

# The Golf Chronicles

## Golf Stories from the Pennsylvania Heartland

Byron Nelson  
Reading CC Pro  
1937-39



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### Horton: Who?

When **Vincent Gebardi** was arrested during while playing the Western Open in 1933, his playing partner, **Howard Holtman**, had no idea that Vincent Gebardi was the infamous gangster, **Machine Gun Jack McGurn**. Holtman wasn't the first golfer to be surprised by Gebardi's true identity.

**Horton Smith** was one of the era's leading players and winner of the first and third Masters tournaments. When he was the head professional at Oak Park Country Club in River Grove, Illinois, a member asked if Smith would give lesson to a friend. When the student introduced himself as Vincent Gebardi, Smith thought nothing of it. A name's a name, right?

Smith was intrigued, however, by the presence of a friend who always accompanied his pupil. The man uttered not a word. When Horton asked Vincent if his pal would like a lesson, the golfing gangster said he was not interested in golf even though he carried his own bag of clubs. Smith found out much later that the man was Vincent's body guard and he was carrying more than niblicks in his golf bag.

This realization came after he discovered that Vincent Gebardi was in reality Machine Gun Jack McGurn, one of Chicago's most violent gangsters. Horton found Gebardi/McGurn pleasant and a good pupil who was keen about golf and played a decent enough game. He enjoyed spending time with Gebardi. The practice tee, however, was adjacent to a busy street. Smith feared that he could become involved in a shooting—after all, this was the age of prohibition and gangsters—if he continued his association with McGurn. Smith removed himself from McGurn's circle and quit teaching golf to Machine Gun Jack.

*(continued on next page)*



*Jack McGurn, Al Capone's enforcer, was arrested while playing in the 1933 Western Open.*

### Big Al's Golfing Pal

This chapter of *The Golf Chronicles* strays far from Berks County. Our story concerns the 1933 Western Open. Played at Olympia Fields Country Club outside of Chicago, the '33 Western was one of golf's most unusual tournaments.

**MacDonald Smith**, a Scotsman, won. Nothing unusual about that. Smith counted the 1912 and 1925 Western Open among his 25 tour wins.

**Tommy Armour**, the Silver Scott himself, finished second. Nothing unusual about that. Armour also won 25 times on tour, including the U.S. Open (1927), The Western Open (1929), the PGA Championship (1930) and the British Open (1931).

The top 10 finishers included **Abe Espinosa**, **Byron Nelson**, and **Ralph Guldahl**. Nothing unusual there. All were proven, successful touring pros.

So, what happened that was unusual?

Only this: during the second-round, Chicago police arrested one of the players, an amateur named **Vincent Gebardi**, on charges of vagrancy. That doesn't seem to be an offense that required eight police officers to descend on the golf links to nab the miscreant. But descend and arrest they did because this was no ordinary Joe among the 220 entrants.

**Big Al's Pal**. The man in question and in custody was known as **Machine Gun Jack McGurn**, Public Enemy Number 5 and alleged executioner for **Al Capone**. Born in Sicily on July 2, 1902, Gebardi boxed under the name Jack McGurn. He kept the name when he joined the Capone gang.

McGurn was believed to be the trigger man behind the St. Valentine's Day massacre, February 14, 1929. On that fateful day, Capone's gang of South Side mobsters gunned down seven members of their North Side rivals, a gang led by **George "Bugs" Moran**. McGurn evaded arrest when his girlfriend, **Louise Rolfe**, said the two of them spent the day and night in a Chicago hotel. She became known forever as the Blonde Alibi. The two later married. Louise was following her beloved that fateful August day in '33, flashing on one hand a three-carat diamond and on the other a glittering gold wedding band.

A keen lawman spotted Gebardi's name among the Western Open entrants. He obtained a warrant for his arrest under a newly enacted criminal reputation law that enabled the detention of known bad guys who otherwise beat every rap thrown at them. Owing to McGurn's volcanic temperament, the police showed up with one lieutenant, two sergeants and five patrolmen.

McGurn entered the tournament claiming to be the professional representing Evergreen Golf Club, a public course. He opened with 83, far off **Abe Espinosa's** lead at 69. The law showed up for the second round and spotted McGurn on the seventh hole. He was one under par for the day. It was then that the three

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Horton Smith was one of the greats who played during golf's "Golden Era." He was a member of five Ryder Cup teams, compiling a record of 3–0–1 and was the only golfer to defeat **Bobby Jones** during the latter's Grand Slam year of 1930, at the Savannah Open in February. He played in every Masters through 1963, the year of his death.

