

The Old Lion of British Golf

A Brief Intimate Appreciation of J. H. Taylor of Mid-Surrey

By Humphrey L. G. Fry

IN a recent article, Bernard Darwin said of J. H. Taylor "There is no one else quite so emphatic." As usual, Mr. Darwin was indisputably right. The great master's power of emphasis is the most awe-inspiring thing I know. It seems to spring from some inner dynamo with a force which is nothing short of tremendous.

It takes very little time for an auditor to discover that "J. H." is a man of strong convictions. If you don't happen to agree with him, you are likely, unless you happen to be an unusually courageous soul, to be overwhelmed by the sheer force of his personality. He has an open mind, but it often takes quite a wrench to turn the key and unlock it. He is the soul of honesty, but he

is far too direct by nature to tread the subtle paths of "honest doubt." Everything he does, every opinion he voices, is like a blow straight from the shoulder.

It has often been said that the guideposts were his only obstacles at golf. The comment is trite, but it sums up J. H. Taylor in a nutshell. Straightness is his predominant characteristic—straightness in living, straightness in speech, straightness in propelling a golf ball. Add to this the formidable presence, the strong features, the piercing blue eyes, the prominent jaw, and something may be gathered of the volcanic character of this most lovable man. There is, indeed, a suspicion of intimidation in his manner. He appears to intimidate rather than guide his pupils, just as he appears to intimidate rather than guide his putts into the hole. There is nothing coaxing in his methods.

An hour's instruction from him is an exhausting process, both physically and mentally. And this intense energy and vitality spring from a great natural enthusiasm. He puts every ounce of his being into everything he undertakes. Half measures are anathema to him. After twenty-five years at Mid-Surrey, he will play a friendly round to-day with all the zest of a youngster driving his first motor car. To watch the determination which he puts into every shot is a pleasure in itself. And his keenness is essentially for the game of golf rather than his own game of golf. He gets just as pleased and excited when his opponent hits the ball properly as when he himself puts an iron shot dead or holes a long putt.

If anything, rather more so. To play a round with anyone of so large-hearted and ingenuous a nature is a very rare privilege, for such a round is not only a pleasure at the time, but has the quality of sticking in the memory as an experience worth while.

John Henry is in many ways a remarkable advertisement for golf. He has long since established himself as the unofficial leader and spokesman

of his brother professionals in Great Britain, where the whole golfing world looks up to him as the model of what a golf professional should be. When he speaks—and a most eloquent public speaker he is—it is with the voice of recognized authority. And no wonder! He has thought well, read well and lived well. His integrity is beyond reproach, and he has the courage of his convictions. So that when the weight of his opinions is backed by the sonorous rhetoric and emphasis of gesture which he employs, it is not surprising that his remarks are treated with respect.

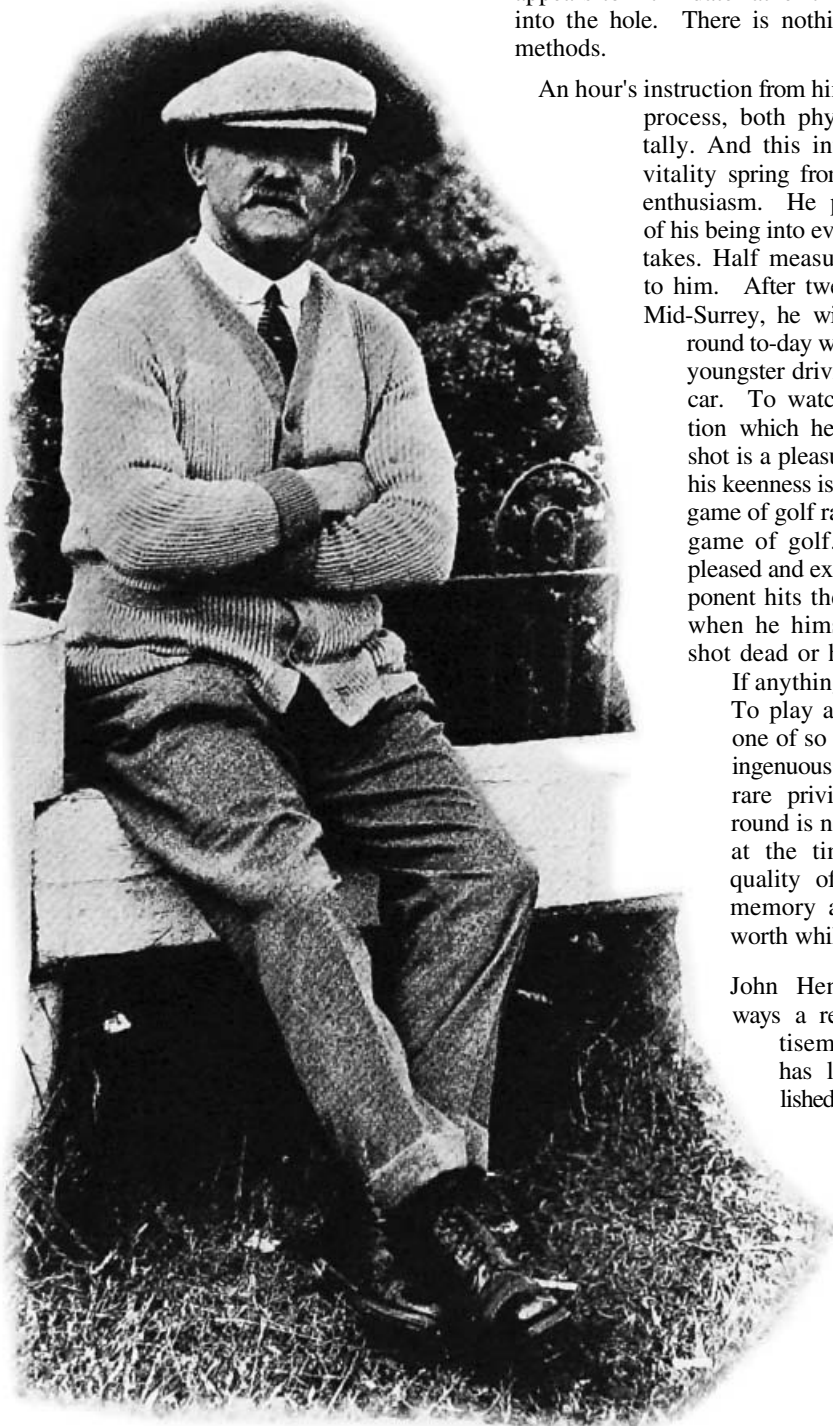
It is quite impossible to picture him taking a back seat; locally, nationally and internationally he is a commanding figure. Physically, too, he is a striking advertisement for the game. Looking at his robust frame and healthy features to-day, it is difficult to realize that as a lad he was rejected as unfit for the Navy. Born in seafaring Devon of seafaring stock, it was his early ambition to lead a sailor's life. Health denying him, he became one of the world's greatest golfers instead.

