

HARRISON, THE KING AND THE HAWK

BY STAN AWTREY

Here's how Atlanta's Charlie Harrison teamed up with Arnold Palmer to beat Ben Hogan in a friendly game prior to the 1960 Masters.



WHEN CHARLES W. HARRISON arrived at Augusta National in 1960, he was greeted by a very wet course. There had been heavy rains in the week leading up to the Masters and the contestants for the 24th annual tournament weren't going to be getting any breaks.

None of that mattered to Harrison. He was so happy to have finally qualified for the Masters that he would have played on water skis. It had always been a dream for the lifelong amateur from Atlanta to get a chance to compete in the most meaningful tournament for any Son of the South.

Harrison was 29 and a graduate of Georgia Tech. He received his invitation to Augusta after reaching the quarterfinals of the U.S. Amateur Championship. He remembers upsetting fellow Georgian — and future Masters champion — Tommy Aaron to reach the final eight and lock down that spot for Augusta.

"It was about the only way an amateur of my stature was going to get in the Masters," Harrison said. "Tommy was one of our stars."

Humility is one of Harrison's most endearing qualities. Most amateurs would love to have his career. He qualified for the U.S. Amateur on 16 different occasions. He won the Atlanta Amateur 10 times, the Atlanta Athletic Club championship nine times and the Atlanta Country Club title six times. He won the 1955 Southern Amateur and the 1959 Georgia Amateur. In 1967 he was an alternate for the Walker Cup team. He was a quarterfinalist at the 1980 British Amateur, which he played while on his honeymoon.

But his goal had always been to reach Augusta. Needless to say, he was excited to finally get the opportunity in 1960 when he was 28 years old.

Getting invited to the Masters meant a lot of things to Harrison, but most of all he reckoned it might give him an opportunity to meet his golfing idol: **Ben Hogan**. Harrison played the equipment and golf balls that bore Hogan's name. He had tried — to no avail — to broker a practice round with the reclusive icon.

Harrison was on the practice ground at Augusta National that week when he spotted Hogan at the other end. Wearing his signature hat, Hogan was with his caddie and another player, Australian **Norman Von Nida**, along with a crowd of about 30 people. Two-time Masters champion **Horton Smith** walked past, noticed Harrison hitting a bag full of Hogan balls and shouted, “Hey, Ben, we’ve got a guy over here playing your equipment.”

Hogan never looked up, but Harrison saw that as an opportunity to approach “The Hawk” and request a practice game. Hogan didn’t acknowledge him and Von Nida told him the price of a game was a \$50 Nassau, way out of Harrison’s league.

“Hogan never looked up the whole time I was there,” Harrison said. “You could just see the tip of his nose under that white cap he wore. He never recognized that I was standing there. That was my hero that just stiffed me.”

Harrison, being the gentleman he is, didn’t say what he wanted to say. He simply went back to his end of the range and continued to hit balls. In his mind, that was the end of the



story and his quest to play the great Hogan.

The next day, the Thursday before Masters week, Harrison was completing a nice practice round with **Bob Rosburg**, the reigning PGA champion. As they were walking to the clubhouse, Rosburg heard the voice of **Arnold Palmer**. “Hey, Rossie...” Palmer said. “You want to join us and we’ll play five.”

Harrison barely knew Palmer. Harrison played at Georgia Tech and Palmer played at Wake Forest, but the schools were not in the same conference at that time, so their paths never really crossed. It isn’t like today when most of the major amateurs and college players grew up competing with each other.

Palmer, **Byron Nelson** and **Dudley Wysong** were teeing off on No. 1. Palmer and Wysong agreed to a \$2 Nassau game with Rosburg and Harrison. Harrison said he would play Palmer, if The King would give him one shot per side for a \$2 Nassau.

Harrison shot 72 that day and won \$12.

“I was the happiest man who ever lived,” Harrison said.

On Friday morning Palmer met Harrison at the door of the dining room at Augusta National and said, “Charlie, how about playing with me today? I need a good partner.”

Harrison explained to Palmer that he had already promised to play with **Gene Stout**, the professional at Augusta National, or otherwise he would be happy to play. Stout realized what a round with Palmer would mean to Harrison, so he insisted his friend take the game.

