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Champions—Then and Now

There is No Fair Basis for Comparing Leaders of Periods Thirty Years Apart

By Bernard Darwin

I HAVE found a large number of people over here interested in Mr. Jerome Travers' "informal ranking of stars." They display their interest both by talking and writing. Nobody criticises it at all fiercely—indeed it would be absurd to do so, for Mr. Travers stated his opinion most modestly and added expressly that the first five on his list were "so closely grouped that it seemed like splitting hairs to separate them." I should sum up the comments I have heard by saying that everybody thinks it a good list but everybody also thinks he could make one even better himself.

Mr. Travers' list, it will be remembered, is as follows: 1-Robert T. Jones, Jr., 2-Harry Vardon, 3-Walter Hagen, 4-J. H. Taylor, 5-James Braid, 6-MacDonald Smith. It has been variously criticised. I read one gentleman (possibly with a long white beard) who complained that Young Tommy Morris was not included. Well, Tommy died twelve years before the compiler of the list was born, so we may let that pass.

A more serious criticism is that Harry Vardon is not at the top, and indeed I suppose it is to British golfers a sort of mild blasphemy to suggest that anyone ever played as well as—to say nothing of better than—Vardon. This classifying is a dangerous business and, though most of us are classifiers at heart, I am not going to put my head into a hornet's nest. "You're both right, and you're both wrong" is the safe position that I prefer to take up in such disputes.

I may, however, point out that some of Mr. Travers' critics should read his words carefully again. "The six players of my

time" says he, and those words "of my time" are very important ones.

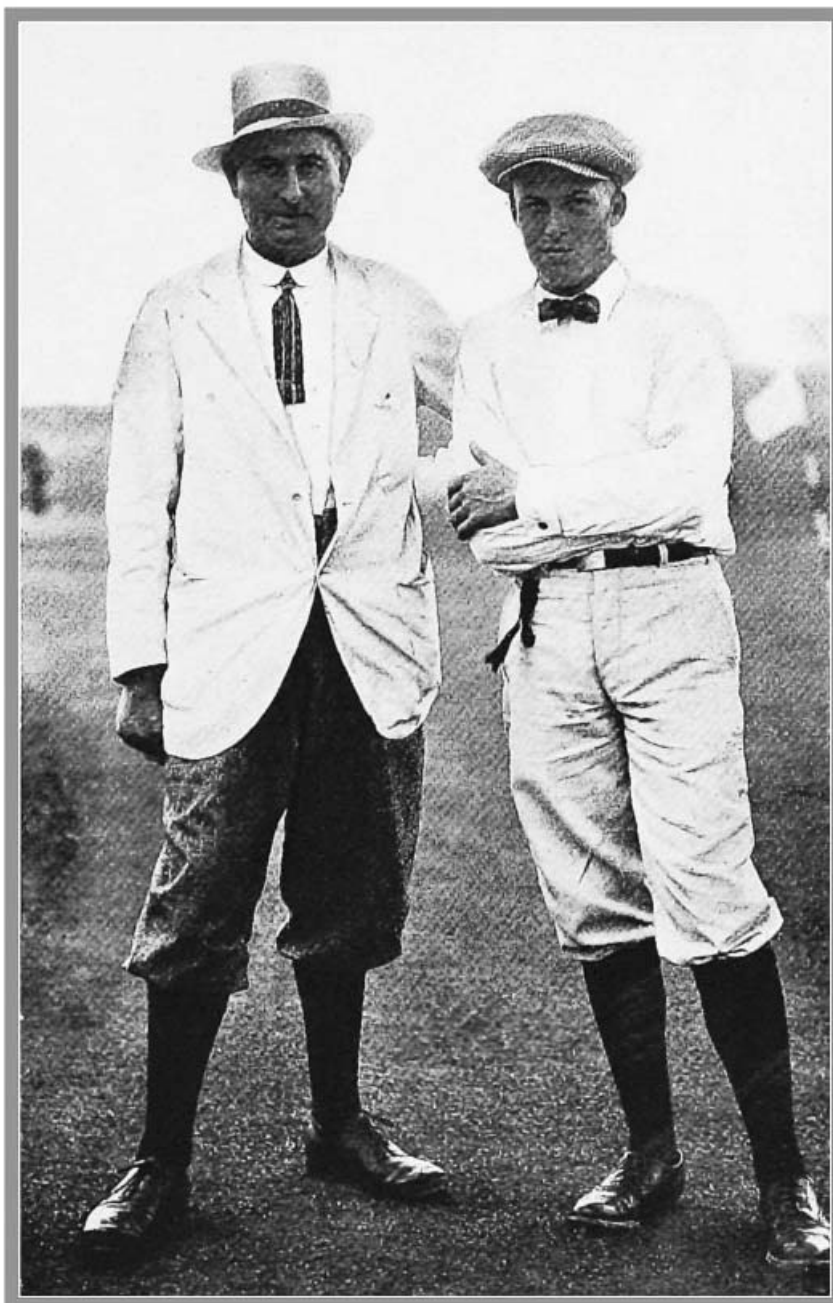
golf while he himself has been playing it and watching it. But they can hardly all five be said to be players of the same time. Vardon and Braid were born, so the books tell us, in 1870 and 1871, Hagen in 1892 and Bobby Jones in 1901. Between the first year and the last the gap is altogether too long.

