

George Lyon

by Frank Cosentino

Canada's George Seymour Lyon was the gold medalist in golf at the 1904 Games, a surprise, perhaps, only to those who did not know him. He had excelled in baseball and cricket and only took up golf on a dare – and this when he was thirty-eight years old. Golf became a new love; he pursued it with a passion – not without trials and tribulations. He incorporated his cricket and baseball swing into his golf game and developed a swing which a New York critic labeled as being akin to “using a scythe to cut wheat.” He looked and acted anything but like a golfer; he was portly, loved to joke, was boisterously enthusiastic, liable to break out in a verse of ‘My Wild Irish Rose’ or suddenly begin to walk on his hands. Staid onlookers could only shake their head in awe and disbelief when they witnessed his apparently ruthless, haphazard, swipe at the ball and sent it far down the fairway.



In one year he was the best golfer at Rosedale, defeating the City of Toronto's best golfer in the process. Just before his fortieth birthday, he won the Canadian Amateur championship by twelve up! He repeated in 1900 and 1903.

Eight-four golfers from Europe and North America entered the Olympic Golf competition; some were already calling it a world championship. Lyon had no problem in winning his qualifying round, Monday, September 18. He was in ninth place among the 32 remaining. His second round caused a bit of a buzz. He defeated his opponent, a hometown favorite, by eleven holes with nine to play!

Predictably, his form was criticized by the St. Louis papers: Yes, Lyon drove the ball huge distances but that hardly made it golf. But, substance being superior to form, he was now among the elite eight: three from St. Louis, three from Chicago, one from Seattle and the unlikely, according to the media, and maligned Lyon. He ignored his detractors, defeating his third round opponent by four holes. His semi-final competitor was Newton, the Pacific Coast champion. Some called it the best game of the tournament with the eighth and ninth holes described as “being negotiated by the cleverest golf ever seen in North America”, the highlight being a drive of 327 yards by Lyon.

Many saw the final for the Gold Medal as a mismatch. His opponent was the recently crowned American champion 23 year old Chandler Egan, the fans' favorite. His victory seemed a foregone conclusion; Lyon appeared to not be taken too seriously. He was said to have had a severe attack of hay fever which cut into his golf playing that summer. Others thought him to be on the verge of collapse what with the long train trip from Toronto combined with the mental and physical pressures of his four rounds of pressure golf. He was forty-six and rather dumpy in appearance. And, he just didn't look as if he stood a chance, a feeling reinforced each time he took a swipe at the unfortunate ball. Newspapers took to referring to his “coal-heaver's swing”, prompting Lyon to write to the United States Golf Association: “Whether I play like a sailor or a coal-heaver, I never said that I am proud of my form. I only do the best I can.”

Two eighteen-hole rounds would determine the winner of the Gold Medal. That, combined with the rainy morning weather had many feeling younger Egan would benefit. True to form, however, Lyon showed up as enthusiastic as ever as he stepped up to the first tee amid polite applause. He drove to within eight yards of the 276 yard pin placement, took two putts and was one up. Egan matched him hole for hole afterwards throughout the first 18 holes; Lyon maintained his one-up lead.

Biographical information

George Seymour Lyon
* 27 August 1858
Richmond Hill, Ontario (CAN)
† 11 May 1938
Toronto, Ontario (CAN)

Olympic results

1904

Golf, individual: gold medal

The two broke for lunch and resumed play at 3pm for the final eighteen. The great match was the talk of the clubhouse. Word spread; the gallery increased. Lyon's steady game paid dividends. Nine holes into the second round, the twenty-fourth of the day, his lead increased to four. Egan mounted a comeback. He won the next two holes. He was two behind with ten to play. At the thirtieth, it appeared that Lyon's lead would shrink to one but he made a clutch putt to retain his two-hole lead with six to play. Egan wasn't about to cave in. He won the thirty-first. They tied the thirty-second. Lyon was still one up.

The gallery seemed to be waiting for Lyon to crack; he seemed unfazed. His drive on the 33rd was straight down the middle of the fairway; Egan ended up in the lake. Two up for Lyon. The next hole was a virtual replay of the 33rd. Lyon won the hole and the match three up with two to play, ending what some were calling "the greatest golf tournament ever held in America." He was the Olympic Golf champion.

Clearly, George Lyon had energy left. Onlookers cleared a path to the clubhouse where his trophy and medal were waiting for him. With a seemingly boundless reserve of energy, Lyon walked there on his hands! Before the night was out, he had all singing his favourite song: My Wild Irish Rose.

There is a postscript to all of this. At the 1908 London Olympics, golf was once again on the program. Lyon went to defend his gold medal. A dispute between golfers of the U.K. and Games officials resulted in the British golfers boycotting the Olympic tournament. Understandably, Americans were unwilling to journey to London with all the uncertainty. Thus, at the deadline, Lyon's was the only official entry. Olympic Officials informed him he would be awarded the Gold Medal. Lyon refused to accept it; he wanted no part of a prize he did not win in a competition.

His Olympic gold only spurred him on. He won the Canadian titles in 1905, 06, 07 and 1912. With the end of the Great War and now sixty, he turned to Senior competitions, winning every one from 1918 to 1930 except 1924, 27 and 29. He would have won the latter, having made the finals, but his son was getting married that same afternoon. Family being Lyon's priority, he withdrew. At age seventy, still winning championships, he was determined to shoot his age at least once a year over 18 holes. And he did, except when he turned 79. A broken wrist prevented it. An illness that winter resulted in his death in his eightieth year. A joyful spirit, a keen sense of joy of effort and fair play characterized George Seymour Lyon. He is a member of the Royal Canadian Golf Association Hall of Fame and Golf's last Olympic Gold Medalist.

Further Reading

- Frank Cosentino and Glynn Leyshon: Olympic Gold. Toronto, 1975: Holt Rinehart and Winston.
- L.V. Kavanagh: History of Golf in Canada. Toronto, 1973: Fitzhenry and Whiteside.