

Beatrix Hoyt: The First Teenage Golf Sensation

by Sharon Lynch and Wayne Morrison

Long before the early golfing exploits of Tiger Woods and Jack Nicklaus, and even before Bob Jones was recognized as a teenage golf sensation, Shinnecock Hills Golf Club member Beatrix Hoyt, the champion of the 1896, '97 and '98 U.S. Women's Amateurs, captured America's attention with her outstanding performances in national championships beginning at the age of 16. Shinnecock's pioneering treatment of female members set the stage for Hoyt's rise to stardom, but it was the young player's commitment to improving her swing and desire to win that allowed her to dominate the increasingly competitive world of women's amateur golf.

Hoyt was born on July 5, 1880, the youngest of William Sprague Hoyt and Janet Ralston Chase's four children. The Hoyts were a distinguished family. Beatrix's paternal great-grandfather, William Sprague, had served as Governor of Rhode Island. Her maternal grandfather was Salmon P. Chase, President Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of the Treasury and later Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Although the Hoyts were a prominent family in society, it was a family in financial decline. Her father descended from the Sprague textile manufacturing family, the originators of gingham cloth and at one time the largest textile manufacturer in the country. Misfortune came with the Economic Panic of 1873 and her father's company, Hoyt, Sprague, and Company, suffered severe losses. The family fortune and business were gone, and William Sprague Hoyt never recovered. He became more and more estranged from his wife and children, and died in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 1905, at the age of 59.

Janet Hoyt kept the remaining relatives together and held on to the remnants of the family wealth. "Nettie," as she was known to those closest to her, purchased initial shares of the new Shinnecock Hills Golf Club, which was incorporated in 1891. The Hoyts moved from First Neck Lane, in the prestigious estate section of Southampton, barely two miles away to Shinnecock Hills. They brought with them the "Grist Mill" which had graced the family's 9-acre Lake Agawam property. The windmill is still in the "Hills," though the Pasadena-style Arts and Crafts house of great charm they built there has since been demolished.

Janet exhibited great foresight in buying one, possibly two (one for Beatrix) of the original 75 shares issued to build Shinnecock Hills Golf Club. Forty-four individuals purchased these shares for \$100 each and the proceeds were enough to build the golf course, laid out by Willie Davis, and a small clubhouse, designed by Stanford White of McKim, Mead & White. Though William Hoyt never joined the club, Janet was a founder member, likely the first woman member of a golf club in the United States.

The club's welcoming attitude toward female members served as the backdrop for Beatrix's growth as a golfer. From the moment she took a club in her hand at age 15, Beatrix practiced relentlessly, even hitting balls into a sheet hung from a line in the hour before dinner at home. She took instruction well and understood the mechanics of the swing perfectly. Her daily

practice was noted by The New York Times during her first tournament appearance at Morristown, along with the fact that this young girl had vanquished more than one very credible male player at Shinnecock Hills.

In 1896, the strongest part of Beatrix's game were precise iron shots. From fairway through green, she was unstoppable. In short mashie approach shots, or in playing out of a difficult lie, Miss Hoyt was one of the most accomplished amateurs of her day. The Marshfield Times reported: "She has a swing which closely resembled the Scottish professional, her irons shots are excellent, and she has great coolness and endurance."

The comparison to Scottish professionals was no small coincidence. She had been trained by the best. The October 1898 issue of Outing magazine reported Hoyt had first been trained by Willie Dunn, the Scottish golf professional at Shinnecock. When Dunn departed for Ardsley Country Club in 1896, he was succeeded for a few years by Robert Black Wilson, a Scot who trained under Old Tom Morris during the late 1800's as a golfer and a clubmaker. Outing continued that R. B. Wilson was "one of the best players with the iron clubs ever seen in this country" and that he had a hand in framing Hoyt's style.

