



The Golf Chronicles

Golf Stories from the Pennsylvania Heartland



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All About Byron

- **Byron Nelson** estimated that more than 1,500 people ringed the 18th green at Augusta National in 1937 when he completed play on Sunday.

“It’s funny how golf galleries shift,” he said. “They were following me after I got that 66 in the first round. But after my poor third round, I had only about 10 people on my trail until after the 10th hole of the fourth. After getting a bird on the 10th, it seemed that the whole world was chasing me down the last hole.”

- Lord Byron shot a front-nine three over par 39 in the third round of the ‘37 Masters. He made bogies on the third and seventh holes and a double bogey on the fourth. His lone birdie came on the eighth. He came home in even par 36, with a birdie on 14 and a bogey on 13. His 75 knocked him from the lead to third.

- In **Bill Reedy’s** column in the *Reading Eagle*, April 8, 1937, **Byron Nelson** offered his opinion on the USGA’s proposed rule to limit players to 14 clubs.

“That rule won’t effect the pros. It will have more effect on the middle-class player or the dubs,” he said. “That rule was tried out in the tournament in Belleair, Florida. I carried only 12 clubs that day and it didn’t make any difference.”

Nelson’s advice on which clubs the average player should carry: “Every player should certainly carry the four woods, a chipper and a dynamiter. He doesn’t need the No. 1 iron.”

Dynamiter? That was a brand name for a Spaulding sand wedge. Guess whose clubs Byron played? Come on, this is a gimmie.

- The 14-club rule took effect for the 1938 season. Why 14? Most likely because the advent of steel shafts allowed manufacturers to sell matched sets of nine irons, four woods and a putter. The rule was implemented at the urging of the PGA. A survey at the 1935 U.S. Open and Amateur found that players had an average of 18 clubs. **Bobby Jones** himself was known to carry as many as 25. One pro showed up at a tournament in 1935 with 35—one right-handed set and one left-handed. It was time for a new rule.



*Byron Nelson recommended that golfers should carry a dynamiter—sand wedge—among their 14 clubs. The modern sand wedge was created by **Gene Sarazen**. After he won the 1932 British and U.S. Opens with the help of his new club, its popularity quickly grew. The USGA and R&A had previously banned clubs with features such as concave faces and overly wide and deep grooves. Sarazen’s improved design was within the rules.*

The Reading Effect. Reedy interviewed Byron for an article published on April 5, the day after he won the Masters. Nelson said he was spurred on to success at Augusta and the preceding tournaments by the prospect of taking over at RCC.

“I wanted to make good with Reading before I got to Reading,” said Lord Byron. “That fact put a little extra pressure on me, though, in the Masters tournament, I couldn’t get away from frequent thoughts that my scores were being closely watched in Reading. Maybe it was lucky for me to have signed that contract in February. Have you noticed that I have been in the money in the different tournaments ever since?”

After signing with RCC and before the Masters, Nelson had four top 5 finishes in seven events. He won only \$1,547, but purses were in the \$3,000 to \$4,000 range.

Among the interesting comments to Reedy: Nelson missed only one fairway during the Masters and at that point in his career, he had made two holes-in-one.

The cow effect. When asked how he developed such large, strong hands, Byron replied, “I got them milking cows back in Texas.”

Byron said the pressure he felt on the back 9 at Augusta was the greatest of his career. His two-over-par 38 on the first nine holes left him four strokes behind **Ralph Guldahl**.

“I felt it like no other time in my life when I sank that 35-foot putt on the 10th hole. Believe it or not, but I couldn’t even see straight from that hole on. I was banging the ball and playing more by instinct than anything else.” Nelson’s instincts were spot on for the final nine holes. He shot 32, four under par. [In his book *How I played the Game*, Byron writes that the birdie on the 10th hole was from 15 feet.]

Putting woes. By his measure, his finest shot of the tournament was his second to the par 5 15th hole on Sunday. He carried the pond in front of the green with a 4-iron. Sadly, he took three putts.

“I lost my putting touch in the third round and that’s why I slipped out of the lead with a 75,” he said. “It’s almost impossible to keep a putting touch for four straight days on such greens. They get on your nerves.”

Lost his putting touch, indeed. He rolled the ball 37 times on the short grass, including a 4-putt from 20 feet on the fifth green. Ouch.

Byron’s Big Breakout 3 Nelson goes Lower

*This is the third chapter of The Golf Chronicles look at **Byron Nelson’s** breakout years at RCC.*

Byron’s arrival in Reading in 1937 stirred up the town’s ink-stained wretches of the fourth estate. Both **Bill Reedy** and **Gordon Williams**, sports editors of the *Eagle* and *Times*, respectively, devoted sizeable column inches to Lord Byron.

Nelson was big news that April, having won the fourth Masters tournament at Augusta National Golf Club. An Associated Press article in the *Reading Times* on April 5 told his story.

The article reported that Nelson, then 25, started in golf at age 17 as a caddy at Glen City Country Club in Texas. In his first 18-hole round, played in a caddy tournament, he shot 117. Four months later, he broke 80 for the first time. In 1930, he won two regional amateur events, one at Garden City and one in Oklahoma City. Byron turned professional in 1932 at age 20.