

History of Elite Competitive Golf in the United States

1. Summary

This paper looks at the historical evolution of elite amateur and professional golf competitions in the United States. A statistical analysis of the playing lengths of golf courses used for elite competition, a complement to this report, may be found in R25 - Evolution of Playing Lengths for Elite Competitions in the United States.

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2. Introduction

The Distance Insights project is a joint project between the USGA and The R&A. The project was publicly announced in May 2018 with the overall vision of building the most comprehensive understanding of the past, present and future impact of distance in golf to support a sustainable future for the game.

The following changes in the landscape of competitive golf in the United States from the 1890s to the present should be considered as context for the trends noted in the event yardage analysis:

- Increased numbers of golfers, regionally, nationally and internationally (1890s-1920s, 1960s, 1980s-2000s)
- Increased opportunities to compete (1900s-1920s, 1940s-1960s, 1980s-2000s)
 - Proliferation of clubs, organizations and tours that conduct elite competitions
 - Increased accessibility to national and international competitions
- Increased financial incentives for players to perform and win (1940s-2010s)
- Increased competition for tours and associations to survive financially (1980s-2010s)

3. The Changing Landscape of Competitive Golf in the U.S.

Prior to the USGA's founding in 1894, the landscape of competitive golf in the United States consisted of the country's handfulⁱ of independent golf clubs hosting members-only competitions, inter-club matches, and open competitions for prominent golfers. Most club professionals were British or Scottish immigrants who served as instructors, clubmakers and

greenkeepers. As the game's popularity grew, competitive opportunities for every level of player proliferated:

- **1895:** The USGA inaugurates three national championships: the U.S. Open, U.S. Amateur and U.S. Women's Amateur Championships. Requirements for participation (handicap, club affiliation, etc.) and championship format (match play vs. medal play, qualifying rounds, etc.) were designed to determine the "best men"¹ to compete for the titles.
- **1897:** The Intercollegiate Golf Association is founded. The USGA assists with administrative affairs and their annual championship until the National Collegiate Athletic Association was created in 1939.
- **1897:** Metropolitan Golf Association (MGA) is founded. The organization is praised early on for preventing scheduling clashes between New York area tournaments and creating a network of clubs that supported each other with tournament preparation.²
- **1899:** Western Golf Association (WGA) is founded to promote golf in the Chicago area. WGA titles would be considered some of the most prestigious in the country through the mid-twentieth century.

By 1900, fifteen golf associations existed to organize local and regional competitions for both men and women in major metropolitan areas in every corner of the country,³ while the number of U.S. golf facilities had increased to nearly 1,000 clubs.⁴ This explosive growth was coupled with the rubber-core ball's invention and its appearance in elite competitions shortly after 1900.⁵ Newspapers across the country noted improved scores and increased driving distances for players of every skill level. As the game attracted more enthusiasts, the golf industry developed. *The Official Golf Guide* of 1899 reported 35,000 men employed by the golf industry, commenting, "No sport whatever, and few single industries, finds labor for anything like so many people."⁶ In reaction to the increased number of eligible participants, entries for competitions grew in number, and handicap requirements became more stringent for national championships.

Originally, a USGA championship host club was selected from member facilities who invited the Association to consider their club for a championship, usually four to seven months in advance. Prior to 1908 the WGA selected dates and courses for their events as late as two to four months in advance.⁷ The choice for USGA championships was based on "accessibility", accommodations and condition of the course."⁸ The host club was responsible for every aspect of hosting a championship, except for determining the field. Before 1915, few substantial changes were made to the course prior to championship play. The *Washington Post* noted USGA officials arrived a few days before the 1911 U.S. Open to review the course and playing length.⁹ However, clubs soon began to edit and prepare their courses specifically for championships. Merion Cricket Club spent "two thousand dollars a month throughout the summer improving its already excellent courses in every detail that would bring them up to

¹ Notes from USGA Leadership Meetings. 1897.

