

Fairway to Heaven

Victors and Victims of Golf's Choking Game

Tim Glover and Peter Higgs



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CHOKING GAME

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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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Preface

When it comes to the ultimate climax in golf, the players need no extra stimulus, no Viagra, to supplement what is already a surge of adrenaline of Niagara proportions.

Nowhere is it more abundant than at the closing stages of a major championship. The crowd, absorbed in every shot, convey the tension to the players, who are also involved in another contest - the mind game.

Before missing the most notorious putt in the history of the Open Championship, Doug Sanders was already thinking about which side of the gallery he would turn to first to acknowledge the applause. When he missed from three feet, a putt that would have won him the old silver claret jug, there was no applause. Instead people reacted as if they had just witnessed a terrible accident - which, in a sporting context, they had.

It was Jack Nicklaus, rather than Sanders, who went for the jugular and, in the process, took possession of the jug. The line between victor and victim can be measured not only in millions of dollars but also in fractions of inches. 'One minute you're on cloud nine.' Sam Snead remarked, 'the next you can't scratch a whale's belly.'

When Nick Faldo won the Open at Muirfield in 1992, he broke down in tears. It had felt more like 15 heavyweight rounds than 18 holes of golf and the gut-wrenching intensity of it reduced the ice man to meltdown. 'I went to the edge of seeing what real failure was,' said Faldo. 'If it had gone wrong it would have been a tough one to live with. I've been lucky in avoiding the major scars in this game.'

Some are scarred for life. The greater the prize, the greater the pressure, and putts that a professional golfer could make with his eyes closed are suddenly missable

when a place in history beckons. In the choking atmosphere at Muirfield, Faldo survived; John Cook, who missed a putt at the 17th that was even shorter than the one Sanders missed at St Andrews, did not. Years later, Sanders said of The Putt, 'It's not so bad now. Some days I can go for five minutes without thinking about it.'

When a golfer misses a tiddler there is, of course, no one else involved, but if there is an analogy with football it is the player who misses a penalty when the stakes are at their highest.

The manifestation of pressure is at its most obvious on the greens but its effects are felt in other areas too. A player stands on the 18th tee for the last time and all he needs to secure a place in history is a par four. A good drive is important. So is the approach shot. Then the nervous system has to withstand a serious onslaught of mental pressure to give the putter a chance. You might be able to recover from a poor drive but you can't recover from the long, sharp shock of missing a sitter.

Of the four major championships, only the Masters has a permanent home. However, familiarity with Augusta National tends to breed respect rather than contempt. When Greg Norman is in contention playing the 18th and he hits his second shot into the crowd rather than onto the green, it's almost as shocking as the little one that got away.

Then, of course, there's the unique condition of asphyxiation by water. The presence of H₂O on a golf course has almost the same effect as the wreckers who lured vessels onto the rocks and a watery grave. There's no lighthouse at Augusta. Look at Ray Floyd at the 11th, or Tom Weiskopf at the 12th, or Curtis Strange at the 13th, or Seve Ballesteros at the 15th, or Norman at the 16th. There have been huge improvements in courses, equipment and golf balls, but nobody has yet found a way of playing out of a

pond. It is the penultimate stymie. The ultimate is what lies not from tee to green but between a player's ears.

So this is what it usually comes down to on Sunday, bloody Sunday, the fallout from a slow-burning four-day fuse. And that is what this book is about. Not the commanding victories, however impressive, but those memorable major championships which went to the bitter end. The most dramatic finishes in golf's colourful history are chronicled in the following pages. We hope you enjoy them.

The Open

Cursed be the hand that made these fatal holes!

- Richard III

Hard Times and Heroes

Beneath the calm exterior of the Royal and Ancient game lie passions which are usually kept admirably under control. But not always. There have been walk-outs, a walk-over, allegations of match-fixing, putts being taken from the wrong place, players being misled by spectators, caddies deliberately giving their bosses wrong information and rudeness displayed to the winners. And then, of course, there are the countless heart-breaking tales of failure within sight of victory.

During the 1950s the British won only a single major championship and would go until 1969 before they won another. They were lean years compared to the harvest of the '80s. Yet some of the best players from these islands missed their chance to, at least, finish equal first in the Open because they could not par the final hole. Welshman Dai Rees, Scot Eric Brown and Christy O'Connor from Ireland all suffered that fate. It happened to Jack Nicklaus, too, but while the three mentioned above never won a major championship, the Golden Bear was to more than atone for his lapse.

