

How The Glasgow Herald inspired the Ryder Cup



[Russell Leadbetter](#) / Saturday 2 February 2013 / [Sport](#)

On a momentous Saturday in June, 1921, in front of the clubhouse at Gleneagles, a large crowd gathered to watch a seal being put on a historic day for golf.

Present were numerous professional golfers, the Duchess of Atholl, a cluster of spectators – and the chairman of the directors at Outram & Co, proprietors of The Glasgow Herald. The ceremony was the culmination of a spellbinding week of golf at the Perthshire course. The actual hotel had not yet been completed – James Gourlay, chairman of Outram & Co, referred to it as "rather a blot on the landscape" at the time – but the two courses, the King's and the Queen's, both designed by one of the participating golfers, James Braid, had emerged with flying colours. And the week's showcase opening event, a match between top professional golfers from Britain and America, would in time be seen as a forerunner to the Ryder Cup.

Few are today aware that The Glasgow Herald sponsored the match and provided medals for the golfers. Its role in the events of that June has not been given the exposure many feel it deserves – among them Herald reader Dr Jake Davidson, who stumbled upon the link while researching Pollok Golf Club archives at the Mitchell Library in Glasgow. Now, with the Ryder Cup being played in Scotland for the first time in more than 40 years – and heading for Gleneagles – the time may have come to put this right. Last September at Medinah Country Club, Chicago, after Europe had retained the cup, no less a figure than First Minister Alex Salmond told a global audience that golf would be

coming home in 2014, "and so is the Ryder Cup. For it was in Gleneagles in 1921 that the first international match was played which inspired the Ryder Cup".

The idea of assembling a US team to challenge the Britons prior to the Open Championship is credited to James Hartnett, a circulation manager at Golf Illustrated magazine, whose proposal in December 1920 that each US player would receive expenses and \$1000 was approved.

In the middle of March 1921 The Glasgow Herald announced it would be promoting, once again, a "golf tournament on a large scale" at Gleneagles. It had staged one there the previous year, but this one would be bigger and better. "The prize money provided, one thousand guineas, would in itself be sufficient to attract every professional golfer of note," said a report on March 18, 1921, "but the fact that the Open Championship falls to be played this year at St Andrews, a week after the Gleneagles meeting, ensures the presence in Scotland in June of all the great golfing men, and very few of them will miss either of these events." So it proved.

By May 10 no fewer than 75 professional golfers had signed up. "All the States professionals who are to be in this country have asked that their names be entered - The Gleneagles meeting will be their first public appearance in this country," observed The Glasgow Herald. Among the field were JH Kirkwood, at 24 years old "reckoned to be the best golfer the Antipodes has ever produced", and the reigning Spanish champion, Angel De La Torre. By May 17, the number of competitors had risen to 100.

According to the Gleneagles Ryder Cup website, the US team who would challenge Britain set sail on the Clyde-built RMS Aquitania, making the Atlantic crossing from New York and, once they had landed, taking the train to Gleneagles.

En route to Perthshire they stopped to greet their friends George Duncan, the reigning Open champion, and Abe Mitchell, playing an exhibition match at Pollok Golf Club. Then it was on to Gleneagles. Monday, June 6, dawned bright and clear.

The event, wrote The Glasgow Herald's unnamed correspondent the following day, "has brought together for the first time teams representative of British and American professional golf - The amount of prize money to be distributed throughout the week is the largest that has ever been offered." The newspaper's owners, he added, "yielding to a widespread desire to repeat the event of last year, did so in the belief that the Scottish public were anxious to witness the talent of the golfing world on a course that has already established its right to rank with the finest either in this country or in the States - Gleneagles, young as it is, has already begun to make golfing history."

In view of the fact the hotel was not yet open (its grand unveiling wouldn't be until June, 1924) the players were put up in sleeper coaches at Gleneagles station – a far cry from the situation in 2014, when the luxury hotel will be given over to players and officials.

The opening event was the international match between Great Britain and the United States. Britain's team was the older one by far. Captain JH Taylor was 50; Braid – from Earlsferry in Fife – and Harry Vardon were both 51 (they remain the Great Triumvirate of British golf, between them winning the Open on no fewer than 16 occasions between 1894 and 1914). Josh Taylor was 40, James Sherlock and Ted Ray, the reigning US Open champion, were over 40; James Ockenden, Scotsman George Duncan and Abe Mitchell were all in their mid-30s, while the youngest, at 25, was Arthur Havers. Against them were arrayed such notables as Walter Hagen, an all-time great, and expatriate Scots including Jock Hutchison (St Andrews) and Fred McLeod (North Berwick). Hutchison

would go on to win that year's Open; the year after that, Hagen would secure the first of his four Open titles.

But Britain won the Gleneagles international, beating the US 9-3. The event was reported enthusiastically in The Glasgow Herald the next day under a multi-deck headline, all in capitals, the typesize becoming slightly smaller the further down you read. "GLENEAGLES. INTERNATIONAL GOLF. BRITAIN v AMERICA. HOME TEAM VICTORIOUS. THE 'GLASGOW HERALD' TOURNAMENT." The US ambassador to Britain had made the long journey up from London, expecting to see his countrymen triumph, and when they failed, he made a speedy departure.

