



LITTLE POISON

Paul Runyan, Sam Snead, and a Long-Shot Upset
at the 1938 PGA Championship **JOHN DECHANT**

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Prologue

In the beginning, he was just a kid trying to find his way onto a golf club, one across the road from his father's dairy farm. Then, in his tenth decade alive, there he was again, now an old man—a very old man—trying to get onto a golf club.

Not just any club. The most famous of its kind, Augusta National, known the world over for its annual Masters Tournament, a celebration of not just championship golf but also everything that's perfect about this former plant nursery, which golf legend Bobby Jones had first laid eyes on shortly after his Grand Slam conquest of 1930: the breathtaking reveal one gets when driving down Magnolia Lane, the flawless azaleas, the annual champions dinner, the nearly commercial-free television presentation, the meticulous course conditions (fawned over by club golfers and downplayed by golf course superintendents everywhere who each April, like clockwork, have to listen to a chorus of members asking, "Why can't our course look like that?"), the neatly packaged pimento cheese sandwiches, and the throwback pricing of other crowd-pleasing foodstuffs like chicken biscuits and Georgia pecan caramel popcorn. And on, and on. The place had become as famous for such hoopla and creature comforts as it had for its entire reason for being—golf.

Paul Runyan, ninety, described by one journalist that April day in 1999 as a "peanut of a man," accompanied by his second wife and carrying his own thirty-pound golf bag, had shelled out \$10 for a shuttle ride from his hotel only to get dropped off at the wrong gate outside Augusta National, on the side of Washington Road.

Runyan now faced a half-mile walk to the famed Augusta clubhouse. His journey to Augusta that early spring had been less than surefire.

Prologue

Months before, after deciding he'd like to play as an honorary invitee in the Par-3 Contest, annually held on the Wednesday before the Masters begins, Runyan picked up the telephone and tried to let someone at Augusta National know he'd be coming. Problem. He couldn't get a live body to take his call. "Telephonic devices," as Runyan called them, were his kryptonite, and the voice on the machine asking him to press 1 for this and 2 for that and so on only confused him.

Didn't matter. He and his wife would head for Augusta National anyway. It would be Runyan's first trip there in four years. His very first trip came in 1934, during the first of FDR's several terms as president. That year he had played in the first Masters ever contested, then known as the Augusta National Invitation Tournament. It was played in March back then. He scored a featured pairing that year with no less than Bobby Jones, the man who founded the place. Now, in 1999, Runyan was back in Augusta, Jones was long dead, and Bill Clinton, a native Arkansan like Runyan, held the highest office in the land.

As Runyan and his wife walked toward the clubhouse that April morning, fate intervened. A car pulled over. Not just any car but one occupied by Sam Snead's manager and caddie. They recognized the man in the black sweater and gray wool golf slacks as Runyan and offered him a lift, which he accepted. It was 9:00 a.m., and the sun was starting to warm up this southern patch of golf heaven in a hurry. Runyan was a seven-year survivor of heart bypass and just a month removed from carotid artery surgery, performed to prevent a stroke. A car ride sounded like a good idea. That it came from two members of Snead's posse was more perfect. That's history winking at you.

Contest organizers found a spot for Runyan in the Par-3 Contest. It was an ideal spot, paired with former Masters champions Tom Watson and Ben Crenshaw, known as two of professional golf's finest gentlemen and biggest history buffs. And they found him a caddie, an Augusta regular named Rick Flinchum.

At 1:12 p.m. Runyan made it to the first tee of the 1,060-yard short course at Augusta National and shook hands with Watson and Crenshaw. Arnold Palmer made a special trip over from the putting green and hugged Runyan, smiling like he was embracing his own uncle at Thanksgiving. Then, wearing a white Callaway bucket hat, Runyan

Prologue

was announced to the crowd that had gathered around the tee. And off they went.

Runyan played the Augusta par-three course that day. Every hole. Not his best, but he played. He shot a nine-over-par 36, making four pars, two bogeys, two double bogeys, and one triple. As the group neared completion of the round and walked along a narrow path toward the ninth green that snaked around Ike's Pond, Ben Crenshaw made sure to take the inside route, acting as a human barrier just in case Runyan lost his balance and started to fall toward the pond.