In addition to his two Masters victories, Smith won 28 other PGA tour events, leading 1929 in wins with eight. Smith died of Hodgkin's disease in 1963 at age 55. He was enshrined in the World Golf Hall of Fame in 1990.

McGurn was not the only prohibition-era gangster to catch the golf bug. Berks County's beer baron, **Max Hassel**, was also an avid golfer and a fixture at the now-defunct Riverside Golf Club in Muhlenberg Township. Max was so smitten by the game that he built his own golf course, the nine-hole Green Hills Golf Club in Cumru Township, which no longer exists.

Alas, Max did not live to play his own creation. He was gunned down in a mob hit in an Elizabeth, N.J., hotel room in 1933. Although no arrests were made in the murder, the popular opinion was that the hit was ordered by **Dutch Schultz**, who did not want Max invading his territory.

*Louise McGurn followed her husband in the 1933 Western Open. Her alibi for her then-boyfriend Jack saved him from arrest for his role in the 1929 St. Valentine's Day Massacre. She was thereafter known as the Blonde Alibi.*



plainclothesmen introduced themselves to the gangster golfer. The officers were surprised to find Louise, in her white dress and white hat, following her man. Louise's presence told the officers that the dispute between the Capone gang and the Touhey gang must have ended because they would make easy targets in the open expanse of the golf course. The police had no doubt that gangsters would not hesitate to shoot their rivals in such a public place.

**Louise Lets Loose.** As McGurn and his playing partner, Howard Holtman, a young professional from Beecher, Ill., approached the seventh green, the police lieutenant stepped in front of McGurn and read the warrant. That was Holtman's first inkling that Gebardi was the infamous Machine Gun Jack. McGurn remained silent as the officer completed his task; he then asked politely for permission to finish his round. The officer agreed. Jack proceeded to make a double bogey 6. Louise it was who complained, screeching loudly, "Whose brilliant idea was this?" She didn't get an answer.

An obviously flustered McGurn blew up on the eighth hole. He recorded an 11, seven over par. He also blew up at a photographer who took three photos on the green. As Louise stood by applauding, Jack grabbed the lensman by his shirt and shook him, yelling, "You've busted up my game!"

On the next hole, the group became a threesome. One of the players ahead quit his game, leaving **Arthur Tilley**, an attorney and amateur golfer, alone. He joined McGurn and Holtman. Tilley was a corporate lawyer with no criminal practice, a member of Olympia Fields Country Club and the Chicago Bar Association golf champion. His presence seemed to calm McGurn, who played steady golf to post 86, 14 over par. His 169 total was well above the cut line of 155. Holtman finished at 89-91—180, Tilley had 86-85—171. Also missing the cut with rounds of 73-84—157 was a young pro from Dallas named **Ben Hogan**.

The eight officers surrounded McGurn after he completed his round and escorted him from the premises. Before leaving, Machine Gun Jack shook hands with his playing partners. The spectators pretended to ignore the unfolding scene while stealing furtive glances, but otherwise kept their distance.

**Igoe Ignored.** McGurn remained silent as he left but **Michael Igoe**, a former city commissioner, state representative and a member of the club, accosted the arresting officers. He seemed more upset with the police disturbing the golf than with having a known violent criminal on the premises. The police remained silent but a *Chicago Daily Tribune* reporter pointed out that the police were executing a lawfully issued warrant. When Igoe learned of the reporter's presence, he stated that he didn't want to be quoted in the newspaper. Too late, Michael.

Igoe's protest seemed to awaken Machine Gun Jack. "I broke the law?" he bellowed. "I was out playing golf, so they arrest me. Trying to suppress crime, hey? It's the punks out pulling stickups who shoot the policemen. Why bother me? I haven't done anything for a year."

**Rumble On.** Jack and Louise were permitted to drive his coupe to the police station with two officers in the rumble seat. Following a brief conversation between the couple in front of the station, she drove off and he went inside.

McGurn went to trial on September 6. The jury deliberated 19 minutes and returned a guilty verdict, resulting in a six-month jail sentence. His attorney's re-

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quest for a retrial was denied. When the attorney stated his intention to appeal, the judge set bail at \$10,000, which was paid, allowing Machine Jack to go free.

