PETER DOBEREINER
WITH INTRODUCTION BY LADDIE LUCAS

MAESTRO: THE LIFE OF HENRY COTTON
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Sir Henry Cotton’s life, which makes one of the most compelling human interest stories of modern times, is remarkable for three prime features.

First, it changed, in a decade, and often amid vehement controversy, the image and status of a long-established and, in a class sense, subservient profession. Second, it achieved by example, personal regimen and endeavour an all-round standard which its contemporary characters had either never contemplated or had regarded as being far out of reach. Third, its fame endured, in its successive and distinctive phases, for – literally – a lifetime.

The subject of this definitive biography was being talked, argued and written about long after his highly-publicised playing days were over. He was ‘news’ in his twenties and he remained ‘news’ in his seventies. Right up to the end of his life he cultivated and, usually by design, provoked ‘talking points’. Seldom was he out of the public’s gaze.

What a story it was and how effectively has the biographer now told it! Peter Dobereiner, with his arresting prose style, his eye for the unusual, his humour and his understanding of the human frame (particularly when it is contorted with a golf club in its hands), has provided just the narrative which Cotton’s extraordinary career deserves. For an old friend of the Maestro, the result inevitably sets the mind racing back over the years to savour again the events which are still cut deeply – and gratefully – in the memory.

My first, fleeting contact with Cotton was at the Open championship at Muirfield in 1935. He was the defending champion
himself to slow down because he was the victim of demonic pos-
session: success was not just something he wanted, he needed it to
survive.

When he could no longer ignore the damage he was doing to
himself he eased his physical burden of an arduous train and
bicycle journey to work from Dulwich by setting himself up in a
bachelor pad near the club. He bought a church hall, St Mary’s
Hall, Bromley, and had the word ‘Hall’ obliterated. An architect
was engaged to convert it into a suitable dwelling with, at Cotton’s
insistence, a most lavish bathroom. His old nanny became his
housekeeper. By this time Cotton was beginning to attract the
interest of equipment manufacturers and the chairman of
Spaldings went to lunch at St Mary’s. “Henry had a unique living
room,” he recalled, “furnished with low coffee tables and at least
one hundred cushions, which you were supposed to pile up
against the wall. We went in there for coffee after lunch and it was
so surprisingly comfortable that I all but fell asleep before the
coffee came.”

By this time Britain’s traditional supremacy in golf had been
firmly surpassed by the United States. After some earlier false
starts the game took root in America towards the end of the
nineteenth century and up until the first world war professional
golf was dominated by immigrant Scottish players. Native Ameri-
cans then took up the running as the craze for golf gripped the
nation and the new breed of home-bred professionals, uninhibi-
ted by social constrictions, elevated both the standing and the
standards of their calling. A structured calendar of regular tour-
naments persuaded the best of them to specialise as tournament
players, without benefit of a golf club appointment, and this
development provided a powerful stimulus to advances in tech-
nique since they had to play well in order to survive. Cotton was
strongly attracted by this development and he knew that if he was
ever to become a world beater he must play with, and learn from,
the best players in the world. With the blessing of the Langley
Park committee and members he put all his resources into a £300
letter of credit and a ticket – first class of course – on the Aqui-
tania, and sailed for America to compete in the winter session of
1928-29.

All those hours of hitting golf balls into a net in the restricted
space of the family garage had given him a markedly upright
swing which hit the ball in a curving flight pattern from left to
With his first trophy, aged sixteen, in 1923.
The pinnacle of Cotton's career as a match-player was probably when he won the 1932 British match-play championship, sponsored by the *News of the World*, by beating Alf Perry in the final. Bernard Darwin wrote of the last day's play:

It is difficult to restrain oneself about Cotton's golf in the final. My inclination is to say that I have never seen such golf played—no, not by Bobby Jones nor Sarazen nor the Triumvirate (Harry Vardon, James Braid and J. H. Taylor) nor anyone else. I will curb my enthusiasm, but I can safely say that I never saw better golf, for that would be impossible. Moor Park measures 6,500 yards and the ground was very wet. Cotton's score for 28 holes was nine under an average of fours. There really seems no more to be said. From tee to green I did not see him make one single shot with which any fault could be found. Twice he took three puts, but in each case his first putt was from the very edge of a big green, and, goodness knows, he made up for these two tiny slips by holing a cruel number of long ones. In fact, he putted, as he did everything else, quite magnificently. I am sure he has never been so good a golfer as he is today.

