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WHERE THE FAME LAST FLICKERED

By Jim Healey, Member of Glen Echo CC

Over the past decade, golf and the Olympics have pursued an awkward courtship. The 1996 Summer Games were expected to return golf to the Olympiad for the first time since 1904—with no less a venue than Augusta National Golf Club its likely host. But cries of elitism and exclusionary membership policies led to a political DQ of Olympic golf that year. In subsequent quadrennials, the anti-golf sentiment has been internecine, stemming from a requirement that some sport be dropped before golf could be added.



The idea receives tepid support from the game's leading players, who question the logic of adding a new competition to their already loaded calendars. Meanwhile, the string of greed-borne scandals plaguing Olympic organizers has prompted golf types to wonder how wise it would be to lie down with dogs.

With golf's present-day Olympic status so sketchy, it's a comparative joy to look back upon its brief moment in the Olympic sun at the beginning of the 20th century. The primary physical remnants of Olympic golf history sit just a few miles apart in Toronto. At the Royal Canadian Hall of Fame at Glen Abbey is the magnificent Olympic Trophy awarded to George Lyon for his individual victory in 1904. Nearby at the Rosedale Club, a symbolic gold medal for the same victory sits behind glass, the original medal having been lost decades ago.

But the most unabashed ongoing celebration of golf in the Olympics is found some 800 miles away, at Glen Echo Country Club in St. Louis. The memory of those matches lives on and is celebrated by the Olympic flag that flies just below the Stars and Stripes in front of Glen Echo's pro shop.

In November 1903, as St. Louis was awarded the Olympic Games for 1904, the planned International Golf Matches, which were to be held in conjunction with the World's Fair, were reinvented and rescheduled to become the Olympic golf matches.

For a number of reasons, the 1904 Olympic Games have been much maligned by historians. However, the golf event, under the watchful eye of Col. George McGrew, Glen Echo's founder and president, was skillfully organized and staged.

In 1903 there were but nine courses in greater St. Louis (fewer than 350 existed throughout the United States) and Glen Echo was its first course to be designed and built as an 18-holer. When it opened in 1901 at just over 6,000 yards, it immediately became the area's premier layout. Designed by the famed Scottish émigré brothers Robert and Jim Foulis—both of whom trained under Old Tom Morris at St. Andrews—it was proclaimed the finest course in the western U.S. by no less a figure than U.S. Amateur champion Walter Travis during his 1903 visit.

The Glen Echo course of 1904 boasted 27 holes, including a nine-hole putting course, considered unique in the entire U.S. At 6,148 yards, it played to a par of 79, mainly due to a 548-yard par-6 and seven par-5s of more than 400 yards—quite challenging for the hickory-shafted clubs and Haskell balls of the era. Today, with the course playing to par-71 at 6,502 yards, 15 of its 18 holes are essentially the same as they were on opening day.

Sparing no expense, Glen Echo printed a booklet designed to promote the matches and mailed 500 of them to clubs throughout the world. In addition, Olympic golf chairman Frank Gerould of Chicago requested Glen Echo member Albert Lambert to travel to Europe in an attempt to persuade leading British clubs to send participants. Lambert, who would go into the slim volume of Olympic golf records as the only golfer to compete in both Olympic golf events, was president of Lambert Pharmacal, forerunner of Warner-Lambert, and had distinguished himself in the 1900 Paris golf exhibitions, winning the handicap event. Widely respected in business and golf circles, he was seen as influential enough to effectively spur participation.



(Right: Olympic Team Medal won during the Team Competition Event)

Lambert's efforts bore no fruit, unfortunately. A combination of the travel distance to St. Louis and the refusal of both the USGA and the R&A to encourage turnout made this a strictly North American event, contested among three Canadians and 104 U.S. entrants.

The formal Olympic competition began on Saturday with a 36-hole team event. The Western and Trans-Mississippi Golf Associations each fielded teams while a third entry, dubbed the USGA team, absorbed 10 remaining players. With reigning U.S. Amateur champion Chandler Egan as its leader, the Chicagoans made a formidable squad. However, they were not the experienced group one might imagine, being generally college-age. By contrast, the Trans-Mississippi team was comprised of men already established in business, most of them in their late 20s. Ultimately, it was the younger Chicago squad that triumphed, by a 21-stroke margin of 1,749 to 1,770. Each player received an Olympic gold medal for his efforts.



The individual competition began on Monday, with a qualifier out of which 32 players advanced to match play. A consolation event consisting of four flights was held for players who failed to qualify for championship play.

