

A Champion Passes

Jess Sweetser, former Amateur Champion and final link to the beginnings of the Walker Cup, dead at 87.



Jess Sweetser

I ONLY SAW Jess Sweetser play once. It was 1957, and he was 55, a vice president with the Glenn L. Martin Company, a manufacturer of aircraft, out for a round with some friends at the Green Spring Valley Hunt Club, a pleasant although not particularly demanding course on the outskirts of Baltimore. I tagged along to watch. He shot 69 with little effort. A week or so earlier he had shot 64 at the Elkridge Club, another Baltimore course, and 66 at Burning Tree, near Washington.

A burly man, standing a bit over six feet, with huge forearms and bushy eyebrows, he did not have a picture swing, but it was effective.

Jess had left competitive golf long before I met him, and he played only weekend mixed four-balls at his club and annual invitational events, but watching him that day left me certain he could have beaten anybody.

Jess Sweetser died on May 27, in Washington, D.C., where he had lived since the Martin Company moved its headquarters some years ago. He was 87.

WITH HIS passing, the game has lost its last link to the first Walker Cup Match, which was played in 1922, and also to a different age. Jess, like his contemporaries, remained a very good amateur. They did not flock to the professional tours.

Born in Kentucky and raised in St. Louis, Sweetser moved to Bronxville, a suburb of New York City, while he was young. He became interested in golf. He needed money to buy baseball equipment. His father offered to help by paying him to caddie.

He went to Yale, won the National Intercollegiate Championship as a freshman, in 1920, and the 1922 U.S. Amateur, when he was 20. Winning the Amateur was no fluke; he beat the best golfers of the age at The Country Club, near Boston, the site of last year's U.S. Open.

By a quirk, most of the best golfers were thrown into the first half of the draw. After defeating H. E. Sutherland in the first round, Jess beat in successive rounds Willie Hunter, the reigning British Amateur Champion; Jesse Guilford, the current U.S. Amateur Champion; Bob Jones, a year before he won his first U.S. Open; and then beat Chick Evans in the final, a man who had won two Amateurs and one Open.

He demolished Jones, beating him, 8 and 7. Jess was outstanding. On the first nine holes he threw an eagle, two birdies, and a stymie against Jones. Bob made two

mistakes; he was 6 down before he knew what had happened. Jess reached the final again the next year, but he lost on the 38th as Max Marston laid him a stymie.

This might have been enough to establish Sweetser as one of the game's great amateurs, but he is better remembered as the first native-born American to win the British Amateur. He won it in 1926, in Scotland with our Walker Cup Team.

This was a tale. He had caught cold on the ocean voyage, and felt he should withdraw. He was saved when his intended first-round opponent withdrew. Battling influenza, he fought his way to the final, defeating Alex Simpson, 6 and 5.

I WROTE about that match some years later, basing my piece on accounts I had read in old magazines. Reading how he had "dragged himself to the tee" each day, Jess wrote chiding me for overdoing his condition.

"The 'dragging myself' is a bit overdone. Once I hit a few practice shots I felt pretty good, and I didn't tire too much until the day was over. As the week wore on, I got stronger each day. Where I really felt sick was at St. Andrews."

This was the site of the Walker Cup Match, and even though he wasn't well, he teamed with George Von Elm, who was to win the Amateur later in the year by beating Jones, and won his foursomes by 8 and 7, and then defeated Sir Ernest Holderness, 4 and 3, in the singles. When he returned home, he was carried from the ship on a stretcher.

Jess continued to play first-class golf through the rest of the 1920s. He played in the 1930 Amateur, and in a twist of fate, met Jones in the semifinals again, with Bob one step from the Grand Slam. Jess was no match for Jones this day. Bob beat him, 9 and 8.

When playing days were behind him, Sweetser kept close ties with the game as a member of the USGA's Executive Committee. He served as Treasurer from 1938 through 1941, and later served as President of the Metropolitan (New York) Golf Association. He received the Bob Jones Award for sportsmanship in 1986.

He was chosen Captain of Walker Cup Teams, in 1967 and 1973, and the 1966 Eisenhower Trophy Team. He spoke at a dinner before the 1980 Amateur Championship, and he came to Pine Valley for the 1985 Walker Cup Match. Those who knew him hoped he would make it to Atlanta, for the 32d, in August. He had hoped so too. — Robert Sommers

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