



GOOD WOOD

Luck often seemed to evade Craig Wood, but it didn't snuff out his talent and resolve

BY BILL FIELDS

WHERE CRAIG WOOD is concerned, it can be hard to see the many hurrahs for all the heartache. He was the first golfer to lose all four modern major championships in extra holes, falling short to Gene Sarazen and Byron Nelson at their spectacular best among his disappointments, yet no one made more out of tough luck than Wood. Time and again he rebounded from defeat, carrying resolve instead of bitterness, focusing on tomorrow instead of yesterday, to become one of the best golfers in the first half of the 20th century.

In 1941 Wood became the first man to win the Masters and U.S. Open in the same year—a feat matched by only Ben Hogan, Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods—and those major championships were the gems among his 21 PGA TOUR victories. Wood also played in three Ryder Cups (1931, '33 and '35).

As Jack Burke, Jr. characterized Wood a few years ago, noting his ability to roll with punches that would have been knockouts to lesser men, “He was one hell of a dude, I’ll tell you that.”

Tall, blond and possessing, as Claude (Butch) Harmon, Jr. wrote in his 2006 memoir *The Pro*, “the kind of chiseled features that excited advertisers,” Wood looked like a movie star. But despite his college degree (Rider, business) and custom clothes (socks even), Wood was as rugged as the strongest lumberjack in upstate New York, where he grew up outside Lake Placid, the son of a timber company foreman.

How rugged? Just weeks after Wood lost the 1934 PGA Championship on the 38th hole to Paul Runyan and a few months before Sarazen would snatch a victory out of Wood’s hands with his unlikely double-eagle 2 at Augusta National Golf Club’s 15th hole in the fourth round of the 1935 Masters, Wood showed up to compete at the New Jersey State PGA championship in Bloomfield, N.J. He did so despite having a high fever and a badly swollen left leg, reactions to recent

smallpox and typhus vaccinations in advance of an exhibition tour of Australia.

Wood won his first-round match and, against a doctor’s recommendation, set out in his next match against Lou Marffie that afternoon. So dicey was Wood’s condition that tournament officials were worried about him collapsing. This being years before the golf cart was invented, they sent out a motorcycle and sidecar with the match. Wood refused the motorized transportation until the 13th tee, when he felt so puny he rode the last two holes before closing out Marffie, 5 and 4. The next morning Wood beat Vic Ghezzi, 3 and 2, in the rain but was so ill doctors told him not to go on. Instead of packing it in, though, Wood got the start of his semifinal delayed by an hour, and then went 19 holes before losing to Johnny Kinder. He would recover in time to sail for the southern hemisphere, where he spread the golf gospel with Sarazen, Joe Kirkwood and several other pros.

“Coolest demeanor of anybody I’ve ever seen,” recalled Runyan, who inventoried the best for decades.





AP IMAGES

Above: Gene Sarazen, right, putts on the home hole at Augusta National Golf Club on the way to a five-stroke victory over Craig Wood in a 36-hole playoff to determine the 1935 Masters Tournament.

Right: Craig Wood congratulates winner Gene Sarazen following his 1935 Masters win.

It was indeed a good thing Wood had such a reserve of equanimity, because it was tested over and over. He was the Depression-era equivalent of Greg Norman, a great player who sometimes came up short through no fault of his own. Wood had no one but himself to blame for trying to play out of the Swilcan Burn at the Old Course at St. Andrews on the first hole of his 1933 British Open playoff with Denny Shute—a careless bit of strategy that cost him a double bogey and sent him on his way to a five-shot loss—but other times the golf gods simply weren't of the mind to embrace him.

Runyan prevailed in the '34 PGA thanks, in part, to a friendly carom off a truck tire on the first extra hole that sent his ball out of trouble and safely on to the fairway. He was able to tie the hole and beat Wood two holes later. That would be a tiny reversal of fortune compared to what befell Wood at the '35 Masters.

A year after falling one stroke shy of Horton Smith in the inaugural Masters, Wood blazed to the finish on a chilly day with four birdies over the last six holes, including one at the par-4 18th hole, to shoot a closing 70 for 282. His three-shot lead looked insurmountable—until unbelievable news filtered up to the antebellum clubhouse.