"I grabbed him by the arm, and my caddie Carl Jackson and I both said that we better get him going the right way," Crenshaw remembered.

As for Runyan's game, Crenshaw could still picture a once-great player, trapped in the body of an old man. "No question, the vestiges were there," he recalled. "You could see in the way he put his hands on the club and the way that he swung, the way he handled the club. You could tell. It was there."

Playing in the group behind Runyan that day was Tiger Woods, two years removed from his first Masters victory, and he applauded from the eighth green when Runyan's second attempt found the green at the ninth. Woods had played a few groups behind Runyan the year before in a pretournament event at the PGA Championship at Sahalee Country Club near Seattle.

And in the group ahead was Sam Snead, eighty-six, winner of seven major championships and then the all-time leader in PGA Tour victories (eighty-two). Two decades later, Woods and Snead would become linked as Woods threatened to wrestle away the all-time wins record. Snead, on that sunny day in 1999, was sixty-one years removed from the greatest drubbing he ever took on a golf course in serious competition.

It had come directly at the hands of that peanut of a man, Paul Runyan.

PART 1

Hot Springs Boys

I

Something in the Water

Four thousand four hundred years. Scientists say that's the age of the water that emerges from the ground of the thermal springs in Hot Springs, Arkansas. The phenomenon is not easily or perhaps even entirely understood. Rocks called chert and novaculite, formed in deep ocean environments during the Carboniferous period, were folded and faulted as the earth's plates shifted, creating cracks that allowed water to seep into the ground when it rained on the Ouachita Mountains. The rainwater that seeped through, descending some eight thousand feet, started to warm as the earth's temperature increased with depth, a concept known as geothermal gradient. Then the folds and faults of the rocks created a path for the water to rapidly ascend, emerging through the Hot Springs sandstone at a temperature of 147 degrees Fahrenheit. One million gallons of thermal water flowed from the springs every day.

Was there something in the water? You better believe it.

THE CENSUS TAKER who visited Hot Springs Township, Arkansas, on January 21, 1920, likely had no idea of the serendipity that he was recording on the Garland County census form. But what person, whose job was to dispassionately interview people and update their basic information, could be expected to connect the dots that linked neighbors by deeper relationships like master and apprentice, friend, and mentor?

Jimmy Norton, forty-three, and his wife, Dela, thirty-eight, inhabited dwelling number 177 listed on that form. Norton hailed from Scotland and was employed as the manager of a local golf club, the census indicated. Make that *the* local golf club. And let's not stall over census jargon like "manager." Norton was the golf pro, plain and

simple. On line 64 of that same census form, the line directly above Norton's, was the name Paul S. Runyan. Just eleven years old, Paul was the second son of Walter S. Runyan, thirty-eight, and his wife, Mamie, thirty-six. He had been born on July 12, 1908, but the census won't give you that, or any, birthdate. Nor will it give you the exact place of his birth, which was 19 Baker Street in Hot Springs. At that address stood a house, not a hospital.

According to the federal census, the Runyans in 1920 rented their home, and Walter (whose brother, according to family legend, was a moonshiner) worked as a dairy farmer. Any hopes he had about passing along the trade were about to dwindle. Around that time, young Paul decided that dairy farming would not be in his future. It was a fine enough occupation for his father, Paul thought, but the boy had been bitten by the golf bug, and Jimmy Norton—call him the golf pro next door—took a liking to Paul and offered to help.

Help with what? For starters, Norton provided Paul access to the game. The Runyans lived right across the road from the Hot Springs Golf and Country Club, yet the worlds of a dairy farming family and a typical Hot Springs golfer, who was usually a vacationer with enough disposable income to spend a few days or weeks soaking in the warm, supposedly curative spring water sheltered by the east-west-oriented Ouachita Mountains, were rungs apart on the socioeconomic ladder.

Paul started out as a caddie. Even though he considered himself the best caddie in the yard, he had a hard time getting bags because he was small. People worried he couldn't keep up, so on many occasions he caddied for Jimmy Norton. He fought a similar battle in the schoolyard. As an undersized kid, he became an easy target of bullies. He had his share of minor scrapes—nothing too serious—that toughened him up and taught him how to stick up for himself.

