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PGA in His Pocket

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William Richardson of the *New York Times* called it “the greatest record in golf.” One of the most respected writers of the Golden Age, Richardson was describing Walter Hagen’s 4-peat in the 1924-27 PGA Championships. No one else had ever come close to such a feat; Bobby Jones twice failed to win even three straight U.S. Amateur titles. This summer, the PGA brings its championship to Oak Hill Country Club in Hagen’s hometown of Rochester, New York, providing fans a good opportunity to remember one of golf’s greatest champions and its original 4-peat.

Hagen began his improbable streak at the 1924 PGA Championship, held at the French Lick Golf Club in southern Indiana. By then, he’d already played in three PGA’s, winning his first crown in 1921. In those days, the PGA was contested at both medal and match play; eventual winners had to qualify in the top thirty-two through two rounds of onsite medal competition and then defeat five opponents in thirty-six hole matches. At French Lick, Hagen mowed down the field like a combine harvesting a ripe crop. He dominated the medal rounds before slashing his way through four opponents and into a final match against power-driving “Long Jim” Barnes. The 6’4” Barnes was the 1916 and 1919 champion, but he proved light work for Sir Walter, who trimmed the lanky Cornishman 2 up. On top of losing, Barnes was outclassed by Hagen’s appearance. The local paper noticed that Barnes’s baggy trousers offered a strange contrast to Hagen, who showed up neat as ever, hair perfectly combed, and clad in bow tie and knickers.

In 1925 the PGA moved to Chicago’s Olympia Fields. This time, Hagen struggled. He barely qualified, finishing eleven strokes behind the leader, Al Watrous. Yet the Haig’s legendary confidence remained strong. Prior to the event, Hagen strode into the locker room and asked a befuddled Watrous and Leo Diegel, “Which one of you

is going to finish runner up?” Thanks to the draw, Watrous did in the first round, although not before taking Hagen to the 39th green.

After breezing through the second round, Hagen clashed with Diegel in an epic third round match. In some ways, Little Leo was an unlikely underdog; slight of build, he employed an unusual putting stance, crouching low over the ball and pointing his elbows away from the club in sharp, opposite angles. The odd-looking stroke worked early, and by the lunch break Diegel compiled a 5 up lead.

Parking their Ford Model Ts along the club grounds, some 3,000 Chicagoans took off that September afternoon to watch Hagen claw his way back and make some golf history. When the combatants reached the 33rd tee, Hagen was still 3 down. But he captured three of the last four holes, squaring the match on the 36th green with a long putt before finally finishing off Diegel on the 40th hole. Everything after the Diegel donnybrook was anticlimactic; Hagen broke “Lighthorse” Harry Cooper in the semifinal and then easily gunned down “Wild Bill” Mehlhorn to retain his title. Hagen, remarked one magazine, is the “world’s champion overtime golfer.”

The third victory of the 4-peat proved the easiest. Held at Long Island’s Salisbury Country Club, the 1926 tournament quickly became a showcase of Hagen’s power. He won the qualifying medal, then crushed all five of his match play opponents, prompting the *Southern Golfer* to bubble, “Hagen dominates the professional golf field like Mussolini dominates Italy.” In his most impressive title defense, Hagen had done what no other golfer had—win the same major title three years in a row. The fact that numerous other champions had been dethroned that fall highlighted Sir Walter’s accomplishment: Babe Ruth’s Yankees lost the World Series to the Cardinals; Jack

Dempsey was outboxed by Gene Tunney; and Bobby Jones failed in his first bid to win a three straight U.S. Amateurs. “At least one dynasty has prevailed,” observed the *American Golfer*.

With seemingly nothing left to prove, in 1927 Hagen traveled south to the Cedar Crest Golf Club in Dallas. The press made much of the fact that Hagen hadn’t touched a club in the ten days leading up to the tournament, instead spending that time fishing for black bass in northern Michigan. His arrival in Dallas the day before qualifying did nothing to raise expectations among insiders, who figured that Hagen wasn’t serious about making a run at a fourth straight title.

Hagen’s nonchalant behavior in the weeks before the 1927 PGA would later feed a popular Sir Walter myth: Hagen was so carefree about tournaments that rarely bothered to practice and sometimes would even show up fresh from the previous night’s party wearing a tux and patent leather shoes. In reality, Hagen played so many exhibitions and tournaments that he feared being “overgolfed.” He became clever at pacing himself in order to maintain a sharp competitive edge for the major tournaments, much like Jack Nicklaus or Tiger Woods in subsequent eras. Taking time off and failing to show up early at Dallas (in this case, he’d already played the course the year before and knew it well) were not casual or risky decisions; on the contrary, they enhanced Hagen’s chances to win.

And so Sir Walter shocked the experts, while also adding to his legend. After qualifying easily, Hagen ripped through his first three opponents before stumbling in the semifinal, where he probably should have lost to Al Espinosa. But the hapless Espinosa cracked under the pressure, handing the match to Hagen with a three-jack on the 36th

green and a blown four-footer on 37. Afterward, Hagen admitted being lucky, telling Espinosa, “I’m sorry Al, I didn’t deserve to win.” Turning to the press, he playfully added, “But what are you going to do about it? You give these boys a chance, and they don’t take it.” The next day Hagen came from behind yet again, defeating Joe Turnesa 1 up in the final, capturing his fourth straight title, and remaining, as one sportswriter put it, the “Big Boy.”

The streak finally ended in the third round of the 1928 event, when Leo Diegel’s flying elbows exacted some revenge en route to his first PGA crown. It wasn’t easy, though. The thirty-five-year-old Hagen lasted to the 35th hole. That loss snapped a string of 22 consecutive match play triumphs for Hagen. Overall, between 1916 and 1927, Walter Hagen won five of the seven PGA Championships he entered. His match play record during those years was 32-2. The first loss was suffered on the 36th hole at the hands of Jock Hutchinson in a 1916 semifinal and the second came on the 38th hole to Gene Sarazen in the 1923 final, which as it turned out, was the only obstacle to Hagen’s winning *five* straight titles and 32 consecutive matches. Another impressive feature of Hagen’s 4-peat is that it was compiled over four different championship layouts; he didn’t simply return year after year to a familiar site that happened to suit his game. Richardson summed it up nicely, declaring Hagen “the greatest match player the world has ever seen—and we don’t mean perhaps.”