"I was up on the balcony of the clubhouse," remembered John Derr, then a cub reporter for a North Carolina newspaper. "The press was up there; we'd drop the stories down on a string to the Western Union operator. We were up there, in the late afternoon, and the son of a caddie came running up and told somebody downstairs, 'Mr. Gene had a 2 on 15.' All of a sudden, it was hold up on that Craig Wood story."

Ready for a drink, Wood suddenly had to get ready for a 36-hole playoff the following day. "I had been on the wagon for a year and was just getting ready to get off it," Wood recalled to *The Augusta Chronicle* in 1965. "[After Sarazen's double eagle], I said then I'd better wait awhile for that drink."

“THAT THE THING HAPPENED THERE IS NO SHADOW OF A DOUBT. AND AS TO HOW IT HAPPENED I GIVE UP.”

—*Golf writer Bernard Darwin on Wood’s par-5 fifth hole shot, which he drove almost 430-yards at the 1933 British Open at St. Andrews.*

If Wood had a libation the next evening, it wasn’t out of celebration. Motivated to win in order to ensure that his albatross would soar into the game’s history, Sarazen outplayed Wood in the playoff. The Squire took an early lead, eventually shooting 144 to win by five strokes over Wood, who struggled to get his putts to the hole.

Wood’s karma at Augusta National appeared to be gone in the first round in 1936 when he carded a horrendous 88. All he did the next day, though, was better his score by 21 strokes with a 67 (which remains the greatest next-day turnaround at the Masters) en route to a tie for 20th place.

Power is a huge advantage for a player, and Wood had plenty of it. His swing was a subject of a photo-sequence spread in the April 1934 edition of *The American Golfer* magazine. Wood learned the game with hickory-shafted clubs but made a seamless transition to steel. Wood’s swing—the soft position of his left arm at the top

Craig Wood’s golf swing was so admired, in 1934 *The American Golfer* magazine ran an 18-frame photo spread of his swing sequence breaking down the components of the action.

of the backswing, the stored-up energy as the club nears impact, the balanced follow-through—is brought to life by the 18-frame sequence.

It is an action worthy of praise, as critiqued by Peter Morrice, senior editor of instruction for *Golf Digest* magazine, who has examined scores of stop-action sequences. “He stays pretty centered over the ball going back, and he’s got that little ‘sit move’ into the ball with his legs, kind of like Sam Snead,” Morrice says. “He drives into the ball really well with his legs, and that’s where he gets that great lag. It almost looks like Sergio Garcia. His hands are within a foot or so of impact and the clubhead’s got another 10 feet to go. He’s got a lot of clubhead speed, and the legs are really moving through the ball. He firms up his left side; the left knee is locked. He’s got that snap move of the left leg. Put that side to side with Tiger [Woods], especially a younger Tiger, and it’d be amazing how similar they look. Tiger used to talk about that being another resource of power.”

Yes, like the dominant player of today, Wood had some length. Sure, the ground was firm and the wind was strong, but on the par-5 fifth hole at St. Andrews in the 1933 British Open, Wood uncorked a tee shot that finished in a bunker about 100 yards short of the green on the 530-yard hole. “That the thing happened there is no shadow of a doubt,” noted golf reporter Bernard Darwin wrote in *Golf Between Two Wars*, “and as to how it happened I give up.”

Wood also was long on encouragement to his peers, a selfless man who was never miserly with advice or support. “Wood was kind of a godfather to the generation of pros that came after him,” observed golf historian Al Barkow. “He gave a lot of them—including Ben Hogan and others—jobs, loans of money and encouragement. He also classed up his profession. He was a smart dresser and well-spoken.”

Sam Snead was one notable beneficiary of Wood’s largesse. In the early 1930s, Wood gave him his first set of clubs, supplied him golf balls, and assured him that if things didn’t work out on tour, he would take care of his travel back home to the Virginia mountains. “He was the nicest guy I think I’ve ever seen,” Snead told *Golf World* in 2001, a year before his death. “I can say nothing else, but that he was the best.”

Claude Harmon certainly would have echoed that sentiment. When Harmon arrived as an assistant pro to Wood at Winged Foot Golf Club in 1941, Wood convinced Harmon he had to weaken his grip and stop relying on a big hook if he wanted to be a serious contender when he ventured on tour. Harmon listened, altered his game and, seven years later, with Wood in his gallery, won the Masters by five strokes.



