

The Golf Chronicles

Golf Stories from the Pennsylvania Heartland

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1937-39



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A Race to Reading

There's a story behind **Walter Hagen's** and **Tommy Armour's** appearance at RCC in 1931. They played the exhibition match on Monday, July 13. The day before, both competed in the Canadian Open at the Wannee club outside of Toronto. Armour the defending champion, finished fourth. Hagen did him better, tying **Percy Alliss** of England for first place. Percy, by the bye, is the father of **Peter Alliss**, who also made a name for himself in golf.

The playoff was scheduled for Tuesday, July 15. Which means the Haig and the Silver Scot endured a 400-mile jaunt from Toronto to Reading. The Haig was a first-class type of guy, so maybe he hired an airplane. Maybe they traveled by rail. Or maybe they endured a car ride. In 1927, that could not have been an easy journey. Cars didn't ride as smoothly and passengers didn't sit as comfortably as they do today and the road system was well defined or appointed. Plus cars weren't air conditioned. All that is known for sure is that they arrived in time for the match.

After playing at RCC, Sir Walter headed back to Toronto to face Alliss. The trip was worth the effort as he defeated the Englishman by a single stroke in the 36-hole playoff. Alliss led after the first 18, 72 to 73. Hagen picked up his play in the second 18, establishing a two-stroke lead through 31 holes. Alliss squared the match with a 35-foot birdie putt on the 34th hole. But the worm turned on the 35th when the Haig nearly holed from the fairway; he tapped in for birdie. Alliss also played a magnificent second, stopping his ball a mere three feet from the hole. But he missed the birdie putt. Both parred the final hole and Hagen, with his afternoon 68, was the champion, 141 to 142.



Tommy Armour displays his form at the 1927 U. S. Open at Oakmont.

Setting it Straight for the Silver Scot

It's time to right a wrong. This concerns a three-time major champion and, yes, there is an RCC connection.

The golfer in question is the great Silver Scot, **Tommy Armour** himself. Although his glory days were in the 1920s and '30s, Armour's name lives on after nearly a century. His grandson, **Tommy Armour III** won twice on the PGA tour and has played the senior circuit. In addition, a line of Tommy Armour signature golf clubs are popular among today's players.

Tommy was born in Edinburgh in 1896. At the outbreak of the Great War, he enlisted with the Black Watch, a Scottish infantry battalion, as a machine-gunner and rose from a private to Staff Major in the Tank Corps. He lost his sight to a mustard gas attack and surgeons inserted metal plates in his head and left arm to repair his injuries. During his convalescence, he regained his sight and resumed playing golf.

French Champ. Tommy improved to the point where he won the French Amateur championship at La Boulie, Versailles, in 1920. It was there where he met the great American golfer, **Walter Hagen**. The Haig encouraged young Tommy to move to the United States, promising him a job at Westchester Country Club in New York. By August of that year, Tommy had crossed the Atlantic and was playing in his first U.S. Open at Inverness in Toledo. Competing as an amateur — he turned pro in 1924 — Armour made the cut with rounds of 80-78. He closed with 76-81 for a 316 total. Hagen finished 11th, posting 74-73-77-77 for 301.

Ted Ray won the Open with a final round 75 for a 295 total, finishing one stroke ahead of **Leo Deigel**, **Jock Hutchinson**, **Jack Burke** and **Harry Vardon**. An 18-year-old **Bobby Jones** posted the best score of the 36-hole finale, a 70 in the third round, to finish three back. The names Ray and Vardon resonate. The two English professionals were famously defeated by the amateur **Francis Ouimet** in the playoff for the 1913 Open at The Country Club in Brookline, Mass.

Playing RCC. Tommy was big news in his day. He was certainly big news on July 14, 1931, when he and Hagen played an exhibition match at Reading Country Club. The two pros squared off against two amateurs, **Will Gunn**, Springhaven C.C., and **Ted Johnston**, Roxborough C.C. The fans who expected to see low scores and maybe even a course record were disappointed. Neither Tommy nor the Haig played exceptional golf, but they easily trimmed the amateurs by 10 shots in the best-ball-of-partners competition. Hagen shot 33-37 for one-under par 70. Tommy's 36-37 left him at 73, two over par. Gunn shot 79, Johnston 80.