Throughout the history of the Open there have been last-hole dramas, many of them tainted by dispute and controversy. Back in 1876 the title was won by Bob Martin, a bearded, mournful-looking Scot, after his scheduled opponent Davie Strath refused to take part in the play-off. Martin, 28, had merely to walk over the Old Course at St Andrews to be declared the champion. Strath, a native of the town, had reached the last two holes of the championship needing to complete them in ten strokes to win but had been involved in an incident at the Road Hole (17th). Thinking he could not reach the green, he had

played into the group ahead, where his ball hit someone (either a player or a spectator) to stop it going onto the road. Unaware of what had happened, Strath putted out for a five believing that he required a similar score at the last to win the Open for the first time. Not only did he take a six to finish level with Martin but he learned that demands were being made for his disqualification for the 17th-hole incident. When the R and A ruled the play-off should go ahead while the protest was reviewed, Strath refused to be part of it and received a great deal of sympathetic support. Three years later he died of consumption at the age of 39.

Ill health and premature death among leading players were an accepted part of history during the hard times of the nineteenth century.

The 1891 Open champion Hugh Kirkcaldy was to die from influenza, aged only 31, five years after he was crowned champion. The circumstances of his victory led to rumour-mongering that his more famous brother Andrew allowed Hugh to win because of his poor health. Andrew, or Andra, as he was known, needed two fours at St Andrews to take the trophy but finished with a five and a six. When questioned about his form, the player regarded as the best of his era never to win the Open admitted he had played badly but insisted he had tried his hardest.

Willie Park Jnr kept a family tradition alive when he followed his father to the title in 1887 and 1889. Yet he knew the misery of last-green failure when he committed a disastrous three-putt to lose the 1898 championship to Harry Vardon. Needing a par three at Prestwick's 18th to draw level, Park found the green, putted up to three feet and, as the crowd jostled round so that Vardon could not see, missed the little putt.

Around that time the Great Triumvirate of Vardon, James Braid and J.H. Taylor dominated the championship, winning a total of 16 times in the 20 years from 1894 to 1914. Yet even these men of outstanding talent and indomitable

competitive spirit suffered occasions when Lucifer tapped them on the shoulder and said, 'Not today, laddie.'

At Hoylake in 1902, victory went to another St Andrews native, Sandy Herd, who made two significant contributions to the sport. Even though he was renowned as a fast player, Herd was famous for 'the waggle' as he addressed the ball, a habit that was to be adopted by legions of players down the years.

It was not this idiosyncrasy, however, but his use of a revolutionary ball which gave him a distinct advantage over his rivals. Since 1848 the standard ball had been a guttie, made of solid rubber from the latex of a Malaysian tree and painted white. But in 1898 a wealthy American amateur, Coburn Haskell, created a new variety by winding lengths of rubber around a solid core. The Haskell not only flew longer through the air and bounced further, it also performed better even when mishit. In 1901 Walter J. Travis won the US amateur championship using the new rubber-wound ball and the following year - when the ball was still in short supply in Britain - Herd was persuaded to try it before the Open. The Huddersfield-based professional was an instant convert and was the only man not to use the guttie in the tournament. His subsequent victory not only led to the Haskell being adopted throughout the game but also created a surge in the sport's popularity.

Yet he nearly didn't win. For Vardon came to the last two holes needing a pair of fours to share the lead. The great man from Jersey achieved the first of them comfortably and hit a fine drive at the last. A play-off looked certain but Vardon duffed his second shot, knocked his third six feet past the pin and missed the return. Herd and the Haskell had triumphed. Fate had played a crucial hand and left some hypothetical questions unanswered. How quickly would the new ball have been accepted had not Vardon uncharacteristically mis-hit his second shot? And how might

golf history have been changed but for that final-hole blunder?

Two years later the other two members of the triumvirate, Braid and Taylor, were central figures in a fascinating saga at Sandwich. Yet neither of them was destined to win as communication suffered a failure which hopefully would not be repeated today. In those times there were no scoreboards around the course informing players and spectators of the leading positions. The participants relied on word of mouth. So when Braid was told by a spectator that Jack White, the Sunningdale professional, had taken 70 in the final round to lead the event, he, naturally enough, believed him. Braid assessed that by playing the last three holes in level fours he would go into a play-off, in which he would be confident of victory. But he had been misinformed. White had taken 69 and as Braid achieved his objective of three fours he received the news that he had lost by a shot. Not surprisingly, he was a little upset.

