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Walter Hagen: Baron of the Golden Age

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Walter Hagen

Dr. Stephen R. Lowe

Bow ties, bathtub gin, jazz, and the Charleston. Wall Street, Fords, and flappers. The Roaring Twenties. It was the most colorful decade in American history, as well as an era of intense, rapid change. Long-held traditions and standards were challenged repeatedly. A booming economy produced millionaires in every walk of life and helped fuel a Golden Age of Sports.

Golf thrived and changed with the new prosperity. Mounds of sand became factory-made tees, hickory shafts hardened into steel. A new international rivalry, the Ryder Cup competition, was born. The game's stars, like the decade in which they played, were some of the brightest ever, but none of them outshone Walter C. Hagen, the charming, well-built son of a poor, immigrant family from Rochester, New York.

A true original, "Sir Walter" perfectly suited his times. Hagen was the first "unattached" touring pro, as well as the first player to dress flashily during competition, to endorse a matched set of irons, to employ gamesmanship, to hire a full-time agent—and to make a million dollars in golf. In competition Hagen was the first American-born player to win the British Open, the first U.S. Ryder Cup captain (and competitor), and the first player to win the same major championship four years in a row. Grantland Rice, the Golden Age's top sportswriter, considered Hagen "the irrespon-

sible playboy of golf, and at the same time a keen and determined competitor." To some, Sir Walter was an arrogant rebel; others saw him as their personal champion, leading the way to golf's future. On one point all were agreed: Walter Hagen embodied change.

There was nothing in Hagen's humble background that suggested future wealth and fame. He entered the world on December 21, 1892, in a small, two-story home built by his father, William Hagen, on the outskirts of Rochester, New York. Before Walter came along, all of the Hagen men made a living as manual laborers—and none of them had the wherewithal to play golf. Walter's dad worked as a blacksmith in the railroad yards of East Rochester, and his mother, Louise Balko Hagen, was a German immigrant who raised five children while keeping up the house and garden on the quaint two-acre Hagen homestead.

Young Walter developed a lifelong passion for the outdoors, especially hunting and fishing. He passed the long winters of upstate New York by sledding and skating with his four sisters. When the snow melted, he loved to play baseball, and although his pitching prowess has been exaggerated over the years, Hagen was good enough as a teenager to excel in tough local semipro leagues. School was one of the things Walter didn't enjoy, and like so many from his social class, he dropped out early, barely finishing the sixth grade. In all, Hagen's childhood was rather ordinary.

There was one crucial difference, though, between Hagen's background and that of most other working-class kids. The Hagen house happened to be located near property that was purchased by Rochester's wealthy sportsmen for the purpose of constructing the city's first golf course. If not for that coincidence, the persona of "Sir Walter" would probably never have been born. But in 1895 the Country Club of Rochester (CCR) was formed, and soon after, golf was played within a mile of the Hagen land. By his seventh birthday little Walter was caddying at the CCR, toting and cleaning clubs for the city's elite.

Hagen quickly became a favorite with club members, and the feeling was mutual. He remembered admiring "the ease with which they spoke of huge money deals—and I certainly eyed wishfully their fancy golfing outfits." Rochester's professional, Andrew Christy, noticed Hagen and took the young caddie under his wing. When Hagen turned fourteen, Christy offered him the assistant professional's job. Christy taught Hagen the fine art of club making and repair, management of the pro shop, and the basics

of greenkeeping. Hagen also learned how to swing the club; actually, the most valuable aspect of Hagen's job promotion was the chance to play more rounds at the country club, many under the instructional eye of Christy.

By 1912 Hagen was ready for his first competition. Never one to think small, he made plans to enter the U.S. Open, but Christy encouraged him to wait another year and instead play in the Canadian Open. Hagen reluctantly agreed, traveled to Toronto, and finished a respectable twelfth place. Weeks later Christy resigned his post at the CCR, and at nineteen years old Hagen became one of the first American-born club professionals.