When Bobby Jones had scarcely attained to his first pair of knickerbockers, and Mr. Travers himself was a schoolboy, Vardon had had his bad illness and done his greatest deeds.

Fine player as he has been since he has never been so great as he was with a gutty. The Haskell arrived in this country in 1902 when Vardon was already thirty-two years old. I should much prefer to say of these two wonderful golfers that each was the best of his own time and leave it there.

Mr. Travers rightly points out that Vardon's putting is frequently below proper standard, whereas Mr. Jones is an "accurate and reliable putter." But when Vardon, in his youthful prime and before his illness, was spread-eagling all fields, he was not a bad putter. He may not have been a very polished one, and he put his seconds so near the hole that he did not seem to have much putting to do, but he did not putt badly. He was always a good approach putter and did not in those far-off days suffer from that sudden hitch or jump in the movement of his club which has since attacked him at short range. He could and did get the ball in and was at least a reasonably efficient putter.

When it comes to number 3 and 4 on the list, Hagen and Taylor, the (Continued on page 28)



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Harry Vardon and Bobby Jones as they appeared in the United States Open championship at the Inverness Club of Toledo in 1920. This was Bobby's first open, and Vardon's last tournament appearance in this country

The first five on his list are all players of his time in the sense that they have been playing big

"Bobby Jones—vs—Harry Vardon"

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same remark as to dates applies. Between 1871 and 1892 there is a great gulf fixed. It is easy to argue forever that Taylor never had quite the power and the hurricane brilliancy of Hagen, and which to my mind is more certain that Hagen never had Taylor's power of making no bad shots. It is much more to the point that the two have never met, and never could have met when both have been at their best.

It is not fair to press this argument of dates too far in favor of the older men. Those who hold briefs for the younger ones have a right to use it too, to say that golf has come on so much in popularity, that the number of players has so greatly increased, that the competition is today more severe than it used to be. That is entirely fair even though it is impossible to appraise exactly the effect of that increased competition. The most we can say is that here is another difficulty in the comparing of generations.

I was discussing this question the other day with one of the most brilliant of professionals (he is not on that list of six). He is one of the most devout worshippers of Vardon and he was saying that Vardon's supreme strength lay in his power of playing wooden club shots up to the hole. He added that this shot has to a very great extent disappeared in modern golf, which is a statement of fact. He further added—and this is only a statement of opinion—that the best of the modern golfers never could have played that shot as well or nearly as well as Vardon used to play it with the gutty.

There I did not wholly agree with him. Let it be freely admitted that no one today can hit a brassie shot up to the pin as accurately as Vardon did, but then nobody today has the same chance of acquiring that art or the same compelling necessity for doing so. For my part I believe that the man who is the best of his generation could learn, if he had to do so, to play the shot that his predecessors played.

So let us not worship to excess either rising or setting suns. One shines and will shine, the other has shone as highly as possible on its particular day. I always come back to Mr. Leslie Balfour Melville's answer when I asked him to compare Young Tommy Morris with later champions: "Well, I cannot imagine anyone playing better than Tommy did."

