

The Ryder Cup Challenge Matches

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From 1940 through 1943, the official Ryder Cup matches were cancelled due to World War II, but the United States Ryder Cup team played a series of “challenge matches” in Detroit to raise money for war-related charities. While many athletes and celebrities donated their time and talent to aid the war effort, this series began as an old-fashioned grudge match.

The bi-annual Ryder Cup competition with Great Britain had begun in 1927. Walter Hagen had captained every American team, and Gene Sarazen had been a fixture in the lineup. But in 1939, Hagen and the rest of the selection committee picked four rookies and left Sarazen off the team. Sarazen was not pleased, telling reporters in late November that Hagen’s squad was “[a] fine team – on paper. But I’m afraid it might look better on paper than it would against the Britons.”¹ By then, the 1939 Ryder Cup had already been called off,² so Sarazen boasted that he could assemble a superior team and defeat Hagen’s men.

Fred Corcoran, the PGA’s tournament manager, had already booked the Ryder Cup team for several charity matches, including a rain-soaked affair against Bing Crosby, Richard Arlen, and other Hollywood stars at the Lakeside Golf Club in Burbank, California in January, 1940.³ After Hagen officially accepted Sarazen’s challenge that June, Corcoran went to work, contacting representatives from four major cities to find a home for the event.⁴ On June 16 Corcoran announced that Detroit had outbid Boston and San Francisco; three days later, the Oakland Hills Country Club in Bloomfield Hills, the site of the 1937 U.S. Open, was selected as the host course.⁵ The two-day event would begin on Tuesday, July 16, and would benefit the American Red Cross.

Sarazen and Hagen agreed to play the standard Ryder Cup format: four Scotch Foursomes (alternate shot) matches on the first day, followed by eight singles matches on the second day.⁶ All matches would be 36 holes, 18 in the morning, followed by a second round in mid-afternoon. But the two captains did not agree on everything. “Sarazen claimed he could pick a team from those overlooked by the PGA and beat us,” Hagen told reporters on the Sunday before the matches. “But when it came to picking the team, he selected quite a few who weren’t eligible for the Ryder Cup team.”⁷ Sarazen, who had ignored the rule that only American-born PGA members were eligible, was unapologetic, and responded: “Anybody who bets on Hagen’s team is a sucker.”⁸

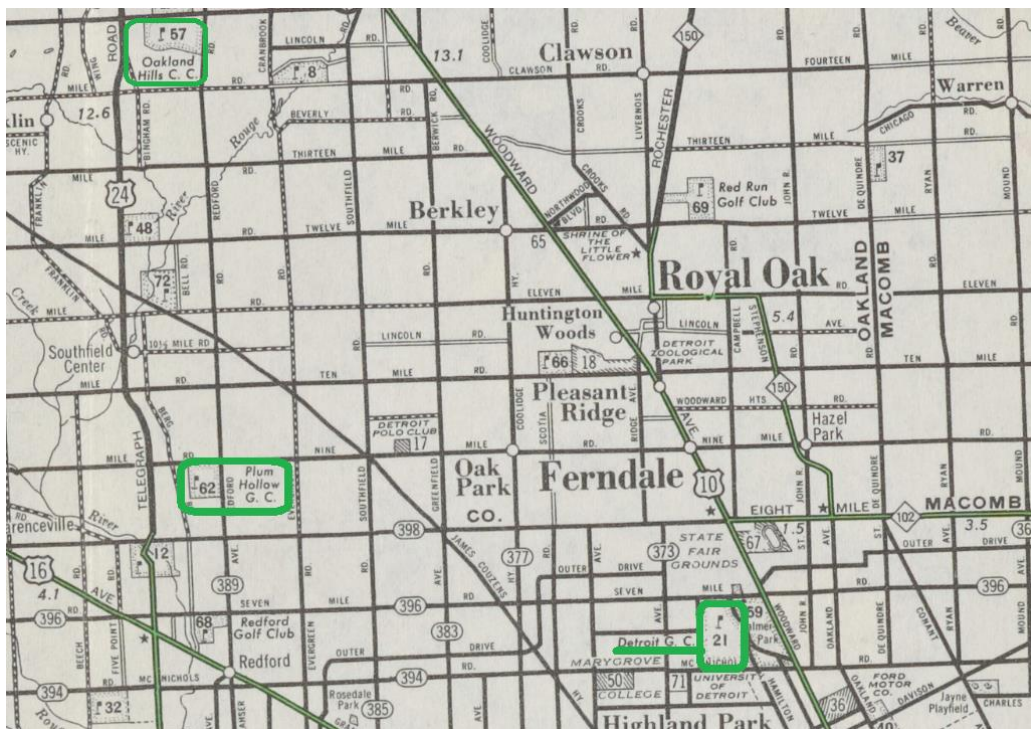
The next day, Sarazen went a step further, pulling out of a previously discussed 36-hole singles match between himself and Hagen. “Hagen is a nonplaying captain and can get into competition only in case of emergency,” Sarazen explained. “As far as I can see, no emergency exists, so the Hagen match is out. ... What rules are we playing – Ryder Cup rules or Hagen’s rules?”⁹ Sarazen obviously preferred a third option: his own rules.

