

with Charlie Epps

TALKIN' GOLF

Of Merion, Hogan and Tiger

One of the really neat things about my new job as Director of Golf for Champions Golf Club is spending time with Jackie Burke. During the past weeks, I've often spent my lunch hour with Mr. Burke, the two-time major champion, Hall of Famer and co-founder of Champions.

We sit in the kitchen and have a bowl of soup and maybe a sandwich. We talk about golf and the things that have happened and are happening in this game we love.

The other day, I asked Mr. Burke about the 1950 U.S. Open, which was played at Merion Golf Club just outside of Philadelphia, the site of this year's event. The first thing Mr. Burke told me was about a guy named Bill Nary, who played the 1950 U.S. Open without a single wood in his bag. His longest club was a 1-iron. And—get this—Nary finished eighth.

The idea of playing a major without any woods got me thinking about Tiger Woods, the undeniable favorite headed into the U.S. Open. More on that in a minute.

That 1950 U.S. Open is known as the "Miracle at Merion" because 16 months prior to the championship, the great Ben Hogan nearly died in a car accident in West Texas. On a foggy morning near Van Horn, a Greyhound bus plowed head-on into Hogan's car. It crushed Hogan's legs and many thought he would never play golf again. In fact, there were erroneous reports of his death the day of the crash.

But Hogan came back with a vengeance. He won the 1950 U.S. Open at Merion by beating Lloyd Mangrum and George Fazio in an 18-hole Monday playoff. You've seen the most famous photo in the history of golf—Hogan hitting 1-iron from just over 200 yards into the 18th green—and that, too, was from the 1950 U.S. Open.

So as the championship heads back to Merion this month, all eyes are on Tiger. And rightfully so. He's already won four times this year, and his game appears to be as strong as it has been in years.

Tiger is definitely back and, like Hogan, he's back with a vengeance.

This won't happen, of course, but if Tiger took a page out of Bill Nary's book and left his woods in the trunk of his courtesy car, Tiger would run away and win the U.S. Open by five or more shots. Even with the lumber in his bag, I expect Tiger to dominate and capture his first major since 2008.

There are, by the way, some comparisons to be made between Hogan and Tiger headed into Merion. Hogan was 38 years old when he won the 1950 U.S. Open. Tiger turns 38 later this year. After Hogan's win at Merion, he went on to seize five of his nine career major championships.

Hmm, five majors after the age of 38? I think Tiger would like to do the same... and I'm starting to believe he will.

There's no doubt Tiger has rekindled the conversation about passing Jack Nicklaus' record of 18 majors. Six or eight months ago, I honestly didn't think Tiger would get his game back to the point that he has. I guess the lesson is to never underestimate the heart of Tiger.

In closing, I want to congratulate Tiger's coach, Sean Foley. He's an interesting character who has taken a lot of criticism, but there is no question that Foley is a great golf mind. He has put Tiger's swing together like a mechanic fixes a fine luxury automobile.

Tiger craves information and wants to put the club in the right places to hit his desired shot, whether it's a fade or draw, high or low. Tiger's ball-striking is once again superb, and with very few exceptions, poor ball-strikers don't win the U.S. Open.

I expect Tiger to notch his 15th major title this month. And like Hogan, Tiger may well win five majors after the age 38. Whether he does or not, it's going to provide great theater for all golf fans to follow. **TL**

Known as "The Golf Doctor," Charlie Epps has been one of Houston's most respected PGA golf professionals for more than 25 years and is a member of the Texas Golf Hall of Fame. He is Director of Golf at historic Champions Golf Club, founded by Texas Golf Hall of Famers Jimmy Demaret and Jackie Burke Jr. Listen to Charlie 9-10 a.m. Saturday mornings on the Sporting News Network Golf Show, 1560 AM in Houston, channel 127 Sirius and 242 XM.



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