Another growth area during Cotton's career was the rise in public interest in international team matches. It remains an historical curiosity why this development was so slow. After all, the nationalistic element in challenge matches gave them an obvious added zest, as in the case of Taylor versus Kirkaldy. The first professional team match did not take place until 1913. It was an informal affair, arranged by the players themselves, and so strictly speaking not a truly representative contest, between the United States of America and France. It was played at Versailles and Arnaud Massy, Louis Tellier, Jean Gassiat and Pierre Lafitte beat Johnny McDermott, Mike Brady, Tom McNamara and Alex Smith. There was no opportunity for a return match because professional golf went into abeyance until another international encounter at Versailles five years later resulted in a treaty which brought peace to Europe for the next twenty years.

The golf editor of a New York newspaper, Jim Harnett, was responsible for setting in train the events which led to the establishment of the Ryder Cup matches. He solicited contributions from his readers to send a team of American professionals to challenge the British players. Emmett French was appointed captain and he selected the other members of the team: Walter
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Cotton's tall and slim physique was deceptive. He habitually wore long-sleeved shirts and tailored slacks for golf and his outfits were very carefully chosen, both for understated elegance and to disguise the disproportionate development of his golfing muscles. Reg Whitcombe described his forearms as resembling other men's calves and on the occasions when Cotton wore plus-fours it was plain to see that his calves were almost heifers. He had deliberately structured himself with selective body-building exercises into his ideal of a golfing machine, based on his highly personal and controversial concept of golf as a game to be played mainly with the hands.

To over-simplify a highly complex subject, the received wisdom of golf theory was, and largely remains, that the club-head is accelerated by a rotation of the body multiplied by a downward pull of the arms to a point where centrifugal force takes over and carries the club-head through the impact zone, with the wrists acting purely as free-swinging hinges. The ball is almost incidental; it simply happens to be located on the path of the swinging club-head at the point where the speed is at its maximum. In other words, the golf swing was a flail action in which the only function of the hands was to hold on to the grip.

From his earliest days as a teenager Cotton became convinced that the hands had a much more vital contribution to make. He became obsessive about building up the strength of his hands and spent hours scything thick rough with a club and squeezing squash balls. And, while he assiduously watched and questioned great players and experimented with their methods, he never
wavered in his belief that the hands held the key to golf.

His schoolboy swing produced a natural fade and on his first visit to the United States he was persuaded, by the counsel of Sam Snead and others, that he would have to master the technique of drawing the ball from right to left if he was ever to command enough length to compete at the highest level. In the classical, flail swing, the hands naturally roll anticlockwise through the impact zone. But this necessarily has to be a left-sided action, causing conflict within pupils who find it difficult to understand (and even more difficult to obey) exhortations not to let their right hands dominate the action. Why not? Their main strength lies in their right hand and yet they are not to use it.

For a while Cotton was attracted by the prevailing view that there must be a perfect golf swing, a method which optimised all the potential of the body's major muscles to deliver the maximum power at impact. This would be the standard swing which everyone should employ. He studied the actions of all the great players, experimented with their styles and copied elements which he felt he should incorporate into his own game. This search for golf's holy grail proved fruitless, as it has for many others, and he wrote that it was not until he decided that he could not play like the golfers he had tried to copy that he made much progress. He became persuaded by the evidence of watching the individual methods of the great masters of the game that a universal swing could not and should not be imposed on all golfers, regardless of their shape and size. The bespoke swing, incorporating certain fundamentals but tailored for each individual, must be the way.

