

# Ben Hogan: Greatness

by  
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Ben Hogan - born August 13, 1912 in Dublin, Texas. Died July 25, 1997, Fort Worth, Texas. Survived by his wife, Valerie. A public memorial will be held at the Fort Worth University Christian Church. Burial will be private.

This would hardly describe the events in the life of the man termed by many as the greatest golfer, or at least the greatest ball-striker, of all time. "*Bantam Ben*" was hardly the prototype golfer - small of stature, with a vicious duck hook, the first club Hogan owned was a left-handed mashie - which helped spread the rumor that he was left-handed (which he wasn't). He grew up caddying at Glen Garden CC where, at age 15, he lost the caddie championship to Byron Nelson, another caddie there. While Nelson would achieve the earlier success, it would only serve to make Ben that much more determined.

The man created the concept of practice. At a time when most players on the Tour hit a few balls, played their round, then hit the 19<sup>th</sup> hole, Ben would return to the range and hit balls for hours. But this was not the aimless act of hitting ball after ball; it was the precise, determined actions of a man who wanted to be the best! When others would walk by, often laughing, Hogan would let little deter him. Ben loved it!

Numerous stories - legends - abound about his practice sessions. Before the days of stacked Titleist' on the range, pro's had their shag bag and their caddie would retrieve the balls. Hogan would have his caddie go to a specific spot where, never moving more than a foot or so to either side, he would scoop-up the shots as they drove toward him. Playing in an era without sprinkler head markers or yardage books, he was a master of distance control. A story goes that a young pro was playing with Hogan and kept inquiring what club he used in his approach to the green. Finally Hogan had had enough. From about 150 yards out, Hogan hit the green with every club in his bag except his putter!

His drive and single-mindedness would be perceived by many as aloofness. His demeanor on the course gave the appearance of isolation as he methodically went about his business. His other nicknames belied his manner - '*Wee Ice Mon*' as he was called at Carnoustie, and of course, "*The Hawk*". But it was in those early years where the lack of success created much self-doubt. Would he ever win? Could he ever control that horrible hook? Would he be destined to life behind the counter? When you're down to your last \$8 and eating fruit for dinner you begin to question yourself.

From the earliest days on the circuit, Ben struggled with a hook which managed Ben more than he managed it. Still, from 1940 to 1960 he was never out of the top ten in a US Open. One day, after weeks of practice, he showed up at a tournament with a power fade, and the rest is history.

In 1946 he won 12 events, including the PGA Championship. In 1948 Ben would claim 10 titles including six consecutive starts from June 12 to August 22, the best streak besides Nelson's 11 in a row in 1945. His win in the PGA at Norwood Hills was one of these.

Nearly killed in a head-on collision with a bus in 1949, 1950 would mark a turning point in his career. "*Winning the 1950 US Open [at Merion] was my biggest win*", Hogan would state years later, "*it proved I could still win!*"

The 1951 US Open at Oakland Hills would provide the most dramatic backdrop to his career. "*I'm glad I brought this course - this monster - to its knees,*" Hogan said afterward. Many golf historians call his final-round 67 as one of the greatest rounds ever; during the tournament the average scores for a round were just about 77, and only one other sub-par round was shot all week!

But the magical year, perhaps the greatest ever in professional golf, was 1953. Ben entered only six tournaments that year and won five of those. He first won the Masters by 5 shots over 'Porky' Oliver, then came the US Open at Oakmont CC in which he bested Sam Snead with a 6 shot win. The British Open

was played at Carnoustie and Ben shot a 282 for a four stroke margin. The PGA was held immediately after the British Open so he was unable compete, and in light of the problems with his legs, many doubted whether he could have survived the week of match play. But Ben had conquered three of the majors in one year; the only time anyone has accomplished this, and the closest anyone has come to achieving the legendary professional Grand Slam.

Some players, Bobby Jones and Arnold Palmer among them, have plaques that commemorate significant shots in their careers. Hogan had entire courses named after him. Colonial CC and Riviera CC are called "Hogan's Alley". A pro circuit for budding professionals was named for him in 1990. The headgear he wore was recognized as the Hogan cap. While you might call out to Arnie or Jack or Tiger, it would have been unthinkable to call him Ben much less Benny! He was simply Hogan!