Hagen spent most of 1913 settling into his new job, but by September he was ready for more competition and took the train to Brookline, Massachusetts, to play in his first U.S. Open. Hagen fought hard at the country club and ended in a tie for fourth place, behind leaders Harry Vardon, "Big Ted" Ray, and Francis Ouimet, a young local amateur who put American golf on the map the next day by defeating the British professionals in a play-off. The valuable experience Hagen gained at Brookline helped him break through the following year at Chicago's Midlothian Golf Club, where he edged out rising amateur star Charles "Chick" Evans by one stroke to capture his first national Open in only his second attempt.

The Midlothian victory launched Hagen's competitive career. He would eventually win another U.S. Open (1919), four British Opens (1922, '24, '28, and '29), five PGA Championships (1922, '24-'27), and five Western Opens (1916, '21, '26, '27, '32). During the early 1920s, before Bobby Jones ascended to the emperor's throne, Sir Walter was widely regarded as the number-one player in the world. In the summer of 1924, after Hagen won his second British Open, the *New York Times* declared him the "greatest golfer who ever lived—bar none."

As for the number of "majors" Hagen won, it depends on how one counts them. He collected eleven of the currently designated "major" events, although only three of them were contested in the 1920s. In that decade the Masters was but a dream in the young mind of Bobby Jones. Golf writers, but more important the players themselves, generally considered the Western Open to be a fourth major, and including those victories, Hagen had sixteen contemporary majors. However one classifies them, Hagen compiled a record that easily ranks him among the best.

But Hagen's significance to golf runs deeper than his outstanding competitive career. Hagen changed golf fundamentally by pioneering the pro-

fessional tour and thereby taking the sport from the private country club to the public. There were no professional golfers before Hagen, only golf club professionals, men who served wealthy members by performing the tasks that Christy had taught Hagen at Rochester.

Club professionals came from the lower classes and early in the century were almost always British immigrants. Their identity was defined entirely by their club; they played competitively for small amounts of money only a few times each year, and they were always listed in newspapers and tournament programs according to home club, such as "Walter C. Hagen, Country Club of Rochester." Members generally looked down on their pros, perceiving them as rough, uncouth, and subservient.

Hagen suffered such prejudice at Rochester and at Detroit's Oakland Hills Country Club, where he migrated for the 1918–19 season, because for a man of his social background second-class treatment at a country club was more comfortable than first-class treatment in the railroad yard. But after he won a second U.S. Open in 1919, Hagen had had enough. Displaying an old-fashioned German-bred pride, he decided to break free from the constrictions and condescension of the private club and become a full-time touring professional golfer. Never again would Hagen be contracted to a club. Beginning in 1920, he was identified in tournament summaries as "Walter C. Hagen, unattached." Hagen was the first to carry that label, which denoted economic free agency. Most observers either scoffed, believing that Hagen couldn't make a living through exhibitions and tournament play, or criticized him for "unduly commercializing" a gentleman's sport. The great British professional J. H. Taylor, for example, castigated Hagen for playing "unattached," saying that "real pros" worked for the "honor, prestige, and dignity of the clubs" they served. Hagen simply went his way, proving some wrong and cordially disagreeing with the rest.

Hagen carried his challenge further by pushing boundaries at some of the most famous clubs around the world. In 1920 he traveled to Deal, England, for his first try at the British Open. Europeans were much more tradition-bound than Americans, and at Deal the professionals were not even allowed to enter the clubhouse but rather were asked to use a nearby shed for their locker room. Upon arrival, Sir Walter alighted from his chauffeured Austin-Daimler motorcar wearing a Savile Row overcoat, looked over the accommodations, and concluded that they were no place for his fine wardrobe. In protest, Hagen used his limousine as a locker

room that week, parking it each day in front of the clubhouse's main entrance.

Three years later at Troon, Hagen refused to take part in the trophy presentation ceremony, despite the fact that he was the runner-up, because professionals had not been admitted into the clubhouse during the previous week. If club members deemed him unworthy to enter their sanctuary during the tournament, Hagen reasoned, then why should he enter it for their trophy presentation? Instead, Hagen marched up the steps to the front door, turned to the crowd, and said, "I'd like to invite all of you to come over to the pub where we've been so welcome. If the [tournament] committee likes, they can present the trophy to the new champion over there." Democratizing golf and developing respect for its professionals became a crusade for Hagen.

