

Walter Hagen

Like a few other top players, most notably Byron Nelson, Walter Hagen was ambidextrous. In fact, he could pitch well enough with either hand that the Philadelphia Phillies once offered him a major league contract. During the 1929 British Open at Muirfield, Hagen's ball came to rest against a stone wall. He simply turned the club on its toe, gripped it lefthanded, and played the shot perfectly toward the green - to the delight and astonishment of the gallery.

Hagen had scant regard for deadlines, starting times, or meetings of any sort. In the 1933 Ryder Cup competition, played at Southport and Ainsdale, this cavalier attitude almost cost the American team the matches by forfeit.

As captain, Hagen was scheduled to meet with J.H. Taylor, the captain of the Great Britain/Ireland team, to exchange pairings. The time for the first meeting came and went without either Hagen or an explanation. Hagen was a no-show for the second meeting as well. Taylor, incensed by what he took to be gamesmanship on Hagen's part, issued an ultimatum: if Hagen didn't appear for the next meeting, Taylor would pull his team out of the matches. Hagen calmly arrived on schedule, but without bothering to offer an apology.

In 1928, the height of Prohibition, Walter Hagen traveled to Royal St. George's for the British Open. While there, he was introduced to a brand of scotch that he particularly enjoyed. Knowing it would be difficult to obtain this brand in the States, he tried to figure out how to bring some home with him. After winning the championship he quickly discovered the solution to his problem. He put a bottle in the trophy case and breezed past the customs officials in New York.

"I was paired with Walter one year in the old Inverness Four-Ball, and even though he was in his fifties then and well past his prime, I was still excited about playing with him because he had been my idol as a boy," remembers Byron Nelson. "We finished the front nine, and as we headed for the 10th tee Hagen turned for the clubhouse.

" 'Play hard, Byron,' he said. 'I'll see you on 14.' "

"I'd like to say it didn't matter and that I played good enough for both of us, but the truth is we finished dead last," said Byron.

The late Charlie Price was an elegant and knowledgeable writer who grew close to Walter Hagen in the process of collaborating on a book. He was the source for many of the stories in this series of books, particularly stories about "The Haig."

"One year Hagen arrived in New York by steamship after winning the British Open," Charlie recalled. "He had given his winner's check to his caddie and was dead broke. His son, Walter Jr., wasn't much better off, but he had at least won some money betting on the deck races on the trip over. Walter borrowed enough money for cab fare to Delmonico's Hotel, where he told the front desk that instead of his usual suite, he'd take an entire floor. He then asked the desk to advance him \$500 in crisp, new bills - which was the only kind of cash he'd carry. "When they were settled in upstairs, young Walter asked his father just how he planned to pay for all this. Hagen simply summoned the hotel manager to his room, explained the situation and how much publicity the hotel would get from having the British Open champion as a guest, and then told him to come back when he's come up with a solution - one which wasn't going to cost Hagen any money.

Hagen was a generous, if distant, father. Once he bought his son an expensive Austin roadster for his birthday. It was the perfect gift . . . for another birthday. Junior was only fourteen at the time.

Walter Hagen really enjoyed being around other people, much the same way Arnold Palmer does, remembered Charlie Price. "After winning the PGA Championship at Olympia Fields in 1925, he had gone to several celebrations, then returned to Olympia Fields, where he was staying in a cottage. When he couldn't get the door unlocked, he simply broke in, which



surprised the heck out of the elderly women who was staying there. But, she was delighted to meet Hagen, offered him a drink, and sat and listened as he recounted his win for several hours.