

CLOSE-UP OF NELSON, WORLD'S BEST GOLFER

By Sgt. DAN POLIER



Nor long ago a bunch of golf professionals put their heads together and voted their rich relative, John Byron Nelson, as the world's greatest golfer. Mr. Nelson wasn't impressed with this very fine epithet. He stepped up to a nearby tee and announced:

"You mean the world's second greatest golfer. Walter Hagen is the greatest golfer that ever lived."

Anybody who knows Nelson wouldn't be surprised to hear him single out Hagen as the world's greatest anything. Nelson has always worshipped the very fairway that Hagen strutted on. This reverence goes back to 1926 when Hagen was battling Willie Turnesa for the PGA championship under a broiling-hot sun at Dallas, Tex. Hagen needed a cap to shade his eyes and, looking over the gallery, he spotted a youngster wearing one with a long sun visor. He went over to the boy and asked if he might borrow the cap to finish out the match. Thrilled silly, the boy whipped off his cap and proudly offered it to the Great Man. Years later, when Nelson himself won the PGA, he asked Hagen: "Do you remember the time you won the PGA at Dallas and borrowed a cap from a little boy? It was me."

Hagen frankly didn't remember borrowing the cap, but he said he did, anyhow. "The disappointment," Hagen told a friend later, "would have broken Byron's heart. I'm still his idol."

Whether Nelson realizes it or not, he is not only the world's greatest golfer, but truly an all-time marvel. According to Mr. Fred Corcoran's PGA statistics, Nelson has played 73 rounds of tournament golf since spring with a 69.34 stroke average, or a break-down of 130 strokes below par. He is also the world's richest golfer. So far this year he has won \$39,500, smashing all past money-winning records. Totaled up, his earnings would probably soar to a giddy \$100,000.

Oldtimer Tommy Armour, who has won every major golf title in sight, says: "Even when he is only halfway putting, Nelson can't be beaten. He plays golf shots like a virtuoso. There is no type of problem he can't handle. High shots, low shots, hooks or fades—he has absolute control of all of them. He is the finest golfer I have ever seen."

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Yet there is much more to Nelson's greatness than just his ability to control his swing. More important, we think, is his controlled temperament. Dogged and mechanical, he is always harder to beat when you seem to have him beat. The Knoxville (Tenn.) Open of last April provided a classic example. Trailing Jug McSpaden by two strokes at the halfway point, Nelson was actually refreshed and stimulated by the discouraging situation. When McSpaden shot a three-under-par 67 for the third round, Nelson came right back with a blazing 66 to cut the lead to one stroke. On the final lap, McSpaden pieced together a neat 69, but Byron picked up the marbles. He had a 67.

Nelson met another crisis in the 1937 Masters Championship at Augusta, Ga. Big Ralph Guldahl, for all purposes, had him beat with a four-stroke lead at the end of 63 holes. But Nelson rose to the occasion, matched Guldahl birdie for birdie on the 64th and 65th, then fired a deuce on the 66th and an eagle three on the 67th to win the championship by two strokes.

Like most professional golfers, Nelson came from the humble caddy ranks. In fact, he and Ben Hogan carried bags together at the Glen Garden Club of Fort Worth. In those days Byron used to strangle a golf club with a baseball grip and Hogan played left-handed. When Byron was 16 he won the Fort Worth Amateur but was disqualified when somebody tipped off the tournament committee that he was a caddy and not a junior member at Glen Garden. He didn't return to high school that fall but instead took a job with a railroad as an office boy and played golf in the evenings. In 1930 he went to work for a publishing house as file clerk, because the hours were shorter and he could devote more time to golf. By 1931 he thought he'd make more money playing golf and turned pro to play the Texarkana Open. Surprisingly, he finished third behind such outstanding mashie swingers as Ted Longworth and Ky Laffon. Since then, Nelson has won virtually every major open golf title, including two Masters championships, one National PGA, a National Open and a Western Open.

For all his monotonous success, Nelson has had his trying moments, too. During his first swing around the winter circuit he had to wire home for money because his earnings for the month had only come to \$12.50. He lost the Greater Greensboro (N.C.) Open in 1942 because his tee shot hit a spectator on the shoulder and bounced into the rough. It took him six strokes to recover on a par-three hole and he finished a stroke behind Sammy Byrd.

Another time Nelson had second-place money all sewn up in the Hershey (Pa.) Open when his ball vanished from the fairway. The mystery wasn't solved until a few days later when this letter came: "My girl friend found a golf ball while you were playing the Hershey course and took it along with her. She doesn't know a hell of lot about golf. I'm sorry it cost you second place and I take this opportunity of sending \$300 you lost by it."

The big rap against Nelson is the old, old cry that he only seems great because the equipment and courses are better today. That's true of every sport that can be measured or timed; they have all shown improvement in recent years. But to shrewd observers like the veteran Al Ciuci, who has played with all three—Nelson, Jones and Hagen—the tall Texan stands alone. Ciuci thinks Nelson hits his irons and woods more consistently than either Hagen or Jones and makes fewer mistakes from tee to green. True, Nelson doesn't have the smooth, flowing putting stroke of either Jones or Hagen, but he usually sinks the long ones when he has to.

It is too bad Nelson doesn't think himself great. Maybe Mr. Hagen should tell him.

YANK

OCTOBER 13, 1944

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