² *The Official Golf Guide*. Edited and Compiled by Josiah Newman. New York. 1899.

³ "Officers of the Golf Associations and Leagues," *Harpers Official Golf Guide*, 1900, Page: 23-24

⁴ Robert L. A. Adams, John F. Rooney. "Evolution of American Golf Facilities." *Geographical Review*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (Oct 1985). Page 421.

⁵ "The Women's Championship." *Golf*. November 1901

⁶ *The Official Golf Guide*. Edited and Compiled by Josiah Newman. New York. 1899.

⁷ Joseph E.G. Ryan. "Golfers Manifest Early Enthusiasm." *The Inter Ocean*. February 23, 1908.

⁸ By-Laws of the United States Golf Association. 1895.

⁹ Many Seek Golf Title. *The Washington Post*. June 20, 1911.

championship requirements” before the 1916 U.S. Amateur.¹⁰ Similarly, Oakmont lengthened holes and added bunkers in anticipation of the 1925 U.S. Amateur:

“Fine-combed down to the last blade of grass and its thousands of traps refilled with more than twenty carloads of troublesome sand, the famous Oakmont Country Club is a complete departure from that over which the amateurs six years ago battled for the National Championship.”¹¹

By the 1910s and 1920s, a vast number of regional, sectional and national competitions were well-established annual events. Mini tours, for both male and female amateurs and professionals, were beginning to spring up, especially in southern resort towns during the winter. These events laid the foundation for modern professional tours decades later. However, competitive golf at a national level was still separated geographically between East and West. Opportunities for the top players to meet were few and far between; the most successful regional players might only compete against one another a few times a year at the most prestigious events.¹²

1908: USGA has 276 member clubs; WGA membership reaches 114 clubs.¹³

1916: Professional Golfers Association of America is created to protect professionals’ interests, elevate the standing of professional golfers, increase equipment sales and establish a championship.

1916: USGA Women’s Committee gives female players the opportunity to select their national championship course.

Following World War I, public respect for and interest in professional golfers, previously considered members of the working class, began to increase, though the most significant events remained predominantly for amateurs. Two distinct types of professional golfers began to appear: the club professional and the touring pro. With the rise of the sports celebrity in American culture, opportunities to make a living through prize money, exhibitions and endorsements began to appear for a select few. Golf, and the commercial and public relations activities associated with it, expanded substantially during the 1920s.

1919: U.S. Open purse is increased from pre-war total of \$900 to \$1,745 due to increasing costs of railroad and hotel prices.¹⁴

1922: Admission is charged for the first time at the U.S. Open.

1922: USGA inaugurates the U.S. Amateur Public Links Championship, demonstrating the growth of quality home-grown American golfers and the increasing number of municipal facilities.

1924: Regional qualifying is instituted for the U.S. Open. In 1925, qualifying expands to East, West and Mid-West locations.

1924: The National Golf Writers Association is organized at the U.S. Amateur by representatives of 60 newspapers to obtain proper facilities for reporters at nationally significant competitions.¹⁵

¹⁰ The Coming Amateur Championship. Golf. August 1916. Volume 39. No. 2.

¹¹ William A. White. Oakmont Awaits the Big Battle. The American Golfer. 1925.

¹² Mark Soltau. “Where Would Golf Be Without California?”. Golf Journal. June 1998. Page 16.

¹³ Nine Ladies Out. The Rock Island Argus. May 9, 1908.

¹⁴ Notes from USGA Leadership Meetings. 1920.

¹⁵ “Golf Writers Form Ass’n. The Atlanta Constitution. Sept. 25, 1924.

1926: For the first time, progress reports on play at the U.S. Amateur are delivered by radio, broadcasted directly from the championship clubhouse.¹⁶

1927: Admissions at the U.S. Open surpasses the U.S. Amateur by just over \$1,000. In 1929, that figure would grow to \$8,500.

