

# The Golf Chronicles

## Golf Stories from the Pennsylvania Heartland

Byron Nelson  
Reading CC Pro  
1937-39



Number 83 • October 4, 2019

### A Philly Golf Legend

A PGA Pro for over 50 years, **Pete Trenham** is a respected historian of the sport. His research into and writing about the game has earned him considerable acclaim, as have his accomplishments as a golf professional.

A 1959 graduate of the University of Florida, Trenham was the captain of the Gator's golf team during his senior year. While an amateur, Trenham won the Cleveland District Golf Association Championship in 1957.

In 1960, Trenham turned pro. He joined Philadelphia Country Club in 1962 as assistant golf pro. In 1965, he had his best showing in a PGA Tour event, when he tied for 28th at the 1965 Azalea Open.

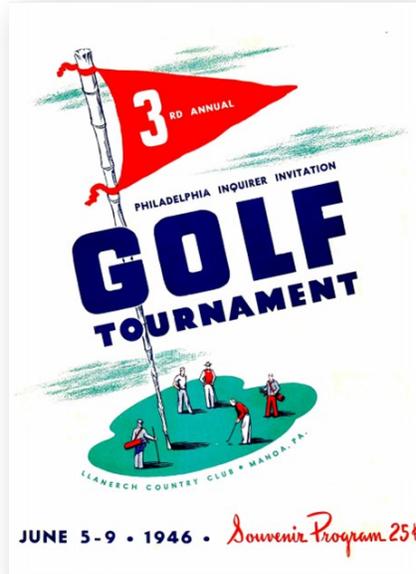
Trenham's next stop was the St. David's Golf Club in suburban Philadelphia, where he served as the head professional for 29 years beginning in 1966. In 1995, Trenham left St. David's for Ireland, where he opened the Adare Golf Club. He returned to the states to serve as the Director of Golf at Reading Country Club for ten years.

He won the PGA Philadelphia Section Senior Championship in 1994 and 1995. He qualified for the PGA Club Professional Championship six times and played in the Senior Club Professional Championship three times.

Trenham was a member of six Philadelphia PGA Section Challenge Cup teams. Notably, Trenham played in the 1994 PGA Senior Championship and the 1997 U.S. Senior Open.

In 1987, Trenham became the Philadelphia Section's 27th president, serving for two years.

In 1979, Trenham was the Philadelphia PGA's Golf Professional of the Year. Among his many honors and awards, Trenham was one of the original inductees into the Philadelphia PGA Section Hall of Fame in 1992.



### Byron's Big Play

If you don't follow Pete Trenham's golf web site, you are missing an important cache of what makes the game great. Pete's site, [www.trenhamgolffhistory.org](http://www.trenhamgolffhistory.org), chronicles the Philadelphia Section of the PGA.

Among his finds is the program from the third annual Philadelphia Inquirer Invitational, June 5-9, 1946. Played at Llanerch Country Club in Manoa, Pa., the event attracted the game's leading players competing for the \$2,500 winner's share of the \$15,000 purse.

On page 8, you'll find an article "Byron Nelson is easy to caddy for."

The article recounts the experience of Phil Riley, Nelson's caddy when he won the tournament in 1945. It's a good read.

### Byron Nelson is Easy to Caddy For

By Phil Riley, as told to Leo Riordan, Executive Sports Editor, Philadelphia Inquirer

Off and on, I've caddied ever since 1915, first at the old Aronimink club and then at Llanerch. I was caddie-master at Llanerch in 1941 and 1942, then quit, except for an occasional round—it's a good chance to; get outdoors and pick u[p a few dollars at the same time—until The Philadelphia Inquirer Invitational Tournament came along last year.

Ordinarily, I would not have rated one of the top players. It is customary to let the regular caddies draw for them. My younger brother Bob had been a "regular" at Llanerch for seven or eight years and he drew Nelson. But Bob is very nervous and decided he'd rather carry for an old friend. Bob Boyle, so he said that I could have Nelson if I wanted him.

I had seen Nelson play at Llanerch before and figured he would win it, which would mean a good piece of money for his caddie, so I sand okay. I had never caddied in a big money tournament before, but that didn't worry me at all.

