

THE DEFINING MOMENT: THE 1951 U. S. OPEN

By Richard Howting

Part V

On Open Saturday, Hogan's morning round had begun birdie 3, birdie 4, par 3. His final round began with considerably less panache: par 4, par 5, and a bogie 4 as the result of a 2-iron into a back bunker on the third hole. Over the next few holes he could manage no better than three par 4s. This certainly wasn't the way he had hoped to "burn it up." On the seventh hole he grabbed a stroke back with a two wood off the tee (to avoid the creek), a seven iron to the green, and a two-foot putt for a birdie 3. With pars at eight and nine, he finished the front at even par 35.

Then Ben caught fire.

On ten, he hit his tee shot just over 260 yards right down the middle. Next, he sent a low fade into the green with his 2-iron. That 2-iron shot was when everything clicked. "It was my best shot of the tournament," he would later say. "It went exactly as I played it, every inch of the way." It came to rest within four feet of the pin. He sank the putt. He was one under.

On eleven he had a par 4, on twelve, a par 5. On the par 3 thirteenth, he put a 6-iron fourteen feet from the flag and knocked it in the cup. He was two under.

Fourteen had not been Hogan's lucky hole. He'd bogied it in rounds one and three. This time he sent his 3-iron approach over the green. He chipped on with his wedge but missed the putt and, once again, bogied. He walked off the green visibly angered. He was back to one under.

Fifteen was the hole he'd double bogied in the morning round. Having just bogied fourteen he couldn't afford to lose another stroke. He took out his three wood, or maybe his four, there's some disagreement, in any event, he stayed out of the fairway bunker and the rough and then nearly holed a 6-iron that stopped within six feet of the pin. He sank it. A birdie 3. Back to two under.

On sixteen, he sent his drive all the way to the water's edge. Then he launched a 9-iron that dropped four feet from the hole. He was all set up for another birdie, just the way he had been in his morning round, and just like the morning round, he missed the putt. Still two under.

He had bogied seventeen in the morning round. But not now. Carefully, he placed a 1-iron on the green, took two putts to secure his par 3, and headed to the final hole.

And now, a few things need to be said about eighteen: Together with number eight, this was one of two holes Trent Jones had shortened from a par 5 into an impressively difficult par 4. At 459 yards, eighteen was the longest par 4 on the course. Complaints about it began just as soon as practice rounds began. Some said the driving zone was unfair because it fell away to the left as the hole doglegged right. Some thought the bunkering excessive – six bunkers tightly framed the driving zone and several more reduced the green entrance to a few yards. Some claimed that the green wasn't designed to receive the long approach shot that the hole demanded as a par 4. Most simply believed that the hole should remain a par 5 and that it was all but impossible as a par 4. Some were even willing to consider unorthodox methods to deal with eighteen.

During a practice round about eight days before the tournament began, Walter Burkemo, a former assistant pro at Oakland Hills, was spotted on the eighteenth tee trying to determine if there might be an advantage to playing backwards down the tenth fairway to the eighteenth green. This path could dodge a lot of bunkering and save a few yards by avoiding eighteen's dogleg. News of this sent Oakland Hills' tournament general chairman John O'Hara, green committee chairman John Oswald, green keepers Herb Shave and Forest Acton, and Trent Jones into frantic action. On June 7th, golfers were greeted by something new when they got to the eighteenth: three large pine trees next to the tee now blocked any access to an alternate route down ten.

On the tee of the 72nd hole, Hogan knew he was a stroke ahead of his 140 goal for the final two rounds. Parring in would give him 288, that, he thought, should wrap-up the championship. But he had something in mind beyond the championship. Herbert Warren Wind, the great golf journalist and historian followed Hogan on that last day. "He was so purposeful," Wind recalled, "I've never seen a man who was so determined. He made playing Oakland Hills a personal matter." And so it was a personal matter. Winning the tournament was one thing, but proving that he could subdue Oakland Hills –that this impossible course was not beyond his abilities— *that* was the real contest.

Hogan hit his drive just as hard as he could and sent it sailing over the dogleg and all the fairway bunkers. He had only a 6-iron left to the green. The ball came to

rest pin high about fifteen feet from the hole. He spent several minutes lining it up, then he stood over it for nearly half a minute before tapping it downhill. Dead silence was followed by a deafening roar as the ball fell in the cup. A birdie 3, a back nine 32, a round of 67, a tournament total of 287.

Out on the course, Bobby Locke and Clayton Heafner heard the cheering coming from eighteen. "That took the starch out of the rest of us," Locke would comment later. When informed that Hogan had shot 67, Locke just shook his head, "Did he play every hole?"

How great a round was Hogan's 67? In his book, *The U. S. Open*, Robert Sommers says there have been other great finishes, he cites Gene Sarazen's 66 at Fresh Meadow in 1932, Arnold Palmer's 65 at Cherry Hills in 1960, the 65 by Jack Nicklaus at Baltusrol in 1967, and Johnny Miller's 63 at Oakmont in 1973. He claims that none of these compared to Hogan's 67 at Oakland Hills: "Sarazen, Palmer, and Nicklaus played their great finishing rounds over easier courses. . . and Miller made most of his birdies before he realized he was in position to win. Hogan shot his magnificent round over a brutal golf course knowing he needed just such a score to win." He goes on to add, "If anyone had clung to the belief that Hogan was anything less than the best of his time, they were convinced now."

