

2014

Arnie, Seve, and a Fleck of Golf History

Bill Fields

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Fields, Bill, "Arnie, Seve, and a Fleck of Golf History" (2014). *University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters*. 279.
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ARNIE, SEVE, AND A FLECK OF GOLF HISTORY

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ARNIE, SEVE, AND A FLECK OF GOLF HISTORY

Heroes, Underdogs, Courses,
and Championships

BILL FIELDS

FOREWORD BY BEN CRENSHAW

University of Nebraska Press • Lincoln & London

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Chapters 1–30 originally appeared in *Golf World*, 1994–2011,
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fields, Bill.

Arnie, Seve, and a fleck of golf history: heroes, underdogs,
courses, and championships / Bill Fields; foreword by Ben
Crenshaw.

pages cm

Summary: "Candid profiles and informed observations on
golf by one of the sport's best living writers"—Provided by
publisher.

ISBN 978-0-8032-4880-9 (paperback: alk. paper)—

ISBN 978-0-8032-5526-5 (pdf)—ISBN 978-0-8032-5527-2 (epub)

ISBN 978-0-8032-5528-9 (mobi) 1. Golf—Anecdotes.

2. Golfers—Anecdotes. I. Title.

GV967.F53 2014

796.352—dc23

2013047891

Set in Scala by Renni Johnson.

For Juanita H. Fields
and
in memory of Gene Fields (1920–1980)

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FOREWORD

It is with pleasure—and it's an honor—to write a few words about Bill Fields and his talented prose. I have always loved golf history, for it is rich with people and places and the famous battlefields where many important events and milestones have occurred.

Bill writes about a wide variety of that history in this collection of some of his best stories. One happens to be about amateur Francis Ouimet's historic victory in the 1913 U.S. Open at The Country Club near Boston against British titans Harry Vardon and Ted Ray. It was The Country Club where I traveled in 1968 to compete in the U.S. Junior Amateur, an experience that heightened my interest in the sport's past.

There is a broad mix of subjects in this anthology. Bill's portraits of Sam Snead, Byron Nelson, and Ben Hogan illuminate America's great triumvirate born a century ago. His profiles of Jimmy Demaret, Billy Joe Patton, and Bert Yancey speak to the rich characters who have inhabited our game. He writes revealingly about the unique putting challenge at Augusta National Golf Club, where generations of champions have tried to solve those baffling greens.

There are very few writers whose words reflect the research and love and sensitivity that Bill's do. They can run the full gamut of

heartbreak, pure elation, sadness, and joy, but, in the end, this is the maddening and life-giving game that we all enjoy. Bill's stories have always provided the reader with rich detail, enveloped in a humanizing way that is distinctly his. In sum, to paraphrase the great Bob Jones, who said of golf, "It is the type of game that burns inwardly and sears the soul," so it is with Bill's considerable efforts.

Ben Crenshaw

Austin, Texas

July 15, 2013

INTRODUCTION

When I was fourteen, I met a friendly, fast-talking writer-editor-photographer for *Golf World* magazine named Michael Dann, not long out of the University of Illinois. He was giving free golf lessons for the recreation department at a field not far from my house in Southern Pines, North Carolina, where the magazine was based for many years.

Mike was a good golfer, and, as I would soon find out when we became friends, he had a great job. It seemed even better than being on press row at Atlantic Coast Conference basketball games, which to that juncture had been my career objective if the professional golfer thing didn't pan out.

He traveled the country—even the globe—covering golf tournaments and writing profiles about people in the game. As a teenager, I had no idea if I would ever be able to do something like that when I grew up, but it sure seemed like quite a career.

“The writer on golf is a fortunate being,” the *Guardian's* Pat Ward-Thomas, one of the finest twentieth-century British golf correspondents, said in 1966. I am lucky indeed, having had the opportunity to cover the game for three decades, much of that span for *Golf World*.

Golf provides a deep menu of writing possibilities. Many of its venues are beautiful, its protagonists compelling, its challenges enduring, its competitions riveting, its mysteries fascinating. The late George Plimpton famously said the smaller the ball used in a sport, the better the literature produced about it. A golf ball has a diameter of only 1.68 inches. I'm not going to argue with him.