The only thing Nelson told me before we started out was to be sure to keep the faces of his irons clean. It only takes the pros two or three holes to see if you; know your business, I guess, and then, if they find out you don't, they just "fire" you.

Think the toughest part of a big tournament for a caddie is the gallery.

There wasn't such a big crowd following Nelson the first day, so it wasn't so bad, but on the second round, I was nearly trampled twice when I

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### The Streak Lives

**B**yron won the 1945 Philadelphia Inquirer Open with a score of 269, taking home \$2,500 in war bonds. Riley and Riordan don't recount the drama or the historic nature of Nelson's victory. Byron birdied five of the last six holes for a closing 63 and a two-stroke victory over **Jug McSpaden**. This win was Byron's seventh in succession as he was on his way to a record eleven consecutive wins, a PGA tour record that still stands.

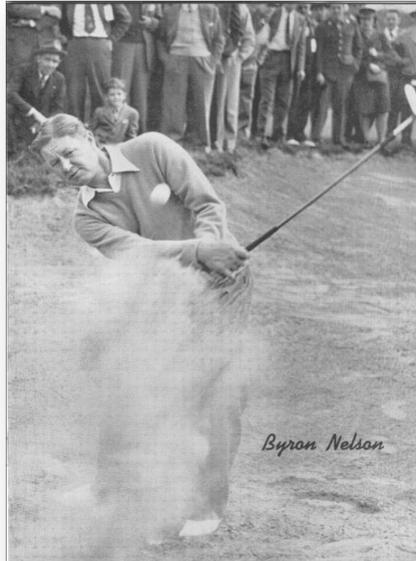
Nelson's telling of the final round seems at odds with the Riley-Riordan account. In his book "How I played the Game," Byron writes on page 142 that the final round pairings were not made by score. The players were spread around the golf course to try to even out the galleries. According to Byron, McSpaden, the third-round leader, was playing several groups ahead. When Byron started his birdie barrage on the 13<sup>th</sup> hole, McSpaden had finished with a 66 and was in the clubhouse at 271. Leo Diegel, a club pro who was following Nelson, relayed this information to him.

Riley wrote that after birdies on 15 and 16, Byron said: "Now I want to finish 'two-three,'" meaning two more birdies. **Herman Barron**, who was paired with Nelson, said "three-three" would be enough, but Byron said: "No, this guy behind me is too hot."

So, where was McSpaden? Ahead of Byron or behind? According to the article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 18, Nelson was in the clubhouse watching as McSpaden finished his round with a par 4. Looks like Riley's retelling was stronger than Byron's memory.

Byron mastered the carpet in his final round 63, putting only 27 times.

With the win, Byron finished in the money for a record 87<sup>th</sup> consecutive tournament. In his era, players making the 36-hole cut did not always win money. In the '45 Inquirer Open, only the top 30 cashed.



*Photo from the 1946 Philadelphia Inquirer Invitation Golf Tournament program book.*

stopped to replace his divots. When those fans start to run, they don't care what's in the way, they just run right over you. I finally gave up trying to put back the divots; it was impossible to do that and still keep up with the players.

Nelson is easy to caddy for because he is straight as string and because he hits his ball so consistently true that you can always figure just about what he will do with any club in the bag. That's not true of the average golfer, or even some of the good pros, and so you don't know what to tell them when they ask your advice as to what club they should use.

Some of the pros, particularly on a strange course, ask the caddy about clubs or nearly every hole. Byron never asked more than 10 times a round—fully thing, he depends more on his caddy when he's playing well than when he isn't—and unlike some of the others, he never bawls you out in public when he thinks you were wrong.

Whenever he thought I had given him the wrong club, he'd wait until we were by ourselves and then say: "That wasn't enough club," or "you could have given me more there," or something like that.

And then he wouldn't ask me again for a hole or two. He'd just come up, grab a club out of the bag, and walk up to the tee without saying a word.

Byron never talked much, for that matter. He likes to play fast; I remember a couple times when we were held up he asked: "What are those fellows doing up there, anyway?"

But I never saw him discourteous to the gallery. He always answered all questions the fans asked, and I never saw him refuse his autograph. The only time he really exploded was on the third hole of the first round, when he hit a wild hook on his second shot. "That was the worst shot I've hit in years," he grumbled.

