

“Cadillac Man”
by
Jim Healey

Sixty-four years ago, Chester O’Brien completed a remarkable achievement. He walked off the 18th green at Hillcrest CC in Kansas City, having defeated Bob Cochran 1-up, to successfully defend the State Amateur Crown he won the previous year. And in the years since that day, only one other player in Missouri Golf History has accomplished that same feat - back to back state titles - PGA great Tom Watson.

As Chester began preparing for the 1933 Missouri Amateur at Westborough CC, he could reflect back on the past several very successful seasons. He had been playing well since the mid-20’s, competing in the 1926 US Publinks in Buffalo, and then winning the 1926 and ‘27 Munny title held over the Forest Park Links. In the 1927 District Finals against Elliott Whitbread, Chester had a remarkable round; after birdieing the 4th hole, he ran off a string of 26 consecutive pars. But Whitbread was a tough competitor and would birdie the 36th hole and win the match 1 up. In the 1928 State Amateur finals at Riverview CC, he lost a close match to Whitbread once again, this time by the margin of 4&3! In 1929, at the US Amateur at the Pebble Beach Golf Links, he was on hand for the last two holes of the match where upstart Omaha-native Johnny Goodman bested Bobby Jones in one of the most remarkable upsets in the Amateur up to that point. He qualified for the US Open in 1931 at the Inverness Club in Toledo where he would compete against the likes of Sarazen, Guldahl, Von Elm, Mehlhorn, Macdonald Smith, Harry Cooper, Horton Smith, Joe Turnesa, Tommy Armour and Walter Hagen, just to name a few.

As the 1933 Amateur approached, the Cleveland High grad was one of the areas top players. But he was not alone. Among the other pre-tournament favorites was a 21 year old Bob Cochran, along with Jimmy Manion, Eddie Held, defending champion Bryan Winter, Dick Bockenkamp, Clarence Wolff and numerous Kansas City Golfers; all ready to challenge for the title.

Chester had been a Publinks player for many years, but by 1933 he had joined Westborough CC, so he would be competing over his home course. Despite his successes in earlier events, he was determined to prove that he could win a State title, the crown jewel for Missouri golfers. But as you will recall, the ‘30’s were not an easy time for anyone. Chester was a car salesman, a Cadillac salesman to be exact. With the Depression gripping the country, few had money for new cars, much less Cadillacs, so he had to work extra hard to make each sale, and, as a result, had played very little during the previous year.

He would shoot a 71 in qualifying, placing him in the top four for match play and drew St. Louisan Charles Martin, whom he dispatched 4&2. Next he defeated Mike Roach 6&4 and then got a little revenge by defeating his friend Elliott Whitbread 1-up. Kansas Citian Frank Staller was the defending champion and he fell 3&2 in the 3rd round. In the other bracket things were not going according to plan for some. Jimmy Manion would top Tom Draper, but Dick Bockenkamp, “Doc” Leydecker and Jim Black would all fall in the second round. At the end of the third round Staller had fallen to O’Brien while Manion would go up against Sid Salomon Jr., who was playing in only his 2nd Amateur. When Salomon nailed Manion 2&1 it set up the showdown for the State Crown with Chester. Salomon, playing out of Westwood CC, was known for his long drives. But Chester’s steady play proved to be the deciding factor. Taking the lead on the 2nd hole, he never fell behind. He went 4-up twice, once in the morning and again in the afternoon round as he closed-out Sid 4&3. Chester was superior on the greens, matching Salomon’s birdies frequently, making few mistakes. In the end it was his good all-around play that proved the difference. A large smile lit his face as he held the champions trophy for the cameras.

Later that summer, Chester would qualify for the 1933 US Amateur in Cincinnati, and fall just a stroke from making it to match play. He would also qualify for the US Open where he

would see the aforementioned amateur Goodman get the better of Ralph Guldahl and become the last amateur to win the Open.

