



The American Dream

Nigel Morecroft

details the relationship leading American golfers have had with The Open and their love of St Andrews

LEADING American golfers sustained The Open during the twentieth century and ensured it remained one of the world's major golf championships while, as a venue, St Andrews in particular has benefitted from widespread American approbation. American golfers breathed fresh life into The Open during the 1920s with Hagen and Jones, and, arguably, resuscitated it after 1960 with Palmer, Nicklaus and others. They have also enjoyed considerable success in the modern era since 1920. The Open has been played 96 times and won on 46 occasions by Americans. They have been particularly dominant at St Andrews with a success rate of 58%, winning eleven of nineteen tournaments.¹ Along the way, Americans have also brightened up the game.

The first American golfers²

In 1912 at Muirfield, Johnny McDermott was the first native-born American golfer to play in The Open.³ He was a prodigious talent who won the US Open in 1911, aged nineteen, and again in 1912.⁴ At Muirfield, despite having two very low scores on the practice days, he scored over 90 in the first round so failed to qualify for the final two rounds. He came to grief in strong winds with his high ball flight when 'he played three balls over the wall into Archerfield. His fourth was saved a similar fate by striking the wall and eventually holed out for an eight'.⁴ McDermott played well at Hoylake in 1913, and finished fifth, but Prestwick in 1914 was, unfortunately, another tale of woe for him. He was delayed in transit, missed the start of the event and refused to play. While on departing, his boat was involved in a serious collision and he had to take refuge in a lifeboat.⁶ McDermott had a stellar, if tragically short, career. His last competitive outing was at the US Open in 1914 but, subsequently, he had nervous breakdown in 1915 and was diagnosed with chronic schizophrenia.⁷ It is possible that McDermott's enthusiasm for The Open was influenced by the search for a 'double' and, Walter Hagen followed in his footsteps and played at The Open at Deal in 1920 also as reigning US Open Champion.⁸

Confident, prosperous professional American golfers



Johnny McDermott drives from the First at Hoylake, 1913
Image courtesy Royal Liverpool GC



Hagen, with three ex-pats: Cooper, Kirkwood and Hutchison



highlighted the different cultures that prevailed on opposite sides of the Atlantic. As a professional, Hagen had been refused admittance to the Clubhouse at Royal Cinque Ports during the tournament at Deal in 1920. Ostentatiously, he stayed at The Ritz in London, and as a direct riposte, he hired a chauffeur-driven limousine and would get changed in the car, directly in front of the Clubhouse.⁹ On the evening of the first day of play, he also chose to eat in his car rather than use the tent at the rear where the other professionals were dining, whereas the amateurs were fed in the clubhouse.¹⁰ In 1921, the St Andrews Golf Club had extended the courtesy of the Club to all players at The Open that year and while this gesture would have been well-received, in practice, all the leading American golfers were booked into the Grand Hotel, which was equally close to the course.¹¹ However at Troon in 1923, Hagen had been denied entry to the Clubhouse all week; he finished second, but at the conclusion of the event he was invited inside for the presentation of prizes. Hagen publicly declined and said to the organisers and the crowd 'I'd like to invite you all to come over to the pub where we've been so welcome.'¹² Despite these occasional setbacks, Hagen always enjoyed golfing in Britain and he was very popular on both sides of the Atlantic. He made a very gracious speech at Muirfield in 1929, his fourth success at The Open, when he heaped praise on Braid, Vardon and Taylor in front of a cheering crowd of 7,000.¹³

