

Stetson prevails over Goss in motherly battle at Merion

by Rhonda Glenn, USGA 2013

Noted golf writer O.B. Keeler quaintly called the 1926 U.S. Women's Amateur, "Mothers' Day at Merion."

Keeler, or perhaps his headline writer, was referring to the finalists, Helen Stetson and Elizabeth Hardin Goss. Both were married mothers and both had outlasted more famous single women, prevailing over "the great Glenna (Collett)," "fair and divinely tall" Helen Payson, "the beatific" Bernice Wall, as well as Edith Cummings, Virginia Van Wie, Edith Quier and "that dear little" Virginia Wilson, as Keeler wrote in the November 1926 edition of *The American Golfer*.

Keeler, better-known as the chronicler of Bob Jones and the most famed golf reporter of his time, was quite right. At that time, single women dominated the game. From the first Women's Amateur in 1895 there had been only three married champions: Mrs. H. Arnold Jackson (1914), Mrs. C.H. Vanderbeck (1915), and Mrs. Dorothy Campbell Hurd (1924). With two married women now in the final, a fourth was guaranteed.

Helen Stetson's parental role, in fact, had forced her to forgo the Women's Amateur for six years in favor of preparing her two daughters for the approaching school year. Finally, in 1926, Stetson signed up to play.

This was a transitional year at the Women's Amateur. The previous year, a rebellion of sorts among players had created the possibility of *two* national women's amateur titles. In 1925, America's top women players had favored organizing their own national governing body, which they proposed to name the "Women's National Golf Association," to conduct its own championship. It would be similar to the Ladies' Golf Union in Great Britain, they claimed, and the appeal of the plan was that women would conduct women's championships, rather than the all-male USGA committees of the day.

Their efforts, however, were unsuccessful. The championship remained under the auspices of the USGA, but in response to the uprising a USGA Women's Committee was appointed to help conduct the 1926 championship. Today the dedicated members of that Committee help conduct USGA championships, serve as Rules officials and conduct sectional qualifying. The USGA Women's Committee has thus been in existence for 87 years.

The 1926 Women's Amateur was plagued with upsets. "The great Glenna," the longest hitter of her era, had won the U.S. Women's Amateur twice and appeared poised to win again – at Merion she was medalist with an 81 – but Collett went out in the third round to Virginia Wilson of Chicago. Reporter Lucille MacAllister wrote, "Under the shelter of her caddie's big umbrella she (Wilson) followed coolly along after Miss Collett, taking advantage of every opening that was offered."

The other star in the upper bracket was Edith Cummings, the 1923 champion. Cummings was a great debutante and the delight of photographers, but she “went all to pieces” in her quarterfinal match with Stetson, the veteran player prevailing, 6 and 5. Virginia Wilson went out to Stetson in the semifinals.

The public lost enthusiasm for the lower bracket when Virginia Van Wie and Maureen Orcutt were defeated in the first round. “The lack of interest... so far, was quite obvious,” MacAllister wrote. Survivors in that bracket were all from the Women’s Metropolitan Golf Association. MacAllister said that had spectators been more concerned with the golf and less with personalities, they would have “seen golf superior to that of any of the upper bracket players.”

Mrs. Wright D. Goss Jr., of Baltusrol, had established her fine reputation several years before. As Elizabeth Hardin, she had been an athlete at Vassar and had advanced to the second round of the 1922 Women’s Amateur. In 1923 she made it to the semifinals, where she had been eliminated by three-time champion Alexa Stirling. “A nervous temperament has usually been the cause of her defeat,” MacAllister wrote.

Goss got off to a good start that week at Merion when she was runner-up to Collett for the qualifying medal with a fine 82. Now she would face Stetson in the final and for only the second time since 1914, two married women would battle for the title.

It’s curious how competitors most often prepare for championships expecting gaily played days in the sun. They throw a sweater or two in their luggage for a chilly round, and toss in a jacket “in case it rains.” Our fondest golf memories are so often sun-struck and green, but Merion that week was one long slog.

It rained every day but one. Feet slipped in the mud. Hands slipped on slick grips. Players wearing sodden sweaters and rattling slickers trudged through the puddles. They blamed the late dates of the competition, Sept. 27-Oct. 2, when storms typically prevailed. Many urged the USGA to schedule the championship in late summer when weather was more favorable. With a lone August venture in 1933, the championship was mired in mid-autumn until 1951, when it was moved to August, which was a more suitable date for the school girls who were now blossoming into fine players.

And so, on that long-ago rainy October day, Stetson and Goss struck off in the 36-hole final, both trying for their first national championship. Goss’ “nervous temperament” returned and she floundered in the morning round. Her long game seemed fine but, “Very sensitive to the large gallery she missed putt after putt until the extent of her errors was almost unbelievable,” McAllister wrote.

Goss had 44 putts in the first 18 holes. Stetson had 33. “The finalists did not play fine golf,” Keeler said. “It was ragged golf, as golf goes.”

Stetson was a dependable, consistent golfer and many said that the beauty of her game lay entirely in its steadiness. With rare exceptions, she hit the ball right down the fairway and had a

fine short game. She seemed cool and at ease that day against Goss, the qualities that so often single out a champion.

Stetson won the Women's Amateur final, 3 and 1.

In Keeler's story, he returned to his "Mother's Day at Merion" theory. "I now think certainly there is a spiritual fortitude that comes with motherhood which steels the soul against the smaller adversities," he wrote.

Accompanied by her two tall daughters at the photo sessions on the final green, Stetson impressed Keeler with her calm. "A weary, weary little woman, who had beaten a great golfer and a great competitor... There was so much in her placid, weary face – so much back of it. We men cannot know. We can only guess – and remove our hats.

"The spell of Mother's Day at Merion is on me. And I love to stand with bared and bowed head before the thirtieth woman champion of the United States," he wrote. "There was more than golf in her triumph."

Elizabeth Goss returned to the home in New Jersey she shared with her husband Wright D. Goss Jr., their daughter Jane and son Wright D. Goss III. She was active in the Women's Metropolitan Golf Association and served as president during the war years, 1942-1945. A member of Somerset Hills Golf Club, Goss donated a trophy to be used by the Garden State Women's Golf Association.

After Elizabeth Goss died unexpectedly in 1953, the GSWGA used the trophy to initiate its annual Round Robin tournament in 1954. The Round Robin remains the most popular of all GSWGA events.

Although O.B. Keeler made Helen Stetson sound very old in his writing, she was only 39 when she became champion. Stetson was a semifinalist in the U.S. Women's Amateur two years later and went on to win many of the Philadelphia area's most important golf cups. An ardent competitor, she represented Huntingdon Valley Country Club in interclub matches for more than 30 years.

As she aged, Stetson refrained from senior golf competition and when she chose to retire from the game completely, she began to instead race homing pigeons, a popular avocation of that time.