

“Great Plaques of Golf”

The return to Merion for the 2013 United States Open in June showcased a classic golf course that had been lost to the modern day player and fan for three decades.

The cosy confines of the property, the beguiling short par threes and fours, a rustic clubhouse that was too small even for the players to use (locker rooms were located offsite with players shuttled to and from the course and practice range), the wicker baskets for flags, all added to the charm and occasion of the week.

One of the most exciting prospects for players as they toured the course in practice rounds for the first time was to locate the famous Ben Hogan plaque on the 18th fairway, set on the spot that Hogan laced his famous 1-iron to the 72nd green to set up a playoff for the 1950 U.S. Open – a playoff he would go on to win the following day.

Player after player stopped to reflect and size up the approach shot for themselves, just as any wide-eyed fan would do. Sergio Garcia’s boyish enthusiasm, running across the fairway when the actual 1-iron Hogan used was also brought out to the plaque by a gloved official as if handling ancient scrolls from a museum vault, summed up how many players felt of the experience that week.

The plaque itself was certainly a focal point and reinforces the unique nature of a sport that allows it’s mere mortals, presuming they can pull some strings to land a game at a club like Merion, to play from the same spots as the greatest players who have ever lived.

The Hogan plaque and the reaction it evoked prompted the inevitable: “How many other

famous plaques are out there?”

Too many to list, it turns out. Many golf clubs have erected champions’ walls and ceremonially acknowledge great career achievements around the premises, but those that illicit the most interest and intrigue are the plaques set into the ground that mark for perpetuity, the exact spot from where a momentous shot occurred.

Some are as historically significant to the game’s folklore as the Hogan Plaque and it’s not surprising to learn that the vast majority are located on the 18th holes of many of the courses, where championships have been decided by heroic deeds. Here’s a selection:

- **Bobby Jones – Royal Lytham & St Annes’ 17th.**

One of the earliest heroic shots commemorated in

bronze was struck by the great Bobby Jones at Royal Lytham during the 1926 Open Championship. Jones was tied with countryman Al Watrous playing the 71st hole and pulled his tee shot into sandy waste on the corner of the dogleg. From there, he pulled off a miraculous stroke, a blind 175-yard shot from the sand to the heart of the green to deny Watrous the title.

The mashie club Jones used hangs in the Lytham clubhouse but a plaque in a bunker marks the exact spot to this day.

Jones’ feat in winning the Grand Slam four years later is also commemorated by a plaque at Merion, to the side of the 11th tee where Jones closed out his match to win the 1930 U.S. Amateur Championship and claim the four ‘majors’ of the era in the

one year.

- **Arnold Palmer – Royal Birkdale’s 15th.**

The legend of Arnold Palmer was forged by his swashbuckling style in the late 50s and early 60s and one of strokes that created the legend is commemorated by a plaque to the right of the 16th hole (now the 15th) at Royal Birkdale in England. Palmer lashed an improbable six-iron from tangled rough and blackberry bushes onto the green en route to a one-stroke victory in the ‘61 Open Championship.

“I suppose I swung as hard at it as I’d ever swung a golf club in my life,” Palmer recalled many years later, “I cut enough hay to feed the cows for a year.”

In one of his final Open



appearances in 1989, Palmer agreed to photographer's request to pose with the plaque during a practice round for the Open that year. After a fruitless search in the rough, Palmer called out to his long-time caddie Tip Anderson who was standing by the bag "Tip, where is that plaque?', only to be told it was "150 miles south of here."

The 1989 Open was being held at Troon in Scotland that year, not Royal Birkdale!

- **Jack Nicklaus – Baltusrol CC (Lower) 18th.**

The great Jack Nicklaus of course has his share of plaques, with Augusta National the site of many. Along with Palmer and other Masters Champions, Augusta National celebrates and honours its champions by naming bridges, drinking fountains and erecting plaques around the premises listing their vast contributions to the game.

Nicklaus' 1-iron approach

to the final green to seal victory in the 1967 U.S. Open at Baltusrol Golf Club is remembered by a plaque on the spot in the fairway, 237 yards from the elevated green.

During the 2005 PGA Championship at Baltusrol, Phil Mickelson walked forward from his ball and tapped the plaque twice for good luck with his four-wood before playing his approach to the final hole. The gesture obviously paid off, Mickelson struck his approach short of the green but played a great flop shot from thick rough to three feet for a birdie and a one-stroke victory.

- **Shaun Micheel – Oak Hill CC's 18th.**

Speaking of PGAs, the 2013 PGA Championship returned to the Oak Hill Country Club this August where another plaque on an 18th fairway commemorates a stunning stroke that sealed victory in a major.

While not possessing



the power name of others mentioned, Shaun Micheel's 7-iron from the left rough to two inches of the hole was certainly 'plaque worthy', as it was struck under stifling pressure on a demanding finishing hole, securing a two-stroke victory for the Tennessee native in 2003.

