

Golf's golden man

By Mignonne Rawson Last updated: 22nd October 2009



George S.Lyon - won gold in 1904.

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It was late afternoon on September 23rd 1904, when a crowd of onlookers stood huddled together, shoes wet through by the constant drizzle of rain which had not let up since morning.

The wind whispered through the slender gaps which separated each person. There was a quiet. All waiting. Waiting for the man standing only metres from them, hunched over the little white ball which had taken him miles that day.

With a furrowed brow he produced a steady back swing. A gentle tap on the way through and the ball travelled, all eyes following it, along the clipped grass to the little hole only metres away. Plop. The sweetest sound to a golfer's ears. And for player, George S. Lyon, one of his greatest triumphs.

By sinking that ball, Lyon had ensured himself a place in the history books. This was only the second time that golf had been played in the Olympics, and the first time that a medal was to be awarded.

Lyon had managed to defeat the American amateur champion Chandler Egan by three up with two to play at the Glen Eco Country Club in St. Louis.

This win was exceptional for two reasons. Firstly, he had managed to fend off the best collection of players from the around the world to win this title. Secondly, and perhaps more incredibly, Lyon had done so at the age of 46; double the age of Egan, and most probably the rest of the 77 players who had competed.

This was a man who had only taken up the game eight years earlier.

Over 100 years has passed since Lyon played in his 1904 gold medal round and it is only recently that the idea of re-introducing golf back into the Olympics has been addressed. In August this year the International Olympic Committee voted that golf rejoin the line-up of summer games sports, beginning in 2016.

This means that Lyon's one-time golf gold medal will no longer be the only one around and that the sign over his medal, which hangs on the wall at the Rosedale Golf Club, will need to be changed from 'The Only Golf Olympic Gold Medal.'

In the run up to the final round Lyon had not been the favourite. He had been heavily criticised by the media as having a swing akin to that of 'a man cutting wheat with a scythe' and of having 'a coal heaver's swing'. His swing was not a thing of beauty, being more a combination of cricket and baseball. Nevertheless, it would take him on to great things and his was not a personality to be put off by such jibes.

It has been said about Lyon that he won gracefully and lost graciously. He was a man of supreme talents perhaps helped on by his even temperament. He was a good humoured, portly, boisterous sportsman who was liable to break out in song at any given moment, just as electrifying and colourful on the field as he was off it.

There is no better example of this than when, after the long and gruelling day's play against Egan, Lyon walked on his hands the length of the clubhouse to receive his medal.

Born George Seymour Lyon in Richmond, Canada, on 27th July 1858, he was the son of Robinson E. Lyon and Sarah Maxwell. One of 13 children, Lyon was raised on a farm and as he grew it became apparent that he possessed that rare quality of being exceptional at every sport he touched.

He played baseball, rugby and football, was an excellent curler and lawn bowler and was a star of track and field. At 18 he set a Canadian record in the pole vault and would go on to represent Canada at cricket, scoring 238 not out for his club, which stood as a Canadian record for nearly 40 years.

All these sporting achievements were to be foreshadowed, though, by a chance encounter. One day, at the age of 38, after he had finished a cricket match at the Rosedale ground, in Toronto, Lyon was offered the opportunity to try a new sport by his friend Dick John, who was playing a round at Rosedale Golf Club.

Although a sports fanatic, Lyon was inclined to look upon golf with some contempt. It was a relatively new sport to Canada and as a cricketer of international standard Lyon deemed it a lesser activity and beneath his ability.

His friend, however, managed to persuade him, at which point Lyon leapt over the fence, threw his cricket bat to the side and picked up a golf club for the first time in his life. With instruction from John, Lyon teed up and produced a fine drive down the fairway. He was hooked.

By the next year he had managed to get into the semi-finals of the Canadian Amateur Golf Championships and within three years had won it.

This was the beginning of a run unseen before or since by someone adopting the game at such a late stage. He went on to win the Canadian Amateur Championships eight times (1898, 1900, 1903, 1905, 1906, 1907, 1912 and 1914). He was the runner-up in the United States Amateur Championships in 1906 and the runner-up in the Canadian Open in 1910. He won the North American Senior's Golf Championships three times in 1923, 1931 and 1932.

In fact, his domination was such that of the 15 Canadian Senior's Golf Association Championship tournaments that he played in, he won 10 times (1918, 1919, 1920, 1921, 1922, 1923, 1925, 1926, 1928 and 1930) and came second on four other occasions.

For all his varied sporting achievements, however, it is perhaps his Olympic Gold medal that has remained his most memorable; an accomplishment which he could easily have turned into a double act at the 1908 Olympic Games in London, however, dispute caused the British golfers to boycott the Games and US golfers had then decided to withdraw under such conditions. Lyon's was the only entry deemed acceptable by the Olympic Committee, who informed him that he had won the gold medal by default. He declined the offer, explaining that he could not accept a medal that he had not won fairly in competition.

Until his final years, Lyon continued to play, more often than not carding scores below that of his age. In his later years Lyon's achievements continued. In 1923 he was made president of the Royal Canadian Golf Association. In 1955 he was inducted into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame and then into the Canadian Golf Hall of Fame in 1971. He was a founding member of Lambton Golf Course and was also its captain for 23 years.

He died at his home in Toronto on 11th May 1938.

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