But a side of Hogan rarely seen in public was his humor, though a bit dry at times. When a reporter asked him if he had any advice for young professionals his only comment was "*Watch out for busses!*" When Nick Faldo asked him what the secret was to winning the US Open, Ben replied, "*Shoot the lowest Score!*" When someone told him that they read his book, but it didn't help, his reply was "*Better read it again.*" And when another asked for help with their putting he retorted "*Hit it closer to the pin.*"

There are other classic Hogan stories; such as the time Gary Player wanted some advice from him. Playing Shakespeare clubs at the time, he politely asked Hogan a question about the swing. Hogan asked him what clubs he played. When Player responded "*Shakespeare*", Hogan brusquely quipped, "*...then go ask Mr. Shakespeare!*"

Another famous quote about Hogan came from good friend Jimmy Demaret. When asked by a reporter if Hogan ever spoke to him on the course, Jimmy responded, "*Sure, he talks to me on every hole. He says 'you're away!'*"

Another of the classic stories on the same line, showing his proud manner, recalls Hogan playing with a pro who, after their approach to the first green, told Hogan, "*Mr. Hogan, I believe you're away.*" A similar conversation occurred after their approach shots to the second green. All the time, Hogan said not a word. Finally after the young pro had hit his approach to the fourth, and a good approach it was, Hogan hit his shot, and with the ball barely off the clubface, turned to the pro and stated "*You're away!*"

It has been reported that on one occasion he had a dream that he made 17 consecutive holes-in-one. On the 18<sup>th</sup> hole he lipped-out for a 2. He woke mad as hell!!

Another story has it that after watching him hit balls on the practice range, seemingly one perfect shot after another, a young pro asked him about hitting the "sweet spot" on the irons. To which he countered "*...sonny, if I hit the sweet spot only 4 or 5 times a round, I would shoot 50!*"

When asked if Hogan or Nicklaus was the better ball striker, Tommy Bolt is said to have stated "*I've seen Nicklaus watch Hogan hit balls, but I've never seen Hogan watch anybody hit balls!*"

In 1953 Hogan had made his famous "Secret" statement. After his three wins in the Majors that year, he claimed that he had found the "secret" to golf. Newspapers and magazines throughout the country clamored after him to reveal his secret. Some called it his method of "pronation", while others called it other aspects of his swing. Perhaps it was his swing plane that made him great, or maybe the manner in which he pronated his wrists during the downswing. But he never revealed it publicly...and only Ken Venturi claims that Hogan told him, but he isn't talking. The only comment Hogan made that might reveal his swing thoughts, was his remark that "*one should start the downswing with the hips, not the hands; that this was the key to a good swing.*"

One of the most significant golf books ever written was Hogan's "***Five Lessons: The Modern Fundamentals of Golf***". First published in 1957, the "Five Lessons" changed the lives of thousands of modern players who adopted the Hogan method as their bible. One of the basic principles of his method

was the “swing plane”. The “Plane” became the model for modern golfers. It is still one of the most widely read books on golf.

His final victory came in 1959 at “his” course – Colonial CC – “*Hogan’s Alley*”. While he competed for a few more years, the accident had just done too much damage to his legs. He could no longer practice like he wanted and his game suffered. His last great round was at the 1967 Masters where he shot a 66 in the third round, including a 30 on the back nine. He never played competitively after the 1971 Houston/Champions International, where he was forced to quit because of leg pain. He would practice at Shady Oaks into the 80’s but finally the joy of practice was overshadowed by the sheer pain he endured.

The last time many of us may recall seeing Hogan swing a club was in commercials he did for the Ben Hogan company in the mid-1980’s at Shady Oaks. Clad in the familiar white cap, with his gray cardigan sweater buttoned just so, he took six-iron in hand and reminded us of what many saw at Merion! He showed us that even in his 70’s, and in much pain, his swing was as graceful as always.

In all he won 9 majors, the third most in history, [he won six of these *after* his accident] and claimed 63 tour titles, also third on the all-time list behind Snead and Nicklaus. He is one of four men who claim four US Opens to their credit, including back-to-back wins, and is also one of four who have the career “Grand Slam”, having won all the majors at least once. Had it not been for that Greyhound bus, who knows what else he might have accomplished.

Following his playing days he devoted much of his time to the Ben Hogan Company. His quest for perfection carried over into his manufacturing of clubs. When the initial production run did not meet his satisfaction he told his partners he would not ship the clubs. When they balked at destroying the inventory Hogan bought them out and destroyed \$150,000 worth of clubs. His name would not be on something he could not be proud of!

Beginning in 1987, when he contracted pneumonia, he suffered from numerous ailments; bronchitis, colon cancer, Alzheimer’s and memory loss. He rarely made a public appearance. He became a virtual hermit; even his usual table at Shady Oaks CC, where he lunched and then held court for many years, went begging. Since 1967, the last year he played in the Masters, he had not attended a Masters Champions dinner. He turned down a request from Jack Nicklaus to be the honoree at the Memorial tournament. Byron Nelson is rumored to have stated that he didn’t even have Ben’s home phone number!

During the last two years his memory began to fail him more frequently. In an interview with Golfweek’s Jeff Rude, Hogan indicated that he couldn’t recall his one 1-iron shot at Merion. He could not remember the four US Open wins or his five Colonial conquests. He couldn’t recall the feeling of hitting a crisp iron shot to the green. The events that had given him the most pleasure in life were no longer even a memory.

He will be remembered mostly for his determination, courage and perseverance. When we hear the name “Hogan” though, another word comes to mind – Greatness. This is his legacy.