Cotton set about cutting out the pattern for his own golf and the first requirement he demanded was that the right hand should not only make its due contribution but that it should be the very key to his golf. He liked to illustrate his point by recounting the story of a Frenchman who came to see him at Penina in a state of despair. This man had been receiving regular lessons from a French pro for six months and in all that time he had not been allowed to hit a ball. Monsieur le Prof had apparently selected this pupil as a guinea pig for an experiment in golf instruction, based on the theory that pupils became hypnotised by the sight of the ball and their attempts to hit it out of sight militated against the acquisition of a sound swing. The imagination falters at the thought of a man enduring six months of such self-denial but apparently this pupil did indeed devote six months to swinging a
club without a ball, under the guidance of the pro. He perfected the motion of the swing through long hours of practice in front of a mirror at his home in the evenings. When the great day arrived and the pro deemed him ready to hit a ball the man felt certain, as the pro had assured him, that his patience and self-discipline would be richly rewarded; he would play like Ben Hogan right from the start. In the event he popped the ball along the ground about fifty yards and fled in outrage from his treacherous mentor.

Cotton confirmed that this golfer did indeed have a beautifully grooved, classic swing. The problem was that he had not learnt how to give the ball a hit. His hands had not been schooled to absorb the shock of an eight-ounce club-head travelling at 100 miles an hour and generating an impact value of a ton and a quarter. Fortunately, a cure was at hand from an exercise of Cotton’s devising. He took the man to the practice ground and led him to a worn car tyre lying on the ground. “Forget all about golf technique,” he commanded, “just hit that tyre as hard as you can with your seven-iron.” The pupil took a slightly apprehensive swipe at the tyre. “Harder!” said Cotton, “Sting it! Make it jump from the fury of your blow.” Reassured that the club did not break under such rough treatment the man began to belabour the tyre with a will. “Put more venom into it!” said Cotton. Satisfied at last that his pupil was operating at full power, Cotton dropped a ball alongside the tyre and said: “Now I want you to give the tyre as hard a whack as you can summon and then step back and repeat the action on the ball.” The Frenchman did as he was bid and gazed in amazement at the sight of the ball soaring high into the distance. It was a miracle. In five minutes Cotton had given him what his pro back home had failed to achieve in six months, not quite a Hogan swing, perhaps, but palpably an effective golf shot.

It was sometimes said of Cotton’s miracle cures that they did not last. Pupils would return home and find that the magic had worn off. Some telephoned him to complain about their relapses. Cotton’s bantering response was invariably a counter-attack: “You have neglected the most important thing I told you – ten minutes of tyre drill every day. You can’t play golf without strong, educated hands.” So what was this vital tyre drill?

The equipment is cheap and simple: a cane, an old club and an even older tyre, preferably bald. The first point to bear in mind is
that it is vital to work up gradually to the full routine since overdoing it on the first day can cause muscle strain and ruin everything. But within the span of one week, the usual length of stay for pupils under Cotton's tutelage at Penina, a graduated series of daily sessions on the tyre can produce astonishing improvements on the golf course. Lay the tyre down flat, preferably against a wall or a tree because once you get into the swing of things the tyre will jump about and it is a bore having to keep dragging it back into position. If you are doing the drill indoors do, please, first ensure that there is plenty of room to make a full swing without shattering a Ming vase or slashing the Rembrandt on the backswing. Take the stick in the left hand and beat out a tattoo of twenty-five backhanded taps against the side of the tyre, as fast as you can and taking the stick back only about a foot. Your instinct will instruct you to perform this exercise with a series of wristy flicks. Wrong! To get the benefit of this exercise you must keep the wrist rigid so that the stick is an extension of the arm. You should feel that you are tapping the tyre with the back of the left hand, holding the stick with the thumb on top and gripping it mainly with the pinkie and ringfinger. It will feel awkward and clumsy and that is a good sign because it demonstrates a vast potential for improvement in your golf. Most people believe that bad golf is caused by the right hand dominating the action. That is nonsense, as Cotton continually reiterated. The left hand is much more likely to be the culprit. Once you have that left hand under control with a correct grip and doing its job properly then you can safely let fly with all the power you can muster in the right hand. Twenty-five brisk taps is enough to start with and by now, if you have put enough effort into it, you should feel the first twinges in your complaining arm muscles. Without regripping the stick, lean across to the other side of the tyre and beat out twenty-five forehand taps as if slapping the tyre with the palm of your hand. Switch the stick to the right hand and repeat both exercises, employing a similar grip.