From Bernard Darwin to Herbert Warren Wind, Peter Dobereiner to Dan Jenkins, Charles Price to Jaime Diaz, Al Bar-kow to Curt Sampson, golf has been blessed through the years with observers full of skill and perspective regardless of their individual writing styles. The game and those who appreciate it are better off because of their articles and books.

The thirty stories in this volume (a new essay about Tiger Woods serves as the epilogue), published in *Golf World* between 1994 and 2011, are part of my effort to chronicle the game. Although I've spent many coffee-fueled Sunday all-nighters in hotel rooms writing tournament reports on deadline and done scores of 750-word columns for the magazine about issues, competitors, and events, the pieces here are mostly longer profiles and essays about golf people and places, articles a few thousand words in length. Postscripts after each story gave me a chance to update the subject or reflect on the writing process.

There is a bias toward the historical. As William Shakespeare wrote, "What's past is prologue." It is also just plain interesting, or certainly is to me. I am not a golf historian, if such a designation is defined by an advanced degree, but I care a lot about how golf got to where it is today and enjoy studying the personalities who have appeared in and shaped its long arc.

Every great golfer to have graced the game isn't found in these pages—there isn't room, and I haven't written about each one of them—but many are, in stories in which I attempted to probe the best I could about what made them tick. Some of my favorite stories are the ones about people who aren't household names, who didn't win lots of majors, who had troubles, who made a differ-

ence behind the scenes, who were exceedingly real. The golf canvas, as I've viewed it, is a human canvas.

Regardless of the subjects' station in the sport, it was a privilege to be able to tell their stories. I hope you enjoy reading about them.

Fairfield, Connecticut

Sept. 1, 2013

ARNIE, SEVE, AND A FLECK OF GOLF HISTORY

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1

TALL
SHADOWS

The Greats

CHAPTER ONE

Golf's Gray Ghost

Imagine the stories the father could have told the son. There would have been tales of ships, great golf matches, and an America vast and wide, but painful memories too, of the months in a sanitarium when tournament golf seemed as far away as the moon.

They would have laughed about all those silly people in a Boston department store in 1900 who were spellbound as the father hit balls into a net, or the folks in charge at Ganton Golf Club who decided in 1903 to cut the father's weekly pay as club professional from 35 to 25 shillings a week, no matter that he already had won three British Opens and would win a record six. They would have lamented all those strokes frittered away by a frail champion in a Toledo gale over the last few holes of the 1920 U.S. Open, and they might even have cried over a marriage that all the applause in the world could never cheer.

He would have told the boy about home, a small island named Jersey in the English Channel, where he learned to strike lofted shots that floated politely down to earth. He would have tried to explain his father, who could be as chilly as a north wind, and his younger brother, Tom, who showed him the possibility of golf. He would have talked about great rivals J. H. Taylor, James Braid, and Ted Ray, and about a young American named Francis

Ouimet. He would have shown him how to place his hands on a golf club—right pinkie overlapping left index finger—the way he described it in books, the way he demonstrated it to the world.

He would have seen whether the boy had any of the waltz in his golf swing. The son, now seventy-four and good with balls and sticks like his father, can only imagine. Almost seventy years have passed since the friendly gray-haired man with the smile and the presents stopped coming around to see him lest anyone find out the nature of their relationship. He was grown, and his father was dead before he knew, before he finally found out why his Uncle Walter always pointed out so many articles, kept a scrapbook, and was so convinced Harry Vardon was the greatest golfer the world had ever known and so determined that a certain boy in Birmingham, England, know it.

“I was frustrated and I still am,” says Vardon’s son, Peter Howell. “I thought my mum should have told me while he was still alive, but she couldn’t face up to it. In those days, it was hush-hush. I would have liked to have known him.”

Even if someone has a love of hickory shafts and shaggy greens, there is a temptation to dismiss the golf played a hundred years ago as an off-key warm-up act for what is now available. It is recognizable, but you need to squint. Everything was so different—the swings, the equipment, the course conditions, the golfers—it’s like comparing Kitty Hawk to Chicago O’Hare. The United States Golf Association budgeted just \$500 to run the 1900 U.S. Open, which was contested at Chicago Golf Club by sixty players who putted on grass that was as wiry as a stiff hair brush. Then as now, though, there were stars, and nobody was bigger than Harry Vardon.