It was just that cause that led sportswriters to christen Hagen with his primary nickname, "Sir Walter." The name conjured up images of honor, chivalry, and egalitarianism; to his supporters Hagen was like a medieval knight, slaying unjust prejudices. The crusade required pluck, hard work, charisma, flair, and a lot of moxie. Sir Walter had them all—in spades. In fact there was not another golfer in 1920 who could have carried it off.

To help wage his campaign, Hagen recruited Robert "Bob" Harlow to be his personal manager and agent. Harlow created and then sold "Sir Walter." He scheduled exhibitions, convinced civic leaders to organize open events, and negotiated Hagen's endorsement contracts for products ranging from equipment to knickers to long-playing instructional albums. Smooth talking, well groomed, and disciplined, Harlow was the perfect promoter for Sir Walter's show. With Harlow at his side, Hagen not only survived as an "unattached" professional but did better for himself than any other golfer ever had. During the 1920s his annual income was somewhere between \$50,000 and \$75,000; H. B. Martin once estimated that Hagen made \$1.5 million throughout his career.

The most lucrative seasons were those immediately after Hagen won a major tournament, such as the summer of 1922, following his first British Open victory. Harlow usually invited a headliner, like the entertaining and skilled "Australian trick-shot artist" Joe Kirkwood, to play in foursome exhibitions with Hagen, and the troop would cover the country in trains, boats, automobiles, and even an occasional airplane. The barnstorming tour quickly became a Hagen-Harlow specialty.

While Harlow made tough-minded business decisions behind the scenes, Hagen performed grandly on the stage. Herbert Warren Wind wrote that Sir Walter was a “born showman,” who “loved the big gesture.” Hagen attracted thousands of customers to exhibitions and open events with his knack for the spectacular in dress, mannerisms, and style of play.

In 1924 the *Detroit News* dubbed Hagen “Golf’s Fashion Plate,” revealing a wardrobe that included two dozen pairs of custom-designed golf shoes. In the spring of 1925, O. B. Keeler described Hagen as “the leading showman of sport” and compared him to the great prizefighter of the late nineteenth century, John L. Sullivan. Sportswriter Al Laney recalled that Hagen’s “mere arrival on the scene did something, caused something to happen. His every appearance seemed to be accompanied by the figurative blaring of trumpets and a metaphorical waving of banners, and Walter was perfectly conscious at all times of his role as a performer.”

Hagen’s biggest gesture may have come at the 1926 British Open, when he strode down the final fairway, trailing Bobby Jones by two strokes. Hagen needed to sink a 150-yard approach shot for an improbable eagle and the tie. With Jones sitting on the clubhouse balcony and a tension-filled throng gathered around the home green, Hagen paced off the distance to the hole and then sent his caddie to tend the flag! Sir Walter had every intention of making the shot. He failed, but only narrowly, running his ball within inches of the cup and offering the spectators one of the greatest golf shows of their lives.

Of course, one man’s showmanship is another’s gamesmanship, and Hagen became just as famous for the latter. One of his favorite match-play tricks was to select the wrong club when hitting first in an effort to confuse his opponent. Hagen might, for example, hit an easy mashie into a well-guarded par three and then watch his opponent hit a full mashie into a hazard behind the green. If competing against a player with a shaky putting stroke, Hagen would purposely concede two- and three-footers early in the match but look the other way during the late holes. Hagen would even use his mouth to throw an opponent off balance.

One of his brassiest lines came at the 1925 PGA Championship, when he walked into the locker room and casually asked Leo Diegel and Al Watrous, “Which one of you is going to finish second?” As it happened, they both did that week—Watrous succumbed to Hagen’s match-play wiz-

ardry in the first round over thirty-nine holes, while Diegel fell to Hagen in the third round on the fortieth green. In a piece entitled "What Makes Hagen a Great Player?" the *New York Times*' William Richardson argued that Hagen's greatest assets were his "head" and "confidence." "Others, his mechanical equals, maybe superiors, have to give way to him when it comes to headwork on the links."

Hagen specialized in the psychology of the game because he needed to; his swing was not a pretty sight to behold. The word most commonly used by writers to describe it was *lurching*. Hagen had a wide stance, strong grip, and flat swing plane—a remnant from the baseball diamond. His weight shift was dramatic as he moved to the right on the backswing and then practically lunged at the ball on the downswing. His ideal ball flight was a low draw, but in reality it was unpredictable, especially from the tee. Hagen's forte, however, was the short game; he was the master scrambler.