The Gambler. Hagen drew the largest applause with a daring shot on the par 5, 5th hole. After driving into the creek that bisects the fairway. He gambled with a spoon and launched his ball over the creek that had consumed his first ball and

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Bird Brained

Not that anybody cares, but there are names for single-hole golf scores beyond the well-traveled eagle and birdie. This list came from a web site. No source is credited, so perhaps this is just a put-on, although it mostly adheres to the bird theme, so credit for that.

- Condor - four under par
- Albatross (also known as a Double-Eagle) - three under par
- Eagle - two under par
- Birdie - one under par
- Scratch - par
- Bogey - one over par
- Hawk - two over par
- Grouse - three over par
- Turkey - four over par
- Goose - five over par
- Snipe - six over par
- Quail - seven over par
- Partridge - eight over par
- Vulture - nine over par
- Dodo - 10 over par
- Great Auk - 11 over par
- Moa - 12 over par
- Roc - 13 over par
- Phoenix - 14 over par
- Archaeopteryx - 15 or more over par



Tommy Armour plays from the sand during the first British Open at Carnoustie in 1927. Armour won by a single stroke.

over it again where it cuts in front of the green, a blast of some 230 yards. He failed to get down in par but his partner's 5 bested Gunn's 6. The Haig then dazzled the gallery of 500 with consecutive birdies on 8 and 9, the latter with a 30-foot putt. Hagen blemished his card with a double-bogey 5 on the 15th hole. Armour posted consecutive birdies with a 40-foot putt on 13 and a birdie 4 on 14.

14 Majors. That Monday was most likely the greatest gathering of major golf championships, 14, ever hit the first tee at RCC. Tommy was the reigning British Open champion. He won the title at Carnoustie on June 5, the first time the venerable Scottish links hosted the Open. **Jose Jurado**, Argentina, was second by a stroke. Armour had won the U.S. Open at Oakmont in 1927 and the 1930 PGA Championship at Flushing Meadow C.C., Queens, defeating **Gene Sarazen**, 1 up, in the 36-hole final match. Tommy won 23 other PGA tour events and had two non-tour wins.

Hagen won the U.S. Open in 1914 and '19; the British Open in 1922, '24, '28 and '29; and the PGA Championship in 1921, '24, '25, '26 and '27. Walter took 31 other tour events and 12 non-tour titles, including the Open championships of France and Belgium.

Okay, that's enough back story. Let's right the wrong.

Open champ. On Friday, June 17, Tommy won the U.S. Open at Oakmont, defeating **Harry Cooper** of England, 76-79, in an 18-hole playoff. Quite a few of the pros trekked across the Commonwealth to the Poconos for the first round of the Shawnee Open on Monday, June 20. Tommy took a more circuitous route, first returning to his home in D.C. where he was the pro at Congressional C.C.

Armour started the Shawnee Open with a jittery triple-bogey 7 and a double-bogey 6 on the ninth for an outgoing 43. He slogged it around in 80. Who could fault him for poor play? He had just won the Open, his first major victory. He most likely had a bit of the head-spins going. Time to go home, right? Not Tommy. He came back with 71 in the afternoon round.

Elevenies for Tommy. He was playing decently in the third round when he encountered the 17th hole, a 485-yard par 5. He tried to draw his tee shot to gain the best position for reaching the green in two shots. Too much draw; the ball sailed out of bounds. Tommy hit two more tee shots out of bounds on his way to a large and inglorious 11 for a round of 82, as confirmed by newspaper accounts supplied by **Pete Trenham**, historian for the Philadelphia Section of the PGA. He went back out for the afternoon round, posting a 79 for a 312 total.

End of story, right? Wrong.

Over the years, Tommy's travail somehow grew from an 11 to a 23. Yes, people are out there to this day claiming that Tommy Armour made the highest single-hole score in tour history, a 23. Go ahead, Google it. There's even a name for this golfing monstrosity: an archaeopteryx, a term applied to single-hole score of 15 or more over par. Some claim that Tommy coined the phrase. He didn't; the word describes a genus of avian dinosaurs extinct for 125 million years.

At any rate, let us right this wrong. Shout it from the roof tops.

Tommy Armour did not make a 23 on the 17th hole at Shawnee. He made an 11.