American dominance 1921-1933

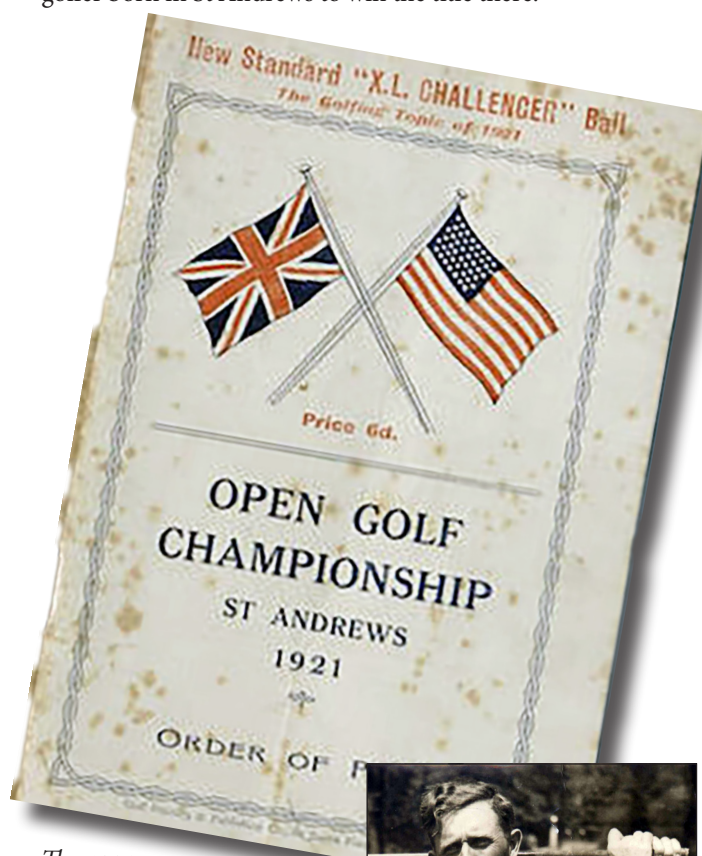
The 1921 Open at St Andrews attracted a large entry from eleven leading US professionals, encouraged by funding arranged by the American magazine *Golf Illustrated* which wanted to promote the national interest by producing a US winner.¹⁴ John 'Jock' Hutchison won The Open in 1921 by nine shots, after a 36-hole play-off against Roger Wethered as both were tied on 296 at the end of four rounds. This was a case of 'gentlemen and players'. Wethered was an amateur, Oxford-educated and an R&A member. The Professional, Hutchison, who had been born the son of a fisherman and lived with the fisherfolk at the poor end of North Street, St Andrews, emigrated in the early 1900s, and assumed US citizenship in 1920.¹⁵ The tournament had a number of incidents. In the first round, Hutchison had a hole in one at the Eighth and nearly holed again at the par-four Ninth but had to settle for an eagle when he tapped-in from three inches. In the third round, Wethered accidentally stood on his own ball on the fairway and incurred a one-shot penalty.^{16,17} Retrospectively, the R&A declared Hutchison's irons illegal owing to their grooves.¹⁸ Perhaps the most noticeable incident came with the award of the trophy because it was

disappointing to find that the premier golf club could not be big-hearted enough to present Jock Hutchison with the cup in as ceremonious and elaborate a manner as would certainly have been employed had Mr Wethered won ... the Chairman of the R&A Championship Committee ... practically threw the cup [the Claret Jug] at the new champion – immediately he called for three cheers for Roger Wethered. With no speech-making or presentation, the crowd dispersed for there was nothing more to see ... all through the game the R&A members were, on the whole, distinctly biased in favour of their player.¹⁹

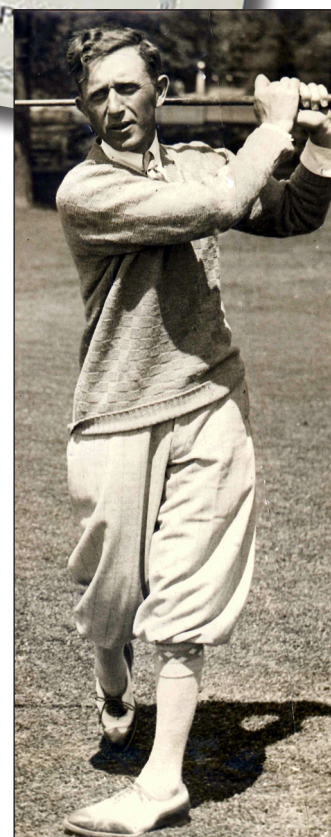
In America, if not in Britain, Hutchison, Champion Golfer, was lauded for the achievement,

the first time that any American had ever succeeded in capturing the greatest honor that can come to any golfer' as 'perhaps the most popular member of the professional golf fraternity.'²⁰