But he came right back with a great wedge shot and then sank a short putt for a birdie, and that tickled him and cooled him off.

The third round was his worst. He started off with two birdies on the first three holes, but he finished up with a 70. I could tell he was mad at himself the way he was banking his clubs around in the bag.

After he bogied 17, I said, "I thought you would be hotter than a firecracker this round." He answered: "No, you never are when you get your birdies early. You're playing to protect them the rest of the round."

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### Lord Byron, Indeed

**B**yron Nelson is the obvious connection between Llanerch and RCC. Nelson won the '45 Inquirer Invitational at Llanerch and was RCC's head golf professional in 1937, '38 and '39. A lesser known connection is **Alexander Findlay**. At the same time the Scotsman was designing RCC's golf course, he was reconstructing Llanerch to make the course into a championship layout. The first nine holes at RCC opened in 1923 and the revised Llanerch golf course was ready for play in 1924.

**Jug McSpaden** and Nelson were close friends, often traveling the pro tour together. McSpaden and his wife, Eva, lived in Philadelphia and hosted the Nelsons during the tournament.

**Harry Markel**, head pro at Berkshire C.C., withdrew after a first-round 76.

The previous week, Nelson shot 268, 20 under par to win the Canadian PGA.

The 1946 Inquirer Invitational went to **Herman Barron**, White Plains, N.Y., who defeated **Lew Worsham**, Bethesda, Md., 70 to 73 in an 18-hole playoff. The two tied at 277, three under par, after 72 holes. Worsham would win the U.S. Open in 1947, defeating **Sam Snead** by a stroke in an 18-hole playoff at the St. Louis Country Club, Clayton, Mo.

**Johnny Markel**, a 24-year-old amateur from Reading, finished tied 13<sup>th</sup> at 291, eleven over par. Johnny succeeded his father, Harry, as Berkshire's head pro in 1966, retiring in 1986. Johnny is the only player to win the Pennsylvania state high school golf championship three consecutive years, 1939, '40 and '41.

Nelson withdrew on the eve of the 1946 championship. He had to return to his Texas home because of the critical illness of his mother-in-law. Byron told the *Inquirer* reporter **Fred Byrod** that his duty was to be by his wife's side in Denton.

The tournament benefited the Philadelphia Section PGA to fund golf equipment to hospitalized service members.



**Byron made headlines with his win in the 1949 Inquirer Invitational.**

Starting the last round, you could see a big change in Byron. He was really concentrating; had even less to say than before. McSpaden, who was a stroke ahead of him after three rounds, was a few holes behind us, and every time he'd do something we'd soon hear about it from the gallery.

Byron didn't get home on the 11<sup>th</sup>—the hole that gave him more trouble than any other—and after muttering, "I haven't hit this green yet," looked at me and added: "I could have used more club, too."

I knew this was meant for me when he grabbed a No. 7 iron on the 12<sup>th</sup> without saying anything.

I was glad he did, because I didn't know what to give him there. He knocked it still, too. Someone laughed right out loud when he hit a bum first putt on the 14<sup>th</sup>—it was really bum, too, a couple feet off line—and he didn't like it a bit. He looked at the gallery and said: "I don't see anything funny about that."

After he got birdies on the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>, he said: "Now I want to finish 'two-three,' meaning two more birdies. Herman Barron, who was paired with us, said 'three-three' would be enough, but Byron said: "No, this guy behind me is too hot."

He debated a long time after I suggested a No. 5 iron on the 17<sup>th</sup>, and then asked how the green broke, but he finally took it and put the ball five feet from the cup. "That was just right," he told me after knocking in a curling, five-foot putt.

He finished with another birdie on the 18<sup>th</sup>, and was he happy then! I guess he was satisfied with me, too, because when he paid me off, he said: "You did a nice job, Phil."

It's a break working for Nelson because he doesn't kill you on the practice field. Some of the pros practice an hour or more before every round, and since you get paid by the day, it's just extra work for the caddie.

But Byron only went out twice, and then for about 15 minutes. Another time he wanted to hit a few balls, but cars were parked all over the practice field, so he said it didn't matter, we'd go up to the putting green and he'd chip a few.

Yes, I guess Nelson is about as easy to caddie for as you can find.