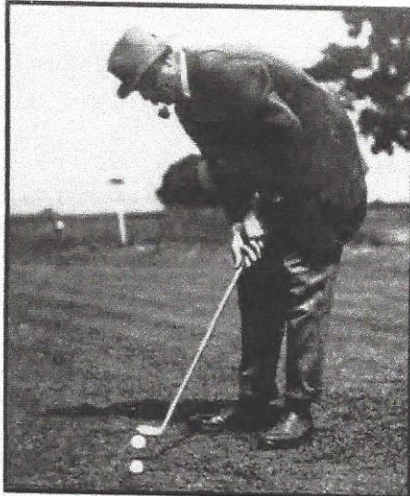


CHAPTER THREE—Early Golf Greats at Nassau



Ted Ray demonstrates how to loft a stymie. Another option was to putt around your opponent's ball.

In the Met Amateur, Douglas was twice the champion. In 1901, he defeated C. H. Seely by 11 and 9 in the final at the Apawamis Club, and in 1903, he bested John A. Moller, Jr. by 10 and 9 at Deal Golf and Country Club. In 1907, he lost in the final by 8 and 7 to Jerry Travers, at Nassau.

Douglas was Nassau champion in 1904, 1905 and 1908 and was successful in many other Met area events. Of them all, he once said that his "most cherished golf prize" was the St. Andrew's Golf Club's silver trophy of 1897. Douglas remembered it so well because he had been forced to jump a stymie at critical stages in his semifinal and final matches. He negotiated both successfully. To the day he died, in 1959, he always maintained, "It was a mistake to take the stymie out of golf. It added more interest to a match."

Note: A stymie occurred when your opponent's ball lay on the green between your ball and the hole, the balls being more than six inches apart. The stymie was part of match play from the game's beginning until 1951, when the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, Scotland, and the USGA abolished it. To play a stymie, you had to either "jump" your ball over your opponent's ball with a lofted club or putt your ball around the other, using a slope on the green.

Douglas' game stood the test of time. At the age of 57, he won the 1932 U. S. Seniors Golf Association championship at the Apawamis Club, Rye, NY, with a score of 148.

Douglas was more than just a fine player. In 1908, he was one of 70 original founders of Charles B. Macdonald's National Golf Links (Shinnecock Hills, Long Island, New York). He also served the game as president of the USGA from 1929-30, of the MGA from 1922-1924, and the U. S. Seniors Golf Association in 1937.

Ruth Underhill

Born in Englewood, New Jersey, in 1874, Ruth Underhill was a grand-daughter of Charles A. Dana, editor of the *New York Sun*. She was a graduate of Bryn Mawr College, and, as a young woman, contributed short stories to leading magazines as well as being one of America's pioneer women golfers. While she won the U. S. Women's Amateur in 1899, this was not the first time she had competed in the championship.

Underhill made her debut in 1897, when the Essex County Club, Manchester, Massachusetts, hosted the event. She then was playing out of the old Queens County Club. At the time, golf historian H. B. Martin described her as a "young player coming to the front." She failed to qualify on a day laconically described in the magazine *Outing* as "stormy." This was probably an understatement since the medalist, Beatrix Hoyt, took 108 strokes. That year, Hoyt won the championship for the second time in a row.

In 1898, at the Ardsley Club, Ardsley-on-Hudson, New York, Hoyt won for the third time. She again was medalist, with 92. The next best score was 100. Underhill shot 105. Nine of the 16 qualifiers had higher scores, the highest, 109. If these scores sound high, one must remember that this was still the era of the gutta ball, when men were qualifying for the Amateur with scores ranging from 87 to 94.

After winning her first round match 1 up in 19 holes over Madeline Boardman of Essex County, Underhill lost to Frances Griscom of Merion 6 and 4. This was no disgrace, as Griscom was a formidable competitor. Moreover, the press highly praised Underhill's courage in her match with Boardman. Four down after 13 holes, Underhill fought back to square the match at the 18th and win on the first extra hole.

In 1899, the Philadelphia Country Club, Bala, Pennsylvania, hosted the championship. Again, Hoyt was medalist with 97 and Underhill, now playing out of Nassau, qualified with another 105.

Outing Magazine describes Underhill's progress to the final. "Undoubtedly, Miss Underhill was the surprise of the competition, not so much because she was a dark horse as because the public eye was riveted on Mrs. Caleb Fox (the other finalist, who put Hoyt out in the first round and then defeated two other highly fancied contestants) . . . Had this eclipse not obscured Miss Underhill, the public would much earlier have recognized her possibilities, not only from her past form, but from her present play." By "present play," the magazine was referring to Underhill's victory earlier that year in May in a three-day tournament at Lakewood (N. J.), when she was first in a large field.

The magazine continued, "To those who saw her play on Wednesday in the first match, when she easily disposed of Miss Janet H. Swords by 3 and 2, or on Thursday when she



Ruth Underhill, U.S. Women's Amateur Champion in 1899. Note the upright swing, very unconventional in her day.