The next exercise is a larger version of the first. This time take the stick back about waist high and cane the tyre, exerting real force and venom. Do it as fast as possible and make the stick swish and whistle as it cuts through the air. When doing these exercises you should stand tall, with a straight back, and feet slightly apart as if addressing a golf ball. On the first day, if you have applied yourself to the task with uninhibited gusto, you should now be
almost fit to drop. Grit the teeth and proceed to stage three. Take the club and hold it with both hands in a proper golf grip. Whether you prefer the overlap, interlock or two-handed grip, the essentials are that the third knuckle of both hands should be discreetly screened from your view as you look down at your hands. The left thumb should be on top of the shaft, the right thumb lying across the shaft. Taking the club back about waist high, belt the tyre as hard as you can. Forget about golfing style, apart from maintaining your proper grip, and simply concentrate on beating the tyre to death. Make it jump with the fury of your blows, using every atom of strength in your body. Twenty-five belts delivered as fast as you can is enough for a start. Don’t forget to follow with a similar number of equally energetic backhanders. Finally, repeat the exercise using a full swing, twenty-five lusty hits. By now you should be as limp as a rag doll. And if next morning you feel that your upper body is being crushed in some fiendish, medieval torture device then you may be reassured that the exercises are doing you good. Repeat the routines morning and night until they become child’s play. Then increase the dose, working up to fifty hits a session, then 100. For really advanced masochism once you have worked up to the full 100 stage, you can progressively add weight to the club by winding lengths of lead wire around the hosel and you can introduce the ultimate refinement of doing the club exercises one-handed.

Cotton and his tyre became famous throughout the community of golf. Portly American businessmen made pilgrimages to Penina, their heads full of theory about straight left arms, dominant left sides, leg action and finger pressure. They were, almost literally, putty in Cotton’s hands. He enslaved them with his charm and wit. Cotton and the donkey-caddie, Pacifico, were an irresistible double act on the course and the magical transformations on the tyre, with the pupils suddenly hitting real golf shots for the first time in their lives, completed the conquest.

Cotton, ever with an eye for the main chance, duly capitalised on the euphoria he created. One of his ploys when playing a round with a visitor who had duly fallen under his spell was to observe the major fault in a player’s technique. Then, after the man had made a particularly embarrassing hash of a drive, Cotton would say: “Let me have a look at your driver. Yes, just as I thought; the weight distribution in the head is all wrong for you. Here, give my driver a try. Now, when you swing, this is what I
want you to do . . .” Armed with a tip that put his swing right, the man naturally hit a good shot. Amazing! Cotton would let the man finish the round with the wonder driver but he would not present it to him right away. The impression had to be created of soul searching before the making of a supreme sacrifice. But that evening, on returning to his room after dinner, the visitor would find the driver with a note saying something like: “Your need is greater than mine, old boy.” And when the hotel bill was rendered the purchase of one driver would be itemised, at a greatly enhanced price. A contemporary of Cotton’s, Maurice Bowyer, a noted clubmaker who made clubs for Bobby Jones in his youth when he served as an assistant to Jack White at Sunningdale, had a golf equipment company, Castle Golf. Bowyer was a great innovator and one of his inventions was a two-piece shaft. It was a good enough shaft but it never caught on commercially. Quite a few drivers fitted with that two-piece shaft were ‘bought’ by visitors to Penina after playing with Cotton. Nobody ever complained about the exorbitant price; most likely nobody even considered the price to be exorbitant. In any case the driver plus the value of the lesson constituted a bargain. And, ironically, those drivers are surely worth more today as collectors’ items than the visitors paid for them.

Oddly enough, Cotton persisted in his search for the perfect putting method and the physical problems which plagued him throughout his career were partly the result of his attempt to make himself into his idea of a putting machine. He had a vision of how the body could be conditioned into becoming a mechanically consistent striker of putts and he practised so hard and so long in pursuit of this unattainable goal that on many occasions he had to be physically picked up and carried off the practice green because his body had become locked in the shape of a question mark. As a result he was an inconsistent putter, never better than adequate, and his record was undoubtedly blemished because his putting did not match the standard of the rest of his game.

