

# A Great Amateur

JESS SWEETSER

By DOUGLAS LARUE SMITH

**B**OB JONES once said of Jess Sweetser, "His match play was matchless." Jones, of course, was in position to know, having seen Sweetser perform in some of the toughest matches of golf's golden age. One of those was Jones's disappointing loss of a semi-final match in the 1922 U.S. Amateur when he (Jones) had been

favored by many to win. Jones and Sweetser were true contemporaries — exactly the same age; avid competitors, often meeting head-on in major events; superb teammates, playing together on four Walker Cup teams; accomplished players; and close friends.

Sweetser grew up in St. Louis, but his game blossomed after his family moved to the suburbs north of New York City and he joined Siwanoy Country Club. In 1920 he entered Yale University, which had dominated college golf to that point; its teams had won nine consecutive championships, a mark still unsurpassed today in any sport, and Yale players had won or shared nine of the first 18 individual titles. Sweetser added to Yale's glory

when he won the Intercollegiate Golf Championship his freshman year. In 1920 and '21 he won the Victory Cup, a trophy donated by Rodman Wanamaker (and the same gentleman who gave the money for the trophy that got the PGA Championship under way a few years earlier).

Sweetser just missed qualifying for the 1920 U.S. Amateur, but the following year he advanced all the way to the quarterfinals, where he lost to Chick Evans, 1 down.

It was good training for 1922, as Sweetser was about to make a great name for himself. Having just turned 20, he was off to The Country Club in Brookline, Mass., where Francis Ouimet had changed golf forever in

America nine years earlier and where Sweetser would face the greatest amateurs in the world. By this time, Jones was already known far and wide, and there was no question he was a crowd favorite. Evans was there as well and having won the Open-Amateur double in 1916 and the Amateur again in '20, was an emotional favorite of many.

It was a crucial time for Jones because, as his biographer, O.B. Keeler, wrote, "he had been through seven lean years — many victories but never a major." This year was thought to be it, but it was Sweetser who charged to victory — a triumph in true Horatio Alger fashion.

As *The New York Times* wrote of Sweetser's victory, "In gaining his place on the throne, Sweetser accomplished a task that no one thought possible a week ago, for he blazed his way through one of the greatest fields that has ever played in the event. The field comprised not only the stars of American golf but those of the British as well, and he personally accounted for four of the greatest players of the game today."

The story went on to say, "His margins of victory were all decisive enough to stamp him as one of the greatest players of the age." After Sweetser ran roughshod over his first-round opponent, H.E. Kenworthy, 10 and 9, he had only a slightly more difficult time disposing of Willie Hunter, the reigning British Amateur champion, 7 and 6.

Next was Jesse Guilford, the defending champion, but he fell by 4 and 3, which brought Jones up next. But in one of Sweetser's best rounds ever, the equivalent of a course-record 69, he swept Jones aside, 8 and 7.

An interesting exchange took place between the two 20-year-olds after that match. "Bob, I've just beaten the best man in the field," Sweetser said. But Jones shook his head and replied, "No, Jess, I've just lost to the best." Sweetser secured the Amateur title by defeating Evans, 3 and 2, but equally as important



Sweetser had already won an Intercollegiate title for Yale when he played in the '23 Walker Cup.

was the relationship now cemented with Jones.

The two young friends went off together to play in the first official Walker Cup at National Golf Links in Southampton, N.Y., where the United States won, 8-4. During that match, Sweetser became the only player to have lost at extra holes. He was all square with C.V.L. Hooman after 36 holes, and after they were told to continue Hooman won the 37th. It later was decided that Walker Cup matches tied after regulation would be halved.

When the 1923 Amateur arrived and Sweetser went to Flossmoor Country Club in Chicago to defend his title, all the greats were there again — Ouimet, Evans, Jones, Guilford, Von Elm, Fownes, Denny Shute and Max Marston. Sweetser defeated two former champions, Robert A. Gardner and Guilford, en route to the final, but Marston had an equally tough road as he faced, and beat, both Ouimet and Jones. In only the second Amateur final to proceed to extra holes, Marston denied Sweetser his chance at consecutive victories by winning at the 38th.

In 1926, when the 40th British Amateur was played at Muirfield in Scotland, Sweetser was there for what was arguably the greatest victory of his life. When he defeated Alexander Simpson in the 36-hole final, 6 and 5, Sweetser became the first native-born American player to win the championship. (Walter Travis had won the 1904 British as a U.S. citizen, but he was born in Australia.)

*The New York Times* described Sweetser's victory glowingly:

"But one by one our flowers withered away. On the first day our successes were great, for all our giants survived. Then the carnage started. On the second day Von Elm, Gardner and Mackenzie expired. On the third day



The first American-born winner of the British Amateur received a hero's ride to the clubhouse.

Chick crumpled in ruins and Ouimet went with him. On the fourth day, Guilford and Watts Gunn dropped, and on the fifth day Bobby Jones, who had previously crushed the British champion, Robert Harris, was ushered out by a comparatively unknown golfer.

"Only Sweetser remained and he came through. What brought him through was his great fighting spirit, for next to Walter Hagen there is no better match player in America. There were

many lions in his path that he defeated, J.D. McCormack, the Irish champion, Francis Ouimet, Robert Scott (Glasgow's finest), Alan Cave (the Oxford varsity champion) and Alexander Simpson in a 36-hole final, 6 and 5."

The Scots were generous in their acclaim, hoisting Sweetser on their shoulders and carrying him a quarter of a mile back to the clubhouse after he'd won. The British press also praised him. *The London Observer* said, "None can





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Despite a lengthy recuperation, Sweetser reclaimed a scratch handicap by 1928 and again played in the Walker Cup, on the 1932 team.

make the statement that Sweetser's name is not worthy to figure on the roll of great amateur champions. He had to reach it by way of some of the most grueling tests any golfer could undergo."

Gruelling, indeed, because Sweetser's victory came at a terrible price. Before he arrived at Muirfield he had a cold that became worse every day, and by the time of the matches he was in such dire straits that he was on the point of defaulting. But when it was announced that his first opponent had already scratched, Sweetser managed to nurse his cold and pull himself together.

Herbert Warren Wind, in his book, *Following Through*, was even more complimentary of Sweetser. "The astonishing thing about Sweetser's victory,"

up to the exhausting demands of the championship despite a severe illness that he thought was a bad case of the flu, but which proved to be tuberculosis."

But Sweetser didn't give up. The following week he went on with his teammates to play in the Walker Cup at St. Andrews. The U.S. won, 6-5, but now Sweetser's illness was serious, and he sailed for home under the care of the ship's doctors. Arriving in New York harbor, he was lowered into a revenue cutter that came alongside the ship. He was taken ashore, where his family was waiting with an ambulance. He spent more than a year recovering in the salubrious air of North Carolina, and again his strong will pulled him through. By 1928 he was a scratch play-

er again, playing in the Walker Cup that year and again in 1932. In all he played on six U.S. Walker Cup teams, and only three other Americans — Jay Sigel, William Campbell and Francis Ouimet — have been more frequent selections. Sweetser compiled a record of 5-1 in foursomes play and 2-3-1 in singles.

He was honored to be chosen the non-playing captain of the U.S. Walker Cup teams twice, in 1967 and 1973, and in 1986, on the 60th anniversary of his monumental British Amateur victory, he was selected the recipient of the USGA's Bob Jones Award for distinguished sportsmanship in golf. When he died in 1989 at the age of 87, he was still being called the "Valiant Warrior" in memory of his great victories in golf's golden age. — Douglas LaRue Smith