





# A GREAT MYSTERY

*After conquering the game with natural talent, Ralph Guldahl fell hard off the golfing summit*

BY AL BARKOW

**R**ALPH GULDAHL LOOKED NOTHING LIKE A METEOR, in the metaphorical sense. He was a tall, bulky man with rather rounded shoulders who moved like a bus through a school zone. His broad, quiet face betrayed little emotion. But for three years in the late 1930s, he streaked across the American golfing firmament like few golfers have ever done.

Between 1936 and 1939 he won three major championships (two U.S. Open titles in a row and a Masters) and three “semi-majors” in the Western Open, which in those years players held in high regard. It was a phenomenal run of championship golf that had a mysteriously abrupt ending. Here came Ralph Guldahl to tower over the competition in golf’s biggest championships, and there went Ralph Guldahl slumping into oblivion. What happened?

Guldahl was born in 1911 in one of the hotbeds of American golfing talent, Dallas, and as a youth showed as much promise as his ultimately far more famous and accomplished contemporaries in age and place, Byron Nelson and Ben Hogan. Guldahl began playing golf at 11, and at 16 he won the Texas High School championship with rounds of 65-71. All he ever wanted to do was play golf, and, in fact, missed his high school graduation ceremony in 1930 to enter the Texas Open as a first-time professional. He tied for 11th.

Later that year he qualified for the U.S. Open—where Bobby Jones won the third leg of his Grand Slam—and finished tied for 15th, a pretty good start in big-time golf for a fellow who didn’t practice much and never thought much about how he played the

game. Therein, perhaps, would lay the rub of his career.

Guldahl grew up in a home that defined consistency. His parents were immigrants to America from Norway, and they were steady, hardworking people. His father worked for the same company in Dallas for close to 30 years. His younger brother spent his entire working life in the U.S. Postal Service. The tone at home was hardly flamboyant, certainly non-risk-taking, and although Guldahl decided as a teenager to make his life at a game that in itself is a precarious endeavor and in his day offered a most uncertain living, his character was nevertheless modest and self-effacing. He had none of the stereotypical characteristics of his fellow Texans; Guldahl never got into anyone’s face, wasn’t prone to bragging, and was not one to take



Above: In 1937, Ralph Guldahl, right, won the first of his two U.S. Open Championships at Oakland Hills Country Club near Detroit after beating Sam Snead, left, by two strokes.

Below: Ralph Guldahl was a member of the victorious 1937 U.S. Ryder Cup team. Pictured as they sailed aboard the S.S. Manhattan on their journey to England are, from left to right: (top) Horton Smith, Byron Nelson, Sam Snead and Johnny Revolta; (middle) Gene Sarazen, Danny Shute, Guldahl, Tony Manero, Henry Picard and Fred Corcoran, tournament manager of the PGA; and (front) Ed Dudley, and George Jacobus, president of the PGA.

chances. His demeanor was in some part accountable to having lost all but 25 percent of his hearing in one ear when he was 11 years old, but it was simply the way he was.

In 1931, Guldahl began playing the tournament circuit, and he got off to an encouraging start by winning the Santa Monica Open. The next year he won the Arizona Open, and in 1933 he went to the last hole of the U.S. Open tied for the lead with Johnny Goodman. However, when he bogeyed to finish second and had some subsequent frustrations, he became discouraged and took a break from the game. It was, in part, out of discouragement, but also because he had married and needed to make a living in the heart of the Great Depression years. He became a car salesman, yet another exploit that seemed contrary to his nature, which may have been why he didn't remain in that line of work for long. It was also because he found his game again.

When he returned to competitive golf in 1936, everything started clicking. He won the Western Open, the Augusta Open and the Miami Biltmore Open, and he became one of the stars of a pro tour that was beginning to gain more public attention. In 1937, he won only twice, but in a big way, capturing the Western Open and the U.S. Open, which,

of course, thrust him into the public eye. The U.S. Open victory was particularly exhilarating and had a certain historical significance not apparent at the time. In a way it joined him at the hip with Sam Snead for the rest of his playing career.

