

The Tom Morris Championship



Was Old Tom Morris the best golfer who ever lived?

Tom Morris won the Open Championship four times, and he came in second four other times. Morris was born and bred in St Andrews, on the east coast of Scotland. He was apprenticed to the famous golf professional and ballmaker, Allan Robertson. For four years as an apprentice and five more as a journeyman, Tom worked with the poultry feathers, the "lum hat", a boiling pot, and a little pocket of bull's hide to stuff and stitch three or four "featheries" per day. And he learned to play.

Robertson and Morris played as partners, and were considered formidable opposition. They had a bad falling out, however, in 1851, the year of Young Tom's birth. While playing a match at the Old Course, Morris exploded his feathery in midround, and accepted the loan of a gutty. Robertson met him at the last hole with a look of betrayal. Back in the shop, their association was dissolved. Gutta percha was on its way, but Robertson was like a buggy whip manufacturer railing against automobiles. Robertson died at 44 as a result of inhaling too many feather particles.

So Tom moved to Prestwick that year, as greenkeeper. While at Prestwick, he helped to set up the Open Championship, and he finished second to Willie Park in the inaugural event of 1860. After eleven years at Prestwick, Morris was recalled to St Andrews as greenkeeper, and later professional. Old Tom was known for his good course management, and for amazing accuracy from tee to green. Putting, however, was a weakness.

Old Tom's club making business was established in 1867 by the side of the 18th green of the Old Course. For the next forty years, Morris built clubs, designed many courses in Scotland, and dominated the St Andrews golf scene. When Old Tom died in 1908 at age 86, he had gained so much respect that his funeral procession spanned the length of South Street in St Andrews.

At the inaugural Open Championship (three times around Prestwick's 12-hole layout in one day) Old Tom lost to Willie Park, 176 to 174. That was 1860, the year Abraham Lincoln ran for president. The next two years, Park was second to Tom, by four shots (167-163) and by 13 (176-163). Old Tom was runner-up again in 1863 and the winner a third time the following year. Like Jack Nicklaus at the Masters, Morris was 46 the year he won a fourth and final title, the one he would attempt to defend in 1868 against his 17-year-old son.

Was Young Tom Morris the best golfer who ever lived?

Young Tom Morris also won the Open Championship four times. The son of Old Tom, he grew up with golf all round him. His first big win was an exhibition match in Perth at the age of 13. At 16, he won a professional event at Carnoustie. When he won the British Open in 1868, he was only 17 years old. Young Tom won again in 1869 and 1870. At that time, the winner of the tournament was presented with a red, Moroccan "championship belt." The rules stipulated that anyone winning the belt three straight years got to keep it. Morris did just that, and the belt was his permanently.

The Open was not played in 1871 while authorities figured out a way of overcoming such unexpected domination of the competition. They decided to rotate the championship between three courses, and to purchase a Claret Jug to be used as a prize. In 1872 the Open Championship was held again. Young Tom Morris won the event, with his father finishing runner-up. That was Young Tom's fourth and final Open Championship.

Young Tom can be regarded as having invented the modern approach shot, hitting down on the ball with a medium iron club, using an open stance, imparting back-spin to check the ball on landing, and flighting it most of the way to the flag. He took a shorter, fiercer cut than his father's, but had the same grace of temperament and a like imagination. Owing to a fast swing, Young Tom needed the stiffest clubs, and, in a testament to his strength, he broke off a few of them right at the grip before they ever touched sod.

And his ball went farther than anyone else's. Consider this - the year Tommy won his fourth Open, he began with a three on Prestwick's 578 yard first hole. Hickory shaft. Gutta-percha ball. You try it.

Most remarkable, however, was Tommy's putting. He was a genius at putting. Half-topping his putts, they spun like high-hit cue balls, rolling over the bumps that the others were obliged to hurdle. On good greens, he employed his wood putter; on rougher greens he used his cleek. It is claimed that nobody ever saw Tommy putting badly.

At age 23, Tommy married his childhood sweetheart. Ten months later, she died while giving birth. Three months later, on Christmas Day, Tommy Morris died in his sleep at his father's house in St Andrews.

The Tournament within the Tournament

The Tom Morris Championship

On October 10, 11 and 12, of 2005, the Tom Morris Championship will be played in St Andrews, Scotland. This 54 hole competition will be used to determine whether Old Tom's wisdom and experience are more valuable than Young Tom's extra distance and nerveless putting stroke.

The Tom Morris Championship is a best-ball event between two two-man teams. Representing the Old Toms are Jeff Fitzgerald from Hickory, North Carolina, and Paul Rasmussen from Morganton, North Carolina. The Young Tom team is made up of Jacob Pittman from Houston, Texas, and Erik Rasmussen from Colindres, Spain.

The Tom Morris Championship is played using the rules of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews. Courses include the Old Course, the New Course, and the Jubilee Course.



THE OLD TOMS



THE YOUNG TOMS

