



The Hole Cutters

So, why a golf hole is 4 ¼ inches in diameter?

The answer is, nobody knows for sure. What is known is that back in the old country there was no standard size. Holes were dug out by hand by specialists known as – What else? – hole cutters. These lads filled in the old holes and dug the new ones. There was no standard, so the sizes varied from course to course. This went on for hundreds of years.

We do know that in 1891, the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews mandated the 4 ¼ inch hole as the standard. The United States Golf Association wasn't founded until 1894, so the R&A's rules ruled the golf world.

That standard hole size is believed to come from the Musselburgh Links in Scotland. As the story goes, the hole cutters used a piece of old pipe that measured, well, you know. Musselburgh may be the world's oldest golf course. The game was played there in 1672 but there are some who say **Mary Queen of Scots** played Musselburgh in 1567. Why quibble over a hundred years or so? The place is old. Musselburgh hosted the Open Championship six times between 1874 and 1889. Not bad for a nine-holer, which it remains. Musselburgh is a public golf course, so you can head over there today and play.

The nine holes remain largely unchanged from the Open days. Most of the course lies within the Musselburgh horse race track, built in 1816. The first hole requires a tee shot over the track.

The course is short at about 3,000 yards. Musselburgh developed in the hickory shaft era and, in keeping with the historical theme, golfers can rent vintage clubs for the **Old Tom Morris** experience.



Paul Runyan tees off in the final round of the 1933 Miami Biltmore Open.

The Hole Truth about the Big Bucket

This episode of The Golf Chronicles is all about holes. Specifically, that elusive gouge in the ground that, without emotion, rebuffs the golfer's every attempt to deposit the ball underground as required by the rules.

How many times has this happened to you? You hit a perfect putt. The stroke is sublime. The ball rolls straight and true off the blade. The ball is breaking ever so slightly to the cup, following the line you plotted in your head. At the last split second, the ball turns ever so slightly to the left. It catches the edge and just as you begin to celebrate your birdie, the golf gods decide today is not for you. The ball spins violently around the elusive hole in the ground. Instead of the sweet sound of the ball rattling around inside the cup liner, the only sound is your groan. And maybe a few select words of dismay.

Those are the days we curse that old Scotsman who decided the diameter of the golf hole should be 4 and one-quarter inches. How many putts would be holed if the cup was just a smidge wider?

Well, back in 1933, the godfathers of the Year-Round Clubs Open, played at the Miami Biltmore, March 3, 4 and 5, decided to try what became known as the big bucket. They played the event using a six-inch diameter cup.

The Squire Speaks. The brains behind this experiment belonged to Gene Sarazen, the old Squire himself. Sarazen was about as big a name as there was in golf. By '33, he had won the National Open in '22 and '32, the PGA Championship in '22 and '23 and the British Open in '32. He won another PGA later in '33. The Masters Tournament had not yet been founded. Sarazen would win it in 1935 when he hit "the shot heard 'round the world," holing a spoon for a double-eagle two on the 15th hole at Augusta National. That's seven majors and at least one of each, making Sarazen the first to achieve the career Grand Slam. Since then, Ben Hogan, Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player and Tiger Woods have joined the club.

The point is, Sarazen was a guy you listened to. His opinions meant something. That's most likely the reason the Biltmore boys agreed to go along with his suggestion.

A Runyan Rout. So let's bet back to Miami in March 1933. Paul Runyan, known as Little Poison, from Hot Springs, Arkansas, shot 69-64-65-68 for a 266 total, 18 under par for the win and a \$1,000 prize. Paul finished a whopping 10 shots ahead of Charlie Guest, a Jersey boy, who took home \$750. Next in a tie were **Walter Hager**, **Al Espinosa**, **Joe Kirkwood** and **Olin Dutra**, who each pocketed \$506.22.

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Putter Patter

Gene Sarazen picked up the six-inch cup mantle from **George Duncan**, a Scottish professional for years had advocated for a larger cup. Duncan won the 1920 Open Championship, staging one of the greatest comebacks in Open history, making up 13 shots over second-round leader **Abe Mitchell**. With rounds of 80-80-71-72—303, he is the last player to win a golf major with a score of 80 for a round.

The Squire at first favored an eight-inch cup, but discarded this size after a nine hole test. Sarazen believed the larger hole was too easy so he settled on the six-incher.

Wild Bill Melhore tried out the large cups in a practice round and found the wider diameter didn't make much difference on long putts. He took 20 tries from 25 feet or more and made none.

"The only advantage I see is that we will hole more of the six and eight footers," Wild Bill opined.

Melhorn was spot-on. **Paul Runyan** had the most birdie putts, holing 23 of 55, a 42 percent success rate. He was nine for eight from six feet or less. **Charlie Guest** was next in attempts with 47, making 14, a 30 percent rate.

The top ten finishers canned 63 of 66 attempts from short range, an impressive 95 percent success rate. As expected, the percentage of made putts dropped significantly from longer distances. The top ten made 48 out of 124 (39 percent) from 6 to 15 feet; 37 out of 158 (23 percent) from 15 to 24 feet; and only 5 of 87 (6 percent) from 25 feet and longer. **Walter Hagen** led the long putting, holing 2 out of 8 attempts. Runyan was 2 for 11 from distance. **Al Espinosa** was the only other player in the top 10 to can a no-brainer.

Runyan was no stranger on the pro circuit. He won 29 tour events, including two PGA Championships. In 1934, he defeating **Craig Wood** in 38 holes, and in '38, he defeated **Sam Snead**, 8 and 7, the largest margin of victory in the match play era. In twelve Masters appearances, he posted five top 10 finishes. Runyan was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 1990 and he played in the Masters par 3 tournament in 2000 at age 90. Little Poison died in 2002 at age 93.

Johnny Goodman, Omaha, was low amateur at 284. Well, so what, you might say. Here's so what. That June, Goodman won the National Open, the last amateur to do so.

How dominating was Runyan? He hit 55 of 72 greens. Guest hit only 47 and next closest was **Tommy Armour**, the Silver Scott, with 46. Runyan canned 23 birdies to Guest's 14. Paul's lone eagle came from a holed fairway shot. Who knows, maybe that would not have gone in with the smaller cup. Next closest to Paul was Horton Smith with 17 birdies, but he finished well back at 284, even par.

Gene Sarazen, the man who pushed for the big bucket, got around in 281 strokes, three under par, winning \$200.

Bigger Hole, Smaller Bucks. So, how did the six-inch cup fare? Scores were lower, as expected. In fact, Runyan's winning 266 was 25 strokes better than **Denny Shute's** 291 in winning the Miami Biltmore Open on the same course the previous November. Runyan scored 294 in that event. What the big bucket proved is that the best players will shoot the best scores. Nobody came from the ranks of the unknowns to shine. Runyan was a small man who was among the shorter hitters in the pro ranks. So maybe the larger hole helped him, maybe not. The fact that he hit the most greens suggests otherwise because the size of the hole has no influence in hitting the green. Shute, the winner in November, shot 283 in March, one under par, an improvement of eight strokes. He won all of \$66.65.

The greatest difference between the November and March tournaments was not on the golf course. It was in the banking. In November, the pros played for a purse of \$10,000, with \$2,500 to the winner. The March event saw a \$5,000 purse, with Runyan winning \$1,000.



Gene Sarazen measures the six-inch cup, surrounded by the leading contenders. From the left, **Wiffy Cox**, **Olin Dutra**, **Paul Runyan**, **Horton Smith** and **Johnny Revolta**.