

NOT only were many of those who went to Woodhall tempted to describe it as the best inland course in the country but the Championship itself—in the odd way these things do happen—suddenly convinced a number of the most experienced pundits that a new era had started in Amateur golf, and become incontrovertibly proved in that event.

Analysis of the actual scoring would be a bore, and prove nothing, either: so much depending on the wind, the day and the state of the course (infernally difficult!). Analysis of why so many of us—from younger players to older players, right up to the senior golf writer present—felt this suddenly strong impression of a new standard, is not too easy either. But what seems to have happened is that there is now a much wider field of amateurs, all able to score well under competitive championship conditions; and most of them are young. Of the 43 qualifiers for the last two rounds, all on 153 (76, 77) or better, over half were under 25, less than 10 over 30. This is a change, and a radical one; for in championship qualifying rounds over a course like Woodhall in its hard conditions, wisdom, ability to keep one's head, and sheer experience of how and why to cope, must count for a lot. These young players had not suddenly and magically acquired these qualities, natural to their elders. Not at all; they succeeded simply because they have learnt to swing well, hit the ball hard, and rested on the confidence that comes from that: they could rely on their swings to take them through.

Basic Method

The elder watchers noted that where ten or fifteen years ago one would have seen a great number of unformed or untidy swings all over the field, nearly all these young men have comparatively simple, sound methods. Perhaps—and it could be an important trend if it is true—it is the first definite result of the work of the Golf Foundation, in encouraging both the game and the proper learning of it amongst the young; added to, most likely, both by the coaching schemes subsidised by the four national unions, and by the general climate of

LINCOLNSHIRE GREEN

John Stobbs played in the Amateur Stroke Play Championship and reports his impressions from Woodhall Spa.

attention to method engendered in the attitude of—and through the controversies about—the Walker Cup selectors.

However it is, there can be little doubt but that it is true; and that young players of ordinary county standard now score and compete with consistency and dash of a far higher order than their predecessors were capable of. There are far more people now in the field capable of still being in the picture after the first three rounds; and in fact in the first 30 in the results, from the 290 of Slater and Shepperson down only to the 304 scored by Joe Carr, and stopping there, the only players definitely over 40 were Slater, Carr and Pierce; and over 30 Thirlwell, Burgess, Davidson and Huddy. Nearly all the rest were youngsters nearer 20 than 25.

It suddenly thus becomes possible to prognosticate with some certainty that within another five years—if the trend continues, and there is no reason why it should not—there will not only be a positive flood of good players still under 30, but many more come up by then to join them. Competition in amateur golf will be much more on the American pattern of acknowledged free-for-all; and favourites vastly more difficult to

foresee—as, indeed will rapidly become national and Walker Cup teams. Although this certainly means the eclipse of the middle-aged county player (and none of us likes being swept into backwaters, by however admirable a tide) it will undoubtedly do British golf a vast amount of good.

Scottish Verdict

The second theme is the course itself. If Woodhall isn't the best inland course in Britain, it's not easy to name one decisively better; which may amount to much the same thing. When you find Scots talking of it in the same breath with Gleneagles and Rosemount, Yorkshiremen with Ganton, Sussex men with Pulborough, Surrey men with Walton Heath and Sunningdale, and Hertfordshire men with Berkhamsted, some special quality of merit is at least deducible!

So let enthusiasm rip! May I admit that I took 83 in the first round, then in the second a score I just refuse to reveal: and still came away admiring it immensely and longing to play it again. You can say more: that it is the sort of golf course you could settle down to play on for the rest of your life, and never want to live anywhere else.

It is so nothing of an odd phenomenon. The country of Lincolnshire all around is flat and fen-like, a continuation of the Wash country. But set suddenly in it at Woodhall is this ridge of sandy country with heath, heather and pines. Golf was played there for some time before the local Lord of the Manor, Colonel G. V. Hotchkin, took a hand in it, redesigned

the layouts and ended with the present course.

The first 11 holes proceed in a loop of 5, then a long run out to the turn, and a tack back, through wonderful open, slightly undulating, heath. The fairways are narrowish, and bordered by heather of a peculiarly tough and clinging consistency, though it is nowhere left long enough to make a ball disappear.

But the wonderful character this somehow gives the course, with the holes laid out as they are, is hugely added to by the cavernous sand bunkers everywhere. There is nothing magic about bunkers; in fact many nowadays are just a bore; but none of them are a bore at Woodhall. Never have bunkers fitted so absolutely naturally into an inland course. Understandably, because the bunkers are there anyway; all you have to do is to excavate them and keep them open—a little job performed adequately enough by the constant spade-work of niblicks.

Three Blind Shots

There is something indefinably right about the way they are placed, too. They give the impression of growing out of the terrain, as it were; and perhaps the best thing about them is that though their penalty is real if you do get in (often to take three strokes before seeing the fairway again, since they are often deeper than your hat) there is absolutely no need to go into any of them at all. Their function is mainly to terrify the eye; and to nearly every green a straight, firm shot, pitching pin high, is absolutely and utterly safe from them.

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The last 7 holes are able to ease up a bit with the sand hazard; for from the 12th drive onwards into the trees we go on the lower level of the heath; and from then to the end belts of birch make a continual threat along every hole. There's one hole, though, where the sand comes back in a tight battalion before and around the green: the drive and short-pitch 15th. There I took a lovely 7, 5 of it struck out of sand: and this is quite, quite easy to do.

One Bad One?

There is perhaps one bad hole, the 16th: rather an undistinguished drive and pitch to a flat green surrounded by trees, and half hidden by a cross ridge 30 yards short. In winter conditions this may be a fine hole; but it somehow lacks the character of the others; and is vastly overshadowed by 15 and 17, both challenging drive-and-short-pitches. It's a contrast to them, yes; but not a very good one.

You can sit back and try to analyse the particular charm and challenge of Woodhall, and never quite arrive at a certainty. Perhaps that itself is part of it—as with the theme of a woman with a bit of irreducible mystery about her, no matter how many years you know her. But in Woodhall's case I think part of the answer may be that the essential of playing it well is to direct the drive to the tactical side—usually the bolder, too—of every fairway; then be able to play firmly at the pin: and then do so! Your mind, in fact, must weather the hazards before the ball is struck; and that, perhaps, is part of the best of golf.



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All this, I think, makes good golf. But *splendid* golf, as Woodhall provides, is essentially indefinable and subjective. Either it is there for you, or it is not.

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