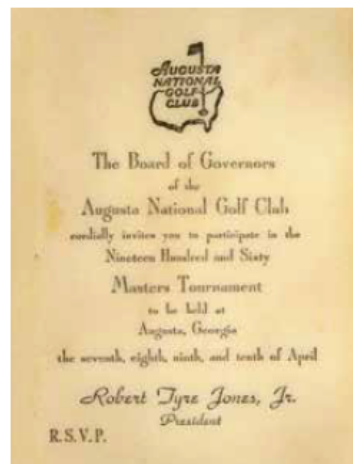
Palmer came back to the table and asked again. “Charlie, are you sure you can’t play with us?”

This time Stout answered and told Palmer that Harrison would be able to join his game. Harrison gave in and said he’d play.

What happened next changed Harrison’s golfing life and led to one of the best non-tournament stories in the event’s glorious history.

Palmer slapped Harrison on the back and loudly said, “OK, Ben. I’ve got my partner.”

Unbeknownst to him, Palmer had gotten Harrison involved in a little team



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BEN HOGAN TAKES A SWING, WHILE CADDIES AND (L-R) ARNOLD PALMER, CHARLIE HARRISON AND NORMAN VON NIDA WATCH. THIS IS THE ONLY KNOWN PHOTOGRAPH OF THE FAMOUS MATCH.

competition. They would be playing Hogan and Von Nida, the same duo that had slighted him the previous day. They walked to the first tee and Hogan went to the very back, stuck a peg in the ground and said, "Let's play the tips." As they walked off the first tee, Harrison approached Hogan with the offer of a \$5 game for the day and the Hawk nodded in agreement.

Harrison said he was so nervous he could barely breathe, but admitted that "sometimes nerves work for you."

It didn't take Harrison long to realize he was playing well. Palmer hit his first tee shot in the trees — a location he spent much of the time in all during the round — and Harrison hit his approach to within eight feet. Hogan, who was already plagued by the yips at this stage of his career, drained a 30-footer for birdie and won the hole when Harrison's putt lipped out.

Harrison followed with a birdie at the second hole — the only one of the four-some to do so — and said "I felt like I was part of the game now. The nerves had left me. I was just wanting to play well."

Harrison hit nice chips at No. 3, No. 4 and No. 5 and made par. Hogan complimented his short game and Palmer said, "Wait until you see him putt. This guy makes everything."

"I was in a Walter Mitty World," Harrison said. "I didn't know what was going on. It's just a wonderful feeling."

That's when Harrison began to get on a roll. He birdied the final four holes on the front nine and turned in 31. That was four better than Hogan, five better than Palmer and six better than Von Nida.

"When I walked off the ninth green to the 10th tee, Hogan said, 'Harrison, I guess I'd better press you.' I said, Mr. Hogan, I wish I had a recording of that." The recollection still brings a smile to Harrison's face.

Harrison had a bogey at No. 11, but was 4-under after enduring Amen Corner.

"I got around to 15 and said to myself, 'I've got a good round of golf going, playing with these guys. If I can get past the water holes, then I'm going to have a good score,'" Harrison said.

On 15, he had a 20-foot putt and made it. On 16 he hit a 5-iron on top of the stick and made birdie. On No. 17 he grazed the Eisenhower Tree, but hit a 5-iron to tap-in range for his third straight birdie.

"That put me 7 under going to 18 and the course record was 8 under at the time," he said.

His tee shot on the 18th hole landed in the rough and was blocked by the overhanging limbs of a tree. He debated to hit a 7-iron and take a chance on getting around the tree or punching a 3-iron and rolling it onto the green.

"I said I'm going to go for it," he recalled. "I'm having a good round. Nothing bad has happened yet and I hit a 7-iron that never touched a leaf. It went right through that hole and coming down right at the flag. I thought I had made 2."

The ball wasn't far enough on the putting surface and sucked off the green. Harrison chipped it up and made a par, giving him 34 for the back nine and a 65 for the day. Hogan shot 72, Palmer shot 73 and Von Nida shot 74.

Everyone settled up their bets in cash and Harrison had his pockets full of greenbacks. He won \$35 that day.

"I was in a *Walter Mitty World*," he said. "I didn't know what was going on. It's just a wonderful feeling."

Hogan even left two dozen golf balls in Harrison's locker and Charlie personally

thanked him. Hogan later approached **Harold Sargent**, the golf professional at the Atlanta Athletic Club, and said, "Tell Charlie to keep his mouth shut about those balls. I'm not supposed to be giving them to an amateur."

The next day Harrison played with **Jimmy Demaret**, **Gene Sarazen** and Britain's **Harry Weetman** and shot 79. He later played with **Cary Middlecoff**.

"It was just a dream world to play with all these great players," Harrison said. "By the time the tournament bell rang, I was out of gas."