The Ryder Cup team dominated the first day, winning three matches, including a lopsided 8&7 victory by Harold (Jug) McSpaden and Byron Nelson over Tommy Armour and Jimmy Thomson (who were both born in Scotland). Sarazen sat out the opening session, then was soundly defeated (8&7) by Henry Picard on Wednesday. The two teams split the eight singles matches, and the Ryder Cup team won, 7-5. Hagen was elated: “Well, we won, just

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as I thought we would – and just as we usually do.”¹⁰ (The United States team had yet to lose a Ryder Cup on American soil.) Despite losing, Sarazen was already looking forward to a rematch. “After all, there was a difference of only one match, and a bit of luck here or there along the way would have changed the outcome. We’ll be back next year to play the Cuppers again over any course selected by the PGA.”¹¹ The players were compensated for their expenses but received gifts such as radios and electric clocks instead of prize money.¹² The two-day event raised \$12,800 for the Red Cross.¹³

The Challenge Matches grew into an annual rite of summer in Detroit, spurred on by local promoter J. Russell Gnaou, a passionate sportsman who also served as an assistant to Ford Motor Company executive Charles Sorensen.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the city was rapidly changing. When the 1941 edition was held at the Detroit Golf Club’s North Course – located about a mile from the Ford plant in the Highland Park section of the city – the United States was technically a neutral country, but was supplying military aid to Great Britain. New factories such as Ford’s massive Willow Run complex were being constructed to increase production,¹⁵ and a flood of people descended on Detroit. The city’s population surged from 1.6 million to over 2 million during the first few years of the war, including 50,000 African-Americans who had migrated from the South, creating a housing shortage and altering the racial demographics of the area.¹⁶



The three host courses for the Challenge Matches¹⁷

Bobby Jones, the legendary amateur golfer and founder of Augusta National and the Masters, agreed to serve as captain for the Challengers in 1941, raising the profile of the event, which was moved to the weekend of August 23-24 to help boost the gate. It worked. Over 10,000 fans turned out on Saturday despite an on-going strike that had shut down the Detroit Department of Street Railways (DSR) system of buses and street cars since the previous Wednesday morning.¹⁸ Jones and Sarazen lost their foursomes match, 8&6, to Jug McSpaden and Byron Nelson, but Jones rallied to win in singles against Henry Picard, and the Challengers triumphed, 8½ to 6½. The United Service Organizations (USO) received \$18,500.¹⁹

In 1942, the event returned to the South Course at Oakland Hills. Walter Hagen and Gene Sarazen were back, but both had switched sides, a result of the PGA selecting a new Ryder Cup team in November 1941 despite the on-

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going war in Europe. Craig Wood, two-time member of the Challengers team, and winner of that year's Masters and U.S. Open, was named Ryder Cup captain, and Sarazen was also selected. Hagen was eventually tapped to lead the Challengers when it became clear that Bobby Jones, who had volunteered for the Army despite turning 40 in the spring of 1942, would be unavailable.²⁰