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won from Miss Pauline Mackay by the same score, she exhibited all her usual characteristics. She played with great judgement and coolness. The deliberation of her address has not diminished, while it would be impossible for the length of her backswing to have increased. There was the unique croquet-like attitude in her putts. Yet it was not until she had made the (lowest) score of the tournament, a 47 on the out holes (50 had been the low score in qualifying, by Hoyt), against Miss Elsie Cassatt that she attracted attention."

This was really Underhill's first formidable opponent. Cassatt was the champion of the Women's Philadelphia Golf League (in 1898 and 1899), a group that included some of the finest women golfers of the day, and on the Wednesday she had defeated Griscom by 3 and 2. Underhill defeated Cassatt handily, by 5 and 4, then disposed of Mrs. Fox in the final by 2 and 1.

In October of 1899, the Women's Metropolitan Golf Association was born. This is the country's second oldest sectional women's golf association; the WGA of Philadelphia dates from 1897. Underhill became the WMGA's first secretary. The association held its first championship at Morris County in June of the following year, when Underhill lost in the final by 9 and 7 to the talented 17-year old Genevieve Hecker. The following year at Nassau, Hecker again beat Underhill in the final, this time by 2 and 1.

Underhill continued to play in the Amateur for a number of years, but without further victories. She qualified in 1900 at Shinnecock, but lost in the first round. Griscom was the champion.

Later that year, the magazine *Harper's Bazar* ran an article entitled "Miss Griscom's Game of Golf." The author, one Arthur Pottow, mentioned that Griscom should take heed of the example of Underhill, who "had lost at Shinnecock, due to a weakness in her long game, the result of as a bad a style as is possible to conceive."

Study of photos of Underhill in this magazine and others shows that she had a baseball grip, then very common, and used, among others, by Alex Smith and Jerry Travers. So, that hardly could be what Pottow was carping at. Underhill did finish the swing with the hands very high, well above her head, a very upright swing plane. This is probably what Pottow meant by "bad style," since a flat swing was then in vogue.

For example, an *Outing Magazine* article of 1898 praised Beatrix Hoyt for her "low, round swing and the most beautiful follow-through to be imagined." (Incidentally, in this "beautiful" follow-through, Hoyt "would often move on a step with the force of her finish," as Gary Player does now.)

Today, with the successes of Nicklaus and John Daly before us, we undoubtedly would praise rather than find fault with Underhill's upright swing! Others had no difficulty in accepting Underhill's golfing credentials. She later wrote a chapter on women's golf in *The Book of Sport*, 1901.

The last time that Underhill qualified for the Amateur came in 1902, when she shot a 90, only one off the pace of two co-medalists. She then had the misfortune to meet the defending champion, Genevieve Hecker, in the second round and lost by 4 and 3. Hecker went on to win the championship for the second time.

Further light on Underhill's highly individual putting style is thrown when, earlier in 1902, she had played in the Poniatowski Cup. This was an 18-hole medal play event hosted by the Burlingame Country Club in San Mateo, California. At the time, it was one of the principal trophies for women golfers in that state. The magazine *Golf* reported that Underhill won with a 96. The holder, Mrs. Gilman Brown, described as the "strongest exponent of the game in Northern California," was second with 102.

The magazine commented on the "greens" of "oiled sand," to which Underhill was "not accustomed." It went on: "Nevertheless her putting was accurate and consistent. The *San Francisco Examiner* naively describes her aluminum putter as follows; 'In the putting, Miss Underhill uses a stick of a kind never before seen on this coast. It is as an iron, shaped like a croquet mallet (Note: In modern golf parlance, a mallet putter—as opposed to a blade), and, standing behind the ball, Miss Underhill propels it from her with the flat side.'"

Naively described or not, at first it does sound as though Underhill was one of the early pioneers of what we would call croquet-style putting (standing astride the line). However, photos of her putting reveal that she stood "behind" the ball by adopting a very open stance. From the angle of the putter face, it appears she then swung the putter back just outside her right foot, and then through and away from herself.

Underhill could not have putted croquet-style because of the era's ankle-length skirts. In those days, women playing croquet used a "golf-type" stance, standing to the side of the ball.



A rare photo of Beatrix Hoyt shown in front of the clubhouse at Shinnecock Hills G.C. in 1896.



Compare this finish with the photo of Ruth Underhill on the preceding page. The low hands and flat swing shown here were then in fashion.

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In 1904, Underhill married Harold Tredway White, a partner in White, Weld and Co, New York investment bankers and stockbrokers. She then gave up writing as well as tournament golf. Her husband's hobbies were hunting, fishing and collecting rare books, but unfortunately did not include golf. She died in 1944.