His win at The Open in 1921 not only made him the first American (or Scottish-American) winner but also the last golfer born in St Andrews to win the title there.



The 1921 programme acknowledged the American presence in the Open Championship



Jock Hutchison, Champion Golfer of 1921

Hutchison's win in 1921 ushered in a remarkable period of American dominance. They proceeded to win eleven of the next twelve events; four (from ten attempts) of which were attributable to Hagen, who also became the first US-born winner of The Open in 1922 at Sandwich. During this period, perhaps the least well-known winners were Scottish-American Tommy Armour in 1931 at Carnoustie and Denny Shute at St Andrews in 1933. An infamous victory was that of English-American Jim Barnes at Prestwick in 1925 when Macdonald Smith relinquished a five shot lead in the final round and The Open never returned to its birthplace.²¹ The most newsworthy, popular and highly-acclaimed winner was Bobby Jones in 1927 at St Andrews and, again in 1930 at Hoylake when he completed the second leg of his celebrated Grand Slam. Jones's impact on golf in America at that time is hard to overestimate,

... before Jones the sports pages normally comprised of news about baseball, boxing and horse racing. No one would have ever thought that a golfer's quest for the 'Grand Slam' would headline every sports section in the country and give Americans something to cheer about during one of the worst times in our nation's history, the Great Depression.²²

The doldrums: 1940s and 1950s

Participation by American golfers at The Open diminished after the Second World War and the 1950s marked a low point. Whereas Jones had lauded St Andrews, Sam Snead who won there in 1946 was rather disparaging and called it 'an old, abandoned kinda place' and described the double greens as 'absurd'.²³ As he said, 'that British Open [1946] was worth \$600 to me but it cost me \$2,000 to go play in it' and he did not return to defend



Bobby Jones en route to victory at Hoylake, 1930

his title in 1947.²⁴ Nor was Snead impressed by the difficulties faced by post-war Britain: 'as far as I'm concerned, any time you leave the USA, you're just camping out'.²⁵ In Britain, food rationing continued into the 1950s so the contrast between the States and Britain was very stark.

Ben Hogan played, and won, The Open in 1953 but nearly left Carnoustie the day he arrived, accompanied by his wife, because their room at the Bruce Hotel did not have an en-suite bathroom so, like Snead, he was not impressed with the facilities in Britain.²⁶ Hogan, having first passed through the qualifying rounds at Carnoustie, added this title to his Masters and US Open successes, but despite receiving a tickertape parade in New York as the first triple Major winner in the same calendar year, like Snead, he did not return to play in The Open in 1954. Interestingly, despite a prolonged stay at Carnoustie in 1953, Hogan chose not to visit St Andrews which was indicative perhaps of the diminishing reputation of golf in Britain at that time for Americans.

Part of the problem was that, from 1953, The Open clashed with the PGA Championship which meant that it was not possible for Hogan, for example, to attempt the modern Grand Slam in that year.²⁷ Additionally, the prize money at the PGA was much higher than at The Open.²⁸ After Hogan, American participation in The Open was very poor even though the event was held twice at St Andrews, the pre-eminent venue, in 1955 and 1957. Perhaps a low point was reached in 1958 at Royal Lytham when there were only two Americans in the field, one of whom was a previous champion from 1932, Gene Sarazen aged 56. In 1959 at Muirfield, only four Americans competed and none of them made the cut.²⁹ American golfers in the 1950s preferred to play in the PGA Championship because it was easier, cheaper and more lucrative than The Open.