Moving through the early rounds, most of the favorites won easily. Lyon defeated Lambert in the quarterfinals and would meet 1902 Pacific champion Frank Newton of Seattle in one semifinal match, while Egan would battle St. Louis city champion Burt McKinnie in the other.

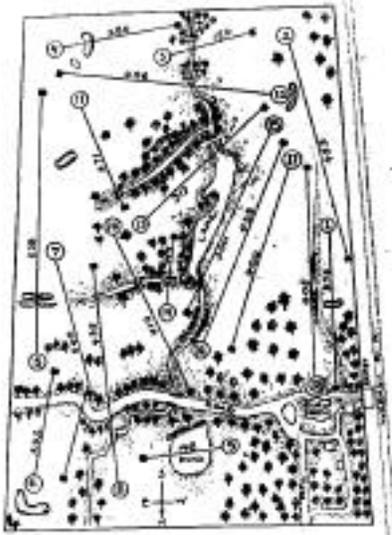
(Above: Olympic Champions Medal won by George Lyon)

Lyon was an excellent athlete, renowned for decades as one of Canada's top cricket players. Having taken up golf in 1895 at age 37, he had already won three Canadian Amateur titles by 1904. He excelled off the tee and seldom was matched in driving distance, an attribute that would help determine the eventual outcome of the championship.

Local newspapers described the Lyon-Newton match as "brilliant," crediting both players for their fine play. Going 1-up in the morning, Lyon faltered briefly, allowing Newton to move 1-up after 29 holes. Newton's nerves frayed and he proceeded to lose three of the next five. He recovered briefly to win the 35th but pitched

poorly to No. 18 green. When Lyon made a putt for his 4, the match was his, 1-up. Egan's battle with McKinnie was less dramatic, as he maintained a consistent lead throughout. The St. Louisan kept the match alive with a win at the 32nd, but was closed out on the ensuing hole, 4 and 3.

The two finalists awoke the next day to a rainstorm that would greatly affect play. Lyon's length, combined with the wet grounds, compelled Egan to force his drives, leading to erratic tee shots for the usually accurate Chicagoan. Despite Egan's birdie 2 at the ninth, the first nine holes ended with Lyon 3-up on the strength of a nifty 37. Egan found his form on the second nine, winning three and losing only one. In poor conditions, each player had posted a very respectable medal score of 83, with Lyon leading the match 1-up. In the afternoon round, Egan's game faltered badly, particularly his tee shots. Only a few flashes of terrific iron play would save him the embarrassment of a lopsided defeat.



Lyon's play that day was of true championship caliber. When Egan's approaches stopped nearer the flag, Lyon would make a putt to end the challenge. Egan was able to reduce the match to a one-hole deficit with a par on the 31st, but after the two halved the next hole, Egan hooked his tee shot into the lake on the par-4 15th, leaving him 2-down with three to play. The 16th hole is where the match finally ended, as Egan once more drove poorly. When he could do no better than a 6 to Lyon's 4, Egan was finished off, 3 and 2.

(Left: Glen Echo layout 1904)

As reigning U.S. Amateur champion, Egan must have come to Glen Echo feeling the Olympic medal would be his for the taking. To lose to a man more than twice his age must have been galling, for Egan made but a brief appearance at the awards banquet before retiring for the night. Lyon, on the other hand, could not have been more jovial.

After much prodding from friends, he rose from the table and, in an attempt to quell the heckling about his age, proceeded to walk on his hands some 30 feet across the room.

Later, asked if he were the greatest golfer in the world, Lyon told a reporter, "I am not foolish enough to think that I am the best player in the world, but I am satisfied that I am not the worst." When another reporter asked him if he were of Irish or Scottish descent, he replied, "I'm a wee bit of Irish and a good bit of Scotch."

Golf was again on the schedule for the 1908 Games in London, and Lyon arrived prepared to defend his title. However, with the R&A in strict control of golf and the IOC having failed to consult with its leaders on the event, British clubs refused to open their doors and the proceedings were cancelled. Golf would never again appear on an Olympic agenda.

Which only adds to Glen Echo's 100-year-old distinction. Continuing to celebrate its landmark '04 competition, the club is planning a centennial celebration for Sept. 23-25. Invitations have been issued to clubs that were in existence in 1904 to field two-man teams in a competition against pairings of present-day Glen Echo members.

Though the original competitors have long since passed away, visitors to the club today need only gaze down each fairway or stride upon each green to realize they walk in the footsteps of golf Olympians. Whether or not golf ever rejoins the Olympiad, Glen Echo, the oldest Olympic venue in the world in continuous daily use, proudly remains the last location where the two sporting institutions came together.