

Nelson's Magnificent Seven

From 1939 through 1946, Byron Nelson ruled Chicago-area golf, winning seven titles, coveted purses and the affection of fans. In 1945, local triumphs were stepping-stones en route to his still-unparalleled 11-tournament winning streak.

By Tim Cronin



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When John Byron Nelson, Jr. first arrived in Chicago in the late summer, 1931, the lanky Texan was virtually unknown to the golfing public.

By the time of his final competitive rounds here in the late summer, 1946, Nelson's nickname was "Mr. Golf."

Between arriving as an unknown 19-year-old ex-caddie and bidding adieu as a 34-year-old gentleman rancher, Nelson did two things. He won almost everything winnable in Chicagoland, and he changed how the game was played.

The first to successfully combine finesse around the greens and a silky putting touch with raw power off the tee, Nelson previewed today's all-out assault on courses, par and the record book.

Nelson beat all three into submission. Not for nothing was his 1946 instructional book entitled *Winning Golf*. When Nelson was at his best from tee to cup, he was unmatched.

That held true most famously in 1945, when Nelson won 11 straight tournaments. This is the feat he is most remembered for, even though he won 18 times during that year. But there's so much more to his career, and a great deal revolves around his Chicagoland achievements.

Record books reveal that no man has won more big-time pro tournaments in the Chicago area than Byron Nelson. He captured seven titles here in an eight-year span, including a stretch of four in a row centered on his fantastic exploits of 1945.

Call them the Magnificent Seven, and rightfully, for each time, Nelson beat a solid field. Even during World War II, many in the services arranged for leave during key stretches, and Nelson had to beat them.

Only Ben Hogan is close, with five area wins. While only once in those five triumphs did Hogan have to beat Nelson en route to victory, Nelson had to hold off Hogan four times in his seven wins.

How great was Byron Nelson? A few numbers hint at his achievements:

- Nelson won seven of the 15 Chicago-area tournaments he played in as a pro.
- His scoring average over 59 rounds was 70.39.
- He scored in the 60s in 26 rounds.
- He was a cumulative 67-under par, even after going 26-over in his first two appearances.
- He was out of the top 10 only once.
- He earned \$37,367.34 in cash and war bonds, and another \$1,187.50 in unofficial money.

There was more to it than that, though. Nelson, more personable than Hogan, though less flashy than Sam Snead or Jimmy Demaret, became a drawing card, in part thanks to four triumphs at Tam O'Shanter Country Club, where George S. May staged the rich, raucous All-American Open and World Championship.

The likable Nelson, in fact, did so well at Tam, where the largest

galleries in the sport cheered him, he was able to buy his Texas dream ranch and retire there earlier than he might have suspected.

Long before, however, the teenage Nelson's first trip to Chicago ended quickly.

An Inauspicious District Debut

Thirty-six holes of qualifying for the match-play portion of the 1931 U.S. Amateur without a practice round saw Nelson come up a stroke short at Beverly Country Club. He wrote in *How I Played The Game*, his 1993 biography, "I'd never seen bentgrass greens before, and I had thirteen three-putt greens. I remember very little else about that Amateur. The course was fairly hard."

It was Nelson's only U.S. Amateur appearance. That he appeared at all was fairly unusual. Most caddies with any game turned pro immediately. Byron learned the game carrying a bag at Glen Garden Country Club in Fort Worth, and learned well. Few dallied at the amateur level beyond club caddie championships—Nelson knocked off Hogan in a nine-hole playoff to win the Glen Garden caddie title in 1928—but Byron ventured to Beverly for his first taste of big-time golf after winning only a pair of minor amateur tournaments.

By the spring of 1932, Nelson had turned pro. He returned here the year after for the Western Open at Olympia Fields Country Club. Now 21, he opened with a respectable 70 but finished at 9-over-par 295. A second-round 77 included an unplayable lie and a lost ball, but 295 meant a share of seventh place. In 2004, seventh in the Western Open was worth \$160,800. Nelson settled for \$75 in 1933. His career earnings: \$184.50. He owed backers more than that.

Nelson didn't play the Depression-era tour regularly until 1935, when his third Chicago visit brought him to Medinah and the revamped No. 3 for the second Medinah Open. He wasn't a threat, opening with a 7-over-par 78 and finishing at 17-over 301. That brought him \$62.50. With expenses about \$100 weekly, he lost money.

Winning soon after for the first time as a pro—he collected a whopping \$440—helped Nelson a great deal, as did his friendship with Texarkana, Ark., oil tycoon James K. Wadley, an early supporter. They met during the winter of 1933, when Nelson was starting as head pro at Texarkana Country Club. Wadley, a former Western Golf Association director, had donated the Western Open's championship trophy in 1924. When it was stolen soon after, he had a duplicate made. The J.K. Wadley Trophy is awarded the winner to this day.

