



Miracle at Merion

“If you can’t outplay them,” Ben Hogan said, “outwork them.” Nowhere was this mental toughness on better display than in 1950 when Hogan practically came back from the grave to win the US Open. Let’s set the stage for what Tiger Woods called the greatest comeback in the history of the game.

(music begins)

Hogan wasn’t a natural like his contemporaries, Sam Snead and Byron Nelson. He ground it out for seven long years before winning his first tournament. Always learning, practicing, taming a nasty hook that he said was like having “a rattlesnake in your pocket.” The hard work paid off.

Between 1946 and 1948, Hogan played in 77 tournaments and won 30, including 3 Majors. That’s 40%. No wonder Sam Snead said, “The three things I fear most in golf are lightning, Ben Hogan and a downhill putt.” Hogan began 1949 by winning 2 out of 3 starts—and finishing second in the one he lost. He was on his way to dominating the game.

Then on a foggy February morning, Hogan was driving to Fort Worth when a 20,000-pound Greyhound bus crossed the center line.

(sound of tires screeching but fade out before impact. hospital sounds)

Hogan suffered a broken ankle, fractured collarbone, chipped rib, a double fracture of his pelvis, and a blood clot in his thigh that almost killed him.

He was told he might never walk again. When he started walking, he was told he’d never play golf again. When he started playing, he was told he’d never compete at a professional level again. “People have always been telling me what I can’t do,” he said. “I guess I wanted to show them.”

16 months later, Hogan was back at the U.S. Open.

(music change)

Imagine being at Merion Golf Club in Pennsylvania. It’s 1950. June. Hot and muggy. But you don’t even notice. You’re swept along in the gallery that swells around Hogan. Like everyone, you’ve seen photos of the accident. It’s impossible to connect that wreckage with the perfect swing on display here today.

On the first day, he shoots 72, tied for 18th. On the second round, he shoots 69, pulling himself within two shots of the lead. He’s in constant pain, his legs wrapped in bandages to stop the swelling.

But he battles on. When he hits a perfect shot, the roar is unlike anything you’ve ever heard. When he bends over a putt, it gets so quiet you’d swear even the birds stop chirping. Hogan was never a popular player on tour. He was all business. But today, every heart in the gallery is behind him.

(sound of putt struck, pause, ball in cup — crowd cheers)

By the final round, Hogan is tied for the lead when he bogeys the 17th. Everyone knows he’s in trouble. The 18th at Merion is a monster. 457 yards, semi-blind drive over a quarry, domed green protected by deep bunkers. Hogan’s legs are cramping so bad, he can’t bend down to pick up his ball. There’s no way.

Then he steps up to the tee. He stares down that fairway, and you understand why he’s called the Hawk. Look at that concentration.

(pause, golf swing, impact, cheers)

He hits a solid tee shot. But as he staggers down the fairway, you know he’s a long 200 yards out. Most players would settle for a 4-wood. You hear a low murmur when Hogan pulls a 1-iron — the most difficult club in a golfer’s bag. You can’t help but think of Lee Trevino’s old joke: “If you’re ever caught in a lightning storm, the safest thing to do is hold up a 1-iron because even God can’t hit it.”

When Hogan unleashes on that ball, the crowd gasps (add sound) like he knocked the breath right out of their bodies. Moments later, he two-putts for par (roar of crowd). You and everyone else flood onto the green, which was an unusual thing for fans to do in those days. But you can’t help it. You just witnessed golf history—there will never be another moment like this.

(music change)

From 1950 on, Hogan only entered a few tournaments. That was all his damaged body could handle. In ’53, he played six and won five, including three back-to-back majors. That was the only year he played at the British Open, and he won it, one-for-one. When he came home, he got a ticker-tape parade, which hadn’t happened to a golfer since Bobby Jones.

So what’s the take-away here? Thankfully, most of us will never have to cope with the kind of challenges Hogan faced. But remember, he formed his philosophy and shaped his swing before the accident. Of all the greats, Hogan is most like us. He didn’t have the natural talent of Sam Snead or Jack Nicklaus or Tiger Woods. Nothing came easy to him. He had to get better the old fashioned way: grinding it out, little by little. Maybe that’s why he appreciated the game so deeply—wisdom that applies to everything else too.

Like Hogan said, “As you walk down the fairway of life you must smell the roses, for you only get to play one round.”