He learned the game at the Royal North Devon Golf Club, Westward Ho!, which he and many others of us still consider the finest course that ever existed. At all events it was a wonderful training ground for accuracy, and the Atlantic gales forced him at an early age to cultivate the control for which he has since become famous. From a caddie at Westward Ho! he graduated to Burnham in Somerset, where he was for a time employed as assistant professional and greenkeeper. Not long after, he began to make his mark in the golfing world, and he came to London as professional to the Mid-Surrey Club at Richmond, where he has remained ever since.

During that time he has won five British Open Championships and gathered laurels all over Europe and in America as well. He has developed a large business as a clubmaker, and has also devoted his knowledge and experience to golf architecture. He writes for newspapers, and is in great demand as a public speaker. More important still, he has endeared himself to the members of his club, who fittingly expressed their feelings towards him when they elected him an honorary life member. To them Mid-Surrey without John Henry would be unthinkable. The club would be shorn of half its personality.

To his friends he is something much more than the hero of scores of memorable encounters. He stands for everything in the game which the true lover of golf would wish to cultivate. He is a good loser, a good winner, the most chivalrous and generous of opponents, the most appreciative admirer of his rivals, a great fighter against odds—in short, a real sportsman. Highly strung and nervous, he needs to be keyed up to high tension to bring out the best in him. Then he looks more grim and determined than ever, and the peak of his cap is pulled yet lower over his eyes.

On one occasion he had a few holes to play and needed something like par to tie with the leader of the field, no one else being in the running. An old friend, who was himself a fine golfer, came and told him that the leader had just finished the last round, and asked whether (*Continued on page 46*)



John Henry Taylor, otherwise "J. H." of Mid-Surrey, five-times winner of the British Open Championship, as he appears to-day at the age of fifty-six

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(Continued from page 30)

he ("J. H.") would like to know what he had to do to win. The great man said "Do you think I ought to know?" to which his friend replied "Yes". Whereupon, he settled down heroically to his task and came in a winner by a short head. But without that knowledge I doubt if he could have done it. His temperament requires some such spur to raise him to the supreme heights.

Always a courageous player, he cannot adopt a mental attitude which tries to save as many strokes as possible. He wants to gain them. He hates to play safe. It is the back of the cup every time with him. On the tees, through the fairway, on the greens, he hits the ball, never hits at it. Incidentally, he was probably the first great player who discarded the old gentlemanly swing for a good honest blow. Today that punch in the shot is universal, but in the nineties it was rank heresy until J. H. Taylor came along and exploded the old theories.

A great deal has been written about the master's famous "cut-shot" with the mashie. As a matter of fact, "J. H." puts no more "stop" or "back-spin" on his shots than anybody else, and probably very much less than a player like Kirkwood. Of course he was always a wonderfully fine wielder of the mashie, but I doubt whether he ever played it as accurately as Vardon. In my opinion, there are just two reasons which have made him the great player that he is. One is the control which makes him invariably straight, due to the fact that he never, never underclubs himself or presses. And the other, even more important still, is the courage which takes him eight times out of ten past the pin with mashie or putter.

That is the true secret of his skill at the short game. Bold and firm, and consequently always up and giving the hole a chance. Those are the lessons we can get from "J. H.", and I suppose ninety-nine out of every hundred of us are in need of these two great lessons more than anything else. "Hit the ball well within yourself, and al-

ways be up" is the master's motto, and it is so elementary that most of us forget clean about it in a pinch.

One more point, which is wrapt up with what I have just indicated. Watch "J. H.'s" head when he plays a shot. You could almost swear that he hasn't raised it until the ball actually pitches. After years of practice which have evolved a swing of mechanical accuracy capable of functioning perfectly even if he were blindfolded, he considers that he cannot afford to lift his head for any shot in the game.