

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

By Richard Howting

### Part IV

"I made six mistakes and shot six over," Hogan said after his first round 76, "You can't steal anything out there." It seemed Hogan's assessment was pretty accurate. Round one was over: No one under par. No one at par. 59 players at 80 or over. There wasn't a lot to be happy about for the golfers, but Oakland Hills' green committee chairman, John Oswald, was taking it all in with a great sense of satisfaction. He had told USGA executive secretary, Joe Dey, that the Open was just too treasured a title for anyone to simply walk away with, he thought it was the duty of the host course to be so difficult that the prize was nearly beyond the reach of any man. And now it appeared that with the aid of Trent Jones, Oswald had gotten his wish.

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Friday, round two, was hot and humid. On the front nine, Hogan improved on his first round 39 with a 37 (343 554 454). On the back, he also bettered his previous day's 37 with a 36 (455 345 334), for a total of 73. Certainly better than his opening 76, but nothing that was going to put him in contention.

First round leader Sam Snead followed his opening day 71 with a calamitous 78, including a back nine 40 (556 244 455). He whined that poorly raked bunkers had cost him four shots. He, Hogan, and Lloyd Mangrum now found themselves tied in sixteenth place at the halfway mark with 149s. The new leader was South African, Bobby Locke, who had followed his opening 73 with a 71 for a 144 two round total. No one had yet broken par, but Dave Douglas and Johnny Bulla were the first in the tournament to match par with 70s, putting Douglas in second place at 145. Alone in third place was amateur Bo Wininger at 146. Clayton Heafner, Paul Runyon, and Lew Worsham were among those who followed at 147. The average score per round for the field after two days was 77.

That evening, a friend who was with Hogan and his wife, Valerie, tried to find something hopeful to say. "You know, Ben, a couple of sixty-nines could take it tomorrow." Hogan smiled, "I'm afraid it's out of reach." In fact, Hogan had already been running the numbers through his mind earlier that afternoon. He'd decided that a pair of seventies just might do it. "A couple of good rounds and I

can catch them yet," he told the *Grand Rapids Herald*. "I've been lacking my power of concentration. . . I figure two par rounds will put me up in there." But he wasn't really convinced that he could shoot those par rounds. If he sounded optimistic one moment, he sounded pessimistic the next. "I'd have to be Houdini to win now," he told one group of reporters, "I'd need 140, and how can anyone shoot 140 on *that* course?"

Hogan's conflicted feelings went right to his inability to figure Oakland Hills out. As he'd reported during his practice rounds, he could usually figure out how to play a course after just two rounds, but he hadn't been able to figure out Oakland Hills in five. And now, after the first two rounds of the tournament, he was no better off.

Hogan had always believed in control and accuracy on a golf course. He believed that there should be room to jockey off the tee – room to place your drive for a proper approach to the pin. In his book, *The U. S. Open*, Robert Sommers offers this example: "When the hole is cut on the left side of the green, with bunkers guarding the direct approach, the smart golfer will try to drive to the right side and set up a better shot at the pin – not at the green but at the pin. He gambles that by playing close to the right border of the fairway he'll have a clear shot at the hole. (Hogan) claimed he couldn't do this at Oakland Hills."

At Oakland Hills Hogan saw fairways that were so narrow and so heavily guarded by sand and rough that a player had no choice but to aim for the dead center of the fairway. He felt, in fact, that the golfer had to hit a smaller target off the tee than with his approach to the green. Although this was a bit of an exaggeration on Hogan's part, Trent Jones had, in truth, made the drive zone a much more restricted target. The implements of golf had been much improved over the years. The pros were now hitting balls much farther and with much greater accuracy. To properly test the skills of the world's greatest golfers, Jones thought that putting them on a golf course designed for hickory shafts was ridiculous. Thus, his concept of target golf was designed to discover which golfers could exercise enough control to consistently place their shots with precision in the drive zone and on the green, and, as a result, reap the benefits – while those who sprayed their shots would suffer penalties.

In short, Jones's modern design philosophy was all about control and accuracy. The irony was that of all the golfers playing in the 1951 U. S. Open, this philosophy suited one golfer more than any other: Ben Hogan.

Hogan had played his first two rounds defensively. He'd played a game of second guessing and searching for safe shots. It hadn't worked. As he soaked his swollen, tired legs in the bath Friday night, he came to a decision about Oakland Hills. It was time to attack.

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Open Saturday meant 36 holes – the final two rounds in one day. Under normal conditions it was a trial of physical endurance, nerves, and skill, but under the conditions that prevailed on June 16, 1951 it was something beyond what the golf world had ever witnessed in a U. S. Open – something more like a pressure cooker, wherein endurance, nerves, and skill were all jumbled up with the toughest venue ever experienced in a U. S. Open, and the largest crowd. Some 17,500 golf fans were gathering at Oakland Hills, all curious to see if the talented Bobby Locke, already in possession of two Claret Jugs, would become the first foreigner since Ted Ray to take the U. S. title abroad, or if, in spite of his first two rounds, Ben Hogan could find a way to successfully defend his title.

As the third round progressed, Hogan's decision to attack reaped immediate benefits. He ripped into the front nine with birdie 3 on the first followed by birdie 4, par 3, par 4, and a birdie 3 on the difficult fifth. On six, par 4. Then, on seven, he put his drive into the creek and had to settle for a bogie 5. But he immediately recovered with a spectacular birdie 3 on the long, uphill eighth. He finished the front with a par 3 on nine for an incredible 32 – the best nine hole total of the tournament. As word spread, the crowds moved quickly over the course and Hogan's gallery grew.

On the back, things seemed to simmer down a bit: par 4, par 4, par 5, par 3. Nothing spectacular, but everything was steady. And then on fourteen, a hole he had trouble with, he chipped poorly for a bogey 5, same as his first round. Fifteen caused even more trouble. Trying to avoid the bunker in the center of the fairway, Hogan ran his drive into the long rough on the right. On his approach, his club snagged and sent his shot across the fairway short of the green into more rough. On his third shot, the ball plugged in a greenside bunker. He got out of the sand but missed his putt and headed to the next tee with a double bogey 6. He valiantly attacked sixteen, placing his approach shot within five feet of a cup that was cut close to the pond. The crowd cheered, but he didn't make the putt and had to settle for a par 4. On seventeen he ran into more bad luck, taking a bogey 4 after missing a short four-footer. He finished the back with a par 4 at

eighteen for 39 and a round of 71. Again, he had improved on his previous round. In fact, through three rounds of the tournament, only three other scores—all 70s—were better than 71. But still, a 71 wasn't much consolation after a front nine 32.

Hogan felt that he'd squandered his chance. He marched off to the clubhouse in disgust. According to James Dodson, Hogan took an aspirin and drank a ginger ale, then he joined Valerie for a small lunch of cold roast beef and bouillon soup.

After three rounds, Bobby Locke was still in the lead. He'd shot 37 on each side for a 74 and a three round total of 218. Jimmy Demaret with a 70 (36 on the front and 34 on the back) had the best third round and was now the co-leader with Locke at 218. Paul Runyon and Julius Boros were at 219. Tied for fifth at 220 were Hogan, Dave Douglas, and Clayton Heafner. Hogan had moved from five strokes back to within two of the leaders.

No one knows if it was the aspirin, the bouillon, or, perhaps, the reassuring conversation with his wife, but when he arrived at the first tee for his final round of the 1951 U. S. Open, the normally taciturn Ben Hogan turned to USGA Rules Committee Chairman Ike Grainger with the composure of a man who has nothing to lose, "I'm going to burn it up, Ike."

**Concludes next month.**

