

Studying the Styles of Champions

No. 8—Alec Smith, Former Open and Metropolitan Champion

By O. B. Keeler

IT occurs to me suddenly that the previous figures in this modest series are startlingly alike in style; that is, in the main points—upright swing, finger-grip; that sort of thing. One notable champion, "Chick" Evans, doesn't use the overlapping grip; all the rest do. And all of them use the finger grip, and all of them employ a swing that is upright rather than flat.

Can discrimination be charged by the short, stout person who grasps the club solidly in his fists, stands well away from the ball, and starts his swing from approximately where his wings will sprout if he is a good little golfer and goes to heaven when he dies.

Forestalling such a charge, let me adduce Mr. Alec Smith. I was going to adduce Mr. Smith anyway, for no series of championship sketches on this side of the water would be complete without the adduction of this sturdy Carnoustie Scot, who for more than a score of years has been an outstanding figure in American golf. A lot of people spell his name "Aleck," but I never could see the use of the final "k." A Scot myself, by heredity, there is an appeal in the wasted ink and time used on the "k," and "Alec" spells Alec a good deal better than Alex does, which is a curious perversion of nomenclative orthography quite generally affected.

Of the Old School

ALEC SMITH, a stocky, sturdy Scotchman, is a gowfer of the old school, along with Alec Herd on the other side; a gowfer who lays hold upon a club very much as does a baseball player grasping a bat; who uses the flat, full Carnoustie swipe, the club hardly coming above the level of the shoulders on the back swing, and being driven through the stroke by the application of immense power from a brawny right forearm and wrist.

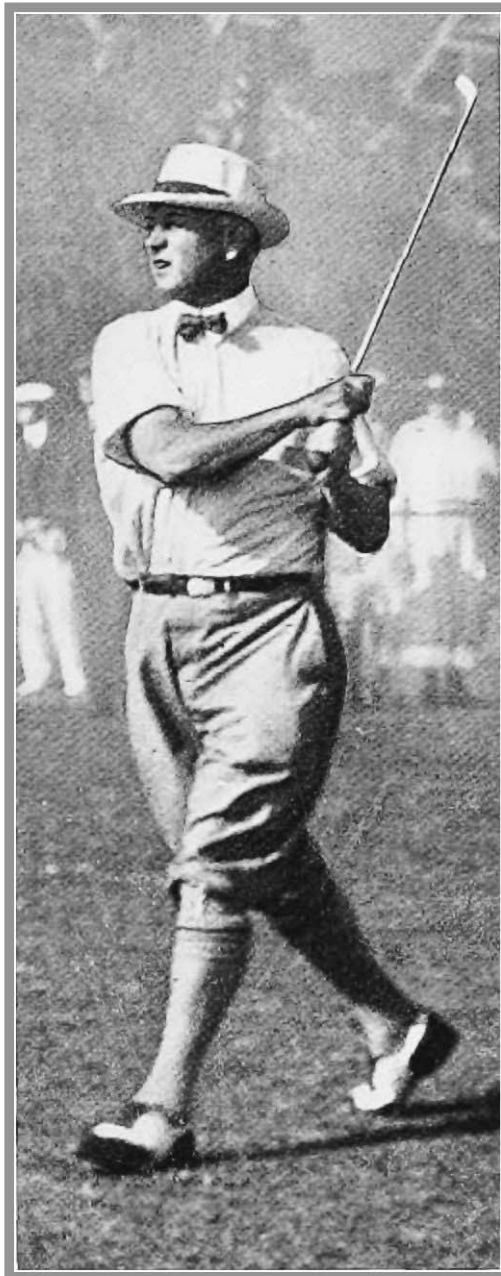
There is something intensely characteristic in the play of Alec Smith's right forearm, wrist and hand in his full shots; I once identified him by that factor alone.

I was sitting on a bench at the second tee at Inverness last summer, watching four-somes of players, practicing for the open championship, play No. 1 and No. 10 and drive for No. 2, and up came a foursome of golfers I didn't know, or thought I didn't. One was a short, stout, gray-haired man who was testing out a club offered for his inspection by one of the others. I watched them drive, and when this stout man came back for his swing I got a good flash at his right forearm.

"It's Alec Smith," I said to myself. I hadn't seen the old boy in many years; and he had taken on flesh and his well-shaped head had grown gray. But there was no mistaking the piston-rod action of that mighty right forearm, driving the club through without the too-sudden turn-over of the right hand that imparts a ruinous hook to almost all other golfers who attempt his style.