Once he decided that he must find the best way for Henry Cotton to play golf he based his experiments on his conviction that the hands must be the paramount source of power and control. He always talked of hands, and squeezed squash balls or spring-steel exercisers until he was well into his seventies, but, of course, the real sources of his strength were the wrists and forearms.
To a golfer's eye, Cotton's style was both beautiful and slightly mysterious. He would take the club in what can only be called a caress, holding it so lightly that you wondered whether it might slip from his fingers at any moment. The act of grounding the club-head behind the ball was ritualistic, almost reverential in the care and precision of the operation. The gigantic feet were plonked solidly into position, with the toes pointing straight ahead. Then one stare of his aquiline eyes at the target would complete the preliminaries.

The delicacy of touch on the club was emphasised as he turned away because as his hands moved back the club-head remained at rest momentarily. He made a full shoulder turn, with the hips opening about 45 degrees and, like all good players, by the time the club reached its position at the top, a markedly short back-swing with the club-face in an open position, the lower body had already started to recoil. The downswing was so leisureed that the onlooker wondered how on earth he could generate enough club-head speed to hit the ball any distance at all. The human eye could not follow the speed of the action as those mighty forearms whipped the club through the impact zone and so it seemed that it had not happened. The only image on the retina was of Cotton standing perfectly still, both feet solidly flat on the ground, his head immovable, looking at the spot from which his divot had been displaced. His extended right arm, with the back of the hand pointing at the sky, having rolled over the left, was waist high on the follow through before there was the slightest movement of the head to follow the progress of the ball.

The other characteristic Cotton action which was clearly discernible was the snapping straight of the left leg to brace his body against the shock of impact. But here was the mystery. How could such a languid movement generate the sound of a whip-crack as the club met the ball? And what strange force was propelling the ball such an inordinate distance on a bee-line towards the target? The answer, of course, was that the whip-crack was produced by the unseen whip-lash of those forearms. The quickness of the hands did indeed deceive the eye. Only a player of prodigious strength and impeccable timing could play golf like Henry Cotton.

He did try to get his pupils to employ the same technique, however, despite the inadequacy of their physical capacity. One of his drills was to get a pupil to set up aiming right of the practice
to demonstrate his skill with different clubs. When he judged that the pupil was becoming arm weary, as any golfer must after hitting twenty or so shots without a break, Cotton would remark innocently: "You could hit the ball twenty yards farther if you used your hands better." Then he would put the pupil through the one-handed and hitting-without-regripping routine and quietly savour the onset of embarrassment and humility.

Cotton well understood the attitude which many pupils have towards teachers. "It is all very well for him; he's been at it full time all his life and it's second nature to him now. He doesn't know how I feel, or understand about my bad back, or realise how difficult this damn game is for somebody who has to sit in an office five days a week. I hope he doesn't try to make me use that stupid Vardon grip because unless I hold the damn club like a baseball bat I can't hit the ball out of my own shadow." Cotton understood all too well. He had a remarkable facility for picking out a golfer's main fault and correcting it with a simple exercise or instruction. The result was an instant and dramatic improvement in the pupil's striking and the conversion of a sceptic into an adoring disciple.

Naturally, the technique varied with each pupil and, apart from his emphasis on the hands, he made no attempt to impose a preconceived Cotton style. Each pupil was given a bespoke golf swing according to his or her size, shape and strength, a method which would enable him to get the most from his potential.

As he taught he expounded his philosophy of golf. He himself wrote several books on golf technique, and innumerable newspaper articles, so it is impossible to do full justice to the range of his ideas in a compressed version. But there is a common thread running through all his instructional writing and an attempt may perhaps be made to distil the essence of it.

The golfer who attempts to play by positional changes of the body, with passive hands, condemns himself to loss of control and almost certain back trouble in the long run. The hands hold the club and they must take priority in the swing, both to control the club-head and to supply its energy. The rest of the body moves to accommodate the paramount action of the arms, wrists and hands. Your swing can only be as effective as your ability to hang on to the club at impact and your hands can never be too strong. Exercise them as much and as often as you can.