Wood kept plugging away throughout the 1930s, and in the 1939 U.S. Open at Philadelphia Country Club it looked as if he would bag the big one. Snead came to the 72nd hole believing he needed a birdie to beat Nelson's 284 total but a par would have been good enough. Instead, Snead made a triple bogey. It was Wood who birdied the home hole to also finish at 284. In the playoff, Wood and Nelson tied with 68s. Neither golfer wanted to decide the matter in sudden death, so they played another full round. Thanks in part to holding a 1-iron for an eagle-2 on the fourth hole, Nelson beat Wood 70 to 73.

Two years later Wood finally would enjoy major satisfaction—twice over, at that. After top-10 finishes at Augusta in 1939 and '40, he reigned at the '41 Masters with an impressive performance. He got out of the gates with a 6-under 66 that staked him to a five-shot lead, and he led wire-to-wire for a three-shot victory over Nelson at 8-under 280. At 39, Wood finally had a major crown and soon would have another.

The 1941 U.S. Open was held at Colonial Country Club in Fort Worth, the first time the championship had been contested out of the East or Midwest. Wood entered the week bothered by a chronic back injury that forced him to wear a heavy corset on the course. He got off to a lousy start—a double-bogey on the par-5 first hole—but persevered with his trademark grit on a layout that was playing long because of heavy

rains. A pair of 70s on the 36-hole final day earned Wood a three-stroke victory over Denny Shute.

It was, to say the least, a popular victory. "The gods of golf, so unkind to Craig Wood in the past, are killing him with kindness," William D. Richardson started his game story in *The New York Times*. A few days later, Richardson's *Times* colleague, columnist John Kieran opined: "Those who know golf and Craig Wood are saying that it couldn't have happened to a nicer fellow and this interested onlooker will subscribe heartily to such statements. He took the raps for many years and came smiling through. Coming down the stretch at Fort Worth, he knew what he had to do to win the championship, and he did it."

Wood turned 40 on Nov. 18, 1941, seemingly with some fine years of competition ahead of him. But Europe was already ablaze in war, and the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor less than a month later. He tied for 23rd in his Masters defense, but golf mostly took a hiatus for several years until hostilities ceased. "If World War II hadn't interrupted his reign," Butch Harmon wrote in *The Pro*, "Craig Wood might have been the Arnold Palmer of his era."

As it was, Wood had to settle for being a gentleman who made the most of his time, a golfer who flicked away disappointment like the ashes off a cigarette, until he had a chance to tee it up again. The big ones that got away, the narrow losses that caused wags to dub him "No. 2 Wood," never dragged him down.

A heart attack took Wood's life in May of 1968 in Palm Beach when he was 66 years old. A widower who didn't have children with his wife, Jacqueline, he died alone, which for a man who had helped out so many, didn't seem right. His legacy is perpetuated near his native Lake Placid, N.Y., with the Craig Wood Golf Course. And anytime a golfer has to pick himself up after a disappointment, he could do a lot worse than think about how Wood handled himself. **MT**



BETTMAN/CORBIS / BELOW LEFT: USGA

Above: Craig Wood and his wife, Jacqueline, look over his winning scorecard from the 1941 Masters.

Below left: In 1941, Craig Wood, shown here with his U.S. Open trophy, became the first golfer to win both the national championship and the Masters Tournament in the same year.



A senior editor at *Golf World* magazine, Bill Fields has covered golf since 1984 and loves to write about the game's history. Born in Pinehurst, N.C., Fields lives in Connecticut.

CRAIG WOOD'S CAREER RECORD

MAJOR CHAMPIONSHIP VICTORIES

- 1941 Masters Tournament
- 1941 U.S. Open

PGA TOUR VICTORIES

- 1928 New Jersey PGA Championship
- 1929 Oklahoma Open, Hawaiian Open
- 1930 New Jersey PGA Championship, Oklahoma City Open
- 1931 Harlingen Open
- 1932 New Jersey PGA Match Play Championship,
San Francisco Open Match Play, Pasadena Open
- 1933 Los Angeles Open, Radium Springs Open
- 1934 Galveston Open Championship, New Jersey Open
- 1936 General Brock Open
- 1938 Augusta Open-Forest Hills
- 1940 Metropolitan Open,
Miami-Biltmore Four-Ball (with Billy Burke)
- 1942 Canadian Open
- 1944 Durham Open

OTHER CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- Ryder Cup 1931, '33, '35

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