At that point reporters filed their stories that White's record-breaking score of 296 (the first time that 300 had been bettered) had made him the champion. The players still out on the course were considered to be too far behind to matter. But Taylor was in the process of producing the best round yet seen in the Open. Needing a 67 to tie, the former Somerset greenkeeper came to the last capable of making the evening papers, which were reaching the streets with the result, look slightly ridiculous. But he failed by a shot and several nervous newspapermen were spared acute embarrassment - and possibly their jobs.

It would be tempting to claim that journalism today has advanced to prevent such risks being taken were it not for the fact that a few years ago one of the most esteemed tennis correspondents presumed that Jimmy Connors would be knocked out of Wimbledon when he trailed 6-1, 6-1, 4-1 and informed his readers of the 'fact'. The American left-

hander fought back to win, leaving the readers confused and the writer somewhat shame-faced.

Drama and embarrassment were evident in large measure at the Open Championship of 1921, when the trophy went across the sea to America for the first time. A young British amateur, Roger Wethered, should have won but made two elementary errors. In the third round he walked ahead to study the line of his shot and returned to tread on his ball for a one-shot penalty.

Then, on the last hole at St Andrews, a par four would have been enough, but after striking a good drive Wethered pitched short of the green and took three more from the Valley of Sin. When Jock Hutchison, a former St Andrews resident who had emigrated to the United States, matched his 296 total with a last-round 70, Wethered astonished officials by expressing doubts about whether he could stay for the 36-hole play-off because . . . he had promised to turn out for his village cricket team!

He was persuaded that the villagers would understand his desire to keep the Open trophy in Britain but was subsequently routed 159-150. It was reported afterwards that the chairman of the Green Committee took the departure of the cup to America so badly that he was ungracious to the winner. The *St Andrews Citizen* said, 'The chairman of the Green Committee was such a poor loser that he practically threw the cup at Hutchison, did not call for cheers for the new champion - instead he at once called for "Three cheers for Roger Wethered".'

The British were soon to learn that their grip on the event had been broken as Americans won every year in the '20s except one (1923, when Arthur Havers beat Walter Hagen by two shots). Hagen proved to be an outspoken revolutionary, sweeping away the pompous prejudices of the past and leading professional golfers towards the status and wealth they enjoy today. He was scathing in his criticism of attitudes he discovered in Britain and was not

afraid to expose them. When professionals were refused permission to change or eat in the clubhouse at Royal St George's for the 1922 Open, he hired a Daimler limousine for changing and eating - and parked it right in front of the clubhouse. Hagen duly went ahead and won the Open for the first time and declared the first prize of £75 so derisory that he promptly handed the cheque to his caddie.

What is less well-remembered - because everyone forgets who came second - is that the highly rated Scot George Duncan could have prevented Hagen's win and immediately turned back the tide of American influence. The 39-year-old professional at Hangar Hill had won the Open at Deal in 1920 and was noted not only as one of the best British players of that time but also for the speed of his play. The author of *Golf at the Gallop* came racing up the 18th needing a four for a 68 to tie with Hagen. But after his approach missed the green he hit a quick pitch which left him a testing putt. Barely pausing to check the line, he knocked it past the hole. Duncan might have looked nervous but he always played that way, often very effectively.

A year later, when Havers held off Hagen to win by a stroke, officials at Troon relented and allowed the colourful New Yorker into the clubhouse for the presentation. Hagen refused, invited spectators along to the local pub for a drink and considerably reduced the attendance at the official ceremony.

He was a difficult man to keep out of the limelight. Even when Bobby Jones won for the first time at Lytham in 1926, causing the revered John Henry Taylor to shed tears at the prize-giving and proclaim Jones 'the greatest golfer who ever lived', Hagen provided the excitement on the last hole. Although faced with an apparently hopeless task, 'The Haig' kept a gathering of illustrious players in the clubhouse in a state of agitated apprehension as he refused to settle for second place and tried to hole a full-iron shot on the 18th to finish level with Jones. Even Hagen could not manage that.

Between them the two great Americans won seven Opens in nine years from 1922 to 1930 as they vied for the distinction of being the dominant player of the age. Invariably their talent brought victory by a sufficiently wide margin to avoid any alarms on the home green. The next American citizen to triumph, Tommy Armour, was not so fortunate. He was to go through a traumatic experience he would never forget in front of the clubhouse at Carnoustie.

