

Old Gold

This week marks the 105th anniversary of golf's only true Olympic moment, when a little known Canadian medaled at Glen Echo CC near St. Louis



all-around athlete: Lyon was a standout in baseball, cricket, tennis and the pole vault but didn't play golf until a friend urged him to give it a try at 37.

BY **DAVE SHEDLOSKI**

PHOTO BY RCGA/CANADIAN GOLF HALL OF FAME

September 21, 2009

When the full legislative assembly of the International Olympic Committee convenes next month in Copenhagen, it will decide whether to include golf in the 2016 Summer Games. More than a century has elapsed since the last Olympic golf competition, leaving a yawning void in the otherwise rich history of the sport and relegating that event to a footnote in the game's musty back pages.

Coincidentally, it was 105 years ago this week that Glen Echo CC in Normandy, Mo., about 12 miles northwest of St. Louis, hosted the last—and some would argue only—Olympic golf competition. Canada's George S. Lyon, a 46-year-old insurance salesman, upset H. Chandler Egan, the reigning U.S. Amateur champion, 3 and 2, to capture the gold medal.

The upset Lyon orchestrated amid a chilling rain on Sept. 24, 1904, deserves recognition. While perhaps not as jarring as Jack Fleck beating Ben Hogan or the recent setback Y.E. Yang dealt to Tiger Woods in the PGA Championship, Lyon's triumph was nonetheless a shocker in its day.

Consider the match-up: Egan, a member at Exmoor CC in his native Chicago and just graduated from Harvard, was more than twice Lyon's junior, only 20, and possessed a powerful and stylish swing, which he used to great effect in '04, winning both the U.S. Amateur at Baltusrol GC, where he dusted Fred Herreshoff, 8 and 6, in the final, and the Western Amateur. Egan had played golf since age 12.

A world-class cricket player, Lyon also had been a golfer for eight-plus years, but he was 37 when a fellow member at Rosedale GC in Toronto goaded him into giving the sport a try in the fall of 1895. He took it up in earnest the following summer. "I caught the fever then and there," Lyon wrote in 1906 in *British Golf Illustrated*. Though strong and sturdily built, he had to endure 36-hole matches each day at Glen Echo, an exacting assignment for a man his age with chronic hay fever. Unlike Egan, Lyon's swing lacked artistic merit. He employed what observers described as "a coal-heaver's swing." Others opined derisively that his lurching movement resembled that of "a baby elephant."

Those barbs notwithstanding, by 1903 he had won three Canadian Amateurs and mastered many sports, including hockey, baseball and tennis. In 1876, when he was 18, Lyon set the national pole vault record of 10 feet, 6 inches.

He would add five more Canadian Amateurs, and with his third straight victory in 1907 he became outright owner of the Aberdeen Cup (just as Young Tom Morris gained possession of the Challenge Belt for his three successive British Opens in 1868-70). Lyon also was runner-up in the 1906 U.S. Amateur and in the 1910 Canadian Open. He served as president of the Royal Canadian GA in 1923.

In addition, Lyon served in 1916 as first chairman of the RCGA's Rules Committee. This was no coincidence. An affable man of immense good humor, Lyon was nonetheless a stickler for the rules. George Stephen, club historian at Lambton G&CC in Toronto, which Lyon helped organize in 1902, used to play golf with Lyon's son, Fred. A favorite tale highlights Lyon's steadfast adherence to golf protocol. One year in the city finals at Lambton, George's opponent hooked his tee shot at 18 into the billiard room. Lyon made the man play his next back into the fairway from atop the billiard table. The opponent was Lyon's eldest son, Seymour, who lost the hole and the match.

In *Golf in Canada: A History*, James A. Barclay wrote that "what George Lyon did for Canadian golf Bobby Jones was to do for American golf 20 years later." Karen Hewson, director of the Canadian Golf Hall of Fame and Museum, likens Lyon more to Francis Ouimet; the former's Olympic victory stirred greater interest in golf in the northern country just as Ouimet awakened the game in America with his epic 1913 U.S. Open triumph over Harry Vardon and Ted Ray. "He certainly is among the top half-dozen figures in the history of the game here," Hewson says. "His impact was immense."

Lyon had never seen Glen Echo prior to the Olympics, which began Sept. 16 and also featured a team competition. This was another hurdle to overcome. Many of the 77 competitors were from St. Louis or Chicago, and 16 were members of the host club, which opened May 25, 1901.

How Glen Echo, the oldest private 18-hole course west of the Mississippi, earned the privilege of hosting the Olympic golf tournament was itself an upset and can be traced to the success of a popular pharmaceutical agent—Listerine.