Changing fortunes after 1960

It is widely accepted that Arnold Palmer popularised golf because nothing like 'Arnie's Army' of dedicated supporters had been seen before, and that his presence at The Open in 1960 also rescued the event from possible irrelevance. 'Arnold Palmer was arguably the most popular player in the history of the game', according to one account, because he took the game in America beyond country clubs into middle-income America, owing to a combination of his exuberant golf game, engaging personality and humble upbringing as the son of a Pennsylvanian greenkeeper.³⁰ In 1960, Palmer was the reigning US Masters and US Open Champion and hoped to repeat Hogan's three victories from 1953 or even complete a modern Grand Slam. He came second by one shot in 1960 but won the subsequent Opens in 1961 (Birkdale) and 1962 (Troon). Nicklaus, the reigning US Open Champion, also played for the first time in 1962. In that year, NBC started televising the event, and Palmer's handsome looks and attractive personality were particularly suitable for a new audience of television viewers during the 1960s.³¹ At the Centenary Open, in 1960 at St Andrews, gate receipts and profits had doubled and by 1962 its position as one of golf's Majors was secure.³² It also heralded another remarkable period of

American success at The Open when they won sixteen of twenty three tournaments between 1961 and 1983, partly owing to Tom Watson with his five victories.

From the early 1960s, the best American golfers have supported The Open in general and endorsed St Andrews in particular. According to Palmer:

that visit [1960] launched my love affair with St Andrews, Scotland, The Open Championship and the Old Course. In fact, I played my last two Open Championships on the Old Course and will never get over the emotional feeling that came over me as I stood on the Swilcan Bridge at the end of the final round in 1995.³³

Palmer was aged 65 at the time of the 1995 event and the eligibility rules had been helpfully tweaked which meant he did not need to pre-qualify.³⁴ Nicklaus followed in Palmer's footsteps, literally, in his final visit to the Old Course and at The Open in 2005 when he was photographed in an identical manner to Palmer on the Swilcan Bridge. Nicklaus described his decision as follows:

I deliberately chose St Andrews as the venue at which to conclude my major championship career because of its place in the game of golf and its place in history, as well as what it has meant to me personally.³⁵

Nicklaus's words carried authority when he explained what he liked about the course and the town:

as a player and then a course designer, I have experienced no place like St Andrews and the Old Course. It has a mystique and charm that is unique and timeless. What some see as rippling fairways of muted green and brown fescue, back-dropped by time-worn grey buildings, I see as vivid and endearing beauty.³⁶

Finally, the great American golfer in the 21st century and twice Open winner at St Andrews, Tiger Woods, also added his praises in 2019:

... my first time in St Andrews, I thought it was the coolest place on earth. I've always loved the golf course ... and the walk up eighteen is the greatest walk in golf. Obviously it's the Home of Golf.³⁷

As recently as 2021 Woods described St Andrews as his 'favourite course in the world'.³⁸

Dressed for success?

Less concerned with social norms, American golfers have often dressed with greater panache and self-confidence than their counterparts in Britain. Jock Hutchison, in 1921 for example, was the last player to win The Open wearing a bow tie whereas Walter Hagen was the first player in The Open not to wear a tie at Muirfield in 1929.³⁹ Despite this insouciance Hagen, nevertheless, was a very stylish dresser and wore exquisitely tailored clothes and became the first sportsman to be included on the list of 'Best Dressed Americans'.⁴⁰ The two other dominant golfers of that era, Bobby Jones and Gene Sarazen, were always immaculately turned out, often in plus fours and, in Sarazen's case, a bow tie. Sam Snead was notably idiosyncratic given his predilection to play in a straw hat but, apparently, also had a penchant to remove his shoes and go barefooted if he was