Hot Springs loopers were forbidden to play the course, even in the summer, which was the off-season in Hot Springs. The penalty for breach of this rule was termination. But Runyan was made an apprentice to Norton, which allowed him the opportunity to sneak in four holes each day on his way to school and five holes on the way back. The Runyan farmhouse was located about four hundred yards from the Hot Springs clubhouse, and Paul's country school sat adjacent to

the fifth green. Paul and his older brother, Elmo, would get pulled aside by the school's headmaster during the morning recess and over the lunch hour for a quick rundown of their afternoon lessons. In exchange, they were allowed to leave school early to report for work at the club.

Picture them, the Runyan boys, leaving school early, bound for the golf course, already with four holes under their belt from the morning commute. Young Paul, dairy farming averse, his older brother at his side, and his father's disfavor on his mind, supremely confident, full of conviction, was embarking on another afternoon as a golf professional-in-training under the watchful eye of a transplanted Scot, his neighbor from dwelling number 177. Perhaps the boys carried their clubs. Or maybe they stored them at the clubhouse. Did they even have their own clubs at that age? It doesn't matter. Wait, yes it does. Everything about the game he loved mattered to the boy. Maybe it wasn't that Norton *offered* to help but that he simply had no way to tell the kid no. You can imagine what the other kids at school must have thought, seeing those lucky Runyans blaze through the afternoon curriculum over lunch so they could leave early for another afternoon at the golf club. It was like watching Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn play hooky every afternoon—with the teacher's blessing. It sounds like a bizarre kind of work-study arrangement for adolescents, but when one of those kids was a golf-crazed aspiring professional, it was the perfect apprenticeship. Could Paul even keep the smile off his face each morning at school—feigning interest in reading, writing, and arithmetic—as his mind wandered toward his afternoon delight?

The money was good, too. Paul was paid 35 cents per half hour to shag balls while Norton gave lessons. The boy became proficient at using his catcher's mitt to snag balls on the fly and save himself some running around. Gratuity was usually 50 cents, sometimes as high as \$1. And that came on top of what he made caddying; typically, as all caddies would attest, the better a golfer played, the better the tip. As a youngster, Paul was able to regularly bring home \$45 a week to his mother. Other caddies were satisfied once they had collected \$5. During especially good weeks, Paul's take-home pay shot up to \$80, sometimes \$90. As he put it, he had "more money to spend than any

kid in Hot Springs.” Still, golf rubbed his father the wrong way. Walter whipped his son several times for deserting the dairy farm for the golf course, Paul said. In the Runyan household, whippings were serious business. His son’s loathing of dairy farming bothered Walter only a little. It was the boy’s choice of alternative vocation that got under his skin. Golf, he insisted, was not real work.

On the subject of his golf obsession, Paul was unafraid of his father. Looking him directly in the eye, he told the old man, “Dad, you can whip me if you want, but it won’t do you any good, because I’m going over to the golf course, and I’m going to become a golf professional.”

The elder Runyan was no fool, even if the boy’s words stung. It became hard to ignore his son’s weekly haul of \$45.

Pinpointing precisely when Paul and Walter had their come-to-Jesus moment over golf is difficult, but it likely happened in 1921. That was the year when the “small, but eager” caddie decided to make golf his future. Small but eager: those were his own words. That was one of two major decisions he made in 1921. The other pertained to the manner in which he played the game. Despite his love for golf, the game did not come naturally. It was a struggle right from the start. Other caddies were better players at first. The Vanoy brothers, described as “strong, sturdy farm boys,” were two of his regular playing companions from the caddie pen, and both could hit the golf ball well past Runyan’s longest drives. In order to compete, he had two options: go home and milk more cows to get stronger under the watchful eye of his father or get really good (or “clever,” as he put it) at hitting short shots. Runyan opted for the latter.

It was a choice made out of necessity, he claimed. It began a lifelong love affair with golf’s short game, and it would go a long way toward determining his future success as a player.

IT ALL BEGAN because a town wanted golf.

