

THE DEFINING MOMENT: THE 1951 U. S. OPEN

By Richard Howting

Part II

It took nearly four hours to get Ben Hogan to the Hotel Dieu Hospital in El Paso after his collision on February 2, 1949. Once he was there, however, things began looking up and he improved steadily over the next couple of weeks. In fact, the doctors had approved his going home when, on February 18, Hogan experienced sharp pains in his chest. X-rays revealed that a blood clot had travelled from his injured left leg to his right lung. It was quickly determined that he would require surgery to prevent other clots from entering his arteries and threatening his life.

An intrusive two hour operation cut through Hogan's abdomen and nearly all the way through his body to tie off his inferior vena cava (the main blood vessel that returns blood from the lower body) and stop the clots. Although the operation had done its job, Hogan's doctors cautioned that he would be lucky to walk again without assistance, and, they added, he would most certainly suffer from persistent swelling and pain in both legs for the rest of his life. As for golf, all bets were off.

On April 1, Hogan went home to Fort Worth. He immediately developed a daily exercise regimen and pushed his convalescence ahead as quickly as he could. Before the end of May he shocked the USGA by mailing in his entry form for the 1949 U. S. Open at Medinah. He wanted to defend the title he had won the year before at Riviera (and won with a record breaking 276). Unfortunately, by the time of the Open, Hogan was still very shaky on his legs, had a limited range of motion in his swing, and couldn't even see as well as he had before the accident. There was simply no way he could get to Medinah.

Someone who did get to Medinah wasn't there to play in the Open, but to observe the players, measure their tee shots, and determine whether or not the travelling distance of the modern ball was increasing. This was the golf architect, Robert Trent Jones.

Jones had done this before, in 1940, at the U. S. Open at Canterbury, where, on the second day, the average drive for the field had measured 253.4 yards. His report from Medinah appeared in the August edition of *USGA Journal*: "According

to our statistics," Jones said, "there is an increase of seven yards in the length of the average drive between the test made in 1940 at Canterbury and the test made in 1949 at Medinah."

Although Jones article didn't draw any conclusions about how the increasing distance of the ball was changing the game, he definitely had strongly held ideas about dealing with this technological advance -- and very shortly he'd have the opportunity to put his ideas to work.

On September 27, 1949, Oakland Hills' Green Committee Chairman John Oswald reported to the board of directors on some preliminary plans submitted by Trent Jones for modernizing the south course. A discussion ensued that lasted for some time, but with the Open over a year and a half away no one seemed to be in much of a hurry. The meeting wrapped up with an agreement to pay Jones \$750 for his efforts. It was noted in the minutes that any further costs would have to be approved by the board at a later date.

After the accident, there were a number of permanent changes in Hogan: he now suffered from chronic pain in his back and behind his shoulder blade; he couldn't get through a round of golf without aching and swelling in his legs; sight in his left eye was severely restricted; and, overall, he'd lost the energy and stamina he'd had before the accident. He would never be able to return to his old tournament schedule, his body simply couldn't take it. But there were a handful of tournaments he'd never miss if he could help it, chief among them was the U. S. Open.

In June of 1950, Hogan returned to the Open – being held at Merion. His first two rounds (72, 69) were solid enough to put him just two strokes off the lead, but in the second round, serious pain had erupted in his legs that wouldn't leave him for the remainder of the tournament. Playing 36 holes on Saturday was an excruciating labor. In the final round Hogan took it pretty much stroke by stroke over the last seven holes wondering if he'd make it to the finish – as the three stroke lead he had painfully built, evaporated. His famous one iron into the 18th green saved him par on the hole and put him in a three-way tie with Lloyd Mangrum and George Fazio at 287. The next day's playoff was anticlimactic with Hogan's 69 besting Mangrum by 4 strokes and Fazio by 6.

Many had wondered if Hogan would be able to play again after his accident and, even if he could, would he be able to stand up to the physical demands of tournament golf in his weakened condition? His performance at Merion answered these questions. It wasn't simply a golfing triumph, but a tremendous triumph of will and physical determination. And Hogan wasn't simply back in tournament golf, he was back as one of the greatest golfers in the world.

While all the drama was unfolding at Merion, Oakland Hills was getting ready for the next National Open.

John Oswald and the green committee met with Trent Jones in June of 1950 to examine clay models of the changes to the greens Jones was recommending. These changes had little to do with any modifications to Ross's famed undulations. For the most part, Jones merely wanted to add a wing here or there to enlarge a target and allow for additional pin positions. Nevertheless, Oswald cautioned Jones that nothing should be done that would make the course any easier for the pros.

Meanwhile, John O'Hara, the club's general chairman for the Open, was doing his best to direct the board of directors. He told them that the club needed to work closely with John Ames, the USGA's tournament chairman, to make certain that the USGA didn't allow tee or pin positions during the Open that were too easy.

On August 15, John Oswald finally took Trent Jones before the board to pitch the changes they wanted to make to the course. They began by explaining that the work they were proposing was necessary to counter the advantages of modern, power golf. Ross's 1917 course was designed for wooden shafts, a smaller more volatile ball, and a bag that carried no sand wedge. It was designed for a game of significantly less distance and accuracy. Now, professional golfers were driving the ball 260-plus yards. They employed steel-shafted clubs and larger balls that allowed for much greater control. The old Ross bunkers 200 to 220 yards from the tee were of no consequence. And the unprotected entrances to the greens made little demand on accuracy. What Jones and Oswald proposed was "double target" golf created by a relocation of bunkers 230 to 270 yards out, drawn in much more tightly to the driving zone. And additional bunkering closer to the greens to drastically restrict entrance areas.

After a long discussion, the board gave Jones the charge to prepare specific, detailed plans reflecting the recommendations he and Oswald had made. On September 6, the board met again to consider the plans they had received from Jones. To quote from the board minutes: "After extended discussion of the proposals and the cost thereof, it was moved, seconded and unanimously carried, that Mr. Jones be engaged to perform the work in accordance with the plans as submitted – at a cost not to exceed \$14,000 exclusive of the incidental work to be performed by the Club's own staff."

At a board meeting at the Recess Club five days after Thanksgiving, John Oswald was able to give a hole-by-hole description of the work that had been done. What little work remained, he concluded, would be finished in the Spring in plenty of time for the course to be in good shape for the National Open.

To be continued.