playing badly.⁴¹

Doug Sanders, known as the 'Peacock of the Fairways', changed the sartorial contours of the game and brought in the era of colourful clothing which has been embraced, subsequently, by the likes of John Daly and others. According to Sanders, 'everything was coordinated. My shirts, my slacks, my shoes, my socks, even my underwear. I had six cases of clothes that I took to every tournament.'⁴² In his mustard yellow outfit, he would certainly have been one of the most dazzling winners of The Open at St Andrews had he not fatally three-putted the eighteenth green in 1970 and then lost the play-off against Jack Nicklaus. Latterly of course, Tiger Woods has popularised collarless shirts and the wearing of a red top on the Sunday of a Championship. In terms of golfing attire, the less conventional approach of Americans to clothing has definitely brightened up our golf courses.

Summary

After the First World War, economic power and golfing talent became centred on America, and has been for over 100 years since. Did The Open need the support of the top US Golfers and could it have survived without them? It would have been diminished at best, and it might have struggled, commercially, while, in an age of mass media, American interest and support became increasingly important as sport went global. If the event had continued to attract only a handful of second-tier American golfers, as in the late 1950s, it is difficult to see how The Open could have been considered as a Major. As the television age dawned, Palmer undoubtedly breathed new life into the tournament after 1960, while Nicklaus fully embraced the event, as has Woods more recently. In parallel, The Open has grown in stature owing to the pivotal work behind the scenes of R&A Secretaries such as Keith Mackenzie, Sir Michael Bonallack, Peter Dawson and, more recently, Martin Slumbers. To win at St Andrews is considered by many as simply the premier accolade in golf and Americans, in particular, have excelled.

Notes

1. Data cover the period from the 55th Open in 1920 to the 150th Open in 2022; as a venue St Andrews has been the most often used. On the occasions when The Open has been played more than five times at the same venue; Americans have the highest success rate at Troon (67%; six wins from nine) and the lowest at Royal Lytham (27%; three from eleven). Particular thanks to my wife Fiona for collecting and analysing the data
2. The definition of an American golfer is complicated because many Britons, mainly Scots, emigrated to make a living from golf in the USA. Some emigrants spent their entire lives in America after emigration and became US citizens (Jock Hutchison); some did not become US citizens (Willie Anderson); while others spent a limited amount of time in the US and subsequently returned to the UK (Laurie Auchterlonie for example played in eleven US Opens, winning in 1902; was the Professional at Queen's View, Illinois; and returned to Scotland in 1911). Donald Ross, golf architect and professional highlights the issue: he emigrated in 1899, played at The Open in 1910 (finished eighth) but only became a US citizen in 1921 so was he Scottish or Scottish-American when he played

in 1910? For the purposes of this article, I will not define golfers as 'American' who returned to the UK after a sojourn but will define a British golfer who lived most of his working life in America as either Scottish-American (Alex Smith, Donald Ross, Tommy Armour) or English-American (Jim Barnes)

3. The first American-based golfers to play in The Open were two Scots friends Alex Smith and Willie Anderson (reigning US Open Champion from 1904) in 1905 at St Andrews. Smith also competed in The Open at Royal Liverpool in 1907 (also as the reigning 1906 US Champion). Smith emigrated in the late 1890s, lived in the US for all his life (he died aged 56 in Baltimore). I have been unable to confirm when Smith became a US citizen but believe he did. Anderson came from North Berwick and had a remarkably successful record in the US Open winning four times. I understand Anderson did not become a US citizen but he died young, aged only 31, in 1910 in America

4. Coincidentally, Alex Smith beat Johnny McDermott in a play-off to win the US Open in 1910

5. *The Scotsman*, 21 June 1912

6. **Glenn R.** *When the Cheering Stopped: The Tragedy of John J. McDermott*. USGA Museum. 2011

7. **Ibid**

8. There appeared to be a pattern of US Open champions playing in The Open: Willie Anderson played in the 1905 Open as reigning US Open Champion; Alex Smith in 2007; McDermott in 1912; and Walter Hagen in 1920