The Hot Springs Golf Club had been organized in January 1898, just five years after the Chicago Golf Club became the first eighteen-hole course in the United States and four years after the formation of the United States Golf Association. Things got moving fast. The Arkansas course was plotted that same month, and it opened for play on March

8. This initial routing consisted of nine holes, measuring 188, 202, 356, 370, 295, 263, 240, 256, and 295 yards. Those distances would make it a short course in modern times, at least in terms of yardage, but in 1898 it was plenty long.

Its geological natural wonder made Hot Springs a resort city. A baseball city. A hotel city. And folks with a financial interest in those hotels needed entertainment for their guests. After all, you can only spend so many hours a day soaking in a hot bath before your skin starts to take on the wrinkled appearance of a raisin. Enter golf, a new-to-the-country stick-and-ball game, fresh off a steamship from Scotland, with its strange rules and customs that offered just the sort of outdoor recreation the local innkeepers had in mind. Visitors to the golf club could pay a daily fee of 50 cents for use of the course. Or they could choose to pay by the week (\$2) or month (\$5).

This arrangement lasted barely more than a decade before the community truly got serious about golf. On April 17, 1909, the Hot Springs Golf and Country Club Association was formed. A board of directors was elected. Stock in the club was sold. And an option to purchase and build on 240 acres of land a mile and a half south of the city was taken at a cost of \$15,000. By golly, Hot Springs, Arkansas, was going to have itself a proper golf club.

Yet for all their enthusiasm, the club's stockholders knew little about what they were doing. The first club president, Martin A. Eisele, whose signature was on the club's stock certificates, confessed as much, stating that "none of us had any previous experience to go on." The group estimated that a golf course could be built, and a clubhouse could be constructed, for a total of \$20,000, though it's unclear, and was even then to Eisele, how they arrived at such a figure.

Off they went.

"The magnitude of this undertaking was, I confess, not fully appreciated by me when I assumed control of it, and I doubt whether many of our stockholders really knew just how great an undertaking this has been," Eisele wrote later in 1909. "To convert 150 acres of practically forest into a golf course within a year is a problem of some magnitude and involved the utilization of both energy and money, coupled with competent and intelligent direction."

On May 15, 1909, work began to prepare the densely wooded grounds for golf. Like much of Garland County and the nearby Ouachita Mountains, the terrain was rugged and heavily forested. Small trees and vines were cut down, and the low-hanging limbs of large trees were trimmed to create space, presumably for course routing and airflow. The club tabbed William Anderson of the St. Louis Golf and Country Club, considered by club members to be “one of the leading experts in the country,” to lay out the course. According to Eisele, Anderson liked the site and suggested that with the proper care and budget Hot Springs could have one of the best golf courses in the country.

The sultry Arkansas summer made it a difficult time to build a golf course. With air temperatures ascending toward triple digits and an off-the-beaten-path job site that made it tricky to hire competent labor, the working conditions proved challenging. While many of his colleagues—likely other club stockholders—fled Hot Springs that summer for cooler climates to the north, Eisele stuck around to supervise the work.

Eisele may well have been the hero of the project. A druggist by trade, he had come to Hot Springs in 1887 and soon took ownership of a series of pharmacies. In 1907 he partnered briefly with Charles Walgreen in the Live and Let Live Drug Store. After a year, Walgreen sold his interest to Eisele and returned to Chicago, where he founded what would later become one of the most successful and recognizable drugstore chains in the world—Walgreens.

Eisele was in his early fifties during the construction of the Hot Springs Golf and Country Club. Despite his advancing age, he seemed well suited to the role of construction supervisor. From 1900 to 1907 he had served as superintendent of the Hot Springs Reservation. In 1832 President Andrew Jackson had designated Hot Springs as the first federal reservation of land for recreational use, and in 1921, five years after the establishment of the National Park Service, Hot Springs became a national park, joining the likes of existing parks such as Yellowstone and Yosemite.

After William Anderson completed his initial routing of the golf course, crews came in to cut down the remaining trees, pull the stumps, and burn the wood. Then the ground was leveled, plowed, harrowed,

graded, raked (by hand), and rolled. It was a hot, dry summer, and the ground was hard. Finally, the course was seeded. Meanwhile, construction of the clubhouse was under way. After careful consideration, the club selected a site that was elevated and would look attractive on approach. Problem: the land was not theirs. That meant they had to purchase an additional six acres. Expenses continued to mount, and organizers had to borrow more money. Eisele remained undaunted.