On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and the United States officially entered the war. Overnight, there was an increased military presence in the Detroit area, including patrols at the Ambassador Bridge and the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel, two key spans across the Detroit River that connected the city with Windsor, Ontario.²¹ The golf world was also affected. Though the PGA held 24 events in 1942, most civilians who had time to play had to make do with "refurbished" golf balls after rubber rationing took effect on January 1.²²

When the two teams squared off during a brutally hot weekend that July, the Ryder Cup team won back the Cup with a 10-5 victory that included a five-match sweep on Saturday. The disappointing opening day performance by the Challengers – in 99-degree heat – likely led Hagen to second-guess his decision to agree to substitute Four-ball (best ball) for Scotch foursomes. But Hagen had more serious concerns on his mind. Earlier in the week he had traveled to Rochester, New York to be with his critically ill father, returning to Detroit in time to reveal his lineup on Friday. Hagen decided not to play, substituting two local stars: Al Watrous, head pro at Oakland Hills, and Chick Harbert, a native of Battle Creek; the pair had won five Michigan Opens between them.²³ (After William Hagen passed away on Saturday evening, July 18, Walter immediately left for Rochester and missed the Sunday session.)

Some of Detroit's leading citizens were at the course that weekend. Detroit Red Wings General Manager and Coach Jack Adams, a member at Oakland Hills, volunteered his time to help out in the parking lots. Mayor Edward Jeffries, fresh from settling another DSR strike, was also in attendance, and even found time to make a hole-in-one of his own on the seventh hole at the Detroit Golf Club on Sunday morning.²⁴

With an increasing number of golfers serving in the military or working longer hours to support wartime production needs, demand for golf diminished. In St. Clair Shores, the Lakepointe Country Club leased its dormitory space to the Navy to house cadets, while other clubs closed their dining rooms, cut their grass less often, and reduced their payrolls by employing pros and caddies only on weekends.²⁵ The Plum Hollow Country Club in Southfield planned to recruit men working in defense-related jobs to stay at their clubhouse, offering free rooms that were highly desirable due to the housing shortage, if they agreed to help maintain the course during their off hours. Head pro Jimmy Demaret, an annual participant in the Challenge Matches, also offered to pitch in and help mow the grounds himself.²⁶ The PGA held only three official tournaments during the spring and summer of 1943, but the Challenge Matches returned for a fourth year.

Plum Hollow was the host course that August. Seven weeks earlier, the city had been rocked by a race riot that had left 34 people dead, and over 675 injured.²⁷ With tensions still simmering – eight whites were stabbed by black attackers during the first week of August, and police continued to make sporadic arrests related to the earlier riots – what was left of the Ryder Cup team arrived to take part in a scaled-down event on the weekend of August 7-8.²⁸

Many former participants, like Ben Hogan, were now in the military; rosters were cut to nine men a side. The number of matches was sliced from fifteen back to twelve, and Saturday's session was reduced to 18 holes in deference to war-related work schedules.²⁹ Captain Hagen even pressed himself into service alongside Chick Harbert on Saturday, losing 1 up to the team of Sarazen and Wood. The Ryder Cup squad earned 2½ points that day, then won six of the eight Sunday matches for an 8½ to 3½ victory. A record take of over \$36,000 was donated to the Red Cross, and \$139,000 in war bonds were purchased during an auction on Sunday.³⁰

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It was a fitting conclusion for the series, though no one knew it at the time. Even with many pro golfers serving overseas, Fred Corcoran and the PGA planned a reinvigorated schedule for the fall and winter of 1943 that would divert attention from charity matches. Gene Sarazen, the catalyst for the series, told reporters in May 1944 that, "Too many fellows are in the service and won't be able to get leaves, especially if the invasion is on," a reference to the expected Allied invasion of France. "Those not in the service yet have a heavy schedule of big-money events and shouldn't be asked to pass them up."³¹