9. **Frost M.** *The Grand Slam*. Little, Brown. 2004. 78

10. **Clavin T.** *Sir Walter: the Flamboyant Life of Walter Hagen*. Aurum. 2005. 142

11. **McCartney K.** *The St Andrews Golf Club, 1843-2018*. Private. 2018. 150

12. **Clavin T.** *Sir Walter*. 188

13. **Clavin T.** *Sir Walter*. 264

14. The 'British Open Championship Fund' was launched in the November 1920 issue of (the American magazine) *Golf Illustrated*. The June 1921 edition explained that it had paid the expenses of eleven of the top professional US golfers and the main task was for one of them to win The Open

15. **McStravick R.** *St Andrews: in the Footsteps of Old Tom Morris*. St Andrews Press. 2016. 168

16. **Mackie, K.** *Golf at St Andrews*. Pelican. 1995. 65

17. **Jarrett, T.** *St Andrews Links – Six Centuries of Golf*. Mainstream. 2012. 195

18. **Davis J.** 'Deep Groove Demise', in *The Golf Heritage Society*, (Spring 2021)

19. *St Andrews Citizen*, 2 July 1921; letter to the Editor

20. *New York Times*, 26 June 1921

21. Prestwick hosted The Open in 1925 for the last time. Barnes achieved his victory in controversial circumstances partly because of the incursion of the crowd. Barnes was English-American and became a US citizen in 1922

22. *The Bleacher Report: The five most influential golfers of all time* (website consulted 25 February 2021) <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/85877-the-five-most-influential-golfers-of-all-time>

23. **Joy D and I Lowe.** *St Andrews and The Open Championship*.

Wiley. 2000. 144

24. *Los Angeles Times*. 2 July 1989

25. **Snead S.** *The Education of a Golfer*. Fawcett. 1962. 128

26. **Dodson J.** *Ben Hogan*. Crown. 2005. 373

27. The 1953 PGA Championship was held from 1-7 July in Michigan; The Open in 1953 was held 6-10 July (qualifying rounds took place on 6 and 7) at Carnoustie. The proximity of dates began in 1953 and persisted until 1965 when the PGA Championship moved to August. The crossing from New York to Liverpool by boat, the main form of long-distance travel typically took around four days which created another impediment. This eased in the 1960s when air travel became more available

28. The winner of the PGA championship in 1953 received \$5,000 (about £1,800); The Open winner, £500

29. The Open (website consulted 3 March 2022) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Open_Championship#United_States

30. *The Bleacher Report: The five most influential golfers of all time* (website consulted 3 March 2022)

<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/85877-the-five-most-influential-golfers-of-all-time>

31. *New York Times*. 8 June 2015

32. **Hamilton D.** *Golf – Scotland's Game*. Partick Press. 1998. 240

33. St Andrews Links (website consulted 23 February 2021) <http://blog.standrews.com/2016/09/27/arnold-palmer-at-st-andrews-in-his-own-words>

34. Wikipedia (website consulted 2 March 2022)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Open_Championship_format_and_qualification#Current_qualifying_process

35. **Jarrett.** St Andrews Links. 9

36. **McCartney.** St Andrews Golf Club. 209

37. *National Club Golfer*. 21 November 2019

38. BBC (website consulted 24 February 2022)

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/golf/59481487>

39. **Lewis P.** 'In The Frame', in *Through the Green*, December 2010

40. *Walter Hagen: the Best Dressed Golfer Ever* (website consulted 23 March 2022)

<https://www.glenmuir.com/pages/golf-apparel-news/walter-hagen-the-best-dressed-golfer-ever>

41. *The Bleacher Report: Payne Stewart and the 25 Best Dressed Golfers of All Time* (website consulted 23 March 2022)

<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/701779-payne-stewart-and-the-25-best-dressed-golfers-of-all-time>

42. *Bunkered*, 12 April 2020

*Nigel Morecroft plans to publish
St Andrews: Camelot of Golf
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