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*“The Greatest Golf Crusade Ever”
Sir Walter, Exhibitionism, and Pebble Beach*

By

Stephen R. Lowe

“The tour was regarded as the greatest golfing crusade for financial gain ever,” recalled Walter Hagen in 1956. Sir Walter was fondly reflecting on his 1922 exhibition tour with Australian star, Joe Kirkwood, and he was right; nothing like it had been tried before. There had been other famous golf tours, including the one by Harry Vardon in 1900 that helped to launch the sport in America and the lucrative charity matches of World War I, but Hagen’s 1922 venture was unprecedented in duration, distance, and profits. Moreover, it was historically significant because it became just one early episode of many in the colorful, controversial career of “Sir Walter” Hagen, golf’s first touring professional. And, it passed through Del Monte.

In April 1922, Robert Harlow, Hagen’s personal manager, stunned the golf media by proposing the ambitious tour. Originally, his plan called for Hagen and Kirkwood to tour the world, but the itinerary was eventually trimmed back because the troop decided that there was plenty of money to be made in the U.S. Their trek began immediately after the 1922 British Open, lasted eleven months, and took them literally around the country, moving from New York to the Pacific Northwest, before turning south to Los Angeles, then east through Texas and Florida, and finally back up the Atlantic coast. The announcement would have been bold enough had it been made after the British Open, but Harlow’s calling the press before Hagen even left for Britain was especially dramatic. Everyone understood that the tour’s success rested on Hagen’s winning the upcoming British Open, a feat that no American homebred had ever accomplished. Never one to wilt under pressure, Sir Walter sailed abroad that spring, battled the

world's best over the Royal St. George's Club in Sandwich, England, and edged British professional George Duncan by one shot to capture his first of four British Opens. Then he returned home, signed numerous product endorsements, including everything from golf socks to the famous "Reddy Tee"—both of which he would promote on the tour—and joined Joe Kirkwood in June for their great crusade.

For the most part, the trip went as planned, proving that the game's top stars, armed with a national crown, could thrive as "unattached" touring players. Throughout their journey, Hagen and Kirkwood took on all comers. Sometimes they competed against other stars, sometimes against local talent. Their opponents might be professional, amateur, British, or female; it made little difference to Harlow, who happily exploited whatever rivalry he could. If a rivalry was not available, the troop used Kirkwood's trick-shot routine, which included such stunts as driving a ball that was teed up on a spectator's toe, as a gate attraction. Although always identified in the press as a "trick-shot artist," Kirkwood was actually a very skilled golfer. He could more than hold his own with Hagen in exhibitions and then perform his act either during the lunch break or in the evening after a match. It all represented some of the most clever sport's ballyhoo of the 1920s.

When the tour ended in the spring of 1923, the *Southern Golfer* reported that Hagen and company were "mighty satisfied" from a financial perspective. Hagen remembered that the team's standard fee was \$500. They could have been little disappointed from a competitive view, either; newspapers put the pair's record at 104-16 nationally and 50-4-2 in the west.

Hagen-Kirkwood picked up one of their western victories at Pebble Beach; indeed, it was on that tour that Sir Walter first surveyed the beautiful Pebble Beach Golf Links. On December 4, 1922, the *Monterey Peninsula Herald* proudly announced that arrangements had been made

“for a big golf feature at Del Monte.” The Hagen-Kirkwood tour was on its way to the Peninsula for a 36-hole match with local professionals Mortie Dutra and Peter Hay to be played on Sunday, December 24. The morning round would be contested at Dutra’s Pebble Beach, the afternoon round at Hay’s Del Monte, and Kirkwood was slated to stroke his trick shots in the evening.

As he often did on that tour in order to maximize profits, Harlow packed the weekend full. On Saturday the 23rd, the team played its last exhibition in Oregon, then took the overnight train some 400 miles, arriving at Pebble Beach the morning of the match. The *San Francisco Examiner*’s correspondent believed that the traveling had taken a toll on Hagen’s game, but if so, it did not cost the barnstormers too much. Hagen-Kirkwood beat Dutra-Hay by the comfortable margin of 6 and 4. The four-ball format took the score of a team’s best ball on each hole, so individual marks were estimates; still, the *Examiner* credited Hagen with a 71 at Pebble Beach that included an eagle 3 on the sixth. When the match concluded, Hagen was +2 at Del Monte. Kirkwood played better, shooting a 70 to Pebble Beach’s par 69 and finishing at -3 for his round at Del Monte when play ended in the afternoon. As for the local pros, Dutra carded a 75 at Pebble Beach, while Hay struggled to an 82. At no time did Dutra-Hay take the lead or otherwise threaten to win the match.

The *Peninsula Herald* reported that a “big gallery” watched the event with “keen interest.” Various newspaper accounts usually put the Hagen-Kirkwood galleries anywhere from 500 to 3,000 during that tour. The local paper also noticed that the visitors were “very much impressed” by both layouts, although they seemed more taken with the Pebble Beach links.

Club officials were already considering a few course alterations in the hope of attracting a USGA championship and, according to the *Peninsula Herald*, solicited advice from Hagen, who

not only approved of the suggested changes but prophesied that the National Amateur would soon be played on the Peninsula. (It was, of course, in 1929.) Another win under their belts, Hagen and Kirkwood remained in northern California through the holidays, playing in a match at the Olympic Club before heading to Los Angeles in mid-January. The Del Monte exhibition was a complete success, creating profits and exposure for Hagen, while allowing golf fans the opportunity to see a living legend—a rare treat in the days before television.

Hagen traveled through Del Monte many more times during his career, but it was for exhibitions, not tournaments. Late in 1926, for example, he visited the area during another exhibition tour, but did not enter the \$5,000 Pebble Beach Open, won by “Light Horse” Harry Cooper. That was typical—and controversial. During his “great crusade” of 1922, Hagen entered very few open events because to do so would mean less exhibitions. For Hagen, it was simple calculation: why bother with a two or three-day \$5,000 open that *might* yield a \$1,200 winner’s check, if he could play in two or three exhibitions that would *guarantee* him at least that much? If simple for Hagen, however, his decisions in 1922 were widely debated within golf. Many felt that the game’s professional crusader had a “duty” at least to defend his Western Open and PGA titles. Yet Hagen simply ignored their criticism, claimed that he was not unduly “commercializing” the sport, and went on his way. So, if Hagen let down Pebble Beach tournament officials in 1926, they could console themselves in the knowledge that they were not the only ones disappointed.

One of Hagen’s last visits to the Peninsula took place in 1938. Sixteen years after their first, Hagen and Kirkwood teamed up for another exhibition at Pebble Beach. By then, Hagen was a bit overweight and well past his competitive prime. Yet watching the old barnstormers stirred pleasant memories for Americans caught in the Depression and facing war, so Hagen and

Kirkwood kept on touring.

In the end, golf's professional crusader developed the same relationship with the people and courses of Del Monte as he did with the rest of the world. Sir Walter Hagen was altogether original, charismatic, endearing, controversial, and above all, interesting; crusaders usually are.