

The Old Man & His Greens

Walter Travis designed courses where intelligent finesse has the edge over pure power.

Born in the Australian gold rush town of Maldon in 1862, Walter Travis took the opportunity to immigrate to America at the age of 23, when the hardware company he worked for decided to open an office in New York City(!). He never looked back, and indeed never returned to the land of his birth.

Travis was competitive by nature, and in his younger years he took to bicycle racing as a hobby, but in 1896 his friends in the city joined the Oakland Golf Club in Bayside, Queens, and Walter Travis bought his first set of clubs and took up the game that fall. Within a year his handicap was down to 7, and in his second full year he was playing in top-flight amateur circles, losing in the final match of the Shinnecock Hills Open Tournament to reigning U.S. Amateur champion Findlay Douglas. His fellow competitors began to refer to the 36-year-old good-naturedly as "The Old Man," a moniker that stayed with him throughout his playing career.

At 38, he won the U.S. Amateur at his new home club, Garden City Golf Club, and defended the title successfully in 1901 at Atlantic City before winning a third time in 1903 [at Nassau CC]. At 42, he became the first American to win the [British] Amateur Championship, at Royal St. George's, where Open champion Jack White [who was in the gallery] described Travis's game thus:

> *What impressed me most was not the remarkable putting that he displayed all through the tournament, though it was really very fine, but the simple accuracy and certainty of his long game. He never tried to get any length. He simply tried to place his tee shots at every hole, to make certain of avoiding trouble, and then he depended on his deadly putting to win the hole for him…*

Every golf architect designs courses that reflect his own golf game, and Walter Travis's designs would challenge the longest hitters while giving scope for an accurate player with a good short game to win holes while the expert threw away shots striving for power.

One of Travis's signature ploys—which you rarely see from other designers—was to build a small ridge right at the front of the green, so that long aerial approaches might hit the downslope and scoot through the green, while a lower-trajectory approach landing short could roll harmlessly up and over the little ridge. (The 13th hole at CC of Troy is an example, as is the 14th at North Jersey.) Such features defend his par-4 holes fantastically from stronger players and give a fighting chance to the canny senior golfer who played short of the green for an up-and-down par—not coincidentally, a player very much like The Old Man himself. They are best viewed from the standpoint of match play, the forum for all of Travis's noteworthy victories, rather than the stroke-play mentality by which most golfers today judge architecture.

Unlike his contemporaries and wealthy friends C.B. Macdonald and Devereux Emmet, Travis was a working man, and he was not shy about using his success at golf to help him in various business ventures. Travis wrote his first book on golf instruction in 1901, on the heels of his first U.S. Amateur title, and began to write articles for *Golf* magazine and for the New York and Brooklyn newspapers, including his thoughts on his trip to practice on and study the best courses in Scotland and England. His thoughts on proper bunkering and golf course design were published in 1908, well before all the famous books on the subject. It may well have been Walter Travis who first suggested that a course should "compel a player to extract the full value from each and every club in his bag during the round, and on one or two of the holes to play certain testing shots with such nicety and keen judgment as to make even the best player pause before attempting their execution." (I always wondered about the origin of that "every club in the bag" idea because I don't remember it in any of the old architecture books. Context has changed drastically from 1902—Travis was referring to different kinds of shots with the clubs in an eclectic, mismatched set, not facing different approach yardages and hitting every number from 3-PW in a matched set with identical swings. I'm all for his version, but I don't care about the latter, which is impossible to control.)

He started consulting at golf architecture as far back as 1899, with the Scots professional John Duncan Dunn on his design for the Ekwanok Country Club in Vermont. In the early 1900's, as chairman of the green committee at Emmet's Garden City Golf Club, he became something like the first "Open Doctor," proposing significant

Travis's greens at Hollywood G&CC are **some of the most intricate** ever built.

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changes to the course in preparation for the 1908 U.S. Amateur. He also participated on Macdonald's design oversight committee for The National Golf Links of America, consulted with Donald Ross on Pinehurst No. 2, and with George Crump on the construction of Pine Valley.