When he sailed to America in 1900, Vardon became golf’s first international star. From the moment he disembarked in New York that January, Vardon attracted attention, first from reporters who amazed him by filling up so many column inches based on his remarks. He came to America to promote Spalding’s “Vardon

Flyer” golf ball, but he also pitched muscle balm, golf coats, and health tonics—the first golf pro to endorse products other than equipment.

In Pinehurst, North Carolina, spectators peered intently at the marks his irons made as they brushed the grass after contacting the ball. In New York City the stock exchange closed so brokers could view his exhibition. In Maywood, Illinois, a course laid out two new holes so long—one of 715 yards and another of 962 yards—just so the mighty Vardon, who tapped twenty-five nails into the bottom of each brogan to ensure a solid base for his fluid, upright swing, could not reach the green in the regulation three shots. “His hands, arms, body and legs appear to work as a well-oiled machine,” the *American Golfer* said of Vardon’s technique, “and there is always present that element denoting complete coordination, ordinarily referred to in golf matters as rhythm.”

Vardon set course records from Florida to Maine in 1900, recording drives of up to 275 yards with a one-piece gutta-percha ball that most good golfers were overjoyed to hit 175 yards. Despite the limitations of the ball, Vardon brought the soaring shot to golf, relying more on carry than any player before him. When he got himself in trouble, he usually found a way to get out. At one point in his career, Vardon added a couple of left-handed clubs to his bag to use if the situation demanded it, and as a southpaw he showed little loss of form. Ganton Golf Club, where he was the host pro from 1896 until 1903, had much gorse, and he often practiced a trick shot with a ball sitting atop one of the bushes. Using a niblick he would pop the ball well into the air and watch it land in the same spot.

At 5 feet, 9½ inches tall and 165 pounds, Vardon was cut like an athlete, and his technique oozed effortless power a long time before such a thing was widely seen. Whether off the tee or from trouble, he was in control. “Nothing else but a picture swing,” is how the late (Wild) Bill Mehlhorn, who played with Vardon in 1921, summed him up. “He never looked like he rushed it, never

looked like he ever hurried it, never looked like he ever tried to hit one hard. He had that one, smooth, slow tempo.” Mehlhorn likened Vardon’s fluidity to that of Julius Boros later on. In 1900 *Golf* magazine described Vardon’s swing this way: “It is wrist power that enables Vardon to lay into the ball at the final moment with such astonishing results; he always gets that indescribable final flick, that whip-like snap, which stands for the difference between good and really first-class driving.”

Vardon’s velvet power rarely let him down in America. Playing about ninety matches—usually against the better ball of two talented amateurs from the host club—Vardon lost only thirteen times. Only Bernard Nicholls was able to beat Vardon in a singles match.

There was at least one golf course in every state by 1900, but the game was in its American infancy. Golf was still largely a diversion for the wealthy, though Vardon’s travels planted the seeds of its subsequent popularity. In Cincinnati golfers caused friction when they took over part of a public park to enjoy the game.

Persimmon was replacing dogwood and beech as the preferred material for wooden clubheads. Gutta-percha balls, which would fade out of golf in just a few years with the advent of the more lively rubber-cored Haskell design, were becoming scarce because the gum from Malaysia was being used for a flurry in the construction of transoceanic cable lines. No doubt the Haskell ball was hotter, but Vardon and some others knew how to launch a guttie. “There were some prodigious shots hit with the guttie,” says retired Royal and Ancient Golf Association historian Bobby Burnet. “There was Ted Blackwell, known in the cartoons as ‘Smackwell,’ who in 1894 drove off the tee at the [par-four] eighteenth hole of the Old Course and put it through the green and up against the clubhouse steps.”

But the Old Course also allowed for some run, and the low-ball-hitting Taylor mastered it during the 1900 British Open, beating

Vardon by eight strokes. Taylor followed Vardon back to America soon after, where he would challenge him for the American championship at Chicago. Jessie Vardon, Harry's wife, stayed home.

The Vardons lost a son when he was only six weeks old in 1892, less than a year after the Jersey couple was married. Jessie had a miscarriage in 1896. The sadness over the losses was compounded by Jessie's disinclination to take part in Harry's broadening world. Although Vardon was not an educated man, one who most likely would have spent his life as a gardener if not for golf, his travels schooled him. "When he was playing golf he was mixing with society people," says Audrey Howell, Peter's wife, whose perceptive 1991 biography, *Harry Vardon: The Revealing Story of a Champion Golfer*, describes the gulf that grew between the Vardons. "He came to have a different view of life and he was able to handle it, and I don't think she could. He could handle the different world he found himself in. And she couldn't cope with it and didn't want to."