Winning once is quite an achievement. But defending your title is, perhaps, even tougher. As Chester prepared for the 1934 State Amateur, he knew it would be difficult. He was not on the friendly confines of Westborough; he was clear across the state at Hillcrest CC in Kansas City. And KC had its share of terrific talent; Frank Aylward, G.W. Duvall, Carey Ballew and Frank Staller. In addition Bob Cochran, Don Anderson, Paul Leslie, Frank Bredall, Warren Riepen, Jim Spencer, Bob Held, Joe Switzer, Tom Draper and Elliott Whitbread also had their sites on the title. No, it would not be easy to repeat. It wouldn't even be easy to get past the early rounds with this type of competition.

Eighteen-year-old Jeff City native Paul Leslie set the pace with a 72 in qualifying, as Chester came in with a 75, placing him in a tie for 11th. He downed Whitbread 3&1 in his opening match, and then John Roberts of St. Joseph 3&2. His next opponent was 20-year old Frank Bredall, playing out of Woodlawn CC in Kirkwood. Bredall had crushed Staller 5&4 in his first match and then battled the other youngster, defeating Leslie 1-up. Others advancing to the 3rd round included 21-year old Bob Cochran, Don Smith and Eddie Guettel.

The Bredall-O'Brien match was considered a toss-up by most observers. While Chester was the defending champion, Bredall had played some outstanding golf during the week. The match was almost even with Chester going out in 37 to Frank's 38. Chester won the 10th, but Frank came back to win the 12th and 14th to square the match. At the 15th Chester had a 15-inch put for birdie to win the hole when Bredall laid a stymie on him. [For those of you unaware of what a 'stymie' is, in those matches you were not allowed to mark your ball on the green. You literally did not touch your ball from the tee until you holed it out. Chester took his niblick out (9 iron) with the intention of chipping his ball over Bredall's ball into or near the hole. But on his follow-through, his club touched Bredall's ball and Chester lost the hole, and Frank went 1-up. Chester birdied the 392 yard 16th, and went 1-up on the 17th as Bredall took a six to Chester's par four. But on the 18th Frank ran-in a 15-foot birdie to square the match and send it to extra holes. The first hole is a downhill 250 yard par-3. Chester had used a 3-wood earlier, but this time he choked down on his driver and was just short of the putting surface, while Frank hit his to the left. When Chester chipped close, Frank was in a do-or-die situation. His pitch failed to get close and when he missed his par putt, he conceded Chester's putt and the match.

He easily defeated Guettel 5&4 and as Cochran downed Don Smith, it set up an all-St. Louis final. Despite this, the crowds swelled into the hundreds to watch the young St. Louis University basketball-golfer Cochran in his first final against the steady O'Brien. Their match was all even after the first 18 holes, with both players carding 75's. But by the end of the third nine, Chester had amassed a 2-up advantage going out in 36 to Bob's 38. In the end, Chester shot a 74 to Bob's 75 in the afternoon to win the title 1-up. He had successfully defended his title. Most sportswriters attributed his win to two things; his outstanding iron play all week, and his tremendous desire to defend his title.

A rather unusual event occurred just prior to the start of the final match. Ed Guettel, the man Chester defeated in the semi's, was to have refereed the final match. But Chester objected to this. In those days, it was common practice for a Calcutta to be held at the tournament. [For those of you unaware of a calcutta, it is the practice where you "bid" on players to see who would win. If your player won, you got the pot. A player could buy himself or other players. In most cases if a player did not "buy" himself, he could "buy" half of himself back from the successful bidder] It seems Guettel had bought Bob for \$175 in the Calcutta, not a small price to pay in those days, and Chester deemed that it might be inappropriate for him to referee the final match. Chester would tell me that he didn't remember what he went for in the Calcutta, but it was considerably less than what Bob went for!

Another interesting footnote to the '34 matches was the winner of the "B" flight was Ray Watson from Kansas City; father of future PGA star Tom Watson!