In 1937, coming off a brilliant rookie winter tour, Snead made his first appearance in the national championship. After he finished his fourth round at Oakland Hills Country Club, near Detroit, Snead was being congratulated as the winner. As Tommy Armour put it to Snead in the locker room, "You've won yourself an Open, laddie." The Silver Scot was a bit premature. Guldahl was still on the course, and in the late afternoon he made a rush to the finish to post a 69 and leave Snead in second by two shots. It has often been said that if Snead could have won that Open, he would have never suffered the curse of being the greatest golfer to never win the championship. In light of that, it is nice to know that in subsequent years Guldahl and Snead regularly teamed up in the Miami-Biltmore Four-Ball Tournament, a staple of the early tour, and they won it twice. Obviously, there were no hard feelings on Snead's part.

The next year, Guldahl had an easier time of it in the U.S. Open. At Cherry Hills Country Club, near Denver, he became the fourth player to ever win the title back to back. He took a six-stroke lead into the final round, and once again closed with a 69 to maintain that margin over the runner-up, Dick Metz. Also in 1938, he won his third consecutive Western Open. While the number of victories was slim, albeit of no little significance, he was a factor in TOUR events. Between 1937 and 1939 Guldahl collected 20 second-place finishes.



TOP AND BOTTOM: BETTMANN/CORBIS

In 1939, Guldahl had his best year with four victories, including the Masters. At Augusta National, he once again defeated Snead with yet another final-round 69. In this instance, both wrote Masters history within the space of a few minutes. Snead finished with a round of 68 to set a Masters scoring record of 280, then came Guldahl with his 69 to defeat Sam by a shot and rearrange that record by a stroke. It is also fascinating to consider that this finish in April (not to say the one at Oakland Hills) may have led Snead to the great disaster of his career. At the 72nd hole of the U.S. Open, at the Spring Mill course of the Philadelphia CC, thinking he needed a birdie or seeking to take out some insurance on someone making a Guldahl-like finish (in this case Guldahl was not in contention), Snead tried a risky second shot out of the rough. It led to an infamous, heartbreaking triple-bogey eight when a par five would have been enough to seal the title by a stroke. Ironically, later in that same year, the team of Snead and Guldahl won their second Miami Biltmore Four-Ball. Guldahl also won the 1939 Dapper Dan Open and the Greater Greensboro Open.

Guldahl won two tournaments in 1940, the Milwaukee Open and the Inverness Invitational Four-Ball (with Snead, of course), but after that he virtually disappeared from the scene. Not only did he never win again, he never even came close. It was, and remains, one of the most curious declines in American golf history.

When the slump developed, his friend, Snead, looked closely at Guldahl's swing but couldn't see anything; he only heard something different. "It sounded like Ralph was hitting the ball with a bag of mush. The click was gone," Sam said, when reminiscing some years later. There must have been something in the shape of the swing, though, because Guldahl started hitting a lot of slices. Slices! Not what you would expect from the kind of winner he had been. Guldahl would say, over the years, that he got bored with golf, that he hurt his back, that he got too heavy, that he had laid off the game too long after his back began troubling him.

Others speculated somewhat more objectively. George Fazio, who would make his mark as a golf architect but was a serious student of the golf swing and a very fine player, remarked that Guldahl was the most natural golfer he'd ever seen, and that he essentially didn't know what he was doing; he just did it and did it extremely well when he had it. Fazio remembered a time when he, Guldahl, Ben Hogan, Lloyd Mangrum, Toney Penna, Byron Nelson and others were talking golf swing one evening in a hotel lobby somewhere out on tour. At one point Guldahl was asked how



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**“IT SOUNDED LIKE RALPH WAS HITTING THE BALL WITH A BAG OF MUSH. THE CLICK WAS GONE.”** — *Sam Snead referring to his good friend Ralph Guldahl’s slump*

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he would play a shot out of fluffy grass. “Why, I’d just take the club for the distance and just hit it,” Guldahl explained.