The correct tension of the fingers throughout the swing is loose at first, tightening at impact and then relaxing again. This sequence will occur
without conscious thought on your part provided you start the action with a light grip on the club. How light is light? Exert just enough pressure with the fingers to prevent the club from turning during the stroke.

The hands must move faster than the rotation of the body through the impact zone, hitting past the body rather than with it. To achieve this acceleration the right hand rolls over at impact and hits past the left hand. Remember, this is a rolling action, not a cupping of the left wrist combined with a forward bend of the right wrist, not a hinging action but a natural twisting movement.

The right hand guides the shot and finds the ball. If you grip the club with the palms in the same plane as the club-face you will automatically square the club-face at impact, as instinctively as you would deliver a blow absolutely flush when slapping someone’s face. Feel that you are making a definite ‘hit’ with the hands. Slicing is mostly caused by failing to sling the club-head through the ball with the right hand. If you have the club-face closed at the address position it is impossible to apply proper hand action.

Hands, always the hands. The stronger they are the better you can play. Most social golfers will despair at the message because they simply do not have the time or opportunity to train their hands to the degree necessary for playing the Cotton way. The tyre drill may not take all that much time but even that is an inconvenience and a chore which only the most enthusiastic golfers will willingly undergo every day. Well, there is a simpler method of strengthening the hands which can be done more or less anywhere and at any time. Raise the arms in the surrender position and then clench and unclench the hands as hard and as fast as you can until you feel that your forearms are about to explode. Anyone can do that while putting on a shirt and this daily exercise will quickly condition the hands and forearms for better golf the Henry Cotton way.

For the last twenty years of his life Cotton’s main interest was helping young professionals. By his own efforts he had turned professional golf into a respected and lucrative career and revitalised the standing of British pro golf. He wanted the standards he had set to be maintained and he enjoyed passing on the lessons he had learnt by painful trial and error. For the groups of young professionals who visited him at Penina, a week in Cotton’s company was a crash course in how to become a champion, a combination of finishing school with heavy emphasis on personal appearance, deportment and making a point of sending ‘thank
they have exhausted their ration of holing vital putts and mounting counter-attacks. In Henry’s case the game went first as age and ill health took their toll. And then, as it appeared to me, a weariness came over him. He slackened his grip. As a young man his preparations for golf were more meticulous and physically demanding than any other golfer had ever contemplated. Under the insistence of Toots he brought the same thoroughness and application to everything he did, from furnishing a house, to making radio broadcasts, to buying a motor car. But that habit of whole-heartedness vanished when his playing days ended and he became really rather slipshod in his commercial activities and interested only in the rewards. But in one area of his life he remained as diligent and committed as ever right to the end. He had a passionate ambition to pass on the knowledge and skills he had acquired so painfully and nothing fired his enthusiasm so much as the visit to Penina of a young player in search of enlightenment. By the time he was in his seventies he was no more than a name in the history books to a twenty-year-old and it is a natural conceit of youth to believe that nobody from a previous generation could play worth a lick compared to the modern superstars.

Henry understood this attitude and so he habitually started his lessons by establishing his credibility as a player and teacher. His party trick of hitting a succession of one-handed shots without regripping the club, an exercise very few if any of today’s superstars could reproduce, has been described earlier. He had another routine which was equally impressive to advanced students of golf. He would take a club, usually his four-wood, and explain that he was going to hit a number of shots. The pupils were to watch him make the stroke and as soon as the ball was struck they were to call out their judgment of whether it was a short, medium or long shot. Before the balls landed Cotton would announce the distances: 175 yards, 220 yards, 200 yards, 250 yards. Nobody ever made much of a fist of this test because it was impossible to discern any change in Henry’s action. He would then explain: “The quickness of the hand deceives the eye,” and the pupils would be in a totally receptive frame of mind to absorb his familiar homily on the paramount importance of well-trained hands. As always in discussions about Henry Cotton, the focus of interest has come round to those hands. They symbolised the strength and significance of his life as a golfer, marking the gulf which separates the elite band of immortals who play golf as opposed to
the millions who play at golf. That is the most important point I have sought to establish in this book. As for the multi-faceted personality of the man, my original plan of leaving the reader to make an individual judgment must stand. But from my biased perspective he was more of a decent type, much more, than a dungstarter.
The Golfer