The Silver Scot had emigrated from Edinburgh in the '20s and built an enviable reputation in winning the 1927 US Open and the 1930 US PGA Championship. Back in Scotland in 1931, he set up the chance of claiming the title he wanted above all others with a flawless final round. Flawless, that is, until he reached the 71st green, where, within sight of victory, he missed a short putt.

So Armour came down the last knowing that he could not afford a similar lapse. Remarkably, he presented himself with an almost identical problem to the one which had proved beyond him on the previous hole. A dreaded short putt. This is how he described what happened: 'I took a new grip, holding the club as tightly as I could with stiff wrists. From the moment the club left the ball on the backswing I was blind and unconscious.' He holed for a 71 and a total of 296 and then waited anxiously to discover whether his score would be good enough. The Argentinian Jose Jurado could have won with a par finish of four, five. But at the 17th he topped a four-iron into the burn in front of him, took six and was then wrongly advised that a five at the last would give him a tie for the lead. He played the hole conservatively and lost by a stroke. Like Braid 27 years earlier, he was a victim of poor communication.

The 1933 success of Densmore Shute at St Andrews was a victory for romantics. A few weeks prior to the event the American had cost his country the Ryder Cup when he three-putted the final green at Southport to lose his match to Syd Easterbrook. This time he beat Easterbrook by a

single stroke to finish tied with his compatriot Craig Wood before going on to win the play-off by five shots (149 to 154).

The most memorable shot that year was a yipped putt at the last by Leo Diegel. Renowned for his nerves on the green, the man from Detroit had a tiny putt to reach the play-off but jerked it a foot wide. Wood's play-off defeat was the first of four he would suffer in each of the majors during the '30s.

British pride was restored with a first victory for 11 years when Henry Cotton won by five strokes at Sandwich in 1934 to inspire a run of six successive victories by golfers from the United Kingdom. The second of his three triumphs, at Carnoustie in 1937, was not as emphatic but was nonetheless welcome in the year that Britain lost the Ryder Cup on home soil for the first time, prompting Leonard Crawley, later to become golf correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, to miss the Open in the firm belief that a home win was unlikely in the face of the transatlantic strength.

Cotton played what he considered to be one of the best rounds of his career in miserable conditions of heavy rain and sodden greens on the final afternoon. At the last he eschewed the safe route of playing short of a burn across the fairway and launched a massive drive as far from the out of bounds on the left as possible. A two-iron found the right-hand greenside bunker, he splashed out of the muddy sand and took two putts for a par five, a round of 71, a two-stroke victory over Reg Whitcombe - and a telegram from Crawley admitting his misjudgement.

The resurgence of the British game during the '30s culminated in a long-awaited triumph at St Andrews in 1939. For the first time in 29 years a resident of the UK took the championship at the home of golf. The honour went to Dick Burton, a tall, fair-haired Lancastrian, and he won in the grand manner. Burton, possibly the longest driver in the field, came to the 18th at St Andrews needing a par to beat

the American Johnny Bulla. He promptly cracked his tee-shot 300 yards down the rails on the right, lofted a nine-iron to 15 feet and holed the putt for a birdie to win by two – just as Seve Ballesteros would do to the delight of millions of television viewers 45 years later.

Burton's victory, although witnessed by far fewer people, brought pleasure to a country in the grip of poverty and depression. He would make very little from his glory. Within a matter of weeks, Britain had fallen under the shadow of war.

* * *

Rarely does a single shot change a golfer's popularity with the public. Once he has established an image, good or bad, he usually has to perform out of character over a period of time in order to shift opinions. Yet Frank Stranahan was transformed in the eyes of thousands from villain to hero by one of the most extraordinary strokes ever witnessed in the Open Championship. Ultimately the shot failed. Yet it was such a glorious failure that it won its executor an army of fans.

Stranahan was a rich American amateur with a boorish manner. His arrogance was resented by opponents and spectators alike. Caddies took a particular dislike to him when he refused to take any notice of their advice, acquired from years of experience. On one occasion a bagman gained sweet revenge when sent ahead to give Stranahan the line for a blind shot to the green. Instead of pointing towards the flag, he directed the player into a thick gorse bush. When Stranahan's ball duly landed in the bush, the caddie said to him gleefully, 'Well, sir, if you think you know so much about it, let's see you get out of that' . . . and promptly walked off the course.

