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Recommended Citation

Lowe, Stephen, "The Haig, Wild Bill, and the Birth of Professional Tour Golf" (1997). *Faculty Scholarship – History*. 1.
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The Haig, Wild Bill, and the Birth of Professional Tour Golf

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On the evening of Saturday, January 27, 1923, "Wild Bill" Mehlhorn approached the eighteenth tee of San Antonio's Brackenridge Park golf course. The situation was clear. Mehlhorn was in the last foursome of the Texas Open and with a one shot lead over Walter Hagen, all he needed was a par four to win the second annual tournament. The eighteenth was not a particularly challenging hole as many of the players had scored birdie threes on it. But, of course, none of them needed a par to win the tournament and Wild Bill (so-called because of his fondness for playing poker, and golf, in a cowboy hat) did have a reputation for shaky putting when it mattered most. Yet, the Shreveport native had been playing like a winner and the four would give him a final round total of 67, four shots under the course's par of 71. He had played well all week, posting rounds of 68, 69, and 74. A par and he would finish the tournament at 278 (-6). Though he had slipped a bit in the third round, played that morning, he had come back strong in the afternoon. So Mehlhorn and most of the nearly 2,500 spectators were confident he would make at least a par.

His drive must have affirmed his confidence as the professional cracked his ball some 290 yards down the middle of the fairway. One more solid iron shot, two more putts, and he was champion. But Mehlhorn pulled his second shot to the left of the green and into the gallery, leaving

himself a pitch and pressure putt for the win. The pitch was near perfect as the ball stopped just three feet from the hole. Mehlhorn lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply a few times, took his putter in hand, and walked to his ball.

Though it was only a three-footer, there were plenty of reasons for Mehlhorn's nerves to demand a cigarette. It was not an ideal situation for a player who had experience with folding in the clutch. After all, he was putting before 2,500 spectators for the largest prize in the history of tournament golf. The total purse was \$6,000 and first prize was \$1,500--both were record highs. Moreover, if he missed the putt, he would have to face the reigning British Open champion, Walter Hagen, in an eighteen hole playoff.

The Haig, as was his custom in such situations, sat on the fringe of the green "in one of his most elaborate sportcoats . . . with the same old smile" and watched the anxious Mehlhorn line up his putt. Hagen, like most everyone, probably expected Mehlhorn to make it. But, utilizing the "gamesmanship" that he became famous for, he placed added pressure on the leader as his presence and smile reminded Wild Bill of what he faced if he missed the three-footer. Gamesmanship aside, Sir Walter's scoring that week was intimidation enough. He had arrived in San Antonio the previous Tuesday morning, after a long train ride from Los Angeles, and shot a "remarkable" 74 on Thursday in the amateur-pro best-ball match. It was the first time he had ever played Brack Park, which admittedly, at 6,207 yards, was not a relatively long or difficult layout. He followed with rounds of 73 and 70 on Friday, leaving him tied for fifth place after 36 holes. Then on Saturday morning he scored a blistering 65, including a six for the third hole, on which he had previously scored a three! His course

record-breaking 65 could easily have been a 62. (Clarence Mangham's previous record score was 66.) That round gave Hagen a three shot lead as Mehlhorn stumbled to his third round 74. But the Haig could not repeat his morning performance and opened the door for Wild Bill by shooting a final round 71 for a total of 279 (-5).

Yet the smiling Sir Walter also had a major psychological advantage on his opponent. Not only had he won three national titles, two American and a British, but he was the first American "homebred" professional to win the latter. In addition, he had developed a reputation as one of the toughest match-play competitors in the game, a reputation that would later be affirmed by his winning four consecutive PGA titles from 1924-27 (The PGA was match play before 1958). He had already won playoffs for the U.S., French, and Metropolitan Opens--certainly he would be favored against anyone in the Texas Open. Moreover, for Hagen and Joe Kirkwood, the Texas Open was an interruption in what was one of the most financially and competitively successful exhibition tours in the history of the game. He and Kirkwood lost but 16 of 120 matches during a tour that stretched from July of 1922 to March of 1923 and from Chicago to California and back east through Texas to Florida. Though affable, Hagen was exceptionally confident and intensely competitive. It was, for example, in character for the Haig to tee his ball on the first hole of a tournament, turn to the other members of his foursome, and say with remarkable sincerity, "I wonder who is going to finish second?" In sum, Hagen was nearing the peak of his career, was recognized as the finest golfer in the world, and Wild Bill knew it. Indeed, if Mehlhorn missed his short putt on the 72nd green, the odds would shift heavily out of his favor.