Career Victories

1925 Kent Professional championship
1927 Kent Professional championship
1928 Kent Professional championship, Croydon and District Professional championship
1930 Kent Professional championship, Mar del Plata Open (Argentina), Belgian Open
1931 Dunlop Southport tournament
1932 Dunlop Southport tournament, PGA championship
1934 Belgian Open, OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP
1935 Leeds tournament, Yorkshire Evening News tournament
1936 Italian Open, Dunlop Metropolitan tournament
1937 German Open, Silver King tournament, Czechoslovakian Open, OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP
1938 Belgian Open, German Open, Czechoslovakian Open
1939 German Open, Daily Mail tournament, Penfold League tournament
1940 PGA championship
1945 News Chronicle tournament
1946 PGA championship, French Open, Star tournament, Vichy Open
1947 French Open, Spalding tournament, Yorkshire Evening News tournament
1948 OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP, White Sulphur Springs Invitational (USA)
1953 Dunlop 2,000 Guineas tournament
1954 Penfold 1,000 Guineas tournament
1956 Metropolitan Qualifying tournament, US Open
The members behind us never seemed to mind. They regarded Cotton as God. If we went out to a fashionable restaurant to dine in the evening, the people at the tables near by stood up as he entered. But mostly we dined at his home which Toots had furnished with exceptional taste and where she kept a table the like of which could not have been bettered in Brussels.

We played fourteen rounds at Waterloo, a course of some 6,700 yards, during our visit. We went off the furthest back tees and every putt was holed out. Henry never missed a fairway from the tee and he never took more than 67.

He had, by then, just made a huge change in his swing. It is worth describing it in detail for, as far as I know, he never wrote about it nor did he ever speak about it except to his few intimates who were also his disciples. He guarded it like the Ultra Secret. Most of the great players, past and present, have had to make big changes in their actions to get to the top and stay there. But, usually, they've been quite open about it. Not so Cotton.

When he won the championship at Sandwich in 1934 he was, he knew, vulnerable in a right-to-left wind. With his always weak left-hand grip, he had started his professional career as a fader of the ball. Then he went to the United States and, as his biographer makes clear, found that Tommy Armour and the rest of the leading tournament players there were drawing the ball from right to left and hitting it further.

He decided to do likewise, but soon after Sandwich – in 1935 and early 1936 – he concluded he would never achieve the absolute mastery he sought over the flight of a golf ball along that road. And the ability to flight the ball – to move it about at will – to suit all winds and conditions became, for him, the Eldorado for which he strove.

He had always taken the club back flat and well inside and his hands at the top of the backswing remained relatively flat, i.e. barely above the level of his shoulders with the club-face not as open as it subsequently became. Now he made, off his own bat and without any prompting from anyone, the massive change which took him to the summit.

He still took the club back well inside but as it moved up towards the top he began, he said, to get his hands deliberately up and into a more upright and open position with the left wrist more under the shaft and the club-face itself well open, i.e. with the toe pointing downwards. He confided that he had to be
conscious at the top that his hands were “up and forward” with the shaft of the club “not so much across the top of the back as forward almost above the neck”. That was, he said, the latent feeling he was always striving for – the feeling that was to lift his striking into the highest class.

From this upright and open position at the top, he contended he could hit the ball “as early as you like without any fear of hooking it”. Hitting the ball early from an open and relatively upright position at the top – releasing the club, as he put it, early from the top – now became the aim to end all aims in his swing. But he remained ever secretive about his discovery. With it he became confident that he could flight the ball and move it about any way he wanted. It was noticeable to his disciples that he began to judge his contemporaries by their ability to flight the ball – “to throw the ball up, boy, with a long iron or a wooden club: a lot of them drive the ball low and can’t do it”.

From all this flowed his doctrine that to play good, consistent golf in the highest class “you must, boy, know the angles and the extremes of your swing and what they give you. Only then can you find a balance.” Thereafter, he never deviated from these principles.

