

# Novelist John Coyne's hole-in-one... 'The Caddie Who Knew Ben Hogan'

by Ann McCutchan

When John Coyne decided to write a novel set in the world of professional golf, he knew exactly which real-life character to include: the legendary Ben Hogan.

"I wanted to write about the golfing generation of the late '30s, the '40s and early '50s," says Mr. Coyne, author of the recently released "The Caddie Who Knew Ben Hogan" (Thomas Dunne Books). "And in that generation, no one was more charismatic, or enigmatic, than Hogan. For a novelist, he makes a very interesting character."

Hogan (1912-1997), a four-time PGA Player of the Year and one of only five players ever to win all four Grand Slams, was known for his ability to distance himself from the pressures of the golfing scene.

According to Mr. Coyne, one pro said Hogan was "the most merciless of all modern golfers. Hogan played with the burning frigidty of dry ice." Hogan survived a brutal car accident in 1949, but came back to win the 1950 U.S. Open. He's third on the all-time list in "World's Top Golfers" with 63 career wins.

Mr. Coyne (whose previous works include the horror novels "The Piercing," "The Searing" and "The Legacy" and three golf instructional manuals) has brought twin loves, story and sport, together in a page-turner that even those not familiar with golf will understand.

In addition, knowledgeable golfers who've read Mr. Coyne's new opus praise it for its accuracy and "insider" specificity.

## Chicago Open

The story takes place at a posh country club in the summer of 1946 during the last Chicago Open and is told as a flashback by a 14-year-old caddie, named Jack Handley, in need of a mentor. Ben Hogan is new to the course and employs Jack, extending a fatherly hand along the way.

At the same time, Jack plays go-between for his buddy Matt Richardson, an ambitious young pro, and Matt's secret girlfriend, Sarah DuPree, daughter of the golf club's president.

Eventually, seasoned Ben Hogan and impulsive Matt Richardson clash on the golf course, as Jack, Sarah and Sarah's father look on. Everyone involved learns a lesson, and not always about the game of golf.

Mr. Coyne says he introduced the romance between Matt and Sarah in order to explore country club society of a bygone era. "Matt needs Jack as a go-between because in the old days, golf pros were considered like the hired help," he explains. "A club's president wouldn't have wanted his daughter to date a pro. So there's a conflict."

## Tee-by-tee

But the heart of the book lies in the detailed, tee-by-tee practice round between cool Hogan and impassioned Matt. It's to Mr. Coyne's great credit that the round reads as both a highly charged drama between the two players and a lovely evocation of the game by the observant caddie. Here's an excerpt:

*"Up on the tee, Hogan approached the drive, glancing down the fairway once, glancing again, and then his fierce swing. The ball came out of the shadows of the tee low and hard, and even before it crossed the creek, I realized he had hit one of his infamous duck hooks."*

*"The ball cleared the first bunker on the left side and dug down into the rough, disappearing like a scared rabbit in the long grass. I kept my eye on it the whole way, knowing that if I lost the spot, I would never find his ball. And for a caddie, there's no bigger failure."*

Mr. Coyne prepared to write "The Caddie Who Knew Ben Hogan" in two ways. First, he read all the available books on Ben Hogan. "I collected all

the stories and wove them into my plot," he says.

"Everything Hogan says in the book is true, except for a place on the 14th green in the practice round, where he calls Jack back and says he's going to teach Matt a lesson. When I finished the book, I contacted a friend of Hogan's who loved it, but said Hogan would never have said that. I left it in because I needed it for the story."

## Midlothian memories

The author also draws on his memories of working as a caddie at a suburban Chicago country club in the 1940s. "I was never as good a player as young Jack when I was his age," he says, "nor was I as cocky and sure of myself as Jack was as a caddie. I think Jack and I, however, share a similar sense of humor and the same intense love for the game, as well as our knowledge of golf."

"I did grow up on a small farm across from a golf course, as Jack did. So I have that knowledge which I used in creating the character. I was the youngest of six children, and we all grew up working at the Midlothian Country Club, south of Chicago. My sisters were waitresses in the dining hall or worked in the club's office. My brothers and I were caddies.

"I was also the caddie master for several years, beginning when I was 16," he says. "So I knew the caddie shack and pro shop life pretty well. Knowing the subject matter makes a writer comfortable. You're in the saddle."

## Golf and life

Yet Mr. Coyne has always seen his new novel as more than a nostalgic look back or a way to employ his personal knowledge of golf. From the beginning of the project, he wanted nothing less than to show how golf reflects life in so many ways.

"Ben Hogan always said that he had discovered the secret of golf," he says. "That comment has resulted in numerous articles and books about his golf swing as players and writers try to define the 'secret.' But I flipped the question and had Hogan show that the secret of life comes from golf, knowing that what matters in golf (and life) is always the next shot, the next step, and that one has to keep moving forward in life.

"It's my attempt to place the game of golf in a context larger than just a simple match between two players." ■

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