When he arrived at the Open at Hoylake in 1947, the tall, fair-haired American known as 'Muscles' (because he used

weight training to build up his physique) was given a cool reception. Earlier in the season he had sullied his reputation by his petulant behaviour towards an English opponent at the British amateur championship. Matters worsened at a pre-tournament interview. Asked whether Henry Cotton, the British hero, would win, Stranahan replied, 'No, I can beat Cotton.'

He turned out to be right. By the start of the fourth round, four players shared the lead: Fred Daly, from Northern Ireland, the Britons Arthur Lees and Cotton, and Norman von Nida of Australia. Stranahan was a shot behind. But over the closing holes, as the others dropped out of contention, Daly and Stranahan were left to contest the prize. The crowd's support was strongly behind Daly, a typically genial Irishman, who returned a 72 to set a target of 293. The 25-year-old American could force a tie if he finished four, three at two relatively straight-forward par fours. All hope seemed to disappear, though, when Stranahan, trying too hard for a birdie, three-putted the 17th from 35 feet.

Yet if the spectators thought the championship had been decided, one brash young man certainly did not. Stranahan sent his drive at the 395-yard 18th straight down the middle, leaving him 150 yards downwind to the flag. He immediately set about the task of trying to hole the shot.

He walked forward to the green, studied the precise line and returned to his ball. Then he walked forward again, while the spectators waited, not really caring what happened, such was their hostility towards the frosty foreigner.

Finally Stranahan took his nine-iron and swung. The shot was almost perfect. The ball never left the flagstick, pitched on the green and rolled up towards the hole right on line. Surely it could not go in, could it? Well, no, not quite. The ball stopped eight inches short . . . and Fred Daly had won the Open.

Yet such was the audacity, the expertise, the brilliance of Stranahan's attempt that the spectators were overwhelmed. They hoisted the American high and carried him towards the green. With one stroke he had lost the Open but won their hearts. 'That shot changed my whole life in England,' he would say later. 'From then on I was welcomed there.'

* * *

Harry Bradshaw will always be associated with 'The Shot in the Bottle'. At the fifth hole in the second round of the 1949 Open at Sandwich, the Irishman found his ball wedged up against a broken beer bottle. Although he thought he was entitled to a free drop (which he was), he was not sure. So he played the ball as it lay, smashing it forward only 15 yards and being hit in the eye by a flying piece of glass.

The incident was to have a crucial bearing on the championship. For Bradshaw took a six instead of a probable four and ended up on the final green tied with Bobby Locke for the lead. He lost the play-off by 12 shots. Bradshaw could never look at a beer bottle in the same light again.

If Locke could count himself slightly fortunate on that occasion, he had even more reason to thank his lucky stars when he won at St Andrews in 1957. Before he putted out on the final green, holding a comfortable three-shot lead, the portly South African moved his ball a couple of putterheads' distance from his line to allow another competitor, Bruce Crampton, to hole out. Locke then putted from the wrong place. Nothing untoward was noticed at the time, until the error was spotted on a newsreel film. R and A officials met to decide whether the champion should be disqualified in retrospect and the title given to runner-up Peter Thomson. They ruled that no benefit had been gained and the result stood. But Locke never wore his trademark

plus fours again as a reminder of his good fortune and the R and A's compassion.

Around that period, Britain's attempts to regain the trophy were doomed to failure. From the time Max Faulkner won at Portrush in 1951 until Tony Jacklin's victory at Lytham in 1969, the country's players came so near and yet so far.

In 1954 Dai Rees arrived at the last hole at Royal Birkdale needing a par four to tie with Peter Thomson. He hit a solid four-iron to the green but the ball ran through the back and Rees failed to get down in two. The Welshman, once labelled 'the best British player never to win the Open', had let his finest chance slip.

The odds on a home victory in 1958 appeared excellent when three players - Dave Thomas of Wales, Eric Brown of Scotland and Christy O'Connor of Ireland - were all on the leaderboard in the closing stages. Thomas was poised for victory when he faced a routine seven-iron to Lytham's 17th green. But he hit the shot 'fat', it fell short and he bogeyed the hole. All three men could finish tied for first place if they parred the 18th. O'Connor failed and so did Brown when he drove into a bunker from the tee. Thomas successfully negotiated the problem to finish level with Peter Thomson, but subsequently lost the play-off (139 to 143) as the Australian claimed the fourth of his five titles. The big Welshman, rated the longest straight driver in the world at the time, would have been champion if only he had not erred at the 17th. 'If only' . . . those two little words.