From a hundred yards inward to the hole, Hagen was deadly accurate, and once on the green, he putted with a deft touch and steely nerves. British golf writer Arthur Croome once observed that Hagen "makes more bad shots in a single season than Harry Vardon did during the whole period 1890–1914. But he beats more immaculate golfers because three of 'those' and one of 'them' count four, and he knows it." H. B. Martin thought that Sir Walter was "superbly unorthodox, self-taught, and not in the slightest measure a copyist or a patternist" in his golf swing. Hagen was pragmatic about his style; he cared far less about what old-timers thought of his swing than about whether or not it won him tournaments, and he always played to win. Harlow believed that "if Walter got into a game of tiddlywinks with a couple of kids on the nursery room floor, he would try as hard to beat them as he did to win the British Open."

Hagen was unconventional and controversial away from the course as well. His other nickname was "The Haig," most likely an effort to connect Hagen to "The Babe," another hedonistic, charismatic athlete from the 1920s. As with Babe Ruth, the stories about Hagen's carefree lifestyle are legion. Wind recorded that Hagen drank "what would have been for other people excessive quantities of liquor. He broke eleven of the Ten Commandments and kept on going."

Anecdotes about Hagen's spending all night at a party, then showing up at the first tee of a tournament in a tuxedo and patent leather shoes

became widespread. On that score, though, the image rarely reflected reality. In fact the evidence indicates that Hagen took good care of himself during his prime, sleeping more and imbibing less than has been commonly assumed. Later in life Hagen attempted to correct some of the myth, writing, "I could make one highball last longer in my own glass than any Scotchman ever born." Hagen became skilled at holding a drink for long periods, appearing to consume it, while actually using it as a sort of prop as he held court.

But if Hagen's drinking has been exaggerated over the years, then the tales about his womanizing are most likely all true. The largest segment of his gallery was often comprised of women, and Hagen usually found his evening's companionship among them. Handsome and debonair, the Haig was as bold with a woman on his arm as he was with a putter in his hand. Early in his career Hagen was introduced to Ernestine Shumann-Heink, famous contralto of the Metropolitan Opera. He had never seen her before and, after noticing her "ample bosom," supposedly commented, "My dear, did you ever stop to think what a lovely bunker you would make?" Such behavior did not make for a happy marriage, and during a decade in which divorce was relatively rare, Hagen was married and divorced twice. A family friend recalled the popular explanation for the breakup of Hagen's second marriage: "The story is that the dissolution began one night in a Florida hotel, when Walter, returning at a very unseemly hour, was discovered by Mrs. Hagen, as he hastily prepared for bed, to be without underwear." Hagen's only defense was that he'd been "robbed."

Yet Hagen had other, more admirable qualities. In spite of his gamesmanship and self-promotion, he was remarkably popular among his peers, who understood that whatever was good for him would probably benefit them in the long run, too. Moreover, Hagen was just likable; he never forgot his roots, consistently impressing people with a sincere common touch forged by his own modest upbringing. He became famous for giving large sums of money to caddies and friends, and he played dozens of exhibitions for charity. Finally, according to H. B. Martin, Hagen's two most outstanding traits were his refusal to court sympathy or self-pity and his utter disregard for making alibis—whatever the breaks. Those attitudes endeared him to competitors and took the edge off his otherwise cocky behavior. "I love to play with Walter," declared Bobby Jones. "He goes along chin up,

smiling away; never grouching about his luck, playing the ball as he finds it. He can come nearer beating the luck itself than anybody I know.”

In his rise to wealth and fame in golf, Hagen had beaten the odds. But no one can defeat Father Time, and as the Golden Twenties gave way to the Gray Thirties, Hagen slipped past his prime. The transition was made easier, though, by the realization that his crusade had been a huge success; professional tour golf was growing strong, and more people than ever were caught up in the sport. Bob Harlow became the PGA Tour's first tournament manager in 1930, drawing on the experience and success of his barnstorming days with Hagen. Inspired by the example of Sir Walter, other club professionals acquired more freedom—some followed Hagen, touring the world “unattached,” while others simply demanded and received more respect, as well as time for competitive play. “All the professionals who have a chance to go after the big money should say a silent thanks to Walter each time they stretch a check between their fingers,” Gene Sarazen concluded. “It was Walter who made professional golf what it is.”