A formal opening of the golf course had been targeted for the fall of 1910, and it was reported that President William Howard Taft, an avid golfer, would be on hand to hit a ceremonial tee shot. However, Taft's visit, at least in a ceremonial capacity, never came to fruition.

By all reports, the early years of the Hot Springs Golf and Country Club were a success. In March 1912, New York-based industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, a vacationer to the Hot Springs area, visited the course and declared that it stacked up against any in the country. Members thought the same, but it was nice hearing it from an outsider.

Over the summer of 1912, the course was seeded with Bermuda grass. With each passing year, it became more evident that the grand vision was working. Visitors came from all over the country to play the course. Members paid their dues faithfully, and some even requested additional stock in the club. In 1916 the Arkansas State Golf Association brought its first state tournament to Hot Springs, contested over four days in April.

Then there strode into town one Willie Park Jr., whose talents were the final touch that the club needed to become an elite golf destination. The tweed-wearing, mustached Scotsman had won two Open Championships in the 1880s and already had numerous renowned golf course designs to his credit in Europe and the United States, including Kilspindie Golf Club, Sunningdale, and New Haven Country Club. Despite the praise that had been heaped on many of his course designs, Park kept a relatively low profile in Hot Springs. Described as a man with an "international reputation," Park's yearlong revisions to the course were plainly recounted as wonderful improvements. But those improvements—paired with the desirable Hot Springs winter weather—worked. The course was frequently overcrowded that

year. The clubhouse was enlarged, locker rooms were added, and new showers were installed. Play doubled in November 1919 compared to the same month a year earlier. The club received letters from golfers around the country, expressing interest in playing the course during their time in Arkansas. Golf was so popular in Hot Springs, plans for a second eighteen-hole golf course were already in the works.

This all had to be music to the ears of Jimmy Norton when he showed up in Hot Springs. Not only would Norton work as the club professional, but the booming golf scene allowed him the resources to hire additional help. That help would eventually include his dairy farming neighbor's kid, Paul Runyan. The boy had played a little baseball and had dabbled in boxing, at least until his knuckles started to hurt, but he would have dragged those knuckles across broken glass for the chance to apprentice under Norton at the golf club.

Even Babe Ruth himself fancied all that Hot Springs had to offer, golf included. Ever since 1886, when Cap Anson brought his Chicago White Stockings to Hot Springs to prepare for the upcoming baseball season, the city had grown into a spring-training hotspot. Besides the comfortable weather, the owners and players enjoyed the first-class hotels, mountain trails, hot mineral baths, and active nightlife. Perhaps none enjoyed it more than the Great Bambino, who became something of an adopted son to the people of Hot Springs. The Babe liked to hike the mountains, gamble at the casinos, and play golf (when he wasn't hitting massive home runs, such as the 573-foot blast that rose over the right-center-field fence on March 17, 1918, from Whittington Park and landed inside the Arkansas Alligator Farm). Babe and his baseball training companions frequently would play for a box of cigars. It seemed that whenever the Babe teed it up, a decent-sized gallery turned up to watch him play.

Ruth took his time in Hot Springs seriously, even if it sounded more like a vacation than a training session. Three weeks of baths (taken in uncomfortably hot water, followed by a steam treatment, a half-hour sweat, and a cold shower), rubdowns, and casual rounds of golf topped off with cigars became routine for the big slugger every winter.

The Babe was sometimes a guest at the Majestic Hotel, regarded as one of the South's most famous hotels. Located at the intersection of

Park and Central Avenues, on the north end of Bathhouse Row, the Majestic—through an agreement with the federal government—had since 1886 been offering its guests thermal water from Hot Springs National Park in the hotel’s therapeutic baths. Besides attracting the Babe and other baseball regulars, the Majestic later became popular with underworld figures such as Al Capone and Frank Costello. Why? Maybe because New York gangster Owney Madden set up shop in the city and maintained his spot there until his death in the 1960s. His association with the city made it a fashionable hangout for his racketeering comrades, who probably appreciated the security of staying in their hotels to receive a thermal bath over the risk of leaving the hotel and being in plain sight. Or maybe, but less likely, they just wanted to rub shoulders with professional athletes like Ruth.

