

When Four Golf Clubs Made a Set

How Lofted Clubs Have Changed Our Style

By Abe Mitchell



ABE MITCHELL, still with something of the old-fashioned about his golf, down to the jacket in which he persists in playing, but what a magnificent performer he was in those years just after the war when he and Duncan played those historic matches.

THE American rule limiting the number of clubs a player may carry to fourteen came into force on January 1, and I see that it has not made any observable difference in the professionals' scores over there. This has set my mind travelling back to the days when I was learning the game as a boy in Ashdown Forest. Nobody dreamed of carrying fourteen clubs in those days; a driver, spoon, wooden putter and mashie would have been considered a full equipment. Some players had a cleek and lofting iron in place of the spoon and mashie. Until I was a full-grown youth I had only a cleek to my name, but later I acquired a driver.

Our drivers and cleeks had long, whippy shafts and very flat lies, and we stood well back on our heels and swung the weapon round our feet in an effort to get "draw." It is almost unbelievable the distances we sometimes covered from the tee, for the old "guttie" ball would run almost as far as it flew. For lofting purposes I had, of course, to use my cleek, and to cut them up I used to stand well behind the ball with feet open, and play across it. So we had two styles; an ultra-square stance and flat swing on the tee, and an open stance and varying swing through the green. To play well in those days one had to exercise considerable skill, and it is my opinion that the "triumvirate" had better club control than their successors have to-day. I believe that Mr. John Ball in later years carried neither niblick nor mashie. To show how the old school learned to play the shots themselves instead of relying on the club to do it for them, let me tell you a story of James Braid.

Braid's Complete Reply

Many of you must be familiar with the huge bunker at the second hole at Verulam, and know how difficult it is to get out of it. When Braid laid the course out doubt was thrown on the fairness of this bunker. "I don't know sae much," said Braid reflectively, and with that he dropped four balls in the bunker and proceeded to play them out with the cleek that he was carrying under his arm. Laying the face back and playing with cut, he put them all on the green over eighty yards away and then holed three of them in one putt with the cleek!

With the advent of the rubber-cored ball courses sprang up round all the big towns on all sorts of soil—clay, chalk and gravel—making a running approach risky through changing weather conditions. Further, the greens were usually

closely bunkered, so that for both reasons a controlled, carrying shot became imperative. Thus these changes have combined to kill the old methods and have also brought such mechanical aids as spade mashies, and so on.



JOHN BALL'S address and stance when playing a cleek shot.

Over 30 Years' Ago

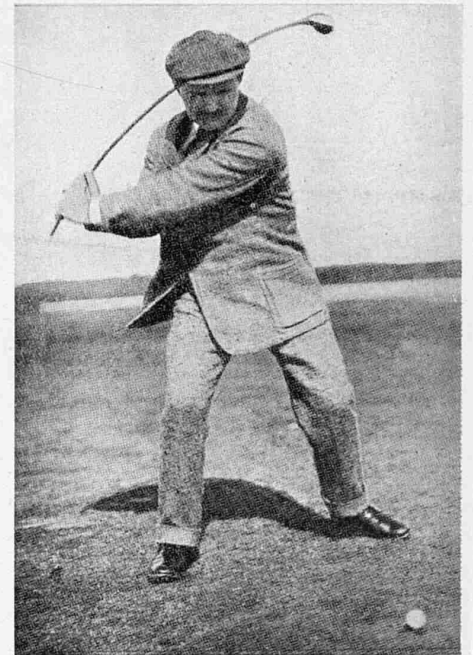
These three old photographs of J. H. Taylor, driving and playing a cleek shot, and of John Ball's stance when using a cleek, bring out some of the changes that have occurred since the beginning of the century.

Below: TAYLOR AGAIN, this time at the top of his swing with a cleek.



The modern steel shaft and the graded lofted clubs that we all carry to-day have changed the method of play for most of us, and for these innovations we are indebted to the Americans. When they took up the game in earnest the gutty was a thing of the past, and they found great difficulty in getting the Haskell ball up with the cut shot, for on their newly sown courses the grass was thin and the ball sat so "light" that a cut shot merely scattered the turf and the ball skidded. So they went in for lofted clubs, well laid back at the heel, to get the ball up—a much easier way. All lofted clubs pull, but the Americans kept straight up the line by shutting the club face and playing against the loft.

Thus a new school of players has arisen, whose swing at impact sends the club head outside the line of flight. I have not adopted this style



J. H. TAYLOR DRIVING: Note the bent shaft. There is plenty of snap in this shot.

but when I practise with my set of steels, I find my swing tends to alter in that direction. The steel shaft demands a slower swing, and the blow appears somewhat dead. My quarrel with the steels is in the short shots. With hickory the grain gives the head a kick forward which synchronises with the throw forward of the leg and arm. But there is no whip away of the clubhead with the steels in the back swing, and no return whip in the forward swing.



JOHN BALL still takes the keenest interest in the game and this picture was taken two years ago during the Open Championship at Hoylake.