



## THE RIDGEWOOD COUNTRY CLUB

A MEMORABLE HISTORY OF THE RIDGEWOOD COUNTRY CLUB

### *Byron Nelson, A Ridgewood Champion*



*Byron at Ridgewood with Tillinghast and Jacobus in the crowd*

Before leaving for the 1935 Masters, Ridgewood's head golf professional, George Jacobus, secured permission from the Board to hire an assistant professional. In Augusta George immediately took a liking to a scrawny, 23 year old from Texas who was in the process of developing a new swing. Young Byron Nelson would make quite an impression on the Ridgewood membership and in the ten years that followed, the entire golfing world. But even today, almost 70 years after he stopped competing, it is not clear whether Nelson's greatest contribution to the game was his accomplishments on the course or the lifelong example he set as golf's greatest ambassador.

We might have The Great Depression to thank for giving us Byron Nelson. He grew up in a poor but loving home presided over by his preacher father in rural Texas. Young Byron envied his friends who had more spending money than he did. They earned it by working as caddies at nearby Glen Garden Country Club in Fort Worth. Byron began working as a caddy and squeezed in time to play golf whenever he could. Despite his limited playing opportunities he managed to win the 9-hole caddies tournament. He sank a long putt on the first playoff hole to wrest the prize away from fellow caddy, Ben Hogan.

Byron had dropped out of school in the tenth grade. He was laid off from his job as a file clerk for Denver City Railroad during the Depression. With few other options, he turned his attention to golf. The change in young Byron's life coincided with a major change in the golf world, one that he would help pioneer.

Hickory shafts demanded a type of swing that is quite different from what we see today. Because of the way the club curved in the backswing, the golfer's lower body had to be very quiet with most of the action being generated by the golfer's hands. Byron was among the first to realize that to be successful with the newly introduced steel shafts, his swing had to be completely reengineered. "You had to be more upright. You had to use your legs and feet more. You had to take the club back straight and inside."

Changing one's swing was not easy. Byron's early efforts were plagued with shanks caused by allowing his head to move too freely. His cure was to hit out from under his head while his lower body shifted past it. For Byron

a steady head was the secret to balance. He credited his time working with Ridgewood's George Jacobus with playing a key role in perfecting his new swing, the prototype for the modern golf swing. Keeping his left arm straight and with very little torque, he was able to keep his club head square through the hitting zone. It was an action that he could repeat precisely and effortlessly. An added bonus was that his new swing was better suited for striking the 1.68 inch diameter ball that was gaining in popularity over the smaller British ball.

His accomplishments on the golf course are legendary. Winning 11 consecutive golf tournaments in 1945, including 18 wins in 30 events, is considered by many an even greater accomplishment than Joe DiMaggio's 56 game hitting streak. It was not until 2000 that Tiger Woods broke his 68.33 for 18 holes record for lowest season scoring average. Nelson was able to play a full schedule in 1945 because his hemophilia rendered him unfit for military service. But the things he did off the golf course are equally compelling.

Lord Byron's place in Ridgewood Country Club lore is literally monumental. A plaque on the patio opposite the pro shop marks the spot where assistant pro Nelson responded to a challenge from caddies as he walked back from the practice range. They bet the notoriously straight-hitting Nelson that with three tries he could not hit a flagpole 93 yards away. After missing with his first he hit a gentle draw with his 3-iron and walked away fifty-five cents richer, all in nickels.

In 1947 Nelson returned to Ridgewood and on East-Center shot a record 63 including a mere 30 strokes on the East course. His 63 was all the more remarkable because his best previous score during his assistant pro years at the club was 68. His signed 18-hole score card from that round and a photo of Nelson are in the newly decorated display case in the golfers' entryway.

The next time you play a round and slip off your comfortable golf shoes, remember to thank Nelson. In 1938 he and fellow competitor Jug McSpaden complained to the salesman for the Foot-Joy line about the flimsiness of their shoes. The soles were so thin you could feel the spikes through the leather. The poorly constructed shoes would not hold up on a wet course. The two pros went to the Foot-Joy factory in Boston and helped design a better shoe. The rest of the tour was immediately envious and put in their orders. Foot-Joy emerged as a major force in golf shoes. For a time Nelson and McSpaden shared a 25 cents per pair royalty on sales.

Speaking of playing on a wet course, remember to thank Nelson when you are well-protected from a passing shower during a round. Floyd Haas of the Hass-Jordan Company, a leading umbrella maker, hired Nelson to be the head professional at Inverness in Toledo, OH. Byron shared with Haas his low opinion of the golf umbrellas available to players at that time. They came with weak frames and were quick to blow inside out on windy days. Byron made the trip to the company's New Jersey factory and helped design a double-ribbed model with a much larger frame. His compensation for helping the company launch a new product line was modest; he was paid \$25 per store call to promote the new umbrella.

In his humble, folksy way, he was a wonderful golf teacher. Tom Watson and Ken Venturi credit him with helping them bring their games to the highest level. Byron's advice to golfers trying to improve is at odds with much of the conventional wisdom.

"If you find something in your swing that works and is fundamentally sound, stay with it. If your game goes sour, resist the temptation to fool with that fundamental. For the average golfer, experimenting is death."

Nelson never obsessed about distance. A three quarter swing with his driver was sufficient to set up the next shot.

Byron Nelson pioneered the role of TV golf analyst. Paired with Chris Schenkel on ABC he introduced the TV viewing audience to the game from the professional's point of view. His rather booming voice led to the addition of a plexiglass screen installed in front of the announcer's booth. Ken Venturi claimed that he once was able to hear Nelson' read of a long putt from the booth. Following the advice, he sank it.



Although they were born six months apart, Nelson's rivalry with Ben Hogan never fully materialized. All five of Nelson's major championships were won before he was 34; Hogan's nine majors came after he was 34.

When Nelson retired at 34, he was worn out by the physical demands of tour travel and the pressure of playing competitive golf. Having achieved his personal goal of being able to purchase a ranch, he shared what motivated him. "When I was playing regularly, I had a goal. I could see the prize money going into the ranch, buying a tractor, or a cow. It gave me incentive."

Byron Nelson's long life concluded in 2006 at age 94.

### THREE TIDBITS FOR TRIVIA BUFFS

*"Byron" is the middle name of John Byron Nelson, Jr. His father hated the "Byron" name and never used it.*

*It was at the 1937 Masters that a sportswriter dubbed him "Lord Byron" because Byron's competitiveness reminded him of a poem written by Englishman Lord Byron describing Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo.*

*By coincidence, Byron's father was named "Byron" because his grandmother loved the poetry of Lord Byron.*

