

The Golf Chronicles

Golf Stories from the Pennsylvania Heartland

Byron Nelson
Reading CC Pro
1937-39



Number 88 • May 12, 2020

The Streak

Byron Nelson's eleven consecutive victories. Winnings were paid in war bonds.

March 8 – 11 – Miami International Four-Ball, Miami Springs Golf Course

Nelson and Jug McSpaden defeated Denny Shute and Sam Byrd, 8 and 6, in the 36-hole final. Lord Byron and Jug played 128 holes at 48 under par and never made a bogey in the better-ball-of-partners format. Each won \$1,500.

March 16-21 – Charlotte Open, Myers Park Golf Club

Byron defeated Sam Snead by four strokes in a 36-hole playoff. They tied at 272, 16 under par, for 72 holes. Won \$2,000.

March 24-26 – Greensboro Open, Star-mont Country Club

Byron's 13-under-par 271 was eight strokes ahead of Sam Byrd. He won \$1,333.

March 30-April 1 – Durham Open, Hope Valley Golf Club

Nelson won by five over Tony Penna with a four-under-par total of 276. Winnings: \$1,333.

April 5-8 – Atlanta Iron Lung Open, Capital City Golf Club

Nelson's 13-under-par score of 263 was nine ahead of Sam Byrd. Winnings: \$2,000.

June 7-10 – Montreal Open, Islesmere Golf Club

Byron won by 10 over Jug McSpaden. His 268 was 20 under par. Winnings: \$2,000.

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Lady Louise and Lord Byron Nelson, golfing royalty. Both stuck to their knitting.

Lord Byron's Fabulous '45

We celebrate the 75th anniversary of the most remarkable year ever by a golfer, **Byron Nelson's** 1945 season. Lord Byron, head golf professional at Reading Country Club in 1937, '38 and '39, won an astonishing 18 of the 30 tour events he entered. What's more, his 11 consecutive wins set a standard that will never be broken.

To put Nelson's year in perspective, the second-most wins in a season is 13 by Ben Hogan in 1946. Next is Sam Snead with 11 in 1950 and Hogan with 10 wins in 1948. Coincidentally, Lord

Byron, Bantam Ben and the Slammer were all born in 1912. Tiger Woods' highest a single-season win total is nine in 2000 tied with Paul Runyan, 1933, and Vijay Singh, 2004. Arnold Palmer twice won eight, 1960 and '62. Jack Nicklaus' best was seven in 1972 and '73.

Tiger's seven consecutive wins in 2006-07 are second behind Nelson. Tiger also won six in a row in 1999-2000, as did Ben Hogan in 1948. Tiger (2007-08) and Ben (1953) also posted five-in-a-row streaks.

Best year ever. Yes, Lord Byron and Tiger played in different eras. Different equipment, Different level of competition. Different course conditions. Different teaching methods. Different travel conditions. But here's something that hasn't changed: You still gotta put the ball in the hole in fewer strokes than all the other players. And in 1945, Byron had the best year ever.

Between March 8 and April 8, Byron entered and won five events. He started the streak in Miami for the International Four-Ball, where he and his partner Jug McSpaden won the final match, 8 and 6, against Denny Shute and Sam Byrd. After Byron won in Atlanta, the tour was on hiatus until the Montreal Open in early June. Byron rolled to six more wins through the Canadian Open that started on August 2.

Two of the events, the Miami Four-Ball and the PGA Championship, were match play. In the other 72-hole stroke-play tournaments, Byron was 109 under par, an average of 12.3 under per event. He won the nine stroke-play events by a total of 60 shots, an average of 6.67 strokes per win. He posted double-digit victories three times, the highest being 13 strokes over Jug McSpaden and Ky Laffoon in the Chicago Victory Tournament. He was forced into a playoff once, by Sam Snead at the Charlotte Open. Byron won the 36-hole playoff by four strokes, posting 138, six under par. He failed to break par for 72 holes only once, winning the Canadian Open by four strokes at even par.

The play's the thing. Nelson stayed busy even between tour events. For example, on June 22, just days after winning in Philadelphia and on his way to the

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The Streak, continued

June 14-17 – Philadelphia Inquirer Invitational, Llanerch Country Club

Lord Byron closed with a Llanerch Country Club record 63 for 269, 11 under par, two better than Jug McSpaden. Winnings: \$3,333.

June 28-July 1 – Chicago Victory Open, Calumet Country Club

Byron finished at 275, 13 under par on his way to a seven-stroke victory over Jug McSpaden and Ky Laffoon. Winnings: \$2,000.

July 9-15 – PGA Championship, Moraine Country Club, Kettering, Ohio

Byron defeated Sam Byrd, 4 and 3, to win his second PGA title. He played 204 holes at 37 under par. Winnings: \$5,000.

July 27-30 – All-American Open, Tam O'Shanter Country Club, Chicago

Lord Byron cruised to an 11-stroke victory over Gene Sarazen and Ben Hogan. He shot 269, 19 under par and won \$13,200.

August 2-5 – Canadian Open, Thornhill Golf Club, Toronto

Byron's even-par 280 was good enough for a four stroke victory over Herman Barron. Winnings: \$2,000.

For his 11 wins, Byron banked \$35,699, paid in war bonds. His take for the year was \$61,744, most paid in war bonds.



Byron Nelson sinks a birdie on his way to an 11-stroke victory in the All-American Open at Tam O'Shanter, Chicago.