Alex Smith

Alex Smith was born on January 28, 1874. He was the eldest of five brothers—the others were Willie, Macdonald, George and Jimmy—who emigrated from Carnoustie, Scotland, to the U. S. around the turn of the century. In the spring of 1898, the Forgans of Chicago, looking for a pro/clubmaker who also had experience as a greenkeeper, invited Alex to come to America. He accepted and took the position of greenkeeper at Washington Park.

In the 1898 U. S. Open, held at the Myopia Hunt Club, Hamilton, Massachusetts, he finished in second place behind the pro at Washington Park, Fred Herd, and again was second in 1901. That was the year that he received an offer from Nassau. Since he would better himself considerably, he lost no time in accepting it. While at Nassau, he won the Open for the first time in 1906 at the Onwentsia Club, Lake Forest, Illinois. He was then 34 years of age. He scored 295, leaving his brother Willie seven strokes in his wake. This was the first time anyone had broken 300 in the championship. He also finished fourth in 1903, second in 1905 and third in 1908.

Another performance by Smith while at Nassau, is, as the magazine *Golf* of August, 1903, put it, "worthy of brief notice." On July 8 of that year, while playing the best ball of three amateurs, he went round Nassau in 66. The magazine noted that he had a 2 at the Circus hole and a 3 at the 12th, 395 yards. Sixty-six was a remarkably low score for those days. In the U. S. Open, for example, no one broke 70 until six years later.

In 1909, Alex left Nassau for Wykagyl. In the following year, he again won the Open, held at the Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) Cricket Club. Blessed with a marvelous sense of humor and temperament for the game, he had need of these qualities on this occasion. On the 72nd green, he missed an easy three-footer for the outright win. He somehow managed a broad grin, and the next day, easily won the playoff with a 71 against his brother Macdonald's 77 and Johnny McDermott's 75.

Alex's overall record is impressive. Besides his two victories in the U. S. Open, he also had three seconds, three thirds, a fourth and a fifth. The fifth place came in 1921, 23 years after his first appearance, when he was 49 years old. Alex's other major wins came in the 1903 and 1906 Western Opens, and in the Met Opens of 1905, 1909, 1910 and 1913. His four successes in the latter event are still a record. He finished second in the Western Open in 1904 and in the Met Open in 1906. He also won three Eastern PGA Championships.

If today's readers think that extra long clubs are something new, they should know that Alex won the 1905 Met Open with a set of so-called "fishing pole" woods, the driver 48 inches long! However, he didn't stay with them long. By the next year, he was still using very long clubs, but the extra long clubs were no longer in his bag (see box at left). Evidently, even a man of his skill couldn't hit the ball flush consistently with such unwieldy weapons.

In the same year, Walter Travis also tried extra-length clubs, his driver measuring 50 inches in length! Even then, the idea was not new. Also in 1905, Van Tassel Sutphen wrote: "Clubs of abnormal length have been tried time and again in the past and the pendulum is continually oscillating between the two extremes . . . In the long clubs, the increased leverage does bring off a longer ball—that is a simple mechanical proposition. But if greater accuracy in hitting be also involved, how shall it profit a man who is wild with the ordinary clubs?"

It was a fad that lasted just about a year.

The pendulum still oscillates. In 1992, Senior Tour pro Rocky Thompson said of his 50-inch driver, "When I hit it, it goes downtown. The only problem is I don't know which town!"

In 1906, Smith won the U. S. Open playing with a Goodyear pneumatic golf ball—the center filled with compressed air. His brother Willie, who finished second, also used the ball. The pneumatics performed well, but had a distressing tendency to explode in hot weather! Like the extra-long clubs, they soon vanished from the golfing scene.

Later, in 1921, O. B. Keeler, Bobby Jones's Boswell, analyzed Alex's playing method

Alex Smith's Clubs In 1906

In October, 1906, Alex Smith started a series of instruction articles for the magazine *Golf*, called "Lessons in Golf." (These were the foundation of a book of the same name published in the following year.) The magazine published the weight and length of Alex's set of clubs at the time:

| Club | Weight | Length |
|----------------|------------|---------------|
| Driver | 14 oz. | 46 1/4 inches |
| Brassey | 15 oz. | 45 1/2 inches |
| Spoon | 14 1/4 oz. | 45 inches |
| Cleek | 14 3/4 oz. | 42 1/2 inches |
| Drive Iron | 15 oz. | 41 inches |
| Midiron | 16 oz. | 40 1/4 inches |
| Mashie | 15 1/2 oz. | 39 3/4 inches |
| Mashie Niblick | 17 1/4 oz. | 39 inches |
| Putter | 16 1/2 oz. | 38 inches |

These are very long clubs. Today, the regular length of a driver equipped with a steel shaft is 43 inches, a 1-iron, 39 1/2 inches, although, thanks to the lightness of graphite shafts, it is now feasible for even average golfers to swing drivers with shafts 44 or even 45 inches long. *Golf* did not list the lofts of Alex's clubs.