Back in the United States, the odds were long that anyone other than Vardon or Taylor would win the sixth U.S. Open, but there was no question that the design of Chicago Golf Club favored Vardon over his longtime rival. Many greens were guarded by deep-faced bunkers, nullifying Taylor's bread-and-butter approach, a low shot that skidded quickly to a stop. Though Vardon whiffed a one-foot putt on the thirty-sixth hole of the first day when the stubborn grass stopped his putter head, he led Taylor by one stroke with thirty-six holes to go.

The finale attracted the best of Chicago society, many of the women dressed in fine gowns that were fully detailed next to the description of the play in the *Chicago Tribune*. Vardon, whose caddie was Tom Bendelow, one of America's first course architects, pulled ahead of Taylor by four strokes after the third round. He showed his virtuosity on the seventh hole of the final round. A mammoth drive caught a bunker 270 yards from the tee, designed to catch second shots, but he escaped coolly with a niblick and made a birdie 3. When Vardon completed the final round in 80

for a 313 total, two ahead of Taylor and nine clear of Chicago pro David Bell, a gallery rope was needed to control the crowd.

“His victory was well earned,” said Taylor. “He played more consistent golf than I, and deserves his good fortune. He had the advantage of being more familiar with the course than I and had been in this country long enough to become thoroughly acclimated, but that was my misfortune and his good luck.”

Vardon pocketed \$200 for his victory. American reporters estimated that Spalding had paid him \$20,000 for the whole tour, but it is likely that his actual fee was a quarter of that. Vardon, thirty years old when he sailed back home, joined his soccer team in Ganton when he returned, but he was tired. His tour had helped American golf grow up, but it had caused him to grow older. Vardon said that he covered 100,000 miles, which is probably a high estimate, but counting ships, trains, trolleys, cars, and on foot the total was still about 40,000 miles.

“The hard work of the tour took its toll,” wrote British golf essayist Bernard Darwin, “and it is doubtful if he was ever so brilliant again.” Moreover, upon his return to Britain, Vardon realized more fully that his marriage to Jessie was not going to improve. “Vardon realized that there was nothing he could do or say that would bring them closer together,” Audrey Howell wrote, “and his answer was to immerse himself in his golf and his life outside the home.”

Vardon’s fatigue turned into something worse in 1903. That he was able to win his fourth British Open title that summer remains one of golf’s grittiest efforts. Soon to be diagnosed with tuberculosis that would send him to Mundesley Sanitarium on the North Sea, Vardon had lost weight, was weak, and was coughing up blood. He nearly fainted several times in the final round and had to be assisted back to his hotel after the victory presentation.

Taking in the fresh air, resting, and eating well, Vardon got better. As he told his fans in a letter to *Golf Illustrated* in the fall of 1903, “I am staying here for the winter after which they tell

me I will be a new man and able to take to the game I love so well.” By the following February, Vardon was able to play golf at a course near the sanitarium. In his first round since becoming sick he made a hole-in-one (a feat he used to describe as a “perfect fluke”), the only one he would ever record.

Vardon survived the tuberculosis. He slowed down some but didn’t alter his pace too much. “Most of his life had been spent in trains getting to golf courses and then getting on another train,” says Burnet. “After the TB, he shouldn’t have been dashing around like that, but he did.” Vardon believed the disease had drastic effects on his golf. He developed what is probably the worst case of putting yips ever to plague a world-class golfer. Without warning, his right hand would twitch as though it had been given an electrical shock.

“His pathetic inability to bring the clubhead smoothly to the ball on a two-foot putt startled me,” said Henry Cotton. “The unbelievable jerking of the clubhead, in an effort to make contact with the ball from two feet or less from the hole, had to be seen to be believed.”

But Vardon played on. He began to crouch more and more on the greens, resorting to a putter with only a twelve-inch shaft and hoping “the jumps” would make infrequent visits. He wasn’t the dominant golfer that he had been in the late 1890s—when it is believed that he won as many as fourteen tournaments in a row and often routed foes by wide margins—but somehow he continued to win. He claimed his fifth and sixth British Open titles in 1911 and 1914, and, while touring the United States for a second time in 1913, he and Ted Ray were beaten by Ouimet in a playoff at the U.S. Open.