Gold medals, struck for the occasion, with crossed Union and Stars and Stripes flags, were presented to each player. "America v Britain," read an inscription. "First international golf match at The Glasgow Herald tournament, Gleneagles, June 6, 1921." In a speech, Mr Gourlay, of Outrams, said that as great as the 1920 Herald competition had been, "it had far been surpassed". He was right.

The rest of the week at Gleneagles featured the main tournament. Four qualifying rounds were played over two days, deciding the leading 16 players for the tense, exciting matchplay rounds. The final was contested by Abe Mitchell and JH Kirkwood, the talented young prospect from Australia. Mitchell had proved his worth by remaining unflustered during a torrid earlier encounter with Hutchison. "You never seemed to worry," someone said to him afterwards. "Why worry?" replied Mitchell, evidently a man of few words. "What good would it do?"

Hagen, the top US name, had been expected to do well but fell by the wayside. Sartorially, at least, he attracted attention, keeping cool in the glorious weather with his white trousers, light black-and-white shoes, and thin, dark sleeveless cardigan over his white shirt. British golfers, noted The Glasgow Herald's man, had much to learn from the Americans "about playing golf in comfort".

Mitchell triumphed over Kirkwood in a tremendous final. Both men received their prizes from the Duchess of Atholl, a moment recorded for posterity by British Pathe. Mitchell was awarded £200, Kirkwood £100 and the two runners-up £50 each. One player got £20 for the best score over the King's course, and another received £10 for the best score on the Queen's course. The rest of the thousand guineas funded special prizes.

Now, the story of The Glasgow Herald's 1921 Thousand Guineas event could have ended there, but thanks to Dr Davidson, 87, who "with advancing years and a shortened backswing, turned to golf history", it has been rediscovered.

Davidson – former head of radiology at Glasgow's Western Infirmary and a member of Pollok Golf Club and the R&A – says, "While researching the exhibition match between George Duncan and Abe Mitchell at Pollok in 1921, I came across a newspaper photograph showing what it called the American Golf Professionals in Glasgow. What were they doing in Glasgow in 1921 and at Pollok? This led me to look back at the golf tournament at Gleneagles. Like many others I was completely unaware of The Glasgow Herald tournament and the huge prize money which attracted the professionals and was hence the first informal Ryder Cup. In my view The Glasgow Herald's role in the cup has been shamefully overlooked. Recognition is long overdue."

There was no talk of a follow-up match and it would have been difficult to imagine then what great competitive golf this first match would lead to. But it is at this point that Sam Ryder enters the story. A workaholic who had made his fortune by selling seed through the post at a penny a packet, Ryder, from St Albans, took up golf at the age of 50. He took daily lessons and engaged Mitchell as his

personal tutor, and would later immortalise his teacher by having him depicted by the gilded figure on top of the Ryder Cup itself.

The Ryder Cup website says there were two unofficial matches between Britain and the US before the birth of the cup in 1927. The first was at Gleneagles (there is, however, no mention of The Glasgow Herald), while the second, at Wentworth, Surrey in 1926, the year of the General Strike, was more significant.

Ryder had suggested to the Professional Golfers Association – perhaps encouraged by Mitchell – that he donate a trophy for an international match between the US and Great Britain/Ireland. The PGA agreed, and the first publicity came about in April.

The match took place at Wentworth on June 4 and 5, 1926, and Britain won by a decisive 13-1 margin. But for various reasons it was decided that this would not count as the first in the Ryder series – that honour was reserved for the next match, at Worcester Country Club, Massachusetts, in 1927, by which time the Ryder trophy, fashioned by jewellers and silverware-makers Mappin and Webb, had been completed. Michael Hobbs, in his book *The Ryder Cup: The Illustrated History*, says that "first" Ryder Cup, "like the 1921 Gleneagles match, has largely been forgotten".

However, there seems to be a case for arguing that the success and high profile of The Glasgow Herald's 1921 initiative helped pave the way for the founding of a biennial challenge match between Britain (later GB and Ireland, now Europe) and the US. Hobbs acknowledges that "it too played its part in what would eventually become the Ryder Cup series"; while the Gleneagles/Ryder Cup website suggests it was "effectively the forerunner" of the Ryder Cup. It is also a fact that the first international professional match between these two great rivals took place under this newspaper's aegis.

Next year, 93 long years after the gilded trio of Taylor, Vardon and Braid, and Walter Hagen, George Duncan, Abe Mitchell and the others assembled at Gleneagles to take part in a transatlantic competition devised by this newspaper, the Ryder Cup might be said to be returning to the course where it all began. A year of homecoming, indeed.

Sources: gleneagles.com/golf/ryder-cup-2014; europeantour.com/rydercup/history; *The Ryder Cup: An Illustrated History* by Michael Hobbs (Macdonald Queen Anne Press)