

How Dr. Lawson Brought Golf to Chapel Hill

By JIM KLUTZ

Editors Note: The story of Dr. Lawson's work in golf at Chapel Hill, N. C. is unique in the game. Not only did this famed former athlete and noted physical instructor make a go of golf but he trained his daughter, Estelle, into international stardom.

Pro golf in furthering its earnest campaign to make golf instruction more resultful should make use of the exceptional qualifications and performance of Dr. Lawson. Together with the foremost pro instructors' own knowledge and experience the valuable talent Dr. Lawson would bring from his great work in physical education should account for substantial progress in teaching golf.

If there ever was a golf course built on a shoe string, it was done at the Chapel Hill (N. C.) CC by Dr. Robert Baker Lawson, Professor of Physical Education at the University of North Carolina.

During the early days of the depression the problem of building a nine-hole course out of the worst sort of hilly land, which already had three make-shift holes, was dropped in Dr. Lawson's lap. With every imaginable drawback, including a shortage of money and only one man to help with the work, Dr. Lawson proceeded to build a layout that, although it doesn't measure up to the standards of our better courses, is a fine monument to his enthusiasm and hard work.

Not only did he perform the seemingly impossible, but Dr. Lawson gave all this time and effort to the project without receiving one penny of remuneration — in fact he has paid his own club dues during the club's existence.

The Chapel Hill course, par 32, and 2,380 yards of extremely hilly land, provides a rigid workout for any golfer. Narrow fairways, steep hills and sloping ground provide numerous hazards. It is one of the hilliest courses in non-mountainous

land to be found anywhere in the country.

O. B. Keeler, of the Atlanta Journal, and one of the nation's leading golf writers, called the course a "glorified cow pasture," but at the same time admitted that the No. 2 and No. 7 holes were as beautiful as any he had seen anywhere in the country. Which is quite a compliment from Keeler, who never throws any bouquets around unless he has good reason to do so.

Although membership in the Chapel Hill club is limited to members of the staff of the University of North Carolina and some of the business men of the town, students are allowed to play. Every day Dr. Lawson can be found in the afternoons hovering around the little house that serves as the headquarters, seeing that the four-somes get started off right and keeping things running smoothly.

Dr. Lawson As Golf Tutor

Should any player be puzzled by a hook or slice, or other faults, he can turn to Dr. Lawson and ask for advice. The doctor's eyes will light up like a theatre marquee and he will go into a diagnosis and explanation of what is wrong with the player's effort. He is not only willing, but glad to help everyone who comes to him for advice, and during the past 15 or more years he has helped hundreds of beginners, and even advanced players to improve their games. And coming from one who tutored his daughter, Mrs. Estelle Lawson Page, to become Women's national champion, the advice can be counted on as being expert. The pleasure he gets out of seeing a person improve his game is all the reward he expects for his coaching.

Dr. Lawson fell into his role as golf booster in Chapel Hill back in 1930. At that time the Chapel Hill course consisted of three short holes, which were little more than tees and greens, with a stretch of cleared-out land in between for fairways. A huge, cavernous ditch wound across all three of the so-called fairways, right in front of the greens.

There were a number of professors and townsmen interested in golf, but none of

them knew what to do about the course. A meeting was held to discuss the problem, and since Dr. Lawson had had considerable experience as an athletic coach, his name was suggested as the man to take over.

"Gentlemen," Dr. Lawson said, rising from his seat, "I've never hit a golf ball in my life. But if you want me to take over the golf course and see what I can do with it, I'll do my best, but I won't make any further promises."

That was in 1930, and although he was carrying a full load of teaching duties, and coaching the gymnastics team at the University as well, he attacked his new job with as much enthusiasm as a little boy taking his first ride on a bicycle.

Everything seemed against him. There was little money for buying equipment. He started from behind zero. He had to learn the game, the layout of a golf course, and many other things. There was money enough to hire one colored man to help him build the course. And with this dark outlook he started out with a dream in his eyes.