The men who slipped 'twixt cup and lip could find some consolation in the fact that even the mightiest have fallen at the most unexpected times. On the same final hole where the three Britons' fate was settled, a young American named Jack Nicklaus stood five years later. He was 23 years of age and, although he had already won the US Open and the Masters, golf's rising star had yet to add the oldest of all the majors to his collection. At Lytham came his chance. A par four at the last would have given him a share of first

place and a play-off against Phil Rodgers of America and the eventual winner Bob Charles of New Zealand. But Nicklaus, wrongly calculating that a bogey would be good enough, hooked his drive into a steep bunker and finished one stroke behind.

Some men might have dwelt on the error, allowing it to dominate their memories of the event. For Nicklaus, that uncharacteristic failure was a mere blip along the way. The next time he was in a similar situation, the Golfer of the Century would show exactly why he deserved such an accolade. Nicklaus came to the 427-yard 18th at Muirfield in 1966 needing a par four to beat Doug Sanders and Dave Thomas by a stroke. He took a one-iron to avoid the knee-high rough and found the centre of the fairway, 208 yards from the flag. After hesitating over a four-iron, Nicklaus plumped for the three-iron and described what happened as follows: 'The impact felt magical, as solid a strike as I've ever made. The wonderful feeling continued as I watched the ball start left, then soar up and hold its line perfectly against the wind, dropping like a butterfly, hole-high and about 25 feet right of the flag.' Two putts later Nicklaus had won his first Open and gone into history as one of only four men to complete the Grand Slam of all four majors.

His ability to play the closing holes so well under the utmost pressure made him such a dangerous opponent even when behind. The following year Nicklaus birdied both the 16th and the 18th of the final round at Hoylake to threaten Roberto de Vincenzo's lead. The Argentinian had to prove himself a worthy winner and did so with a huge straight drive down the final fairway. The triumph at 44 years and 93 days of the oldest champion of modern times was warmly received throughout the country. He, like Nicklaus, had provided the perfect response to what is needed at the knee-knocking, gut-wrenching final hole.

In closing this chapter, it is appropriate to draw attention to one other splendid example of how the demons can be

pushed aside to produce a glorious finale. The year was 1969. Once again the setting was Lytham, where the man going through a maelstrom of emotions was a 25-year-old from Lincolnshire called Tony Jacklin. Anticipation was high throughout the land that here was a young golfer capable of lifting British golf out of the trough into which it had sunk. Here was a player to take on the world.

The driver's son from Scunthorpe was a man of the people and he did not let them down. He led the field by two shots after three days and was five ahead at the fourth hole of the final round. By the time he reached the last, Jacklin was two ahead of his playing partner Bob Charles and fully aware of the dangers that lay in wait at the 389-yard bunker-infested final hole. Lesser men might have opted for a careful one-iron or three-wood. Not Jacklin. He pulled out the driver. 'I remembered how many good players had lost the championship by making a six,' he would recall later. 'But I decided I would not be cautious.'

Jacklin drove his tee-shot over the left bunkers and slid it back into the wind to find the middle of the fairway 260 yards away. It was a brave, bold, brilliant strike. From there he surely could not fail. A controlled half-shot with the seven-iron from 130 yards deposited the ball 12 feet from the pin. When the birdie putt stopped on the lip, Jacklin became a national hero with one of the shortest putts ever to win the Open.

The final hole had summed up his style and courage. Things would never be the same again. In the next 20 years this man would have a massive influence on the changing world of golf. One shot, one drive, did not make him. But it showed what he was made of.

The Miss of All Time

‘Maybe I wasn’t destined to win that dude.’

With those words Doug Sanders was able to console himself more than 20 years after one of sport’s most famous misses. It took place on the 18th green at St Andrews, the home of golf, in the final round of the 1970 Open Championship.

Sanders, clad in signature purple, stood over a three-foot putt for a victory that would have climaxed a colourful and successful career. He was 36 years old, had won 19 tournaments on the US Tour and had come close to winning three previous major championships. In 1959 he’d been runner-up to Bob Rosburg in the US PGA Championship. In 1961 he was second to Gene Littler in the US Open, and in 1966 he was runner-up to Jack Nicklaus in the Open at Muirfield. Now came his best chance. He had merely to hole this little putt to beat Nicklaus, the best player the game had ever seen, and take his place in history.