Still, in this particular tournament his putting had been sound, the nicotine was in his system, and Mehlhorn was as ready as he would ever be to make his three-footer. He examined the line, steadied himself, drew back his putter, and struck the ball. For an instant it looked good as he had hit it perfectly on line, but the gallery gasped as the putt stopped about six inches short of the hole. Despite Bobby Jones' advice on giving a putt a chance to enter the four doors of a golf hole, the bottom line is "never up, never in," especially on a pressure-packed three-footer. That he missed short was evidence of his nerves. Hagen's nerves were just fine as his smile probably turned into a broad grin; in fact, Mehlhorn was possibly the only one not smiling as tournament officials, area merchants, and golf fans alike looked forward to the publicity, business, and excitement that Sunday's eighteen-hole playoff would bring. Many predicted a spectator turnout of near 10,000.

Such predictions proved accurate as one of the largest golf galleries in the history of the state gathered at 10:00 to watch what most believed would be an easy victory for the Haig. The original "shark" of the links, he had the scent of green, \$1500 worth, and few thought Wild Bill could stand up to the game's leading professional. Mehlhorn surprised the gallery, if not Hagen. He played with Hagen the whole way, even leading by one shot at the turn, 35 to 36. On the inward nine, however, Hagen made up the deficit and took the lead on the 16th hole--the first time he had enjoyed it since the fifth. But Wild Bill was relentless, dropping a 30-foot putt on the 17th green to take back a one shot lead as Hagen uncharacteristically three-putted for a bogey 4.

Thus, as the two approached the eighteenth tee for the fifth time in

the tournament, Mehlhorn again held a one shot lead. Driving first, his ball sliced and hit a tree, but still ended up well down the fairway. Hagen followed with a perfect 280-yard drive past Mehlhorn's. Mehlhorn's second shot missed the green, just as it had the day before, this time landing about fifteen yards short; meanwhile, the Haig stuck his approach shot just twelve feet beyond the pin, leaving himself a very good birdie putt which, if he could make, would force Mehlhorn to par for a tie. And, after Wild Bill left his chip shot eight feet short, his par prospects were dubious at best. Hagen lined up his twelve-footer and sent it toward the hole. The ball rimmed the cup, but stayed out and he had to settle for a par four. Now Mehlhorn stroked his eight-footer for the win, but left it two feet short (one account has this putt stopping two feet past the hole).

It was all familiar. He needed to make a short putt to secure a tie and send the match to further extra holes. Mehlhorn examined it from every angle, took his time, and, not wanting to leave it short again, firmly struck the ball. This time, however, he hit the ball too hard and though it found the hole, it popped out and Sir Walter again had cause to smile as for the second straight day Wild Bill Mehlhorn let him and the Texas Open get away. The final scores in the playoff were 72 for Hagen and 73 for Mehlhorn, who would later win back-to-back Texas Open titles in 1928-29.

The 1923 Texas Open is significant in many ways, both to the rise of American golf and to the specific career of Walter Hagen. San Antonio's Texas Open has a legitimate claim to being the birthplace of professional tour golf. The most obvious evidence of this was the record purse, which included an innovative variety of cash incentives, such as, a generous

seventeen final money places, \$25 for every round under 70, daily prizes for low round and course-records, as well as prizes in the amateur/pro preliminary competition. Jack O'Brien, newspaper man and father of the tournament, claimed that his event did not offer the contestants prize "cups," which were "useless nowadays," but "those silver discs, [bucks], or [smackerinos] produced at Mr. Uncle Sam's factory."

Indeed, tournament organizers made the event so profitable that pros from around the country travelled to southern Texas that week. The field included such players as Johnny Farrell, Johnny Golden, Long Jim Barnes, Freddie McLeod, and Tommy Armour. Most notably absent was young Gene Sarazen, who was on a "barnstorming" exhibition tour in southern California with Jock Hutchison. The only other tournaments which attracted such a field were the PGA, U.S. Open, Western Open, and, occasionally, N.Y.'s Metropolitan Open. Later in the decade, the NY Times would describe the Texas Open as the "first of the big money tournaments."