1928: "The extent of golf interest during the past year is best reflected in the unprecedented number of tournaments- major, minor, local and club- and the galleries present at each- and attendance never considered possible in many sections... Receipts- the truest barometer of interest- exceeded all previous figures."¹⁷

1931: 135 district, regional and national golf associations are recorded in the U.S., 34 of which are listed as women's associations.¹⁸

Though the Great Depression caused many golf facilities to close, the number of golfers, especially on public golf courses, continued to increase.¹⁹ Women were reported taking up the game in record numbers.²⁰ By the 1930s, the term "business man golfer"²¹ was no longer used to describe a man conducting business during the week and playing golf in his free time, but a player who made a living solely through tournament winnings and endorsements.ⁱⁱⁱ The exploits of flashy characters like Walter Hagen, paired with the successful public relations ideas of the PGA of America's Bob Harlow, created widespread enthusiasm for a year-round pro circuit. Golf as entertainment continued to flourish with Fred Corcoran's development of PGA and LPGA circuits during the post-war boom of the late 1940s and 1950s, along with George S. May's Tam O'Shanter tournaments complete with bleacher seats for spectators²² and the largest purses in golf²³.

1940: Winner's share of the U.S. Open purse is \$1,000.

1946: First televised golf tournament at the Tam O'Shanter C.C.

1946: Women's Professional Golf Association (WPGA) is established and conducts inaugural U.S. Women's Open.

1948: Robert Trent Jones assists Robert T. Jones, Jr. with changes to Augusta National in anticipation of the 1948 Augusta National Invitational.²⁴

1948-1962: USGA adds four national championships: U.S. Junior Amateur (1948), U.S. Girls' Junior (1949), U.S. Senior Amateur (1955), U.S. Women's Senior Amateur (1962). Adopts U.S. Women's Open from LPGA (1953).

1949: WPGA is reinvented as Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA).

1950: Winner's share of the U.S. Open purse is \$4,000.

1950: "If the pros are not so hilarious as some of their predecessors, one reason is that competition is keener and they are on a continuous tournament grind. In the early days, when a pro went off to a tournament it was in the nature of a holiday."²⁵

¹⁶ Notes from USGA Leadership Meetings. 1926.

¹⁷ "Looking Backward- and Forward." *Golf Illustrated*. Jan 1929. Number 4, Volume 30. Page 9.

¹⁸ *The American Annual Golf Guide, 1930-1931*. Golf Guide Company, Inc. New York. 1931.

¹⁹ Foster Hailey. *Golf Courses Will Set Up Sprinklers*. *The Rock Island Argus*. Jan 28. 1931.

²⁰ Universal Service. *Increasing Number Women on Golf Course Sets Up a New Problem for Solution*. *Quad-City Times*. June 22, 1923.

²¹ S.I. Burick. "Si-ings" *The Dayton News*. Jan. 19. 1931.

²² Barnum of Bunkers. *The Cincinnati Enquirer*. July 1, 1945.

²³ *Tam O'Shanter Brochure*. 1941.

²⁴ Bill Wallace. *Chip Shots*. *The Miami News*. April 4, 1948.

²⁵ "From Gully to Golden Jubilee," Lincoln A. Werden, *Golf Journal*, September 1950

In the 1950s, USGA championship course selection occurred 18 months to two years prior to the event. The USGA official's role in course preparation was purely advisory.²⁶ Host club Green Committees determined conditioning and changes made to course design. Attempting to rectify their reputation following Ralph Guldahl's low scoring record at the 1937 U.S. Open, Oakland Hills employed architect Robert Trent Jones, Jr. in the fall of 1950 to prepare their course for the 1951 U.S. Open.²⁷

"...One USGA official heard such wild reports that he asked for a hasty checkup on Jones' activities. James D. Standish, Jr. USGA president, made a personal inspection, and satisfied everyone when he called the new Oakland Hills 'as great, as far and as exacting a test of golf as an Open possibly could be played on.'"²⁸