Plum Hollow hosted charity golf events again in 1944 and 1945, but they lacked the prestigious "Ryder Cup" label. On July 29-30, 1944, Sam Byrd and Craig Wood played a benefit match for the Red Cross.³² In June 1945, six weeks after V-E Day but with the war still raging in the Pacific, Byrd and Wood returned to Plum Hollow, and teamed up with Jug McSpaden and Byron Nelson for a three-day event promoted as the "Big Fore" matches. Their competition was a quartet of local club pros led by Al Watrous and Frank Walsh, along with Claude Harmon and Chick Rutan.³³ An estimated 18,000 fans showed up to watch a complex event that included both team match play and medal/stroke play, all for the benefit of the Athletic Fund at the Percy Jones Hospital in Battle Creek, Michigan, which was serving as a medical facility for the military.³⁴

There was plenty of talk during the war years that Detroit would host an official Ryder Cup match when that series resumed. After the 1942 matches had concluded, Fred Corcoran had told reporters: "Of course, after the war is over, the series will be renewed with the British and Detroit certainly deserves the post-war contest."³⁵ But in 1947, the Ryder Cup was held in Portland, Oregon after a local businessman offered to underwrite the British team who could not afford the luxury of paying their own way.³⁶ Detroit was also passed over for the 1946 U.S. Open, and received a consolation prize when Plum Hollow was selected to host the 1947 PGA Championship, but the Ryder Cup did not return to the area until 2004 when Oakland Hills had the honor.

One potential reason for this may be related to a sad postscript to this story. After the war, J. Russell Gnaou remained active in promoting golf in the Detroit area, despite a professional setback in September 1945 when he was forced out of the Ford Motor Company after 28 years.³⁷ In 1948, Gnaou helped organize the inaugural Motor City Open, which remained an annual PGA event in Detroit for over a decade.³⁸ But three years later, while attending the Indianapolis 500, Gnaou unexpectedly fell ill and died after emergency surgery. He was just 50 years old.³⁹ Detroit had lost one of its most gifted and connected sports promoters. Along with Fred Corcoran, Gene Sarazen, and the other golfers who participated, Gnaou had helped raise almost \$100,000 for war-related charities and kept the spirit of the Ryder Cup alive during the most difficult days of World War II.

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Unless otherwise stated, all Ryder Cup results, rosters, and statistics were taken from the official *2016 Ryder Cup Media Guide*.

Title image: Public domain flag images superimposed on an Office of War Information (OWI) photograph of the Willow Run bomber plant; photo by Ann Rosener, July 1942. Accessed online via the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017693362/> and <http://cdn.loc.gov/service/pnp/fsa/8e11000/8e11100/8e11192v.jpg> . Accessed November 2019.

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⁶ Wire story, "Ryder Match Set for Oakland Hills," *Detroit Free Press*, June 20, 1940.

⁷ W.W. Edgar, "Hagen Blasts Sarazen Team," *Detroit Free Press*, July 15, 1940.

⁸ W.W. Edgar, "Hagen Blasts Sarazen Team." Sarazen selected three natives of Great Britain (Tommy Armour, Jimmy Thomson, and Harry Cooper) and also picked Lawson Little of California who was not a member of the PGA.

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¹⁰ W.W. Edgar, "Split in Singles Wins for Ryder Team," *Detroit Free Press*, July 18, 1940.

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¹⁵ Sumner, Gregory D. *Detroit in World War II*. Charleston, SC: History Press, 2015. Kindle edition, Loc 320. Also, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/land-cleared-for-fords-willow-run-plant>.

¹⁶ Dominic J. Capeci Jr. and Martha Wilkerson, "The Detroit Rioters of 1943: A Reinterpretation," *Michigan Historical Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1990), p52.

¹⁷ Map with golf course listings: Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division, The New York Public Library. "Official transportation map Michigan." The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1939. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/afb70da0-f3d7-0130-54f5-58d385a7b928> Accessed November 2019. (The locations of the three host courses were highlighted by the author. Each square "block" shown in the map represents a square mile.)