- **Tom Watson – Turnberry's 18th .**

Another great 7-iron approach to a 72nd hole: Tom Watson's famous approach to within two feet in the '77 Open Championship at Turnberry to win the 'Duel in the Sun' over Jack Nicklaus, has 'finally' been honoured with a plaque although only as recently as 2012 during the Senior British Open.

Watson almost gave cause for a second plaque on the hole during the 2009 Open although, alas, his eight-iron to the last bounded over the final green for an eventual bogey. Watson would have created golf's greatest story with a par on the hole by becoming the champion again for the sixth time at age 59.

Sadly for Watson, he succumbed in a four-hole playoff to Stewart Cink and the dream was lost.

- **Robert Gamez – Bay Hill's 18th**

One can imagine Greg Norman would glance away from the plaque set into the 18th fairway whenever he plays at the Bay Hill Club, marking the spot where Robert Gamez holed from 175 yards to defeat him by a stroke in the 1990 Nestle Invitational.

This shock was on the back of the Bob Tway holed bunker shot to defeat Norman at the '86 PGA and the Larry Mize chip-in on the 11th during a playoff at the '87 Masters. Five weeks after the Gamez miracle, David Frost holed from a bunker on the last in New Orleans to again beat Norman by a shot.

- **Greg Norman – The Australian GC's 5th.**

Norman at least picked up some good fortune of his own later that year and earned his own plaque in the fairway on the fifth hole at The Australian Golf Club in Sydney. I was actually at the course and watched Norman play the preceding three holes during the 1990 Australian Open, then left him to walk ahead after watching his tee shot at the par-five fifth.

It turned out to be an inspired decision as Norman holed the next shot with a gigantic 3-wood for an albatross (double eagle) two. I've walked past that plaque





many times since and still kick myself every time.

• **Craig Parry – Doral Blue Monster’s 18th.**

Norman’s compatriot Craig Parry holed one of the more amazing playoff strokes in PGA Tour history at the 2003 Ford Championship at Doral.

Playing the 18th hole during sudden death with Scott Verplank, Parry took an aggressive line with a 6-iron from 176 yards, the ball covering the left pin location tucked behind water and gently releasing into the hole like a putt for an eagle.

• **Tiger Woods – Glen Abbey GC’s 18th.**

Tiger Woods has played enough jaw-dropping strokes to coat a tank in plaques over his career, but his outlandish 218-yard six-iron over water from sand on the final hole to win the 2000 Canadian Open at Glen Abbey Golf Club is among the most deserving of the plaques erected for him.

Of all of the incredible strokes Woods has pulled off in his career, this one

continues to feature in any highlight reel of the most outrageous shots on the PGA Tour.

However, not every piece of metal laid out for all to see commemorates success.

• **Bruce Devlin – Torrey Pines’s 18th.**

Australian Bruce Devlin must be wondering who the sadists were that chose to not only erect a plaque, but name a body of water in his ‘honour’ after one of the most calamitous and embarrassing nightmares of his career.

During the 1975 Andy Williams San Diego Open at the South Course at Torrey Pines, Devlin came to the last hole contending for the lead and left his approach partially submerged in water fronting the green. Six swings later, and Devlin had earned his own plaque and the pond dubiously referred to thereafter as ‘Devlin’s Billabong’ to underline his torment.

(Given the Devlin experience, could there be a ‘Van de Velde Plaque’ in the offing at Carnoustie’s 18th?)

Sadly but perhaps gladly, not all of the great golf shots in history have been afforded a plaque. Their precarious location for one might create a playing obstruction alone – Tom Watson’s greenside chip-in on the 17th at Pebble Beach to steal the 1982 U.S. Open from Jack Nicklaus is one such spot, Tiger Woods’ ‘Just do it’ chip from behind the back of the 16th green at Augusta National in the 2005 Masters is potentially another – while the exact location of others aren’t easily identifiable.

The spot on the 15th fairway at Augusta National where Gene Sarazen holed out for a double eagle in the second-ever Masters in 1935 – known as ‘the shot heard around the world’ – would undoubtedly be one of the most revered and celebrated locations in golf, but there is no plaque.

Bobby Jones was among only a handful of spectators behind the green to have witnessed the shot as did playing partner Walter Hagen, who had called out “Hurry up will ya, I’ve got a date tonight.” before Sarazen struck his historic blow. Sarazen went on to tie Craig Wood in regulation and force a playoff he would win

by five strokes the following day.

The exact spot from where Sarazen struck his four-wood from 235 yards is not identified but the world is reminded of the moment each time a player walks over the Sarazen Bridge to the green on 15 every year.

With the interest created during this year’s Masters by the spot that Bubba Watson hit his miracle wedge from the trees to the right of the 10th fairway in the 2012 Masters playoff, Augusta National may have a decision to make about a ‘Bubba Plaque’ soon enough.

To adequately describe the audacity of the shot in words would suggest a large plate would be required but, the location is deep in the trees so it’s unlikely to be an ongoing playing hazard for too many if it were to be commissioned.

In the fullness of time, it too may be added to the list of the great plaques of golf.



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