A Perfect, Round

I HAVE just been reading an illuminating article by Mr. Hilton in which he says that he can recollect playing, in any important event, only one single round wherein he was "really completely satisfied with his hitting of the ball." This was a certain round at Hoylake in which every hole was played perfectly or better than perfectly till he arrived on the last tee wanting a 4 for 70 and then came "a terrible 6." How the 6 crept in he does not say, but I have a suspicion—perhaps it is an old memory half revived by his words—that his second was an "over-at-any-price" shot which came near to wedging his ball under the palings behind the green.

In any case it is not material, for the

point of the story lies in the desperately high standard set up and the severe self-criticism. I may class with it a remark I once heard made by perhaps the cleanest of all hitters, J. H. Taylor, that only once, or at most twice, in a round did he time a shot to perfection.

These two observations betray a striving after the ideal altogether beyond the stature of common people. If we often thought of our own so-called golf in such terms, we should soon be in a madhouse. So, when I had read the article, I said to myself firmly, "This will not do. That way lies suicide"; I seized a favourite book and endeavoured to banish the spectre. But the harm was done: even Mr. Pickwick could not put Mr. Hilton out of my head, and I began to think of the last round I had played. I had won it, and that, superficially, with a measure of comfort, though only after severe internal struggles against an adversary whom I had expected to beat me. It was he, needless to add, and not I who was chiefly responsible for this result. Still, all was well that ended well, and I had gone home with a mind pleasantly void of remorseful memories. Now, however, with Mr. Hilton goading me into a stricter analysis, it was a different matter.

I began taking the holes one by one. The first was imperfect from beginning to end. Well, never mind that. Let me remember the second, over which I hoped to be able to gloat modestly. It was a difficult short hole and it wanted a wooden club in the teeth of wind and rain. The tee shot would almost have satisfied Taylor. The ball flew like an arrow, never drifting as much as an inch, and ended about eight yards from the hole. The approach putt laid the ball so near that I was not required to pop it into the little pond termed the hole.

Surely here was perfection. No, the torturing imp of conscience made me admit that the approach putt was short. Certainly my enemy was a good long way off; I had in all probability, and, as it turned out, in fact, 2 for the hole, but still I suppose I ought to have given the confounded hole a chance.

Very well, then, let me take the third. The drive split the fairway; with the second, well and cleanly struck, the ball took its curling way round that treacherous little bunker, which its victims call unfair, and the ball finished past the hole. I got my 4, but, hang it all, that approach putt again! It was downhill and the ground was heavy with rain—exactly how heavy no one could tell—but still there was a certain cowardice.

After that I could not think of a single flawless hole, though of many full of flaws. True, there were two when safety first had been an obvious duty. One approach shot had given a very wide berth to the only dangerous bunker; the other had taken only too palpable pains to be over the ditch and had ended very nearly over the green as well. In each case I might have got my 4, if I had been compelled. I called the hole at 4; but—but—but. At this point I came to the conclusion that I

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was growing morbid, hit my conscience, metaphorically, a severe blow on the head with a niblick, and for the time being crushed it.

From this humiliating analysis as far as it had proceeded one fact seems to emerge. It is not new, but, I think, true. It is, that eagerness to win or anxiety not to lose, call it which you will, wastes more shots for us than any mere lack of skill. Why were those approach putts short? Because the striker had in his mind a horrid picture of running out of holing distance and his enemy, encouraged thereby, holing a long putt. Why did those two pitches finish so far from the hole? Again, because the striker thought he might make a fool of himself and knew that, if he did, he would want to bury his head beneath the sofa cushions at

the "George and Vulture" and groan in a hollow and dismal manner.

Even the great are not wholly exempt from this weakness. There is Mr. Hilton himself, if I am right about that last hole at Hoylake; and it was certainly at this very same hole that Herd nearly threw away his Open Championship in 1902 by being too much frightened of the cross bunker in front of the green.

It is only on the very rare occasions on which we feel what we call "confident" that we do not do these dreadful things, and confidence consists very largely in not conjuring up imaginary pictures of disasters that ought never to happen. That is a most difficult frame of mind to attain, especially when those very disasters have been happening only too frequently in other rounds.