On the first day of the tournament, Harrison birdied the first two holes.

"I turned to my caddie and said, 'So, do you think we're going to win this thing?'" Harrison said.

A bogey-bogey brought him back to earth, but he shot a 74 that day. He was still hanging around the second round, five shots behind Palmer and standing on the eighth tee with playing partner **Doug Sanders**.

"I just went into a funk," he said. "I couldn't make a par. Just kept making bogeys and missed the cut, which was disappointing, but had a great time."

He shot 79 and missed the cut by three shots.

Harrison went on to qualify for the Masters again in 1973, thanks to a fifth-place finish at the U.S. Amateur at Charlotte Country Club. But this time there was no magic when he arrived at Augusta. He went into the event with a bad back, a problem that began when he lifted his daughter off the wet grass at Atlanta Country Club. Harrison took some pain medicine that allowed him to play, but also robbed him of that magical putting stroke. He shot 81-81 and missed the cut.

"Hurts to think about it," he said. "But I was there."

Harrison never brokered that round with Palmer with a long-term friendship. "He would have accepted me," Harrison said. "That's one of my biggest regrets that I didn't pursue that." Harrison didn't want to be one of those back-slappers who seemed to suffocate Palmer at every club and restaurant he visited.

Harrison never had any further interaction with Hogan, either. He died in 1997 at age 84.

He stumbled across a connection to Von Nida in a most unusual way. One year, while competing in the Dogwood Invitational at

HOLE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	OUT	IN	TOTAL	
HOGAN	375	400	4	9	4	4	3	5		445	470	4	6	4	5	5	4		3125	3495	36	
VON NIDA	475	555	5	1	4	5	5	5		365	445	4	12	5	3	4	5		6250	6980	72	
SCORE	330	355	4	11	4	4	4	4		130	155	3	16	3	x	3	4		3125	3495	36	
SCORE	170	220	3	15	3	3	4	3		455	475	5	4	5	5	5	5		3125	3495	36	
SCORE	420	450	4	5	4	3	4	4		400	420	4	8	4	4	4	3		3125	3495	36	
SCORE	170	190	3	17	2	3	2	3		465	520	5	2	4	4	5	5		3125	3495	36	
SCORE	315	365	4	13	3	4	4	4		125	190	3	18	2	3	2	3		3125	3495	36	
SCORE	475	530	5	3	4	5	5	5		345	400	4	14	3	4	4	4		3125	3495	36	
SCORE	395	420	4	7	3	5	4	4		395	420	4	10	4	4	5	4		3125	3495	36	
SCORE	3125	3485	36							3125	3495	36								6250	6980	72
SCORE																						

NOTE: Minimum distances, as shown, represent yardage from front of tees to nearest pin locations. Maximum distances represent measurements from back of tees to the farthest pin locations.

Palmer's classic autograph is on the second line and Von Nida's is on the third line, along with the date. Hogan's signature? Palmer intentionally left the first line on the scorecard for Hogan to sign. There it is — plain and simple. Seeing it never ceases to bring a smile to Harrison's face.

Druid Hills Golf Club, Harrison was paired with a young Australian named **Adam Scott**. During the course of the round, Harrison asked Scott if he had ever heard of Von Nida.

The answer surprised him. "He taught me how to play golf," Scott said.


Von Nida, who died in 2007 at age 93, has the PGA Tour of Australasia's developmental tour named in his honor. A few years after their first encounter, Harrison was able to show the famous scorecard of his match with Hogan to Scott during the Tour Championship.

There are several duplicates of the scorecard from that day. The Atlanta Athletic Club has one on display in a trophy case. East Lake Golf Club has one displayed with some other Harrison memorabilia in its clubhouse lobby.

But the original is in a frame that sits in a place of prominence in the Harrison home, as he said, "under lock and key."

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Today **Charlie Harrison** continues to be one of the most beloved figures in Georgia golf. Author and historian **Sid Matthew** said, "Charlie is a national treasure." He was elected to the Georgia Tech Hall of Fame in 1978, the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame in 1991 and the Georgia Golf Hall of Fame in 1992. He helped start The First Tee at East Lake and worked for years there as a volunteer assistant. He's the Ambassador of Golf for East Lake Golf Club. His effervescent personality and easy-going demeanor help make him a magnet for people who love golf and history. And no one can spin a yarn quite as good as **Charles W. Harrison**. 

Stan Awtrey is editor of Golf Georgia. Special thanks to Sid Matthew for use of the historical images of Charlie Harrison used in this article.