Using their extensive studies on driving distance and landing zones at the 1947 through 1950 U.S. Opens, Jones and his staff determined new hazard locations to accommodate the modern distances achieved by top players.²⁹ After 1951, language surrounding championship course criteria and championship set-up increasingly appeared in USGA materials.³⁰ Through the 1950s and 1960s Jones worked closely with the USGA to revise courses in advance of the U.S. Open which would become repeat championship host sites over the next several decades such as Southern Hills, Baltusrol and The Olympic Club. Jones' revision of Oakland Hills, with its lengthened holes, narrow fairways and new hazards created an entirely new conversation surrounding tournament course set-up in America.

"Oakland Hills is definitely an example of development in golf course design towards something more effective; something that will separate the skilled players from those... whose scores make them appear like great players, when actually they lack the finesse required to be in the front rank."³¹

With greater opportunities to fly rather than ride by train or automobile in the 1950s and '60s, championship fields became more geographically diverse and top players were able to compete against one another more regularly.³² Additionally, opportunities for women as instructors, equipment endorsers and touring professionals increased as elite amateur players began to turn pro in greater numbers, setting the stage for women's professional golf to grow in popularity, financial support and legitimacy during the 1970s.

1954: U.S. Open is covered on national television for the first time.

1958: PGA Championship changes format from match play to stroke play, a decision dictated by television producers who "wanted stars in the last scenes."³³

1960: Approximately 5 million golfers in the U.S.³⁴

1960: Winner's share of the U.S. Open purse is \$14,000.

1960: USGA funds first film on a national championship: "Oakmont and the Open."

²⁶ Sarah Ballard. Hogan at Oakland Hills. August 1985. Unpublished.

²⁷ U.S. Open Site Real Golf Test. The Terre Haute Tribune. April 29, 1951.

²⁸ U.S. Open Site Real Golf Test. The Terre Haute Tribune. April 29, 1951.

²⁹ Robert Trent Jones. What the Open Figures Show. Golf Journal. August 1951.

³⁰ Joseph C. Dey, Jr. Control in the Open and Tommy Bolt. Golf Journal. July 1958

³¹ "Fairway- or Foul." Golf World. June 22, 1951. Page 3.

³² Mark Soltau. "Where Would Golf Be Without California?". Golf Journal. June 1998. Page 18.

³³ Charles Price. The PGA a Fourth-Rate Major? Once a Unique Championship, It Now Lacks Definition and Purpose. Golf Digest, August 1985.

³⁴ National Golf Foundation. Sandra Hart. 2015.

1962: Manager Mark McCormack's clients includes Arnold Palmer, Gary Player and Doug Sanders whose combined income exceeds \$1 million.³⁵

1963: First live telecast of final holes of the U.S. Women Open.

1963: First time six golf professionals won over \$50,000 and two over \$100,000 in prize money in one year.³⁶

As competition increased between full-time touring pros and local club professionals for event purses, 1968 marked a split in the PGA of America. Desiring control of how and when tournaments were conducted and negotiations over television broadcasting rights,³⁷ the organization now known as the PGA TOUR was born, increasing standards for tournament course preparation and increasing commercial opportunities for more touring pros.

Golf experienced incredible domestic and international growth during the 1970s, '80s and '90s, demonstrated by a steady rise in the number of facilities, associations and tours at home and abroad. Increasing opportunities for international golfers to gain valuable competitive experience grew as countries and regions around the world established governing bodies as well as developmental and professional tours during these decades. Growth of collegiate golf programs and scholarship opportunities in the U.S. beginning in the 1970s provided more opportunities for young players to compete and become the next generation of touring pros.

1970: Approximately 12 million golfers in the U.S.³⁸

1970: The PGA European Tour is founded.

1970: USGA President Philip Strubing explains U.S. Open "par, yardage and detailed course preparation program is determined at least a year and a half prior to the tournament."³⁹

1972: Title IX spurs the growth of collegiate women's golf.

