

The Match

Walter Hagen teed his ball for his weekly match with Bobby Jones. They were starting mid-morning, as usual. Late enough to miss the early morning crowd, and before the “after lunch” players arrived. With luck, they wouldn’t run into any other players on the course. After a few quick practice swings he stepped up to the ball and hit his first drive. It wasn’t a good stroke. Short, and just into the rough on the right side of the fairway. “Damn!” he said to himself. “I should have warmed up a little more.”

Bobby Jones allowed himself a slight smile as he took his turn on the tee. As usual, they played without talking. They were both concentrating on their game, and they’d played enough to know what each other was thinking. Indeed, under the circumstances it would have been awkward to talk. After several practice swings he hit a clean drive, long and straight down the middle of the fairway.

Walter hit a poor second shot too, crossing the fairway and landing in the rough on the left, only a little past Bobby’s drive. “The old man’s losing it,” thought Bobby. He chose a mid-iron for his second shot and landed just short of the green.

Unperturbed, Walter pulled a spoon from his bag. After taking his time to line up the shot he hit a high, arcing shot that landed on the green and rolled to within a few feet of the hole. Bobby had seen Walter make shots like this often enough to not be surprised, but it still irritated him. Golf was supposed to be a game of skill, not a game where two dubs and a luck shot put you ahead of your opponent. He tried to concentrate on his chip shot, but he couldn’t put Walter out of his mind and he hit it thin. It skittered past the hole and came to rest at the far edge of the green. Furious with himself for his poor chipping he carefully lined up his putt and stroked the ball into the cup. Walter tapped in his putt for par. All square.

The second hole was a long par 5. Walter still had the honor (being senior, he always had the honor on the first hole) and he hit a long, graceful drive that faded slightly to the right side of the fairway. Bobby hit a magnificent drive that went a good 20 yards past Walter’s ball and landed dead center on the fairway. Both players hit decent second shots, Bobby’s again landing a little past Walter’s. Walter’s approach shot landed just short of the green, Bobby’s landed on the edge of the green. Walter used his mashie for a bump and run shot that stopped just short of the cup. Bobby played the break perfectly and hit a long, curving putt that arced gracefully into the cup with a satisfying clink. Advantage Jones.

They matched each other stroke for stroke for the next five holes. Walter’s play was a little more ragged than Bobby’s, but he always managed one of his famous Hagen recovery shots when it counted. He got into trouble on the fifth, when his drive found the edge of the woods, and had to settle for bogie but Jones uncharacteristically three-putted that hole for a tie. Jones maintained his one stroke lead and the pressure began to build on Hagen. He never let it show,

of course. Hagen's smiling, unconcerned demeanor was the envy of every other player, but inwardly he knew that Jones was a formidable opponent who seldom made a mistake. He admired Bobby's machine-like consistency, but at the same time he resented it. Walter's golf game was often amazing, but it was never consistent. Every hole they tied while Jones held the lead put him one hole closer to losing. Normally, he was the one who put pressure on the other players. Even when he didn't have the lead, the seemingly effortless way he recovered from impossible lies and dashed their hopes of gaining a stroke wore away at their confidence. That didn't work with Bobby, though. Bobby seemed oblivious to what other players were doing. He was playing against "old man par," and flashed his all-American smile when he holed a putt, regardless of what his opponent did. His one weakness, as Walter knew well, was his temper. Jones had learned to cover it well, but Hagen knew that if he could goad Bobby into making a mistake, he'd be furious with himself. Sometimes that made Bobby play better, but often it was his undoing.

The seventh hole was a sharp dogleg to the right. It followed a river that ran along the right edge of the fairway and then curved back behind the green. Bobby still had honors. "No point in taking a risk here" he told himself. He had the lead, and he routinely made par by staying in the fairway and playing around the river. He used his brassie off the tee and hit a straight, conservative drive that landed in the center of the fairway, past the bend in the river, giving him a straight shot at the green.

Walter gave one of his famous Hagen grins as he saw where Bobby's drive landed. Despite his flamboyant reputation, he was a conservative golfer who never took unnecessary risks. He knew his limitations, and he realized he was even more prone than most professional golfers to hitting bad shots. His odds of making a risky shot were poorer than most of his opponents. Nevertheless, it was time to take a risk. He was one stroke down on Jones, with three holes to play. The eighth was a short, par three where Jones was sure to make par or birdie. If he was going to catch Jones, this was the hole to do it. He pulled his driver out of the bag and aimed across the bend in the river, cutting at least 50 yards off the hole. He took an uncharacteristically long time to line up the shot, then swept the ball cleanly off the tee.

For a moment, he was afraid he wasn't going to make it. The ball was cleanly hit, but he'd been a little too aggressive with his line and brought more of the river into play than he'd planned. The ball just cleared the river, struck a rock on the riverbank, and miraculously bounced to the right, coming to rest even closer to the green than he'd dared hope for. He flashed another Hagen grin as he put his club back in the bag.

Jones fought to control his emotions as he approached his ball. He was furious with himself for having played his drive so conservatively. He knew he could have cut across the river himself, but he hadn't wanted to take the risk and now he was much farther from the hole than Hagen. He hated losing to that man. The sting of his public drubbing by Hagen in the 1926 "Battle of the Century" still burned within him. Off the course they were friends, and Jones was

as captivated as anyone by Walter's easy humor and wild lifestyle, but once the first ball was struck Hagen was his mortal enemy. Now he had no choice but to play a risky shot or else he'd lose this hole. He chose a spoon and aimed at the pin. It was a good shot, but the morning sun had dried the green a little more than he'd expected. His ball bounced twice on the green and then plopped into the river. He stared at the green in disbelief long after his ball had disappeared from view. The river was a "lateral water hazard" so he could take a drop next to the green with a one stroke penalty, but he knew he was done for. Hagen chipped onto the green with a clean niblick shot and one-putted for birdie. Jones two-putted for a miserable double bogie. His one stroke lead was now a two stroke deficit.

Hagen casually drove his ball onto the green on the par three eighth. Jones could have sworn he heard the man whistling before he hit the ball. Jones had long ago learned to control his explosive temper and he was calm on the outside, but inside he was seething. It was bad enough losing to that man, but to fall behind because of a crappy luck shot by Hagen and a bone-headed mistake by himself was almost more than he could bear. He was fantasizing about the mistakes Hagen could make on the ninth hole as he bent over to tee up his ball. A movement on the seventh fairway caught his eye.

Bill Jacobson straightened up and stared at the seventh fairway. Two golfers in an electric cart were coming up fast. They didn't rent carts here – that was one of the reasons he liked to play this miserable little cow pasture golf course – but some players trailered their own carts to the course. This appeared to be a father and son pair, and they were playing fast. The kid who collected money at the "pro shop" had told him he didn't mind if Bill played two balls when things were slack, but he didn't want to push his luck by holding up other players. He pocketed Jones's ball and walked to the green to play Hagen's ball. The match would have to wait until next week. Maybe he'd bring his steel clubs and play Ben Hogan vs Byron Nelson. That was always an interesting match. . .