The only player Henry ever looked up to in the great days of the late 1930s was Harry Vardon, six times Open champion. “Old Harry,” he used to say, was the purest striker of the lot “because he hit it earlier than the rest – hit the ball early with the club-head”. That was also, he said, why Vardon took so little turf with his irons.

After this change, which took him (under Toots’ ever vigilant eye) some eighteen months to perfect, there wasn’t another contemporary striker, British or American, to touch him. He didn’t win the 1936 championship at Hoylake (he was equal third), but his hitting in that Open was, he said, consistently the best he had yet achieved. A friend of mine, one of the game’s best judges, saw much of it. “My dear,” he exclaimed afterwards, “Henry’s striking at Hoylake was so exquisite it was enough to induce a sexual orgasm!”

I doubt whether more than a handful will remember today just how good a golfer Cotton became in the last years of the 1930s as Europe slipped relentlessly into war. I saw every shot he hit in his last victorious round at Carnoustie in 1937 when, as Peter Dobereiner so well recalls, he beat off the weight of a very good
MAESTRO is the extraordinary biography of one of the great sporting individuals of the twentieth century. Peter Dobereiner, with full access to Henry Cotton’s family papers, captures the spirit of the three-times Open Champion who dominated British golf for fifty years.

In the 1920s, when Cotton turned professional aged only sixteen, golf was not accepted by the establishment as a respectable career, but Cotton’s forceful campaigning led the way for post-war professionals. His single-minded application and desire for success led him to dominate Europe’s tournaments from the 1930s to the 1950s, winning eleven continental Opens in all and two important matchplay titles.

Peter Dobereiner writes about Cotton’s life – his beliefs, his passions, his relationship with his wife Toots (his greatest supporter, mentor and critic), his ambitions – as well as about his golf. He has written the book which explains how and why Cotton became known as the Maestro.

Peter Dobereiner was Golf Correspondent for both the Observer and the Guardian for many years. He is also feature writer for the top golf magazines in Britain and America and the author of numerous books on golf. He is without doubt the most widely read golf writer in the world.
shoulders, which is the true center of the swing, you will have the orthodox slope of the swing for all clubs and all players. The correct slope of the swing is determined by the player’s height and the distance the ball is from him. It is the duty of the right arm to guide the club handle through the correct slope, as it is the duty of the right hand to guide the club head through the correct slope.

“Shanking” (striking the ball with the shank or socket of the club) and heeling the ball are generally caused by too flat a swing—one that is rather more inclined towards the horizontal than it should be. A flat swing takes the club back to a position outside of and below the right shoulder. The remedy is—guide the club up to a position closer to the back of your head by a more upright swing. Too upright a swing makes you slap the ground and strike the ball with the toe of the club. The following may be used as a simple and generally correct rule: In the back swing guide the club up with your right arm and right hand to a position approximately above your neck; or in a short swing, on the plane that would ultimately lead to that position if carried far enough. Do the same thing in going to the finish of the swing.

**Fundamental 4. SWING IN LINE WITH DIRECTION OF PLAY:** To drive a ball in a given direction, the club head must be travelling in that direction at the moment of im-
It is the **right hand** and **forearm**. The left shoulder and arm movements merely drag the club **handle** down to the hitting area. You have arrived at the hitting area when your left wrist is about to come into line with your own head and the ball and while the club head is yet trailing far behind the hands. So I would repeat that the shoulder and arm movements do not whip the club head through, but merely swing the handle end of the club. It is the hands that whip the club head through. So do not use too much shoulder and arm power or that will make it impossible for the hands to do their work, which is to speed up the club head and get it through on time. A golfer is no stronger than his hands.

An analysis of moving pictures of leading players reveals the fact that approximately 85 per cent of the speed of the club head is attained by the wrists, 10 per cent by the arms, and only 5 per cent by the shoulders. As was pointed out before, your shoulders, like a hippopotamus, are slow—what we want is speed, not brute force. So go easy with the shoulders and give the wrists a chance to do the work. They are speedy, but remember that they will not be able to do their work if the shoulders have already done it for them.

**Fundamental 10. TIME BOTH SWING AND STROKE:** Timing is not simply mak-
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