

## History of the Hole Cup

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"Golf means the long and leary putt that glides into the cup." Robert K. Risk, Songs of the Links. 1919

Golf historians believe that the first hole cup was a common length of land tile which golfers at St. Andrews placed in the holes of their greens. Legend has it that they were distressed over the constant degradation suffered of the hole and its rim, and that perhaps the land tile may have helped to control the problem. Apart from environmental wear of the hole, the golfer himself was largely responsible for degradation; for what with the wooden tee not yet in existence, the golfer would - upon holeing out - grab a handful of soil from the hole for shaping into a tee for his proceeding tee shot. Mid-nineteenth century photos of golfers on putting greens show that very often the hole was ragged, and in some cases at least one foot wide!

Some clubs had their own rules against "robbing the hole of soil" as it were. The 1815 rules of Aberdeen stated that ... "No sand is to be taken for teeing within ten yards of the hole", and the 1834 rules of the Royal Musselburgh Club stated that ... "The turf of the putting green shall not be raised up for a tee, and no caddy shall be employed who does not carry a bag of moist sand or clay for tees."

The legendary St. Andrews land tile/hole cup was in use as early as 1850. Its dimensions were 5½ inches outer diameter by 6 inches deep. The 5½ by 6 dimensions of the original hole cup has for years raised a serious question as to why the Royal

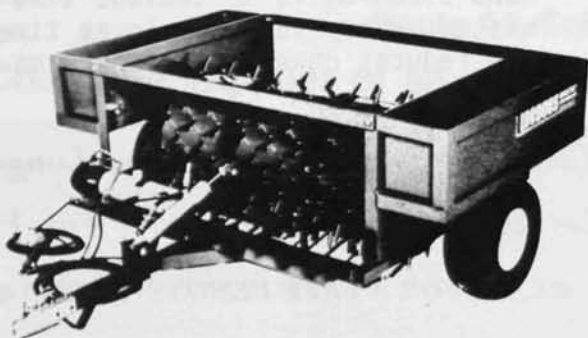
and Ancient went on to lay down the law of 4¼ inches outer diameter by at least 4 inches deep ... some 40 years later. Was the 5½ outer diameter too easy, or were other considerations taken besides that of degree of difficulty. The exact reasoning is unknown, but there are at least two very good theories as to how we have arrived at the present day dimensions.

1). It could be that the 4¼ by 4 was common for many years at many clubs long before the R&A made it rule. It is known that the oldest hole cutter in existence today (part of a collection of golf antiquities from the Royal Musselburgh Club) had/had the very same dimensions of 4¼ by 4, and according to the Musselburgh minutes of **March 13, 1829**, the Hon. Secretary was "authorized to pay the account of Mr. Gays for the instrument for forming the holes". So as early as 1829 these dimensions were common to at least one club.

2). The practice of inserting flag poles was not yet generally common at St. Andrews during the time when the land tile/hole cup was being developed. Perhaps the later use of flag poles may have been coincidental to the hole cup becoming standardized, and the metal cup being adapted to receive it.

In any event, the dimensions of 4¼ by 4 seems to be with us to stay, despite the various attempts throughout history to tamper with it. In 1934, at the Year-round Open at the Miami Biltmore Course in Coral Gables, Florida, Gene Sarazen actually convinced the officials to enlarge the hole to 8 inches! The event served only to prove that good putters still sunk em, and poor putters still missed em.

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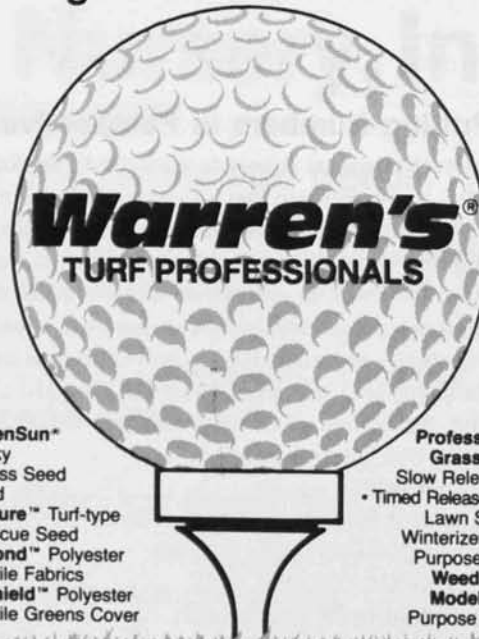


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