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Golf, the Flag, and the 1917 Western Amateur

By

Stephen R. Lowe

Within hours of the horrifying events of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, President Bush told the nation that it had just entered its first war of the new century. For days afterward, little else seemed to matter. Our sports-crazed nation approved the cancellation of professional team schedules through the following weekend. The PGA Tour cancelled its event as well, and the long-anticipated Ryder Cup matches, where the European squad looked to settle their Brookline beef at the Belfry, became another quick casualty.

Those early cancellations of sports events were easy calls. The following week, though, baseball, football, golf, and everything else American began again, if sometimes awkwardly. The role of sports in times so serious as war has always been tricky. When is it okay to play? As Americans fight the first war of a new century, golf fans may find some helpful perspective in the first war of the last one.

On April 6, 1917, the United States reluctantly entered World War I, a terrible conflict that had been raging in Europe for nearly three years and that had already claimed the lives of more than a million men. President Woodrow Wilson cast the struggle in moral terms, telling Americans that their mission was to defeat “barbaric” Germany and “make the world safe for democracy.” At the same time, Wilson also encouraged Americans to go about their daily routines as much as possible and suggested that the nation’s sporting activities should continue—not because they were worthwhile

in themselves but because sports made a “real contribution to the national defense” by keeping young men “physically fit, vigorous, and alert.” By the summer of 1917 every sector of American society was geared up to do “its bit” for President Wilson’s democratic crusade.

Most of golf accommodated quickly to the war effort. Just weeks after President Wilson’s announcement, the *New York Times* reported that the USGA, PGA, MGA (Metropolitan Golf Association), and practically every other g. a. cancelled their events for the year because “nothing should be done to interfere with a man’s first duty to his country when [it is] plunged into war.” Instead, each organization scheduled relief events that raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for everything from the Red Cross to the Fatherless Children of France Fund. But not the Western Golf Association. The WGA was the lone holdout in 1917, deciding to stage its events as usual, despite the war. WGA President Charles Thompson apparently took Wilson literally when he said that sports should continue.

As the only amateur championship contested that summer, the Western attracted an unprecedented field and a lot of press coverage. From a competitive standpoint, the 1917 Western Amateur was the best yet in its nineteen-year history. In mid-July, players from every section of the country traveled to Chicago’s Midlothian Golf Club. Francis Ouimet, who had put American golf on the map with his 1913 U.S. Open playoff victory over Harry Vardon and Ted Ray, led a powerful Eastern contingent that included Jesse Guilford. Perry Adair and “Little Bob” Jones, who made his inaugural entry, headlined the South’s representatives. Defending champion Heinrich Schmidt made the trip from

San Francisco, while J. S. Worthington of England and Jack May of Argentina provided an international flavor.

Although Jones was eliminated in the first round, the play was generally exciting, and on two successive days the crowd witnessed some history. In the second round, D. E. Sawyer and Robert Markwell turned a routine thirty-six-hole match into a nip-and-tuck forty-two-hole marathon; Sawyer eventually prevailed in what was (by two holes) the longest official match in American amateur competition. In the third round, Francis Ouimet set another record when he crushed Paul Burnett 14 and 13. The margin of victory was the widest in Western history and tied the national mark set by Jerry Travers in the U.S. Amateur a few years earlier. The final match, pitting Ouimet against local favorite Kenneth Edwards, provided great copy, too. Billed as a sectional battle between East and West, the match went the distance, with Ouimet eking out a 1 up victory on the home green to take the George R. Thorne trophy out of the West for the first time ever. Even the weather showed up beautifully all week.

But while all skies were blue in Chicago, clouds of controversy formed on the horizon. Before the first tee shot was fired, some observers criticized the WGA's decision to stage its tournaments. The glaring absence of Robert Gardner and Chick Evans highlighted the point. Both were favorite sons of Chicago golf and the WGA, and Evans was the number one amateur that year, having just won "The Double" (U.S. Open and U.S. Amateur) in 1916. Nonetheless, when the U.S. declared war Evans announced that he "would enter no tournaments and play no public golf except for the benefit of the Red Cross." Others, who were not from Chicago, considered the WGA's decision to play

tournaments in wartime unseemly, if not necessarily unpatriotic. The general concern was for the image of the sport; the WGA's action might reflect poorly on organized golf.