That dream at times may have turned into a nightmare as he faced one obstacle after another. When he had his first look at the course after taking charge he stood on the hillside and his heart dropped into his shoes. The sight was discouraging, to say the least. Red clay, rocks, weeds, ditches, trash, and other extraneous ma-

terial barred the way — not to mention the wooded land that would have to be cleared if other holes were to be made.

He went home and called daughter Estelle. They had played tennis together during Dr. Lawson's spare time, and Coach John F. Kenfield, of the University tennis team, had predicted that Estelle would make a name for herself in national competition in tennis.

"Estelle," he said, "put up your tennis racquet. We're going to learn how to play golf." And that's just what they did. In less than seven years Estelle, now Mrs. Julius A. Page, Jr., had won the USGA's national women's Championship. She and her father have won every mixed foursome tournament held in the State at one time or another. In addition, he has won the North and South Seniors, Mid-South Seniors, and the Invitation at the Hermitage Club in Richmond.

Learning About Golf

Before he even stuck a pick in the ground or rearranged a blade of grass on the Chapel Hill course, he set about learning all he could about the construction of a golf layout. He went to Sedgefield in Greensboro, Pinehurst, Hope Valley in Durham, Carolina CC in Raleigh, Myers Park in Charlotte, and other clubs in the section and consulted the greenkeepers and pros as to the soil, the fertilizer, how to construct greens, and other pertinent facts.



A good idea of the type of hilly ground the Chapel Hill course has been hewn from can be gathered from this view of the turn on the dog-leg, No. 1 hole. The green is shown at the left of the trees in the center background with No. 5 fairway beyond.

He watched some layouts under actual construction.

The next step, along with getting down to actual work, was to learn playing the game. Once again, this time with daughter Estelle, he set out for the larger golf courses in the state whenever there was a tournament going on. There they would watch the professionals and take copious notes



Dr. R. B. Lawson, the man who made Chapel Hill and whose remuneration has been the satisfaction of helping others to learn and enjoy the game, takes a few minutes to give Jim Klutz some pointers on putting.

on their styles. They also read every book on golf that they could find.

Then back home to practice. They would go out on one of the hills, where no one could watch them, and practice hitting balls for hours at a time. It was only after much practice that he and Mrs. Page ventured out on a course to play where they could be watched. But since both were natural athletes, it wasn't long until they were quite adept at the game.

The slow process of improving and enlarging the course had now begun. The fairways of the original holes were put in shape. The first hole was a considerable distance from the clubhouse, so a new tee was built near the clubhouse and the ground cleared to make No. 1 a long dog-leg, and leaving the first half of the original first fairway for a new par 3 hole.

Slowly but surely the work progressed. Obstacle after obstacle was surmounted by Dr. Lawson and his one-man staff. Trees had to be cut, stumps and huge rocks just under the surface of the ground had to be blasted out. The road between classrooms and golf course was being kept hot by the energetic little man. The ground had to be smoothed and the grass planted. Tees and greens slowly began to take shape. The erstwhile gymnastics coach was being patted on the back from a safe distance.

With the amount of land available very limited, all possible ground was pressed into use. Plans called for the No. 8 fairway to be laid out along a valley running parallel to the highway at the lower side of the clubhouse. But right down the middle of this valley ran a large gully that measured five feet deep and twenty feet wide. Armed only with a wheel barrow, a shovel, and a strong back, Dr. Lawson's man Friday rolled one load of rocks and dirt after another and dumped them into the gully. This slow process took a year, and when the place was finally filled up, top soil was laid down and grass planted. Soon there was a well-covered fairway, and the large rocks underneath formed a perfect drain.

Makeshift Drainage

However, the gully remained across five other fairways, and was in a position that tile would have to be put in so that the water could drain properly. The ditch in front of No. 1 green needed attention first. Dr. Lawson went in search of tile and discovered that tile he needed would cost \$300. The money wasn't available, and he tried to figure what could be done.

At the time were several highways in the vicinity being paved with asphalt, and one day he noticed that the barrels that the asphalt had been shipped in were being thrown away beside the road. He rushed to the officials and gained permission to take the barrels for his own use. A large truck was obtained and sent out on the highways to gather up all of them that could be found. Then the ends were knocked out and they were laid end to end the length of the gully and were then covered with dirt and grass planted. The immediate problem was solved and the only expense was for the rent of the truck and the workers' time. They have now been in use 15 years, and are still holding up.