And who knows how, exactly, Walter Runyan, Paul’s father, got hooked up with the Majestic Hotel by managing its dairy farm. It’s doubtful he yearned to catch a glimpse of the Major Leaguers, and it’s even more doubtful that he had any ties to organized crime. He was a man in need of a steady income to take care of his family. When the boys were little he had worked as a fireman and a truck driver for a laundry, but he set his sights on something with more long-term potential. Little, if anything, is known about the precise nature of Walter’s agreement with the Majestic, but what is known is that he was ill for several years when his boys were young. Mamie Runyan confirmed the presence of an illness to a newspaper reporter in 1934 for a profile about Paul, noting that her two boys had had to learn to fend for themselves at an early age. Walter’s illness—once reported as a case of tuberculosis that sent him into the state sanitarium for five years and prompted Paul to seek out safe activities outdoors—limited him physically and thus stunted the output of his dairy farm.

The Majestic paid Walter \$120 per month to manage the farm, but as his boys grew up and started to handle more of the labor, he asked for \$250 per month. Management denied the raise, so Walter quit and went off on his own—with his two boys at his side—at the farm across the street from the golf club.

Paul’s tale is not that of the wayward son, at least not in any classic sense. It’s true that at an early age the boy decided he wanted to be

a golfer, not a dairy farmer. Yet all indications are that he was, particularly as a boy, every bit the farmhand that his father needed for his enterprise to survive. He gathered wood for the stove and helped milk cows morning and night, and his brother Elmo—whose given name was Elmo Dickson and who sometimes went by “Dick”—worked right alongside him. They would rise each morning at 4:00 (3:00 in the summer) to milk the cows, cool the milk, then deliver it by horse and wagon. Eventually they bought a Ford to speed up the delivery process. Sadly, nothing could speed up the time it took customers to pay their bills. Between the farm work, the caddying, and his studies, young Paul Runyan’s days were filled from dawn until dusk. His father recognized this fact, too.

“Paul was a good kid,” Walter Runyan told the same reporter who interviewed Mamie in 1934. “He never smoked a cigarette. He never told me a lie.”

Walter’s insertion of “me” into that sentence uncloaks the dynamic between father and son. It’s as if he’s telling the reporter to distrust any supposed tension between him and his son, almost confessing that his lifelong disdain for golf had been overblown. There were worse boyhood diversions than caddying. Smoking cigarettes, for one.

Once, when the boys were young, they asked their father if they could go fishing. When they returned with wet hair, Walter asked if they had gone swimming instead. Dick wanted to fib their way out of it, but Paul wouldn’t let him.

“Yes, Dad, we did go swimming,” Paul said.

“What do you think I ought to do to you for disobeying?” Walter asked.

“I think we ought to be whipped,” Paul said.

“About how hard?”

“About ten licks.”

“That is exactly what I am going to give you.”

Paul received ten licks, and his brother received twenty.

After the evening milking was done at the Runyan dairy farm, Paul would leave for the golf course, carrying a pail filled with golf balls. He would hit ball after ball into the setting Arkansas sun until the pail

was empty, then pick them up one by one. If there was any daylight remaining, he would repeat the routine until darkness.

When the South Central Open first came to Hot Springs Country Club, Runyan was tempted to qualify for a spot in the field. Jimmy Norton preached patience and told Runyan to caddie for one of the professionals instead. He set him up to carry Macdonald Smith's bag. Smith was one of the best players in golf and, like Norton, a native Scot. Runyan took one look at the woods in Smith's bag and wondered how his player ever got them airborne. Then he watched him hit his brassie so high that it looked like it was going up through an elevator. It was a shot Runyan had never seen before and one that demonstrated how skillful elite professionals truly were.