1974: The Tour inaugurates the Tournament Players Championship, now THE PLAYERS, as an event intended to determine the top touring pro, separate from club professionals.

1977: Broadcasting rights for USGA championships double from 1976.

1980: PGA Tour launches the Senior PGA TOUR, now Champions TOUR. USGA inaugurates U.S. Senior Open.⁴⁰

1981: PGA of America and PGA Tour adopt membership programs similar to the USGA Associates Program, encouraging engagement with and financial support from individual golfers.

1985: Approximately 19.5 million golfers in the U.S.⁴¹

1986: USGA assumes responsibility for conducting the U.S. Open, a role previously filled by the host club.⁴²

1990: To prepare their famed No. 3 course for the 1990 U.S. Open Medinah members undertake a \$2 million renovation.⁴³

³⁵ Palmer Companies. Golf World. April 13, 1962.

³⁶ Notes on USGA Leadership Meetings, 1964.

³⁷ Associated Press. PGA, Pros Feud; Fall Break Seen. Pensacola News Journal. July 23, 1968.

³⁸ National Golf Foundation. Sandra Hart. 2015.

³⁹ 1970 U.S. Open Program.

⁴⁰ Senior Commemorative, 1989. NYNEX Golf Digest. The Journal News. May 17, 1989. Page 67.

⁴¹ Golf Participation in the U.S., 2015 Edition. National Golf Foundation.

⁴² Dave Anderson. The Impossible Dream. Golf Digest, June 1986.

⁴³ Peter Andrews. "Inside Medinah's Pleasure Dome." Chicago tribune. Jun 10, 1990.

1990: PGA TOUR inaugurates the Ben Hogan Tour (now Web.com Tour), intended to provide competitive experience for developing tour pros.⁴⁴

1995: Approximately 25 million golfers in the U.S.⁴⁵

1996: International Federation of PGA Tours organized to enhance professional golf worldwide.

2000: Robert Trent Jones-designed or renovated courses have served as host to 79 national championships, including 20 U.S. Opens and 12 PGA Championships.⁴⁶

2003: Participation peaks at 37.9 million golfers in the U.S.⁴⁷

2004: Number of golf facilities peaks at 16,057 in the U.S.⁴⁸

2004: Asian Tour founded.

2005: International qualifying introduced for the U.S. Open to enable the growing number of international players exempt through local qualifying to participate in the championship. The U.S. Women's Open would follow suite in 2014.

2005: USGA releases an official "U.S. Open Championship Philosophy," communicating the intention of course set-up to "prove the most rigorous examination of golfers," and the 14 factors that influence course set up, noting, "The Association typically begins preparing for a U.S. open 5-7 years in advance of the actual championship."⁴⁹

2012: PGA TOUR Latino america founded.

2017: Approximately 23.8 million golfers in the U.S.⁵⁰

Increased international accessibility to golf and opportunities to compete on a global stage has created better, lower-scoring players and strengthened fields for elite competitions. The need to present players with an adequate challenge, while entertain viewers, continuously pushes those determining event course set-up to creatively enhance layouts and conditions.

⁴⁴ Mick Elliot. Hogan's Weekend Heroes. The Tampa Tribune. April 22, 1990.

⁴⁵ Golf Participation in the U.S., 1997 Edition. National Golf Foundation. Page 3.

⁴⁶ Associated Press. "Master of the Challenging Golf Course Dies". San Francisco Examiner. June 16, 2000.

⁴⁷ Golf Participation in the U.S., 2004 Edition. National Golf Foundation. Page 4.

⁴⁸ via Greg Nathan, Chief Business Officer for the National Golf Foundation (information acquired April 25, 2018).

⁴⁹ U.S. Open Championship Philosophy, United States Golf Association, 2005

⁵⁰ Golf Participation in the U.S., 2018 Edition. National Golf Foundation. May 2018. Page 1.