One more problem came up. After building eight holes Dr. Lawson suddenly ran out of land, and there was no ninth hole. After considerable figuring he came up with a plan. A tee was built at a far side of No. 8 green, and the ninth hole doubled back for 87 yards along the upper side of the seventh fairway, making a short but difficult hole.

After four years of hard work the course was finally completed and there was cause for celebration. Dr. Lawson had finished his assignment, and someone else could take over the management. But who could

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ize the tasks that require his feet, face and hands and get for himself and his club more time for using his brains.

EXHIBITS and DEMONSTRATIONS

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DR. LAWSON BROUGHT GOLF

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do the job? There was no money in the treasury to pay a professional, or even for a person as a manager. Not wanting to see his work wasted, he consented to continue management of the golf club without salary and to be green-chairman.

But the completion of the layout did not bring an end to his difficulties. The up-



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keep of the course was quite expensive, and the treasury was always pushed to the limit. Then the war came along, the equipment wore out and couldn't be replaced. Three hand lawn mowers were obtained, and the helper used them in a desperate effort to keep the fairways and greens in playable condition.

The late Donald Ross, world-renowned golf architect from Pinehurst, once looked over the place and told Dr. Lawson that no golf architect could take the same amount (and kind!) of acreage and make any better nine-hole golf course. Quite a compliment to a man who knew nothing about the game before he started out with the project.

Dr. Lawson has a brilliant background as an athlete and a coach, and his natural ability as an athlete enabled him to grasp the fundamentals of the game of golf quickly and become an excellent player at an age when most people are beginning to eye an easy chair rather than taking an active part in sports, especially of a tournament nature.

Although he has celebrated his 73d

birthday, he acts far below his years when it comes to the Chapel Hill course. Recently he played five holes of golf (he passes up Nos. 2, 3, 4, and 5 because of the steep hills) and birdied the 420-yard first hole, birdied the sixth, and parred the last three.

Born in Lynchburg, Va., August 23, 1875, Dr. Lawson got his start in athletics when he entered Locust Dale Academy in Virginia and was a pitcher on the baseball team. That was to lead to a brilliant diamond career that saw him pitch for John McGraw of the old Baltimore Americans, the first year after the junior major league circuit was organized, and later for the Boston team of the National League.

From 1898 through 1900 he was a pitcher on the University of North Carolina nine, winning 35 games and losing only one — a 4 to 3 decision to the University of Maryland. He didn't miss a single game, playing every other position when not pitching. He once hurled seven games in eight days, from Saturday through Saturday, without losing once, including Georgia twice, Tennessee, and Macon (now Auburn) among his victims. He

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batted .418, .426, and .448 those three years, and was captain of the team the last two. He also played three years of football as a quarterback, and was acting captain of the track team as a senior.

While with John McGraw's Baltimore Americans he once pitched 27 consecutive scoreless innings against the slugging Cleveland Indians in four days, three times as a relief pitcher and once the whole game. The Indians had the famed Napoleon Lajoie and other well-known stars in their lineup. After dropping out of baseball he returned to the University of North Carolina as a member of the faculty in 1906, and last fall he began his 43d year as a member of the University staff.

At various times during this period he has coached the football and baseball teams, and was trainer for football from 1906 through 1925 when Chuck Quinlan, the present trainer, took over.

After leaving the University as a student, he attended Medical School at the University of Maryland. He holds medical licenses in the states of Virginia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland, in addition to North Carolina. He was a teacher in the medical school at the University for more than thirty years before being transferred to the Physical Education Department. He coached the gymnastics team for a good many years until the sport was dropped at the beginning of World War II. He now teaches courses in anatomy, physiology, and therapeutics. During his time at the University he had never had a leave of absence until this past year when an illness forced him to give up his teaching duties for the fall quarter. But with the beginning of the winter term in January he was right back at his post.

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