In respect to Guldahl’s fatal slump, Fazio concluded that when he lost his swing he didn’t know enough about it to come back. Or, perhaps he became confused from thinking about it. In an interview with Guldahl in the 1970s, when the subject came up, his wife, Laverne, said: “When he sat down to write that book of instruction, that’s when he lost his game.”

As is always the case, after his great successes in golf’s most important championships, publishers sought after Guldahl to tell the struggling world of average golfers how he did it. He signed a contract to write an instruction book, and with

In addition to his back-to-back U.S. Open Championship wins (in 1937 and 1938), Ralph Guldahl won three straight Western Open titles (1936-38), which, in his era, was held in high regard, almost to the level of a major championship.

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HISTORIC GOLF PHOTOS

**“HE WENT FROM BEING TEMPORARILY THE ABSOLUTE BEST PLAYER IN THE WORLD TO ONE WHO COULDN’T PLAY AT ALL.”** —*Fellow competitor Paul Runyan*

Above: The first five Masters Tournament winners, from left to right: Horton Smith (1934 and '36), Byron Nelson (1937), Gene Sarazen (1935), Henry Picard (1938) and Ralph Guldahl (1939).

Right: In later years, Ralph Guldahl would return to Augusta National Golf Club, site of his 1939 Masters win, where his record for lowest winning score belonged to him alone until Claude Harmon matched it in 1948.

a commendable sense of personal ethics Guldahl decided to not follow the fairly common practice of having a professional writer perform the work. He would do it himself. Armed with pads of paper, many pencils, and a long mirror, Guldahl holed up in a hotel room and analyzed his technique. It was the first time in his life that he asked himself in depth just how, indeed, he did do it. The book was one of those in which you flip the pages and the sequence of still photos becomes a motion picture. It came out in the fall of 1939, and sold for two dollars. Just how many books were sold is not known, but it is known that from that point on Guldahl would win the last two of his 16 professional victories—the aforementioned Milwaukee Open and Miami Biltmore Four-Ball—and then fade completely from the competitive scene. Paul Runyan remarked on Guldahl’s vanishing gift: “It’s the most ridiculous thing, really. He went from being temporarily the absolute best player in the world to one who couldn’t play at all.”

Did Guldahl leave his game in that hotel room where he thought as he had never thought before about how he swung a golf club? Did he smother with too-close scrutiny the uncanny instinct that had brought him so much success? Did analysis, indeed, produce paralysis?

Tantalizing questions, which all golfers might consider as they agonize over the latest duck hook or, to the Guldahlian point, the crisp 6-iron stiffed on the par-3 hole this morning. Ask not how you did it, just enjoy.

In the years immediately after Ralph Guldahl left the game’s main competitive arena, it was as if he had hardly been there at all. When his name came up the response might be, “Oh yeah, the big good-lookin’ guy. Really had it there for awhile.” But he was not forgotten by those who preserve the game’s history. However brief his time on golf, for which he was properly honored with a place in the World Golf Hall of Fame, where he was inducted in 1981. He died five years later.

If Guldahl left the competitive arena, he certainly did not leave the game. From the 1940s on he held club professional posts, the longest (and last) at the Braemar Country Club, in Tarzana, Calif. When this writer visited him there one year, Guldahl seemed quite content. If he harbored any regrets over the loss of his game when he was still in his prime years, one could not tell. And why should he? There are very few among those who take up the old Scotsgame that can claim back-to-back U.S. Open victories, a Masters title, and all those other competitive achievements, not to mention a finely struck 5-iron even when it means not a thing in the record book. MT

