

# Amateurism is Royal,

By Harry Yeates and Peter Gardiner-Hill

For many of us poor souls in the amateur ranks, playing our beloved game professionally is but a fleeting dream. Some might get a little closer than others, but most will empathise with the comforting words of A.A. Milne, one of Britain's great authors: "Golf is so popular simply because it is the best game in the world at which to be bad."

Without meaning to imply that amateurs are not good golfers in their own right, that sentiment explains much about the spirit of golf.

## The Spirit of Golf and St Andrews

For the first hundred years, and more, of playing the game in Scotland, there had been no distinction between amateurs and professionals and everyone played for 'healthful exercise', camaraderie and possibly a small wager. There are frequent references to 'The Spirit of Golf' in this early history without any definition or meaning, but it seems to refer to the exceptional passion displayed by some dominant St Andrews figures of the 19th century.

John Whyte-Melville and Old Tom Morris were among those who paved the way. Whyte-Melville was elected captain of the Royal & Ancient Golf Club in 1823 at the age of 26 and would go on to chair all of the main committees including the links committee, becoming a supportive and friendly boss to Old Tom Morris. Together they established the principles of the St Andrews style of golf course architecture,



AA Milne, creator of Winnie the Pooh (pictured), famously wrote that "Golf is so popular simply because it is the best game in the world at which to be bad."

namely that a course should be in equal parts challenge and fun so as to encourage players of all ages from 5 to 90.

Since the turn of that century, when amateur golf started to be distinguished from professional, the spirit of the amateur game has been characterised by the mantra of 'Serious Fun', a phrase coined by John Low, one of the founders of the Oxford & Cambridge Golfing Society. The atmosphere of today's amateur matches owes him a great deal, best exemplified by his infectious laughter and merriment and, poignantly, by his reprimanding of Bernard Darwin for referring to a match as a 'fight', stating that 'however hard, it [golf] must never be more than a game.'

Over the years the defining feature of Low's 'Serious Fun' has been competition

# Ancient and 'Serious Fun'



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with teamwork, integrity, and humour. In his day this involved 36 holes of match-play, singles or foursomes, with a good lunch between rounds. That tradition is still upheld in many clubs across the country, but is beginning to diversify into other forms, as golf tries to appeal to a wider and younger audience. The European Tour's recent efforts to replicate cricket's Twenty20 effect with their own highly successful GolfSixes is one example.

Whatever forms 'Serious Fun' is to take in future, it is the handicap system and the unwritten spirit and integrity of the game that make it all possible for amateurs; however, for those who come close to making a living on the links, the confines of amateur status could be seen as inhibitory. Whilst the majority of amateur golfers play for the love of the sport,

the sad truth is that 'Serious Fun' is a luxury of which many of those who reach the verge of the professional game lose sight.

Many high-level amateurs are now dropping out of golf, and it has become a very real issue for The R&A and other governing bodies at a time when participation in the sport continues to decline. There is simply not enough incentive for some players to carry on.

## The 'Go Open' debate

The Swedish Golf Federation (SGF) raised this issue back in 1983, prompting the R&A to entertain the following debate: Should golf 'Go Open'?

The SGF's idea was to introduce a third category between professionals and amateurs, known as 'licensed players', who would be

able to receive expenses and substantial cash prizes in club competitions backed by local commercial sponsorship. This offered a viable alternative for non-professional category-one amateurs with professional aspirations to continue playing at a high level, whilst those who wished to retain amateur status could compete without receiving the same cash prizes. The Swedish reasoning named the amateur rules as a 'segregating force', weighted 'in favour of well off amateurs'. Their goal was to make the game 'accessible to everyone'. The ideas certainly came from the right place, but The R&A felt there could be an issue with integrity.

Shortly after this was tabled in Sweden, the Amateur Status Committee of The R&A (ASC) received a letter from the New Zealand Golf Association also suggesting that the game be made more profitable for leading amateur players.

Brian Chapman, the Chairman of the ASC, responded resolutely that the responsibility of his committee was to keep amateur golf 'free of the abuses which can come in the wake of uncontrolled sponsorship and financial incentive'. He went as far as to say 'My Committee believes that financial incentive in golf could give rise to cheating' and that 'much enjoyment and camaraderie would be lost.'

However steadfast this ASC response, a viable alternative had been suggested by a country with over 100,000 golfers, so the ASC felt it necessary to request the appointment of a Commission to consider the status of amateurism.



**The late Angela Uzielli and her mother Peggy Carrick; Angela 'would laugh her way to the English Amateur Championship title in 1990'**

### **The 1983 Amateurism Commission**

The Commission was to be chaired by Peter Gardiner-Hill, the out-going Captain of the R&A. The list of those working with Peter highlights the seriousness with which The R&A took this matter; sadly most have passed away in recent years. The USGA in this case chose to observe rather than participate.

Among their number were Charlie Green, arguably the most decorated Scottish amateur, Geoff Marks, the first man to captain GB&I to Walker Cup victory on American soil, Peter McEvoy, a twice Amateur Championship winner and low amateur at The Open and Nils Thygesen an economic advisor to the Danish government and member of the Danish Olympic Committee, known by

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some as the 'father of the euro'.

The Commission also included Angela Uzielli, a brilliant Curtis Cup player, who would laugh her way to the English Amateur Championship title in 1990 at the age of 50. Her inclusion meant the meetings had to be held in London as the R&A would not allow the Commission to meet in the clubhouse due to her presence. This is just an aside but it gives a significant view of how far the R&A has come since then.

The Commission undertook market research with the golfing governing bodies of over 60 countries and hundreds of individual amateurs within the UK and Ireland in order to establish whether there was a palpable desire for change. The evidence they sourced was overwhelmingly in favour of the retention of the existing amateur/professional distinction.

When asked what the main factors were 'for his or her own continuing participation and enjoyment of the game', 90 percent of the amateur golfers the commission asked specified these three answers:

- The high level of sportsmanship resulting from having to apply the rules to one's own game.
- The continuing personal challenge of every game of golf.
- The spirit and tradition of the game.

This was certainly a win for the advocates of 'Serious Fun'. The Commission's verdict, in concurrence with Brian Chapman's letter, was that the scope for manipulating handicaps or for more direct cheating would be incentivised by cash prizes. As John Low might say it would become a 'fight'.

It would have been interesting had the report included the opinions of Swedish amateur players who had tested the 'licensed'

player system. This would certainly be useful for further consideration.

Of the world's best golfers, only a tiny proportion ever pass through the border posts separating the 'Serious Fun' of amateur golf from the professional way of earning a living and the thorough R&A Amateurism Commission of the early 1980s established that these controls were fundamental to the protection of the spirit of the game as a whole.

### **The Way Forward?**

It is most important that the dialogue on amateur status stays open, as the changing nature of the game dictates that the rules stay culturally and economically relevant to the lives of the best players. The purpose of this and three further articles we intend to write, is to inform and encourage this debate and to reintroduce a historic dimension that may otherwise be lost.

In this context *Golf Quarterly* readers might like to consider the following questions. What evidence do you see of The Spirit of Golf? What forms of the game do you currently play that you might consider 'Serious Fun'?

In the next article we will look at the figures that have best epitomised the spirit of golf on this side of the Atlantic and the lasting impressions they still have on the game that we have come to know and love.

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