As Runyan grew up and matured as a player, Norton let him take on more responsibilities as an apprentice, including club making and golf instruction. On the practice tee, Runyan became like a cash machine for Norton. As Runyan remembered, the lessons he gave put \$500 to \$700 a week into the till. He was paid a salary of \$75 or \$80 a week, so the extra money belonged to Norton and the club. The same went for the money he made on club repairs and cleaning. Sporting an attitude that was perhaps indicative of the era, Runyan was fine with the arrangement and simply grateful for the opportunity.

"I felt I was fortunate," he told veteran golf journalist Al Barkow for his 1986 oral history *Gettin' to the Dance Floor*, which includes one of the most detailed and insightful profiles of Runyan anywhere—exactly what you'd expect from an author as accomplished as Barkow, who in 2005 received the PGA Lifetime Achievement Award in Journalism.

"I was learning a profession and getting paid for it," Runyan said. "How much better can you do than that?"

As for Runyan's own game, his technique, particularly in the short game, was developed through circumstance and his own ingenuity. That's because the putting surfaces at Hot Springs Golf and Country Club in those early days were made of sand. To anyone unfamiliar with this footnote in the history of golf course architecture, it may come as a shock that many golf courses of yesteryear, in certain areas of the country (the Great Plains, for example, where reliable irrigation was

impossible, or the South, where turf was unable to tolerate the summer heat and humidity), had putting greens that were made of sand. These surfaces were constructed by hulling out a parcel of ground and installing a hard base, such as slate or clay, then topping it with sand and applying a layer of oil, often clean motor oil or vegetable oil. In some cases, the sand greens were watered instead of oiled. The greens at Hot Springs, Runyan said, were made from a thin layer of oiled sand over a base of firm clay, and “of table-like smoothness,” according to a report in the *Hot Springs Sentinel-Record* in 1924. The famed Pinehurst No. 2 course, now an anchor course for the U.S. Open, also began with sand greens and stayed that way for many years.

Why sand? Money, of course. Sand greens could be built and maintained at a lower cost than grass greens. Besides saving money, some courses opted for sand greens due to unfavorable climates and insufficient irrigation. The downside? Even the smoothest sand greens roll at a much slower pace than grass greens. And the oil, which would latch onto your pants, socks, golf ball, and hands (and eventually grips), could make you filthy.

Most sand-green courses are now gone, but some remain, scattered here and there, especially in states such as Kansas, Colorado, Missouri, and Nebraska. Canada, too. If you come upon one of these layouts today, say in La Crosse, Kansas, or Dannebrog, Nebraska, you’ll pay a tiny fee to play the course, and immediately you’ll notice the most distinguished accessory to these small, brown patches of sand etched into the landscape as putting surfaces: the rakes and the drags. In order to putt, each green has its own rake with a blunt side to drag a smooth path onto the green so a player can putt toward the hole. After finishing the hole, the green is then raked with the conventional side of the rake before the next group plays up to the green.

As Runyan honed his chipping and pitching techniques, he became frustrated by well-struck shots that would land in a pocket of sand on the green, often created by the tines of the rake, a missed footprint, or sometimes just a soft spot in the sand. These shots would stop dead in their tracks, without any rollout, creating a small sand crater around the ball. Other times, similarly struck shots would dodge the sand pockets and run through the back of the green. It could be

maddening. Thus, he learned what any golfer who has ever played a significant amount of golf on sand greens eventually figures out: low-flying shots provide the most control of the golf ball. Low shots carried more forward momentum and were capable of powering through the pockets of sand, yet the overall distance the ball traveled was more predictable for the player. Developing good touch was made easier, and the vagaries of the sand green were mostly eliminated from the equation. Runyan started playing his chip shots, sometimes from as far as thirty or forty feet off the green, with a low-lofted club and a putting stroke. He developed this style over a six- to eight-month period during his caddying days and continued refining it. He employed a mostly wrist-free stroke powered by his shoulder joints, which caused the ball to come out gently knuckling, with minimal backspin, allowing it to “walk through” the sand.

What was the significance of young Paul Runyan crafting his short-game technique on sand greens? Oiled sand and finely manicured grass are worlds apart in composition. One is soft, uneven, resistant. Full of tiny rocks. The other is smooth, predictable, firm underfoot.