In 1908 Travis founded *The American Golfer* magazine, which gave him something of a bully pulpit to write about the game. As a competitor he had always played with a chip on his shoulder, and in recounting his victory in the 1904 [British] Amateur Championship for an article in March, 1910, he laid bare the small resentments that had fueled his victory, from being assigned a poor caddie to differences with some of his fellow competitors. The resulting controversy came just as the Royal & Ancient Golf Club was considering a ban on mallet putters, including the center-shafted Schenectady model with which Travis had taken the trophy back to America; the banning of the putter became the first break between the R&A's Rules of Golf and the USGA's.

In 1916 the USGA ruled that taking money as a golf course architect was a violation of the amateur status rules. Though The Old Man was no longer a competitor on the national stage, he had won the Metropolitan Amateur at Apawamis that spring (at 54 years of age). The decision ended his competitive career, and directed him toward golf architecture as a full-time occupation.

Much of his design work was done in the Met Area, where his reputation as a golfer was unimpeachable, and up toward Buffalo where his wife, Anne Bent, liked to visit her sister in the summers. But he also did a bit of work in New England, at Columbia Country Club and East Potomac Park near Washington, D.C., and as far south as Camden, S.C., and Sea Island, Ga.

Travis's first assignment in the Met Area was the Garden City Country Club, built in 1916, the same year he did a remodeling of Canoe Brook's North course in New Jersey. The next year, he did extensive remodeling at Hollywood Golf & Country Club, where one of the first full sets of Travis's bold greens contouring was unveiled. Unsurprisingly for a player known for his accurate tee-to-green play and brilliant short game, his greens at Hollywood are some of the most intricate ever built, from the sharp swale through the green of the long 3rd to the four small tiers of the par-5 7th to the back-left bowl of the par-4 9th.

Amazingly, all of Hollywood's greens have been preserved to this day, except for the long par-3 17th that was moved by Rees Jones to get it farther away from the 7th. This is not the case at some other Met Area courses: North Jersey CC had some of the wildest greens anywhere, but in recent years several of them have been neutered as the club wrestles with newer members reluctant to sign on to the original ethos of the design.

After Hollywood, he was on to 36 holes at Westchester Country Club, one set of which he designed to be fully reversible; then a major remodeling of Sunningdale, which Seth Raynor had laid out only a few years before; followed by Spring Brook in Morristown, N.J., and Round Hill in Greenwich, Conn. His final bit of work here, a remodeling of the Country Club of New Canaan, ran into financial difficulties before the work could be completed.

It seems that greater competition for members in the Met Area has been especially unkind to Travis's work; with the exception of Hollywood, his boldest and best-preserved work is in less-traveled spots such as Cape Arundel, Maine (where the Bush family played the game); CC of Scranton, Pa.; Onondaga G&CC on the outskirts of Syracuse; Stafford CC, between Buffalo and Rochester; and at Lookout Point, Ontario, just the other side of Niagara Falls.

For his last course, the Country Club of Troy, N.Y., Travis's deteriorating respiratory health forced him to supervise the design while being driven around the site by car; but to this day you can find some of his most complicated and original greens there. He traveled to Colorado to try and recuperate, but died there in the summer of 1927, and was buried in Vermont, quite close to his maiden design at Ekwanok.

You could say that The Old Man and I are blood brothers in trying to come up with ways to keep shorter hitters competitive with the bomb and gouge set. In particular I don't mind building a tricky green on a very long hole, to reward the guy who can get close enough in two and then play a great short-game shot to secure his par – but I didn't learn that from Travis's work specifically, we both got it from the Road Hole, Sea Headrig at Prestwick, the 4th at Sandwich and so on. The main thing I learned from working on Garden City is that a fallaway green with an open approach is the formula that keeps low-ball hitters in the game. Pretty much every hole there gives an old guy the chance to get close with a long club if he hits it with just the right weight. ■

Those interested in further details of the life and career of Walter Travis are encouraged to consult the Walter J. Travis Society's website, https://travissociety.com