I saw Alec at Belleair, Florida, last Janu-

ary, and he was a rejuvenated Alec, a score of pounds lighter, it seemed, and playing with all his old dash and abandon—he was ever an engaging player to watch. The day before he had set a new course record with a fine 68. He was up to his old tricks, wearing a straw hat, and carrying on a whimsical conversation during his match, in which he and Grantland Rice were paired against Ells-



This was no posed swing by Alec Smith, and the low finish is indicative of his round, flat swing driven through by a powerful right forearm and the old-fashioned palm grip. The picture was made at Belleair, the day after Alec lowered the course record to 68, last January.

worth Augustus, the long-hitting Cleveland amateur, and Joe Schlotmann.

Uses Palm Grip

ALEC SMITH uses the old-fashioned palm grip employed by players in slugging the stubborn gutta-percha ball with a

full St. Andrews swing. On his full shots his thumbs are around the shaft—a regular two-fisted, slugging grip. Coming down to the mashie, he puts his right thumb down the shaft, and this variation is employed for all shorter shots.

His full swing is exceedingly flat, and results in a sort of educated tail-end hook or pull that Alec cultivated early in life, to help the length of the shot. In his prime he was famous for his wood club play, getting distance with remarkable accuracy. He favored a spoon—not of the baffly or bulldog type now so popular—for his long shots to the green, agreeing in this particular with Herd and Hilton of the Scotch and English schools.

Alec was particularly strong in his long play and around the green. He was desperately accurate with his chip-shot, and was a fine putter—he still is, I believe. His main difficulty was with the half irons, and when such a length presented itself he was more than likely to take his mashie and hit the ball hard. He disliked spared shots of any kind and did not play them very well. When he was professional at the East Lake course of the Atlanta Athletic Club, I recall that he did a great deal of practicing with a niblick for approaches of around one hundred yards—full niblick shots, they were—and I fancy he was seeking to get away from a half-mashie in that manner.

Master of Mashie

ALEC'S mashie shots in the old days were a constant source of wonder to his mates. I am persuaded that no one ever played a mashie pitch with less elevation or as great an amount of backspin. The shot always looked as if it were bound to go racing across the green and many yards beyond; but the backspin caught with a terrific wrench and the ball would bounce once or twice, uncertainly; and then limp to a fairly quick stop.

I rather fancy that the lack of delicacy in the full palm grip was responsible for Alec's dislike for the half shots; he did far better by transgressing the convention with regard to under-clubbing, and taking a shorter range club and a full crack at it.

On the green, Alec was a good putter, possibly for the reason that he had to be. His approaches from any distance beyond chipping range were apt to leave him a good deal of putting; and he did it well and most boldly. It was a curious thing to witness his play in this department. He would walk up on the green, talking away, sometimes to others in the match, sometimes to himself; square off at the putt and hit the ball firmly and with no hesitation.

Alec never wasted any time picking up tiny obstacles on the line of his putt or scraping away worm-casts and such obstructions to traffic.

"Why do you leave them there?" he was asked once. "They might throw your putt off the line."

(Continued on page 32)

Studying the Style of Champions

(Continued from page 11)

"Yes," said Alec, "and they might throw it on the line, too!"

A Winning Philosophy

THERE is a large slice of Alec's golfing philosophy in this retort. At golf he is rather a fatalist. In a round he might be going exceptionally well, and on a good shot the ball might kick badly, or some turn of the luck bring undeserved misfortune his way.

Alec would not flare up at such mishaps.

"A'richt," he would say, shaking his head. "It's not my day."

And he would plug along placidly. If it was not "his day," why, another day might come soon that was "his day."

Betimes I think this type of fatalism is none so bad, in golf. The English type, and especially the Irish-American type, take it differently—revolting sharply at the ill-treatment of fortune and seeking with a grim determination to beat the luck then and there—frequently with accumu-

lated disaster avoided by the placid and philosophical Alec. A large proportion of the so-called 100-golfers might be shooting well down to 90, if they only would restrain that ungovernable disposition after missing one shot to make it all up on the next one. Alec Smith realizes as few golfers realize that suprem fact that golf is played one shot at a time, and that each shot, good or bad, creates a solitary situation to be solved by a single shot alone. The man who best solves this succession of solitary situations is the man who wins championships at golf.

Alec Smith has been a truly great golfer, and I understand he has come back rapidly in the last year and now, for all his gray thatch covering, is capable of giving any man in the world a battle—a fine example and consolation to the short, stocky golfer with a round, flat swing and the club grasped firmly in his two robust fists; only they have to be thoroughly robust fists with substantial forearms back of them, to get away with Alec Smith's style.