Following his win in the State Amateur he competed in the US Amateur at The Country Club in Brookline, MA, with outstanding results. He would win three matches before running into Lawson Little, the outstanding Amateur who would win back-to-back Amateurs in '34 and '35 and as a Pro four years later would win the US Open. Little defeated Chester in their match 4&3, but not without a tough battle. Oddly, when he had first seen Little on the range at Pebble Beach in '29 he knew then he would someday be a great player. Only a semi-final loss to Francis Oiumet cost Little a chance at the title in that year. [Chester seemed to have an eye for talent. Ten years later as he was at the Philadelphia CC (Spring Mill Course) for the 1939 US Open he wandered to the range to see a rather remarkable young man hit some of the best iron shots he had seen anywhere. Despite the presence of Snead, Nelson and Craig Wood, Chester's pick for greatness was the young Ben Hogan]

Coverage of golf and of the top golfers during this era was outstanding. With 3 area papers, The Post Dispatch, The Globe Democrat and the St. Louis Times, feature articles, in-depth analysis and shot-by-shot descriptions were common. Papers would send reporters to state and national events; so the coverage was extensive. Men like Jack McGooghan, Vern Tietjen and John Scott wrote with great eloquence of the events of the day. But among Chester's best friends was legendary Globe writer and Sports Editor Bob Burnes who called Chester an "old golfing gaffer", in a 1979 article.

Like many golfers of that era, the coming impact of War hung like a shroud over them. In March of 1941 Chester was inducted into the Army. Originally scheduled to serve only a year, when the war came, he would be in for the duration. From 1941 until 1946 he wouldn't touch a club as his M-1 would replace his sticks. Chester would be part of the 80th Division of the 3rd Army during 1944, serving under General George Patton. Following the German counter-assault, known as the Battle of the Bulge in 1944, he would be part of the famous march during December of that year as Patton's troops relieved the 101st Airborne under siege at Bastogne. Made famous in the movie "Patton", the exploits of the men under extremely adverse conditions, facing a German army fighting for their very existence, made their accomplishments even more miraculous. Following the relief at Bastogne, the German counter-attack was halted, and the war was effectively ended as US, British and Russian troops converged on Berlin. When VE day came, the 80th was just entering Austria on the Enns River. As Patton later noted, "Whenever we turned the 80th loose on anything, we always knew the objective would be attained." His one year tour of duty had turned into almost five, but he was safe and unharmed. Following his discharge Chester, now nearing 40 years of age, returned to St. Louis, fully intent on resuming his career in the automobile business.

Believing his days as a golfer were over, he competed little during the late 40's. But in 1952 he would once again move to the front as his play in the US Amateur that year was incredible. At 47 years of age, few golfers are thinking of national titles; most are thankful for the occasional good round. Chester would win one round at match play before falling in the 2nd round to Stanford-great Bob Rosburg 1-up. Other St. Louisans in this Amateur included Jimmy Jackson, Jim Tom Blair, and Tom Draper, along with national players Harvie Ward, Ken Venturi, Don Cherry, Billie Joe Patton, Sam Urzetta and Charlie Coe.

The Amateur in Seattle would mark the conclusion of his competitive days. Chester would look back on the prior quarter-century with a tremendous sense of accomplishment - both on and off the course.

Chester's best rounds have been a 66 over Westborough, when it was a par 70, and a 67 over Medinah CC, a par 71. Like other talented St. Louisans, Chester did not always shoot a "lights-out" score; he merely played consistent enough to defeat most of his opponents. Sounds vaguely like another St. Louisan doing quite well on the Senior PGA Tour today!

Beginning in 1929, Chester began at Lindbergh Cadillac as a Cadillac salesman. One of the men he worked for over during those years is a name familiar to many St. Louisians, Enterprise Founder Jack Taylor. When he retired in 1985, only one other person in the history of the Cadillac had served that long, and no one in sales. An outstanding salesman, he achieved top sales honors each year from 1965 on. The company estimates that he sold over 5,000 cars in his 56-year career.

He played out of Forest Park in his early days before joining Westborough in 1927. He joined Normandie in 1972 and remained there until it closed in 1985, when he returned to Westborough, and remains a member today. Chester and his wife Mary have lived in Webster Groves for the past 25 years. Like many players of that era, he never seriously considered turning pro, despite having many of the required skills. There certainly wasn't much money in the pro game, and after the War, the idea of competing in tournaments didn't seem to be as much fun as it used to. Chester does have a strong belief; he refuses to play in handicap events; believing that if you can't play straight up, you shouldn't play. As a result he competed rarely in area events and today, at age 92, he just putts around and chips a little. With all that he has accomplished, I suppose he has earned that right! Like the Cadillacs he sold, Chester was the best of his day!

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