

## THE DEFINING MOMENT: THE 1951 U. S. OPEN

By Richard Howting

### Part III

In the fall of 1950 work on the course began. The word spread like wildfire that Oakland Hills, the USGA, and Trent Jones were preparing the most difficult test of golf that the U. S. Open had ever seen. By December, the complaints and criticisms of professional golfers across the country became so extreme that the USGA put a halt to the renovation work. The Jones plan was then reviewed in full and in detail. Satisfied with everything they saw, the USGA gave the go ahead and work continued. The complaints of the pros, however, also continued.

From September of 1950 through the spring of 1951, Trent Jones modernized Oakland Hills' south course. He took a basically old fashioned Donald Ross design and updated it for modern championship golf of the highest caliber, that is, U. S. Open golf. He removed some 80 Ross bunkers that were no longer in play for the professional. He rebuilt the remaining old bunkers and added new bunkering to every hole. In total, the south course went from just under ninety bunkers to just over 120. He narrowed the fairways, particularly in the driving zone, where he tightly sprinkled many of those new bunkers. On holes 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11 and 18 sand hugged both sides of the fairway. With some of his bunkers he either eliminated or severely tightened entrances to the greens. On the fifteenth hole, he filled in all the old fairway bunkers and replaced them with a single bunker – in the dead center of the driving zone. On the sixteenth hole, he nudged the green slightly to the right to occupy a new peninsula of land he had built in the pond, creating a more precarious target for approach shots. He reduced the yardage on 8 and 18 from 491 and 537 yards respectively (as they had played in the '37 Open) to 458 and 459 yards, and he reduced them from par 5s to 4s. But of all the changes he made, perhaps the most severe came as an unintended consequence. To help shore up the edges of his newly built bunkers and prevent erosion, the construction crews had overseeded the areas with rye grass. The idea was that it would grow in fast and thick and hold everything in place. And it did. It grew in very fast and very thick. And it held everything very firmly in place – including golf balls.

For the Open, the course would play at 6,927 yards – 110 yards shorter than 1937. Par was cut from 72 to 70.

On March 30, 1951 Oakland Hills' president, Ferry Allen; tournament general chairman, John O'Hara; green committee chairman, John Oswald; and club professional, Al Watrous, hosted USGA president, Jim Standish; executive secretary, Joe Dey; and championship chairman, John Ames for a review of the changes that had been made to the course. Although some of the work was still in progress, the USGA officials were more than pleased with what they saw, they could head off to England for the Walker Cup matches in April with every confidence that Oakland Hills would be ready for the National Open in June.

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As time for the tournament drew closer, the curious began showing up to see for themselves what Trent Jones had wrought.

Gene Sarazen played a few rounds on the revamped layout in May. "It's the greatest test of golf I've seen in a long time," he said, "definitely one of the best in the country." Byron Nelson was likewise enthusiastic when he visited, "This is the way an Open course should be. It isn't the fearful, tricky thing I'd heard about, but a fair and honest course that will force a man to both play well and think well if he plans on winning."

But Sarazen was past his prime, and Nelson had retired from tournament golf. It was easy for them to talk. When the contestants began showing up for practice rounds, many of the comments weren't so kind. Sam Snead, who had been facetiously picked by Hogan to win the upcoming Open, had plenty to say. "This is by far the toughest course for any Open I've played in. If this tournament wasn't the National Open, there wouldn't be many players sticking around this course." Thinking back fourteen years to the Open he had almost won, Snead added, "There is no resemblance now to the course as it played in 1937." Finally, as if resigned to his fate, Snead concluded, "This place is a nightmare now. But then we might as well get used to it. We've got to play it, but we don't have to like it."

Oddly enough, John Walter reported in the *Detroit News* two days later that ". . . Snead had completed. . . 72 holes of practice with a score of 281, identical to Ralph Guldahl's record-breaking winning total in the 1937 Open when Oakland Hills got an unmerciful beating."

Ben Hogan was no more enamored with what he saw than Snead was. "I've never been on a course in all my life that I couldn't figure out some way to play," he said, "Usually, two rounds are enough. I've played five rounds here and I still

don't know the correct way to play Oakland Hills." Like Snead, Hogan's practice rounds seemed to belie the sincerity of his comments. In one round, for example, Hogan shot a 69, and that was after missing a six foot birdie putt on 18.

Of all the contestants who were gathering that second week of June, Claude Harmon probably came closest to expressing what Trent Jones had tried to accomplish with his changes. "This is a real test of golf," Harmon said, "On most courses the long driver sprays and recovers. Here he pays a penalty." When asked what he thought the winning score would be, Harmon figured 288. Trent Jones himself had told everyone: "If the winning score is 286 or higher, we will have accomplished our objective."

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On Thursday, June 14, the National Open began. In the field of 162, the favorites were defending champion Ben Hogan; perennial Open bridesmaid, Sam Snead; two-time British Open champion, South African, Bobby Locke; the 1946 Open champion who had also tied Hogan at Merion, Lloyd Mangrum; the 1949 Open champion, Cary Middlecoff; three time Masters champion, Jimmy Demaret; and Argentine, Roberto DeVicenzo.

As he left the locker room for the first tee, Hogan took a final shot at the adversary he was about to face, "If I had to play this damn course every week," he said, "I'd get into a new business." And on the first nine holes of the tournament, he played like he should find a new business: bogey 5, birdie 4, bogey 4, bogey 5, par 4, bogey 5, par 4, bogey 5, par 3. A four over par 39. He played the back nine better, but not by much, coming in with a two over par 37 (445 254 436) for a round of 76. Disgusted, Hogan told reporters his 76 was "(t)he most stupid round of golf I ever played."

The leader after the first round was Sam Snead. He'd played the front in one under par 34 (444 443 443) and had matched Hogan's 37 on the back (544 236 544) for a one over total of 71. Second place was shared by local pro, Al Besselink, and Clayton Heafner at 72. Of the favorites, the only one, other than Snead, to make the top ten was Bobby Locke who was tied at fourth with a 73.

Not a single player had managed to break par. Not a single player had even managed to match par. In fact, of the 162 contestants, 59 of the world's greatest

golfers had shot 80 or over. The average score for the field worked out to 78.4.

One of the spectators on hand for the first round was Walter Hagen –Oakland Hills' first pro and the winner of eleven majors including two U. S. Opens. As he considered the situation, Hagen told reporters, "I think the course is playing the golfers, instead of the golfers playing the course."

Also on hand was a lesser known spectator, a West Virginian amateur golfer by the name of Bill Campbell who had closely followed Hogan through that first round disaster. In his biography of Hogan, James Dodson quotes Campbell as follows: "I got the distinct feeling watching (Hogan) that week that his battle with Oakland Hills was something very personal, almost a blood feud for Ben." Merion, said Campbell, was about proving Hogan still had what it took to win major golf tournaments. But "(m)any people were saying Oakland Hills, with all the Draconian changes, was simply beyond even Hogan's abilities. It became a contest within a contest for Ben – something he had to accomplish because no one thought he could possibly do it."

**To be continued.**