As any student of golf lore knows, Sanders dribbled the putt wide on the low - or amateur - side and went into history for a totally different reason. It was a moment of sporting failure that is still replayed at every suitable opportunity. Whenever the name of Doug Sanders is mentioned, particularly in Britain, The Putt is always brought to mind.

Yet the man himself firmly believes that his error has gained him a permanent place in the hearts of the British public. ‘As far as the people of Britain are concerned I won the Open,’ he said recently. ‘If it hadn’t been for the fact that Jack Nicklaus was the one to take advantage of my mistake, I don’t think anyone would have remembered who

did win. It will always be the tournament that Doug lost rather than Jack won.'

Sanders is one of those people who, in his own words, 'things happen to. They just seem to find me,' His story is a fascinating one, and the drama at St Andrews fits neatly into the script.

He was born and raised in Cedartown, a poor farming community in the north-west corner of Georgia, close to the Alabama and Tennessee borders. As a cotton-picking schoolboy he was caught fiddling the weight of cotton he was checking in and put on a punitive rate. 'I worked from sunup to sundown for two dollars every 100 lbs,' he said, 'I couldn't pick 100 lbs in two weeks!'

So he discovered caddying, at the town's single, nine-hole course, as an alternative income. At 12 years old he learned the ways of the world when the other caddies 'robbed' him of his wages in a putting competition. Sanders took to practising in secret and gained his revenge by winning a caddies' tournament at 13, his first victory.

When he was 17, ten local businessmen forked out ten dollars each to send him to the national junior finals in North Carolina. The journey cost him 27 dollars but on arrival the rest of the money was stolen. He borrowed ten dollars, entered a poker game and not only won enough cash to finance the week but went on to win the championship as well.

An illustrious career was born. They made a film of the tournament entitled *The Boy Next Door*. Back in Cedartown, a Doug Sanders Day parade was held. On the strength of his junior title, the teenager was awarded a scholarship to the University of Florida. When still an amateur he won on the US Tour, the Canadian Open of 1956, and he soon turned professional.

Throughout the '60s Sanders was a prominent player in America, finishing in the top 23 every year between 1958 and 1967, and appearing in the 1967 Ryder Cup. Nothing in

his build-up to the 1970 Open, though, indicated a major breakthrough. He had slipped down on the US money list and had to pre-qualify. Then on the first hole of the Old Course he drove into the Swilcan Burn to begin with a double-bogey six. Not an auspicious start.

But in a memorable tournament Sanders soon made up ground. Britain's Neil Coles led on 65 at the end of the first round, with Nicklaus and Sanders in a group on 68 which also included Arnold Palmer and Peter Thomson. The big news of the first day was a sensational outward half of 29 by the holder Tony Jacklin, who was then delayed by torrential rain immediately after he had pushed his second shot into a gorse bush on the 14th. When he returned to complete his round the following day the magic had gone and he laboured to a 67. Although the English hero put up a worthy defence, he was to fall out of contention on the last afternoon.

Sanders, meanwhile, was playing consistently well. He was three shots behind the halfway leader Lee Trevino and had reduced the gap to two going into the final round. As the Mexican uncharacteristically slumped to a last-round 77, two men were left to battle out the championship: Nicklaus and Sanders.

They had started the round level but Nicklaus was in determined mood. He had finished second to Tony Lema the last time the Open was held at St Andrews in 1964 and was desperate to crown his phenomenal career with victory at the most prestigious of venues. The Golden Bear led by a stroke at the turn, which he reached in 35. But he bogeyed the par-three 11th to allow his rival to draw level, and when another shot slipped away at the 16th, Sanders took the lead . . . with just two holes left.

The player with one of the shortest swings in golf was displaying exemplary control in the blustery winds while all around him the fancied names were being blown away. On the treacherous Road Hole Sanders played like a true

champion. After his second landed in the cavernous Road Bunker - from where Tommy Nakajima took a nine in the 1978 Open - he played a spectacular recovery to three feet and holed the putt for par to keep his lead.

'That would have gone down as one of the great bunker shots in history,' said Sanders. 'It would have been the shot that won the British Open and they would have played it time after time. But it kinda got lost because of what happened at the 18th. I used a pitching wedge instead of a sand wedge to cut through the sand and I played a hell of a shot.'