The *Tribune* described McGurn's court room appearance as "a strong country club attitude." He wore a blue sport coat with pearl buttons, neatly pressed grey flannel slacks and shiny black and white shoes.

The conviction was based on testimony from ten members of the Chicago police force who asserted that McGurn was a well-known gangster and hoodlum with no known legitimate means of support. The judge allowed this testimony because the state's vagrancy law made the accused's reputation as well as his deeds a factor in the prosecution.

**Good Guy Jack.** Five defense witnesses stated that McGurn was known as a good fellow and good golfer who was greatly maligned. **Al Megeff**, golf professional at the Evergreen golf course, testified on McGurn's behalf, stating that he was gentlemanly and of good repute.

Life turned sour for Machine Gun Jack and the Alibi Blonde following his vagrancy bust. In January 1934, they lost their house to foreclosure, with the bank claiming the couple was \$7,000 in arrears.

Things were looking up by July 1935 when McGurn opened a gambling establishment in an abandoned bank in suburban Melrose Park. Jack's cashiers took bets for as little as 50 cents on horse races. Card games were arranged, usually after the day's racing was completed.

Jack himself usually appeared after his morning round of golf, holding court at the bar. He drank root beer. The bartender claimed that Machine Gun Jack, the enforcer for America's most notorious bootlegger, did not drink alcohol. His associates and the police knew different.

**Jack a Hit.** McGurn's business venture was short-lived. His past caught up with him on February 15, 1936. Jack left his home at 11:00 p.m. on February 14, the seventh anniversary of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, to go bowling. About an hour after midnight, and after Jack had bowled one game, three gunmen stormed the building and shot Jack dead. Three witnesses saw the murder but all claimed they did not know Jack and his companions and did not recognize the shooters. This was at odds with the police finding that Jack was a regular at the bowling alley. The wall of silence, it seemed, held tight.

Police summarized the hit thusly: "Jack was through long ago as a big shot. He was broke and a nuisance to his friends who still retained a little of the old business with the gangs—vice, gambling and bootleg alky. They were tired of this inter-

ference or of his begging. They put him away for good."

The police stated that Al Capone, in prison at the time, would not have sanctioned the murder of his one-time enforcer. "Capone was grateful to McGurn for exposing a plot to kill him. Jack killed the two plotters. With Capone locked up in Alcatraz, McGurn had little influence within the gangs." The 1936 Chicago gangs were run by **Frank Nitti** and **Ralph Capone**, Al's brother.

The police believed the killing served two purposes. It removed a nuisance and it was revenge for McGurn's role in the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. Next to his body, they found a valentine card inscribed with this pointed message: "You've lost your job, you've lost your dough, your jewels and cars and handsome houses, but things could still be worse you know. At least you haven't lost your trousers!" Jack's murder was never solved.

McGurn was buried on February 18. Although the funeral lacked the splendor of most gangster send-offs, there were 40 floral arrangements in the funeral home. A six-foot tall pillar of white roses and lilies stood at the head of the coffin with the inscription, "From Al." Twenty-seven cars followed the hearse for 25 miles to the cemetery. Al Capone's mother, **Theresa**, and his sister, **Mrs. Mafalda Maritote**, were among the mourners.

**Hole in Al.** It should be noted that Capone was himself a golfer of low skill, suffering from a wicked hook. He did manage, however, to score a hole-in-one of sorts when, following a round in 1928, the .45 revolver he kept in his bag went off accidentally and shot Big Al in the right leg. He was hospitalized for a week.

That's not the end of the Gebardi story.

On March 2, **Anthony Gebardi**, Jack's 24-year-old half-brother, was shot dead while playing cards in a pool room. The police believed the killing of the brothers was linked. They reasoned that Anthony knew who killed his brother and was plotting revenge. According to police, the assailants in the Gebardi murders matched the description of the three men who killed State Representative **Albert Prignano** in December 1935.

The brother's mother, **Josephine**, remarried after her first husband—Jack's father—died. Her second husband, **Angelo DeMory**—Anthony's father—was slain in the 1923 gang war.

The grieving mother mourned her dead son, Anthony. "He was such a good looking boy," she said in Italian to a reporter. "Such a neat dresser. I remember how he looked so nice. I can't bear to see him now."

When asked why her sons were killed, she said, "I don't have to ask my boys questions. They were good to me. They brought me money. They painted and worked in the house and fixed it up for me. That was enough."