With Locke and Heafner playing ninety and sixty minutes behind him respectively, Hogan headed to the clubhouse to clean up and wait. On his way, he was approached by Lone Jones, Trent's wife, who had followed him most of the day. "Ben," she said, "I'm so proud of you. You must be very pleased with the way you played." Hogan stopped and stared at her. "Mrs. Jones," he said flatly, "if your husband had to play the courses he designs for a living, you'd be on the breadline."

Speaking to some thirty-five reporters who swarmed around him in the locker room, Hogan reflected on his round: "Under the circumstances," he said, "it was the greatest round I ever played. I think too, this is the hardest course I've ever played. I haven't played them all and I don't want to if there are any tougher than this one."

On the course, Locke stumbled and eventually finished with a disappointing 73 (37 on the front, 36 on the back). Only Heafner had had any real hope to catch Hogan, and he'd certainly given it his best shot, firing a spectacular final round 69

(35 front, 34 back), the only subpar round of the tournament other than Hogan's 67. But it was too little, too late. After his round, he saw Hogan in the locker room. "Congratulations, Ben." Hogan smiled, "Thanks, Clayton. How'd you do?" Imagine, Heafner was still on the course with an hour to play when Hogan had finished, one would think that Hogan might have been concerned with his opponent's pursuit, but evidently not. All he had to say was: "Thanks, Clayton. How'd you do?" It simply didn't seem to occur to Hogan that anyone else might have had a chance to win.

In the end, Hogan's 287 (76, 73, 71, 67) won by two strokes. Heafner was runner-up with a 289 (72, 75, 73, 69) and Locke was third with 291 (73, 71, 74, 73). Lloyd Mangrum and Julius Boros tied for fourth with 293s. Al Besselink, Paul Runyon, Fred Hawkins, and Dave Douglas tied for sixth with 294s. Sam Snead, who had led after the first round, was one of four players tied for tenth with 295. The field averaged 75.2 for the final round and 77.2 for the tournament.

The award ceremony was held in front of the Oakland Hills swimming pool. John O'Hara, representing the host club, said a few words. USGA president Jim Standish presented a plaque to Oakland Hills' president Ferry Allen, who also said a few words. Runner-up, Clayton Heafner, and low amateur, Chuck Kocsis (who'd shot 297), were introduced and congratulated. Finally, Standish presented the gold medal, the silver trophy, and the \$4,000 winner's check to Ben Hogan and Ben was asked to say a few words. Hogan told the crowd that his victory would not have been possible if it had not been for the help of others. Never forgetting his own days as a young caddie, his first thanks went to a beaming Dave Press, the 14-year-old from Hazel Park who'd been on his bag throughout the tournament. When the thank yous were over, Hogan became more reflective and summed up his feelings about the tournament with those few deathless words that have become more famous than any victory speech in the history of the U. S. Open: "I'm glad I brought this course, *this monster*, to its knees."

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The 1951 U. S. Open was one of those star-crossed moments when people, places, and events come together to create a defining moment. In this case the people were Ben Hogan and Trent Jones. The place was Oakland Hills. And the event was the U. S. Open.

While Merion had offered proof that Hogan still had what it took to win major golf tournaments –that he was still one of the best golfers in the world— Oakland Hills went beyond this, offering proof that Hogan could take on any golf challenge. After the '51 Open, Ben Hogan wasn't simply seen as one of the greatest golfers of his day, but as the greatest golfer alive – perhaps the greatest golfer who'd ever lived.

Before his work at Oakland Hills, Robert Trent Jones had long been a successful golf architect, but Oakland Hills changed his life and, indeed, changed the role of the golf architect. After the '51 Open, Jones went on to become the most successful golf architect of all time, building over 400 courses and renovating nearly every famous U. S. Open venue. As the "Open Doctor" he became the first architect who was as big a personality as the pros.

Before 1951, Oakland Hills had twice been a U. S. Open venue and was commonly considered one of Donald Ross's finest courses, but the changes that Trent Jones made, resulted in Oakland Hills becoming one of the most famous golf courses in the world – becoming not simply "The Monster," but the first modern championship golf course. After the '51 Open, golf championships and the courses upon which they were played would never be the same.

For Ben Hogan, Trent Jones, and Oakland Hills, the 1951 U. S. Open was the great defining moment. This year is the sixtieth anniversary of that moment.

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Postscript

The day after the tournament, John O'Hara discovered Trent Jones out on the course with a measuring wheel, taking note of the actual yardages each hole had played the final day. "They took the fairway bunkers on eighteen out of play," he said to O'Hara, "They moved the tees up." The irony of this wasn't lost on O'Hara. Oakland Hills had waited fourteen years for this championship – from 1937 to 1951. The whole reason for the course renovation had been to toughen things up, a major part of which had been relocating bunkers to the driving zones. And the eighteenth hole. . .well, the eighteenth was the ultimate test. O'Hara didn't say anything, he just shrugged and headed back toward the clubhouse. He didn't think he'd mention any of this to John Oswald.