Colonel George S. McGrew founded Mound City Club, as Glen Echo was initially named, after traveling to St. Andrews and becoming enthralled with the game while playing in the company of Old Tom Morris. Back home in St. Louis he purchased 167 acres of rolling farmland and hired 1896 U.S. Open champion James Foulis to design the layout, though Foulis' brother Robert—who like James was a protégé of Old Tom before they ventured to America—did the bulk of the shaping.



a place in history: More than a century after Lyon earned gold, Glen Echo CC is proud of its unique heritage. Lyon's medal is lost, but visitors can buy a replica at the club, where the Olympic flag is flown. Lyon's surprise 3-and-2 triumph over Egan, a heavy favorite, ended on the 16th hole. Photo: Stefan Hester

McGrew's son-in-law Albert Lambert, avid in golf and aviation (in 1927, Lambert was among those who funded Charles Lindbergh's trans-Atlantic solo flight), was at the turn of the century the president of Lambert Pharmacal, which later became Warner-Lambert, and its most acclaimed product was a certain oral antiseptic. Lambert had traveled to Paris in 1900 ostensibly to market his product, but he also competed in that year's Golf Exposition at the World's Fair. Lambert won his handicap division on Compeigne GC, though the overall title went to fellow American Charles Sands. Margaret Abbott, also of the U.S., won the women's crown. What they didn't know—because that year's Olympiad in Paris, the second of the modern era, was so poorly planned and executed—was that they were competing in the Olympics.

"In 1900, it wasn't clear what was and wasn't part of the Olympics," says Jim Healey, who in 2001 wrote a book on Glen Echo's history. "Glen Echo was the first and last site of the only golf competition that was called the Olympics as it was happening."

McGrew wasted no time trying to put his prized club on the map by formulating plans for a World Championship, which later morphed into the International Golf Matches, and Lambert used his considerable clout to move it along.

The International Matches became the Olympic Golf Matches when an influential St. Louis consortium pressured Olympic founder Baron Pierre de Coubertin and the IOC to move the Games from Chicago, where they had been awarded. President Theodore Roosevelt eventually intervened at the behest of de Coubertin and determined that St. Louis should host the Olympics in conjunction with the World's Fair.

With the exception of Lyon and two fellow members of Lambton Club, all the contestants were Americans, lengthy transoceanic travel keeping Europeans at home. Egan spearheaded the Western GA's team victory, determined by total strokes among 10 players. Another member of that squad was Simpson Foulis, brother of James and Robert. A Trans-Mississippi group, which included Lambert, won the silver, while a hastily organized team representing the USGA finished third but received no medal.

In addition to the medals, the club awarded sterling silver trophies to the top finishers. Additional trophies were given in ancillary contests sponsored by the club. These included a long drive contest, a putting contest, and handicap events. There were no plans for a women's event other than a putting contest that never came to fruition.

A 36-hole qualifier reduced the field to 32 for match play, and Lyon found himself in the tougher half of the draw. He encountered co-medalist and local favorite Stewart Stickney of St. Louis CC in the second round, and thanks to a course-record 77 in the morning, Lyon registered a shockingly easy 11-and-9 win. He then eliminated Lambert, 5 and 4, before grinding out a 1-up triumph over Francis Newton of Seattle, the Pacific champion.

Egan, meanwhile, reached the final by dispatching another St. Louis ace, Burt McKinnie, 4 and 3. But any notion Egan entertained of enjoying similar success in the final was dashed when Lyon, blasting prodigious drives, won four of the first five holes and made the turn 3 up. Egan whittled the deficit to one by the 18th, but the wet weather never abated and neither did pressure from Lyon. He continued to hammer away with his driver and kept his nerve on the greens despite standing water on many of them.

Healey best summed up the afternoon proceedings in his book. "In the second round Egan's game collapsed," he wrote. "The problem was his driving, which was surprising since he had won the driving contest."

Lyon had not arrived in time for the driving contest, so it was startling for onlookers to see him bashing the ball so effectively with his unorthodox swing. In trying to keep up with the older man, Egan lost his rhythm and began spraying his tee shots. He managed to keep it close, but he never led. His fate was all but sealed at the par-4 15th, the 33rd hole, when he hooked his tee shot into a lake. At the 34th Egan hit another wide tee shot and eventually made 6 to Lyon's 4, ending the affair.

According to *Golf in Canada*, Egan called Lyon "a man of remarkable physical endurance ... one of the cleverest players I have met."

Lyon celebrated his victory by walking through the clubhouse dining room on his hands. But he had no illusions about his feat and waved off claims that he was "Champion of the World," conceding that the absence of European golfers made that a dubious title. "I am not foolish enough to think that I am the best player in the world," Lyon told the *Toronto Star*, "but I am satisfied that I am not the worst."

The Olympic golf movement expired at the 1908 Games for reasons not altogether clear. London was the host city, but according to several accounts, disagreements arose between the R&A and the Olympic committee. British players withdrew, and eventually only Lyon remained. He was offered the gold medal by default, but declined.

Sadly, Lyon's 1904 gold medal has disappeared. A medal reissued by the IOC in 1997 hangs on a wall at Rosedale. His trophy is on display at the Canadian Golf Hall of Fame.

Visitors to Glen Echo can purchase a replica of the medal. Needless to say, the club is proud of its unique heritage and touts itself as the oldest Olympic venue in continuous use.

"This is an Olympic site, a very special place," Healey proclaims, though he hardly needs to. Waving in the breeze on a tall pole just outside Glen Echo's pro shop, below Old Glory, is an easily recognizable flag adorned with five colored rings on a white background. Yes, it's the Olympic flag, and there is not another golf course in America so decorated.

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