But there was more to the controversy than that. It *appeared* as though the WGA was exploiting the international situation for old-fashioned political gain. Especially troublesome was the WGA's decision to send invitations to players all across the country. A national field, according to tradition and practice, was reserved for the USGA's annual amateur championship. Little wonder that the *Chicago Tribune* reported "rumored efforts" by "supporters of the USGA to discourage the entries of the leading players" from outside the Midwest. WGA supporters, on the other hand, were thrilled by Crafts Higgins's tournament coverage in the Chicago-based *Golfers Magazine*. Noting that the field had been "thrown open to the country," Higgins believed that the Western Amateur "assumed national importance, it being the only amateur golf event of the year in this, or any other country." But in actively seeking to attract a national field, the WGA was vulnerable to charges that it was enlarging its territory at the expense of other golf associations that had cancelled their events out of patriotic duty.

Nothing fueled that critique more than the victory of Ouimet. The Hero of Brookline had not only traveled from afar, he had also recently been declared a professional by the USGA because of his involvement in a sporting goods business! The WGA defiantly disagreed with the USGA's ruling, declaring Ouimet to be as pure an amateur as ever. So by offering the Bostonian a special invitation to their event, the WGA was thumbing its nose at the national golf authorities in more ways than one. (After Ouimet entered the armed services in 1918, and amidst growing public pressure, the USGA reinstated his amateur status.)

Informed golfers naturally viewed the presence of Ouimet and, more importantly, the WGA's decision to hold its events at all that summer as politically motivated.

Undaunted and unapologetic, the WGA plowed ahead with its schedule, staging the Western Open the following month. Won by "Long Jim" Barnes, it also boasted its largest field ever, received wide press coverage, and was the only regular event for professionals on the 1917 calendar.

By the end of the summer, as more than a million American men trained and marched outside Paris, France, making final preparations to take their positions along the German border, the WGA found itself in a public relations squall. Critics had raised so much doubt about the organization's motivation that President Charles Thompson felt compelled to offer some public explanation. The August issue of *Golfers Magazine*, along with the *New York Times* and other leading newspapers, carried Thompson's statement in the form of an article entitled, "The Reason for the Western Championship."

In the piece, Thompson again summarized the grandeur of the 1917 Western Amateur, predicting that it would "go down in the history of the association as one of the best, if not the best, ever held." Then he acknowledged, "Quite a little comment has been caused by the action of the WGA in inviting players from outside its ordinary jurisdiction and . . . for the holding of this championship tournament." Thompson defended the WGA by reminding golf fans of President Wilson's "hope that sports would continue as far as possible." He also revealed that the WGA had donated all of the entry fees and the money allotted for the purchase of prizes to the Red Cross, adding that the WGA had purchased Liberty Bonds with its surplus cash. Claiming that the WGA was only "trying to do 'its bit' in harmony with President Wilson," Thompson asked, "have other

associations that criticized the WGA done as much?" He argued that it was wrong for "the WGA to be accused of practically every crime in the calendar, including disloyalty and sedition." Thompson declared, "The WGA has tried by all means within its power to show its loyalty and patriotism to the country, and it challenges any statement to the contrary." Regaining his initial tone, Thompson concluded, "I have little doubt but that the same invitation will be extended next year to all golfers who desire to partake of western hospitality."

Actually, in 1918 the WGA fell into line with the USGA, PGA, and MGA, canceling its regular events because, as the *New York Times* reported, "it was the consensus of the country that golf fixtures should be discontinued until the war is over, and the Western body felt duty bound to bow to the edict of the nation." Instead, the WGA sponsored a hugely successful Red Cross tour headlined by Chick Evans.

Among other things, the story of the 1917 Western Amateur illustrates the intense—at times, excessive—patriotism that flourished in America during World War I. Such moments have been rare in the nation's history; a similar feeling marked our society during World War II, and it certainly existed in the fall of 2001. In those times especially, sports authorities must be sensitive and cannot afford even the *appearance* of benefiting—politically, economically, or otherwise—from the country's misfortune. That is one of the few realities of American life that has not changed across a century.