzling 65. He navigated his ball to the par 5 fifth green with a mighty drive over the creek and a 3-iron to eight feet. He missed the eagle putt, leaving a tap-in for birdie 4.

He toured in the afternoon with **Stanley Giles**, the club president who hired Nelson, **Al Ashmore** and **Buck Spanglen**.

Here's how Byron shot 65.

Par out	4 4 4 3 5 3 4 3 4—34
Nelson out	4 4 3 3 4 3 3 3 4—31
Par in	4 4 5 4 5 3 4 4 4—37—71
Nelson in	3 5 5 4 4 3 3 3 4—34—65

There is a distinction between Nelson's deeds and Low's mark. George was playing in competition, Byron was playing a casual round with members. Although the heat of competition leans a bit in Low's favor, Byron most certainly didn't play "up all over" or take any "gimmies".

There was a possible Nelson-Low connection that didn't come to be. **Gordon Williams**, writing in the *Reading Times*, April 19, 1937, reported that Low was a candidate to be Byron's assistant at RCC. He was at large after resigning as head professional at Plymouth Country Club, Norristown, as reported on February 12, 1937. The GC's research team found out that Low ended up at Manufacturers Golf Club in Ft. Washington.

Eight years later, Low extracted his revenge on Nelson; he was the one who broke Lord Byron's 11-tournament winning streak in 1945. Sort of. **Fred Haas** won the event, the Memphis Open, but as an amateur, he couldn't take the prize money. That went to Low, who finished second. Byron was third. In Low's mind, he did the deed.

**Afternoon fade.** Low carded his 68 in the first round of the one-day, 36-hole event. His second trip around the Reading links yielded a 75 for a 143 total, fourth place. **Ed "Porky" Oliver**, the long-swatter from Wilmington, won with rounds of 69-70, for 139. Oliver was only two years removed from winning the Philadelphia caddy championship. **George Fazio**, Jeffersonville, shot 70-72 for 142 and third place. In 1962, Fazio made his mark in Berks County golf with his design of Moselem Springs Golf Course.

In 1937, Nelson would win his first of two Central Pennsylvania Open Championships at RCC, defeating **Bruce Coltart**, Woodcrest, N.J., in a playoff, 68 to 75. The duo tied after 36 holes, each shooting 69-71, for a 140 total, two under par.