Sanders was just one simple hole away from glory. Compared to some treacherous major championship finishing holes, the 18th at St Andrews is relatively innocuous. Named Tom Morris, it measures only 354 yards and has a very wide fairway and large green. Trouble lies in the Valley of Sin in front of the green or - as Sanders was to discover - in being too far at the back, leaving a difficult downhill putt.

None of these pitfalls was in Sanders' mind on the tee. 'I had all the confidence in the world. As I was walking from the 17th, one of the caddies came up to me and said, "Here's a tee peg with Tony Lema's name on it. Hit it for Tony." ['Champagne' Tony Lema, the previous St Andrews Open champion, had been killed in a plane crash in 1966.]

'I never use a white tee because of a superstition I have. It represents a five to me. But on this occasion I didn't think about it. I put the ball down and just knocked it down there.

'The biggest mistake I made was that when I reached the ball I then walked all the way to the green to pace out the distance. It was 76 yards. I had some new clubs and I knew that I hit my sand wedge 80 yards. But I played it by yardage instead of by feel . . . and I carried the ball too far.

'In Scotland it doesn't matter how far you are from the green. You can be 100 yards away and you have to hit a

four-iron. Or you can be 300 yards away and you still hit a four-iron. It all depends on the weather.

'I was at the peak of my game and one of the reasons I played so well was that I was always a good shot-maker. I could play a lot of different shots and manoeuvre the ball. The pitch was the right shot to play rather than the bump and run because I had room to stop the ball. But I hit it too long. I should have played it by feel instead of by yardage. That was my biggest mistake.'

Sanders was left with a downhill putt of about 12 yards from the back of the green. Pace was the problem. He rolled it on line but the ball pulled up about three feet short of the hole. 'When I hit that putt I thought it was going in and I would have been the only player to break par for all four days,' said Sanders.

Nicklaus could do no better than a par four and so the moment of truth arrived. Around the green thousands looked on, not suspecting that they were about to witness one of sport's most memorable moments. Millions of TV viewers, some enjoying colour for the first time, were given the perfect view of the purple-clad figure as he lined up the left-to-right curling putt. 'Here's Sanders,' intoned commentator Henry Longhurst. 'The supreme moment.'

Then an extraordinary thing happened. Sanders spotted a brown speck on the line of his putt and bent forward to pick it up. He did not move his feet and took the putter back only a few inches from the ball, leaning on it to take his weight. Ben Hogan, watching the drama on TV, shouted at the screen, 'Back away, back away, back away!'

But remarkably Sanders did not do so. He stood up, put the blade back behind the putter and prepared to putt. 'I don't know why I didn't back off,' said Sanders. 'I didn't want to take a lot more time. I was more concerned with other things and I still didn't think I was going to miss it. I was thinking about which side of the gallery I'd turn to when I'd holed it. But I never really got set on that thing.'

As he struck the putt, Sanders knew immediately that he'd missed and stretched out in an involuntary motion with his putter as if he was going to give the moving ball a tap into the hole. 'I just went ahead and hit the thing, hit it in the neck, and zap, off it went, and it was history,' said Sanders.

As the ball veered right of the hole, Longhurst told viewers, 'Missed it . . . Yes, a certainty. That's the side you're bound to miss it . . . There it is . . . and there but for the grace of God . . .'

That evening the normally cheerful extrovert appreciated the importance of his blunder, even though he had the chance to atone for it in the next day's play-off. 'I was very down,' said Sanders. 'Mark McCormack came out to see me. I'd rented this old farmhouse and I went out to feed the cows. My thoughts were miles away. I was trying to give them sugar until my wife told me that cows eat salt.'

For the first time in Open Championship history the play-off was over 18 holes rather than 36 and when it arrived Sanders acquitted himself well. There was no self-pitying capitulation. Again the contest was close. And again it went to the final hole.

'I really lost the tournament at the 11th,' said Sanders. 'I left the ball in the bunker. It took two shots to get out and I made a bogey.'

Four behind with only five holes to play, Sanders staged a storming comeback. He holed a long putt at the 14th, birdied the 15th, and moved within a shot of the Bear when, for the second successive day, Nicklaus bogeyed the 16th.

As in the final round, both men splendidly parred the Road Hole, where disaster lurks at every swing. And so they came to the last with the roles reversed. This time Nicklaus held a one-shot lead. Sanders, with the honour, hit a huge drive which drifted slightly to the right and stopped less than ten yards from the green. Realising that his opponent had a chance to make a birdie and draw level, Nicklaus decided to