Another question, this time more direct: did learning the short game on sand greens ultimately contribute to Paul Runyan’s success as a chipper, pitcher, and putter? The answer almost certainly is yes. His short-game technique was mostly self-taught, born out of necessity. And it worked.

But how could something that seemed to be such an apparent disadvantage—learning to control a golf ball’s flight and roll on an entirely different playing surface—ultimately work in favor of the earnest farm boy from Arkansas? Let’s count the ways. First, back up a bit, to the fairway. Eyeing a sand green from any significant distance—say between fifty and two hundred yards—is a daunting proposition. Most sand greens, when compared to typical grass putting surfaces, are much smaller, often 50 to 70 percent. The sand greens at Hot Springs were sixty to seventy-five feet wide, or about twenty to twenty-five yards. That’s a narrow target, and while it’s true that a ball landing on the green with anything other than a head-high, flat trajectory would stop dead in its tracks, balls landing just short of a sand putting surface would often take one large bounce over the green, missing it

entirely. In Runyan's case, most of the balls landing short of the green would get snagged by the catcher's mitt that was the course's sticky and coarse Bermuda grass. Accurate shots of the proper distance were a must if you wanted to putt for birdie.

Having navigated his ball onto the green, a successful sand-green putter accepts the necessity of stroking putts with true, end-over-end roll. If the putter head contacts the ball with a descending blow, the ball will dig into the sand and come up woefully short, even on the smoothest of greens. Such a misstep can often go unnoticed on grass greens, even to a trained eye. And while sand greens are much slower putting surfaces than grass, putting on sand guarantees the old adage, "Never up, never in." That is, putts that don't reach the hole have no chance of dropping. The same is true on grass, but not *as* true. A little extra pop in the stroke is needed on sand to guarantee enough forward momentum for the ball to reach the hole. That heavier hit, and a few additional putts holed over the course of eighteen holes or a seventy-two-hole championship, can make the difference between winning and losing.

Then, of course, there's chipping. Runyan crafted a chipping technique that was an extension of his putting. He kept the ball low to the ground, which he used as a friend. He preferred using low-lofted irons, elevating the heel of the club off the ground, with the shaft nearly perpendicular to the turf. He adopted a unique split-hand grip, his palms facing upward in opposition. If you ask a golf historian or a well-informed instructor to explain the defining trait of Paul Runyan's golf game, that person would almost certainly direct the conversation toward his chipping technique. It came about, the little man said, out of necessity. There on the golf course across the road from his father's dairy farm in Arkansas. On the Bermuda grass and the oiled sand greens.

And it all began because a town wanted golf.

2

Six Hundred Balls a Day

The ascent of a young player—it's a bit like climbing a mountain. At times it seems impossible, out of reach. Trimming seven shots a round so you can go from good to great. Good luck.

The successes—however minor—and the failures—however disastrous—are public, played out in front of discerning galleries. In tournament golf, you eat what you kill. Many times, you simply don't eat. Meanwhile, the young player continues working behind the scenes, in darkness, on obscure workbenches like Concordia Country Club, often through the relentless heat and humidity of an Arkansas summer, sometimes in between lessons or other duties in the golf shop.

The young player is never truly alone, even if it seems that way. There are always ride-along companions, and Paul Runyan had his fair share. It's quite an interesting cast of characters if you get right down to it. As a caddie in Hot Springs, he shared the fairways with Emerson Carey, the salt tycoon and property owner from Kansas, not then knowing that his future in-laws would share geographic ties with Carey. In his twenties, Runyan chased daylight with Harry Tenenbaum, the golf-obsessed son of a Little Rock junkyard owner. Later he counted on the kindness of famed aviator and sportsman Logan A. "Jack" Vilas, who opened his wallet to pass along professional opportunities for the young pro. Somehow, they all pale in comparison to a traveling gambler known as Titanic, who, to be clear, was no companion.

It was never easy. Traveling a thousand miles by train to North Dakota. Spending all day on the practice tee giving lessons to beginners and women twice his age. Owing financiers during the Great Depression. Rat-holing money in order to get married. The six hundred balls a day might have been the easy part.

He must have loved it. How else could he have scaled the mountain?