Hagen won his last event in 1935 and by 1940 was through with competitive golf for good. Always something of a vagabond, he finally purchased some property of his own in 1953, about twenty acres of wooded land on Long Lake, near Traverse City, Michigan. With the help of Margaret Seaton Heck, he penned *The Walter Hagen Story*, an entertaining autobiography filled with favorite anecdotes. Hagen spent his remaining years in northern Michigan, where, with a few exceptions, he lived in surprising obscurity. One of his last moments in the spotlight occurred in 1968, when Hagen became only the fourth American, alongside President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Francis Ouimet, and Bobby Jones, to be made an honorary member of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, Scotland. The following year, on October 6, 1969, while resting peacefully in his cottage, Walter Hagen died at the age of seventy-six.

For weeks thereafter sportswriters around the country stammered to explain Sir Walter's significance. Unfortunately for Hagen, his image as a Roaring Twenties rebel somewhat overwhelmed his competitive record. Al Laney astutely reflected, “All of us who wrote golf in Hagen's day made too much of his flamboyant showmanship [and] not nearly enough of his golf.” The result has been that for the uninitiated, Hagen is often confused with Hogan—a terrible injustice to both men.

And for all too many informed fans, Hagen is remembered as a wonderfully colorful figure and just a good—not great—golfer. Fortunately, his record and contributions speak for themselves, and history has a way of putting things in perspective. The *Times* of London was one of the few that got it right in 1969, reminding its readers that even if Sir Walter “had dressed for the fairways in sackcloth, he would stand in comparison with the best in the world.”

WALTER HAGEN

	Total New Money	Wins	Top10s	Top25s
Majors	\$18,986,325	11	33	44
Other Official Tournaments (and International Wins)	43,362,895	34	119	151
TOTALS	\$62,349,220	45	152	195

MAJOR CHAMPIONSHIPS

	New Money	Wins
Masters	\$ 361,200	0
U.S. Open	6,043,434	2
British Open	5,918,750	4
PGA	6,662,941	5

BEST OTHER EVENTS

	New Money	Wins
Western Open	\$7,534,950	5
North & South Open	4,862,225	3
Florida West Coast Open	3,393,400	4
Metropolitan Open	2,593,500	3

Year	New Money	Total Wins	Top10s	Top25s	Majors	Other Events
1913	\$ 258,330	0	1	1	\$ 258,330	\$ 0
1914	1,000,000	1	1	1	1,000,000	0
1915	391,106	1	3	3	113,906	277,200
1916	3,131,521	3	7	7	506,221	2,625,300
1917	949,100	0	2	3	0	949,100
1918	774,000	1	1	1	0	774,000
1919	2,173,850	2	5	5	1,000,000	1,173,850
1920	3,022,422	4	5	6	142,253	2,880,169
1921	3,590,848	2	8	9	1,641,148	1,949,700
1922	4,236,117	4	9	10	1,366,917	2,869,200
1923	5,874,589	5	11	12	1,320,089	4,554,500
1924	4,515,640	5	8	8	2,378,172	2,137,468
1925	2,486,272	1	6	6	1,307,472	1,178,800
1926	4,726,039	4	9	9	1,809,301	2,916,738
1927	3,679,721	2	8	10	1,177,221	2,502,500
1928	2,636,260	1	6	7	1,673,493	962,767
1929	3,699,382	3	9	12	1,509,519	2,189,863
1930	1,187,503	0	5	7	89,763	1,097,740
1931	3,165,366	2	10	11	216,899	2,948,467
1932	3,501,380	2	11	16	186,358	3,315,022
1933	2,067,139	1	7	8	375,939	1,691,200
1934	1,277,499	0	5	11	166,897	1,110,602
1935	2,602,778	1	7	17	477,766	2,125,012
1936	858,888	0	5	9	145,600	713,288
1937	0	0	0	0	0	0
1938	163,212	0	1	2	0	163,212
1939	214,200	0	1	2	0	214,200
1940	166,063	0	1	2	123,063	43,000