Despite her strong iron play, Beatrix could be out-driven by most golfers. However, she would soon demonstrate a determination to change that. In 1896, 16-year-old Hoyt entered her first national championship, making her debut at Morris County Golf Club in Morristown, N.J. at the second U.S. Women's Amateur. The format for the championship was set at match play, following an 18-hole stroke play qualifying round. Twenty-seven amateurs competed with Hoyt, who captured medalist honors with a 95. Eight players qualified for match play. In the final match, Hoyt won the championship from fellow Shinnecock Hills member, Mrs. Arthur Turnure.

After the 1896 victory, Beatrix sought to execute a fuller follow-through in her drive. Occasionally this included a step through to the finish, which exaggerated the force of her follow-through. This swing change gave her the extra distance she so fervently sought. She was now able to drive the ball 190-200 yards off the tee. Hoyt put this new-found distance to the test in the 1897 U.S. Women's Amateur at the Essex County Club in Manchester-by-the-Sea, Mass. Severe rains drenching the course throughout the day contributed to high scores, but once again, Hoyt was the medalist, this time with a 108. In match play, Beatrix bested each competitor, including Essex member Margaret Curtis, by convincing margins to defend her title.

Hoyt's individualism and freshness charmed writers and audiences alike. In her mode of dress, she was something of a rebel. While still being conscious of propriety, she would not let her clothing restrict her swing. She generally wore a simple shirtwaist, sometimes a club tie, and a full skirt. The skirt always had pockets for her scorecard as well as extra balls and tees and was cut short, just above the boot so she could see her foot placement. While large brimmed hats, gloves and sometimes veils were used at that time by female golfers as sunscreens, Hoyt was often described as perpetually suntanned. She would not sacrifice ease-of-movement for fashion.

After her second national championship victory, Beatrix sought to refine her driving swing by toning down her extravagant follow-through. This second significant swing change debuted at the 1898 U.S. Women's Amateur at Ardsley C.C. in Ardsley-on-the-Hudson, N.Y. For the third consecutive year, Hoyt captured medalist honors with a 92. Entries more than doubled with 61 women competing versus 29 the year before. Sixteen women competed for the championship after the stroke-play round. In each match, Hoyt defeated her opponents by comfortable margins. The final on Saturday saw Hoyt win her third consecutive national title over Miss Maude K. Wetmore, 5 and 3.

For two more years Hoyt would lead the stroke play qualifying rounds of the U.S. Women's Amateur. In 1899, Beatrix Hoyt won medalist honors at Philadelphia Country Club's Bala Course with a score of 97 though her championship run came to an end in the opening round by a comparatively unknown golfer, Mrs. Caleb F. Fox. For the fifth year in a row, Hoyt captured medalist honors at the U.S. Women's Amateur, when Shinnecock Hills hosted its third national championship in 1900. Since its inception, the club was considered one of the most revered layouts in golf, hosting the 1896 U.S. Open and U.S. Amateur. Though Hoyt defeated Mrs. Caleb Fox, 1 up, to avenge the prior year's loss, she failed to win the championship on her home turf, losing to Margaret Curtis in the semifinals, 1 down. Miss Curtis went on to lose the championship to Miss Frances Griscom of the Merion Cricket Club by the lopsided score of 6 and 5.

Beatrix Hoyt and her mother gave up their membership to Shinnecock Hills Golf Club when they moved to Thomasville, Ga. There Hoyt joined the Glen Arven Golf Club, next to their "Pineriff" estate. It was at Glen Arven where Beatrix became a mentor to Mary Lena Faulk, the 1953 U.S. Women's Amateur champion.

Beatrix ran an antique shop for several years in Thomasville. Like her mother, Beatrix was artistic. Hoyt never married. She went about her life without any more fanfare, later moving from "Pineriff" but maintaining ownership and living with her faithful companion Julia Wright. Beatrix suffered a stroke in 1952 but was able to live a happy and productive life until her death at age 83 on Aug. 14, 1963.

Sharon Lynch is a member at Shinnecock Hills, while Wayne Morrison, a member at Merion Golf Club, serves on the USGA Museum Committee and is an expert on William Flynn golf course designs.