Chicago Victory Open, he played in the Big Fore invitational tournament at Plum Hollow Country Club in Detroit. The event brought together Nelson, Sam Byrd, the home pro, Jug McSpaden and Craig Wood in a 72-hole match played over three days. Byrd rode a course-record 64 in the second round to lead Nelson by one after 36 holes, 133 to 134. McSpaden, 144, and Wood, 152, shot themselves out of the competition. Byrd saluted it away in tie third round with another 64 to Nelson's 75. He won with a 269, 11 under par, to Nelson's 278. McSpaden, 286, and Wood, 312, trailed badly. The third day featured a 36-hole better-ball tournament, pitting Byrd and Wood against Nelson and McSpaden. Lord Byron and Jug took the trophy, 132 to 133.

On August 6, the day after winning the Canadian Open, Nelson and Jug McSpaden played an exhibition at Edison Country Club, Schenectady, N.Y. Byron birdied the first four holes on his way to a three-under-par 69. McSpaden toured the course in 70 strokes.

He filled the gap between the Canadian and Memphis opens by playing in the Spring Lake, N.J., pro-amateur tournament on August 11 and 12. Forty-one pros showed up in search of the \$1,500 first prize. Byron won the 36-hole individual competition with a four-under-par 140. Sam Snead and Herman Barron tied second at 141. Baron and Ed Beckley won the second-day pro-am tournament with a 65. The event raised \$12,000 for charity.

Eleven and done. After the Canadian Open, the tour moved on to the Memphis Open, August 17-19. All good things must come to an end and so it was that Byron's incredible winning streak came to a close. Freddie Haas, Jr., an amateur playing out of New Orleans, took the title, becoming the first Simon-pure to win a tour event since 1936. Byron was nine behind after 36 holes. Sixes were wild in the third round as Nelson played himself back into contention with a 66, six under par, to trail Haas, by six. Freddie vaulted into the lead with a 64. Nelson closed with 68, as did Haas, who won with a 270 total, 18 under par. Byron tied fourth with Jug McSpaden at 276.

The loss wasn't much of a set-back for Byron. Writing in his book *How I Played the Game* on page 147, he describes a sense of relief that the streak was over: "I was definitely and genuinely relieved when the streak was broken, because it took so much pressure off me from the media and the fans."

He was disturbed, however, by what he felt was poor play in Memphis. So he got back on the horse, traveled to Knoxville and won the Jayce-Supreme Open, August 23-26, at Holston Hills Country Club. Byron's 276, ten under par, earned

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A Year Like No Other

H ere is a summary of Byron Nelson's record-shattering 1945 season.	
Tournaments	30
Victories	18, a tour record. Ben Hogan is second with 13 in 1946.
Second place	7
Majors wins	PGA Championship, the only major played in 1945
Consecutive wins	11, a tour record. Tiger Woods is second with seven consecutive wins in 2006-07.
Lowest finish	9th
Top 5 finishes	28
Top 10 finishes	30
Scoring average	68.33, the second lowest all-time. Tiger Woods holds the record at 68.17 in 2000.
Greatest margin of victory	13 strokes, Seattle Open
Low score: 18	62, Seattle Open
Low score: 72	259, Seattle Open, tour record since broken
Most under par	22 strokes, Esmeralda Open
• Nelson was named the Associated Press 1945 male athlete of the year, ahead of Felix "Doc" Blanchard, Army's Heisman Trophy winner.	
• Babe Didrikson Zaharias was crowned female athlete of the year. Ann Curtis, a swimmer, was second.	
• Both the Babe and Lord Byron were honored for their golf achievements and both were Texas natives.	



Harold McSpaden, left, and Byron Nelson were known as golf's Gold Dust Twins.

him a 10-stroke victory over Sam Byrd and 11 over Ben Hogan.

Nelson played eight more tournaments in 1945, winning the Esmeralda Open, Spokane, Wash., in September by seven at 22 under par. After a spectacular win in Seattle, where his 259, 21-under-par total set a tour 72-hole scoring record, Byron and Louise, weary from the travel, went home to Texas for a break of nearly two months.

Snow let-up. His final tournament of the year was the Fort Worth Open, December 15-17, at Glen Garden Country Club. His 273, 11 under par, earned Byron an eight-stroke victory over Jimmy Demaret and his 18th tour win of the year. The win was especially sweet because

Byron and Ben Hogan started in golf as caddies at Glen Garden. The tournament was played in near-freezing weather, with overnight temperatures in the 20s and occasional snow flurries. The players resorted to using run-up shots to the frozen greens because lofted shots would bounce high in the air, as if hitting on concrete, and bound over the green. Despite the cold, Byron was sizzling hot in the second round, his six-under-par 65 putting him in the lead by one stroke over Demaret. Byron's third-round 66 left the field playing for second place. Hogan finished tied third with Ed Furgol at 287, six behind Demaret, the runner-up.

Sam Byrd and Jug McSpaden were the hard-luck twins during Byron's streak. Byrd was a former major league outfielder for the Yankees (1929-'34) and the Reds (1935-'36). He racked up four second place finishes during the streak, including a loss in the PGA Championship final. Byrd won six tour events. McSpaden, a 17-time tour winner, was runner-up three times during Nelson's winning streak. Jug's pain was eased somewhat by the win he and Byron posted as partners in the Miami Four-Ball, the streak's start.

Destination domination. Describing Lord Byron's 1945 season as great or fabulous or sensational seems understated. His play was total domination, nothing less. Golf never saw the likes of Byron Nelson in 1945.