¹⁸ "DSR Strike Is Called By AFL," *Detroit Free Press*, August 20, 1941. The strike ended late on Sunday afternoon: "DSR Runs Again; Workers to Hold Election," *Detroit Free Press*, August 25, 1941.

¹⁹ Wire story, "Ryder Cup Matches Assigned to Detroit," *Battle Creek (Michigan) Enquirer*, April 9, 1942.

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- ²⁶ "Today's Sports in Short Order," *Detroit Free Press*, May 5, 1943. "Shannon Will Teach Game and Hold a Defense Job," *Detroit Free Press*, February 20, 1943. M.F. Drukenbrod, "Golfers Advised to Share Work at their Clubs," *Detroit Times*, October 13, 1942.
- ²⁷ "The Report on the Detroit Race Riot," *The University of Chicago Law Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Jul., 1943), pp. 498. "34 dead (9 white, 25 colored) and 675 injured (345 white, 254 colored, 76 police officers)."
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- ³¹ "'Let's Call Off Ryder Series,' Says Sarazen," *Detroit Free Press*, May 15, 1944.
- ³² W.W. Edgar, "Byrd Expects Trouble with Wood," *Detroit Free Press*, 7/29/1944. Wire story, "Byrd Winner by 8 Strokes," *Lansing (Michigan) State Journal*, 7/31/1944. About 2,000 fans paid a dollar each day to watch the action.
- ³³ Claude Harmon, who played at the Lochmoor Country Club in nearby Grosse Pointe Woods, would win the Masters in 1948. Chick Rutan was based on the Birmingham Country Club, a short drive from Oakland Hills.
- ³⁴ The event took place from Friday, June 22 through Sunday, June 24. W.W. Edgar, "Nelson's 68 Shades Byrd in Big Fore Play," *Detroit Free Press*, June 23, 1945. W.W. Edgar, "Byrd Takes One-Stroke Lead Over Nelson," *Detroit Free Press*, June 24, 1945. W.W. Edgar, "Byrd Repeats 64 to Beat Nelson by 9 Strokes," *Detroit Free Press*, June 25, 1945.
- ³⁵ Dale Stafford, "Detroit Gets 1943 Ryder Matches," *Detroit Free Press*, July 20, 1942. W.W. Edgar, "Will PGA Keep Ryder Cup Promise to Detroit?" *Detroit Free Press*, December 22, 1946.
- ³⁶ *2016 Ryder Cup Media Guide*, p216.
- ³⁷ Gnau's departure coincided with the appointment of Henry Ford II to succeed his grandfather as company president and a subsequent purge of Harry Bennett and his allies from the Ford payroll. "Holler Resigns as Sales Chief of Chevrolet," *Chicago Tribune*, September 30, 1945, states that Gnau "long had been a close associate of Henry E. Bennett," and "Gnau Resigns Ford Position," *Detroit News*, September 29, 1945, states that: "His companion at many games has been Harry Bennett, prominent in recent changes at Ford." But Bennett also had battles with Charles Sorensen, Gnau's longtime boss, so the reasons for Gnau's separation from Ford may have been more complicated. Sorensen received public accolades for his work at Willow Run, which led a jealous Henry Ford to grow disenchanted with him. Bennett's departure was worthy of a front page headline in the *Detroit Free Press* on September 28, 1945, while the impact of Gnau's "resignation" on the Detroit sports scene was discussed in W. W. Edgar, "Gnau's Resignation May Hit Golf," *Detroit Free Press*, September 30, 1945, and Harry Leduc, "Gnau Resignation May Cost City Big Events," *Detroit News*, September 30, 1945. Gnau had been promoted the previous October to a position as office manager for the Rouge plant after having worked in Ford's public relations department. Also see: "Gnau Named Office Head at Ford Motor," *Detroit Free Press*, October 15, 1944. Sorensen, p x-xi; Wire story, "Shift Ford Veteran," *Battle Creek (Michigan) Enquirer*, April 30, 1944. Lacey, p431-432, 439, 458.
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- ³⁹ "Russ Gnau, Golf Aide, Dies at 50," *Detroit Free Press*, May 30, 1951.