Vardon returned to the United States once more in 1920, and his last American tour, this one at age fifty, included one more appearance in the U.S. Open at the Inverness Club in Toledo, Ohio. Vardon built a four-stroke lead with only seven holes to play, but as suddenly as the strong winds whipped off Lake Erie, he was exposed as an aging champion.

After a bogey on the long twelfth hole, he bungled a two-foot par putt on No. 13. Vardon three-putted the next three holes. He still might have pulled out an unlikely victory, but he found a water hazard on the seventeenth hole and double-bogeyed. His old friend from Jersey, Ted Ray, shot a 75 and finished at 295. Vardon, with a final-nine 42, had a 78 and tied with three others for second place. "I was tired," Vardon said. "My strength left me on the 12th hole."

Inverness was the first U.S. Open for Bobby Jones and Gene Sarazen. The world Vardon orbited for so long soon would be theirs, although he would continue to try to qualify for the British Open until he was in his early sixties. Vardon never took a lesson himself, but when his skills waned he took to teaching. "He bore the deprivation with philosophy and sweet temper," Darwin wrote, "enjoying teaching when he could not play and always anxious to watch the younger players."

In fact Vardon couldn't let go of his place in golf any more than he could leave Jessie. Both of those truths figured when in 1920 Vardon began a relationship with a young dancer named Tilly Howell, who also worked as a hotel housekeeper. Vardon could talk golf to Tilly, and she would listen. The affair was kept under wraps, but it continued despite the tensions of the arrangement. In 1925 Howell became pregnant, and on January 23, 1926, Peter Howell was born when Vardon was fifty-five years old.

Vardon visited his son dozens of times, but when Peter got old enough to ask questions, Tilly asked Vardon to stay away for fear of embarrassment and potential for scandal. As for Vardon, "he hid the truth from Jessie and if she had guessed at events, she decided to remain silent," Audrey Howell wrote. Peter didn't find out the truth until several years after Vardon's death from lung cancer in 1937, when he was sixty-six. The world didn't know until Audrey's book came out.

"My mother spent most of her life trying to keep it quiet because that's what people did in those days," says Peter. "I would like to

have thought that I could have talked to him as a young man without letting the cat out of the bag if someone had given me the chance. But it was an awkward situation. My father had a wife, of course, and he loved her as well.”

Tilly Howell slipped unnoticed into a back pew at Vardon’s funeral, an anonymous mourner in the large crowd of British golf dignitaries who came to honor Vardon. She heard J. H. Taylor, Vardon’s toughest rival and old friend, deliver a eulogy. “His style was so apparently simple,” Taylor said that day, “that it was apt to mislead. He got his effects with that delightful, effortless ease that was tantalizing.”

Peter Howell lived most of his life with more questions than answers until the late 1980s, when he joined his wife while she researched Vardon for her book. On their journey they confirmed Vardon’s greatness as a golfer and pinned down many details of his life off the course. His golf, they discovered, may not have been as effortless as it looked.

“It was sort of a personal sadness, really,” says Audrey. “He was a man at the top of his profession, yet he had all this heartache in the background. J. H. Taylor had several children, and when [Taylor and Vardon] were playing together and he would have been talking about his family, who knows what Vardon might have been thinking?”

Peter Howell is retired after a lifetime running a frozen foods business. He plays a little golf but spends most of his time playing croquet. He is very good. More important, he knows why.

June 9, 2000

Some years after I wrote this profile, I played in the National Hickory Championship, a tournament in which players use hickory-shafted clubs and replica golf balls from the late nineteenth century. I can

only say it was a revelation of how talented Vardon and his contemporaries must have been. I've covered a couple of tournaments at the Inverness Club, and it always causes me to think what it must have been like for the aging Vardon trying to hang on to win the 1920 U.S. Open. Few golfers have truly shaped the sport; Vardon is one of them. Although Tom Watson, with his remarkable run in 2009, came so very close to tying him, Vardon remains the only man to win the British Open six times. This year, 2014, is the centennial of Vardon's sixth triumph, an occasion that no doubt will allow a new generation of fans to find out a bit about this important golf figure.