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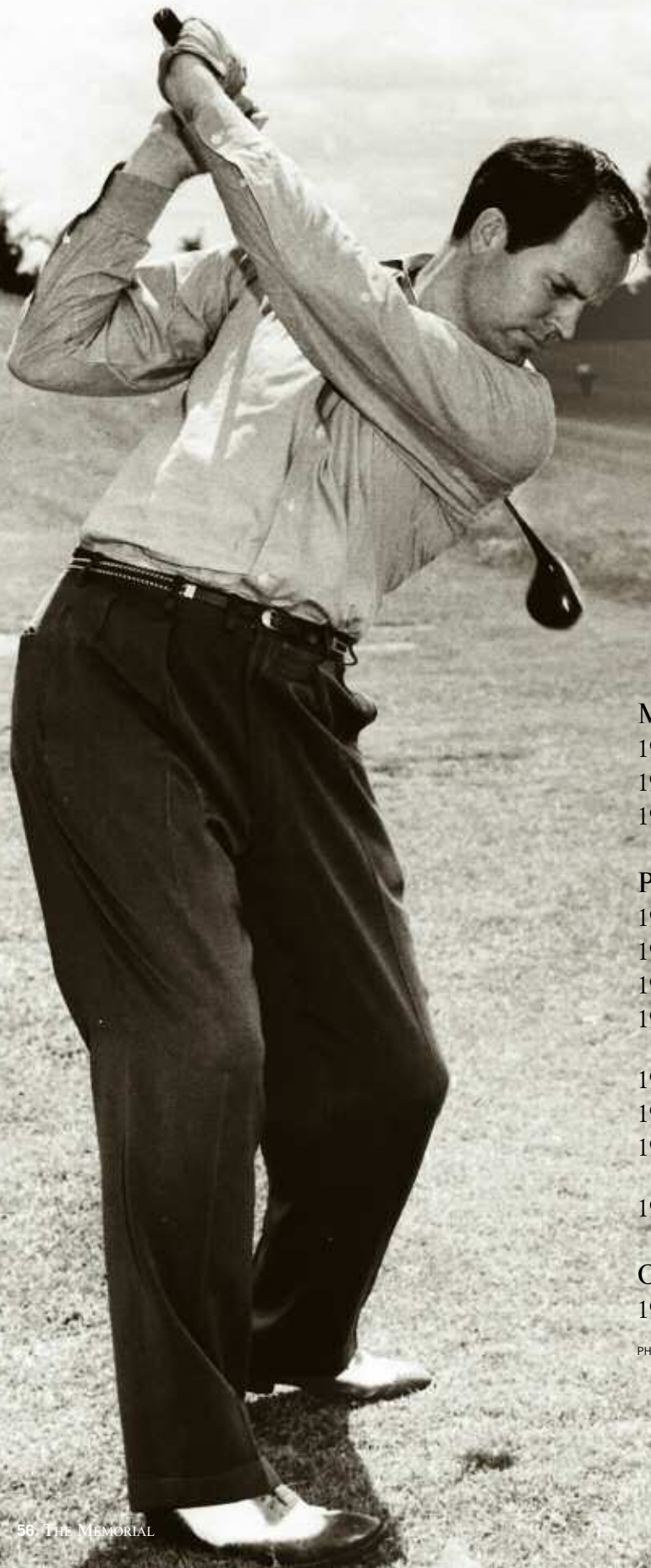


HISTORIC GOLF PHOTOS

# RALPH GULDAHL'S CAREER RECORD

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## MAJOR CHAMPIONSHIP VICTORIES

- 1937 U.S. Open
- 1938 U.S. Open
- 1939 Masters Tournament

## PGA TOUR VICTORIES

- 1931 Santa Monica Open
- 1932 Arizona Open
- 1934 Westwood Golf Club Open Championship
- 1936 Western Open, Augusta Open, Miami Biltmore Open
- 1937 Western Open
- 1938 Western Open
- 1939 Greater Greensboro Open, Dapper Dan Open, Miami Biltmore Four-Ball
- 1940 Milwaukee Open, Inverness Invitational Four-Ball

## OTHER CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- 1937 Ryder Cup

PHOTO: HISTORIC GOLF PHOTOS