Beyond the money, the tournament added the attraction of daily banquets and entertainment for the ninety-man field. Officials treated the pros as important "guests" and on the Wednesday before play got underway, Mayor O.B. Black awarded the visiting pros the "keys to the city." All of this was important to pros who were customarily given second-class treatment compared to amateurs. Other municipalities had tried some of this before, but none had the success of San Antonio in 1923.

The Texas Open instantly became an important stop on the infant southern "swing," which was firmly established by the end of the decade. It started in San Francisco in late December and moved south for the Los

Angeles Open (another municipality-sponsored tournament that began in 1926 and modeled itself on the San Antonio event), then on to northern Mexico for the Agua Caliente Open, next into Texas for the San Antonio event (among others), then to Hot Springs, Arkansas, and south again to Florida for several events, finally ending with the North and South Open at Pinehurst, North Carolina in late March. In April 1923 the New York Times called the winter golf season a complete success and the best ever, pointing to the beginnings of a legitimate golfing circuit. From this the PGA tour evolved to what it is today and San Antonio must receive the largest share of the credit. If not the sole seed in its formation, the Texas Open was one of several important birthplaces of the PGA Tour. And some argue that it was the most important because of its innovative purse, treatment of professionals, and geographic location linking California to Florida. (Interestingly, the PGA Tour still moves in the same general direction each winter, though the current TO is played in the fall.)

But beyond the location, the purse, and the treatment of the players, the Second Annual Texas Open was a success because of its champion, Walter Hagen. How appropriate it was for the country's first touring professional golfer, the "Johnny Appleseed" of modern professional golf, to win the world's largest purse, put up by the world's most innovative professional tournament. That **he** won, in such a way that was vintage Sir Walter, that is, coming from behind, with little practice, to win an 18-hole playoff, gave the tournament a luster and credibility that it would not otherwise have had. For excitement and publicity, city boosters could not have scripted a better ending, nor a more fitting champion. (The 1922 Texas Open, despite also having the largest purse ever, among other

similarities, did not garner the attention of the 1923 event.)

Yet, just as the Haig was important to the Texas Open, the Texas Open was significant to the Haig. It was the highlight of his most financially and competitively successful winter season. The victory and season solidified his reputation as the world's best "money-player." It reminded everyone that Sir Walter had nerves of steel and amazing comeback ability, so that while he was often down, he was rarely out. It is so easily forgotten that as of early 1923 Bobby Jones, the greatest golfing figure of the era, had yet to win a major championship, while Walter Hagen, with at least four such titles (depending on which ones you count--some would add his two Western Opens), was the undisputed "emperor" of American golf, a title he could claim for several years to come.

Finally, it is interesting to contemplate why Bobby Jones has always received so much attention compared to Walter Hagen. Actually, their competitive records are quite similar. Using major victories as a measuring stick, Jones ended up with thirteen (5 U.S. Amateurs, 4 U.S. Opens, 3 British Opens, and 1 British Amateur) and Hagen eleven (5 PGAs, 2 U.S. Opens, and 4 British Opens, plus five Western Opens). Yet, when the greats of the game are discussed today, Hagen's name rarely is mentioned with the likes of Nicklaus, Jones, Palmer, Watson, Hogan, and Nelson. Yet only Nicklaus and Jones have won more majors than Hagen.

Why did Hagen fail to emerge from the shadow of Jones? Was it Jones' amateur status? Was it the Grand Slam? Is it the legacy of the Masters Tournament? The answers to these questions are "yes," as Jones was an extraordinary figure. But might it also be that golf has always been primarily a sport of propriety and conservatism, and that

Jones best represented such things, while Hagen, on the other hand, was golf's "bad boy," a drinking, womanizing, gamesmanship professional who, seemingly, played purely for self-interest and profit? (Hagen would disappoint Texas Open officials the following season by failing to defend his title, opting instead for more lucrative Florida exhibitions.)

In view of their similar competitive records, the fact that Jones has been idolized and Hagen has been forgotten says something significant about American culture in the Twenties as well as the current golf scene. It certainly offers further affirmation, in this case from golf, of what historians realized some time ago: that is, these men lived in an age that was more conservative than is often portrayed. For whatever reason, Walter Hagen has for too long been overlooked or minimized by historians and golf fans. In fact, the Haig and the Texas Open were essential factors in the rise of American golf.

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