Making His Mark at Medinah

In 1939, the trophy's presence at Medinah brought Nelson added inspiration on his second visit to the big west-side club. By then, Nelson was a star, the new U.S. Open champion, plus runner-up in the PGA the week before. As the favorite, he also lived up to expectations, capturing the Western by a stroke, passing co-leaders Dick Metz and Lloyd Mangrum in the last round.

The key wasn't his opening round of 2-under-par 68 on Medinah No. 1, but an approach shot on No. 3 in the final round. It prompted fellow competitor Tommy Armour to say, "For my shillings, it was the shot that won the tournament."

The Silver Scot, a multiple major winner and Medinah's head pro, rarely offered such praise. Nelson drove into the 15th fairway—remodeled, it's the 14th today—with a 1-iron. His approach

to the hole was guarded by a bunker.

"His chance for the birdie depended upon dropping his ball over that bunker just right and holding it tight to the flag," Armour said. "Byron took his pitching niblick, his 'double-duty' iron, and nipped it over perfectly, to four feet from the hole...and sank his putt for the birdie."

Nelson rather liked it himself.

"It was one of those shots that you know is exactly right the instant you hit it," he told reporters. "I knew it was right on the flagstick and that it would hold when it got to the green. I knew then I had it."

He would finish with par 71 to total 2-under-par 281. Mangrum was a stroke behind. Nelson had won the first of the Magnificent Seven.

Decades later, Nelson still had a warm spot in his heart for winning the Western—and the Wadley.

"Mr. Wadley was one of my absolute marvelous best friends," Nelson recalled. "So winning that trophy, in that sense, meant more to me in a way than nearly any trophy I've ever won or got my name on."

The title—Western Open champion—offered prestige and monetary value.

"In my time, the four major championships were the National Open, the PGA, the Western and the North and South," Nelson noted a few years ago. "In 1939, I won the National Open, the North and South, and the Western, and I was runner-up in the PGA. So, had I won the PGA, it would have been considered a kind of grand slam."

Drama at Tam O'Shanter

Nelson's game was just as solid two years later when he returned for the inaugural Tam O'Shanter Open, which instantly proved itself to be anything but a standard circuit stop.

Tam O'Shanter had hosted the Chicago Open in 1940, and club owner May promoted it extensively. May, enjoying the commotion, decided to sponsor his own tournament in 1941. Dubbed the Tam O'Shanter Open, his baby turned the golf world on its ear.

May established a \$1 admission. He bought full-page ads in the papers. He arranged radio broadcasts. He built a permanent grandstand behind the 18th green. He also put up an \$11,000 purse, \$2,000 to the winner. That was money unseen in golf since a \$25,000 tournament in Agua Caliente, Mexico, in the Roaring Twenties.

In 1941, with a war raging in Europe, \$11,000 attracted spectators and players alike. May was determined to keep it that way. Noted *Chicago Daily News* columnist John Carmichael, "From now on, the club insists that its annual affair will top any offering in the land for prize money and it can stand a few raises, too, if another club thinks it's bluffing. In other words, Tam O'Shanter will up its ante \$1,000 above the best figure for any tournament just to keep faith with itself in a pledge that here, each fall, is really the end of the rainbow."

In 1941, Nelson chased leader Leonard Dodson for three days and caught him, and the pot of gold, on Sunday. Opening with a 5-under-par 67, two strokes off Dodson's pace, he remained second to Dodson after 36 and 54 holes, then made his move on Sunday. Watched by 23,000, a gallery PGA official Fred Corcoran called the largest in American golf history, Nelson birdied the ninth, 10th and



Lowell Rutherford (left) with Byron Nelson at the 1943 Chicago Victory Open.

Byron Nelson's Chicago Tournaments

| YEAR | TOURNAMENT | CLUB | FINISH | WINNINGS |
|------|------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|--|
| 1931 | U.S. Amateur | Beverly CC | missed match play | N/A |
| 1933 | Western Open | Olympia Fields CC | T7 | \$75 |
| 1935 | Medinah Open | Medinah CC, No. 3 | T12 | \$62.50 |
| 1939 | Western Open | Medinah CC, No. 1/3 | 1 | \$750 (plus \$62.50 low-round money) |
| 1941 | Tam O'Shanter Open | Tam O'Shanter CC | 1 | \$2,000 |
| 1942 | Hale America Nat. Open | Ridgemoor CC | T4 | \$475 |
| 1942 | Tam O'Shanter Open | Tam O'Shanter CC | 1 | \$2,500 |
| 1943 | All-American Open | Tam O'Shanter CC | T3 | \$900 (plus \$100 low-round money) |
| 1943 | Chicago Victory | Beverly CC | 5 | \$0 (paid only top four players) |
| 1944 | Chicago Victory | Edgewater GC | 3 | \$1,250 war bonds; \$422 cash |
| 1944 | All-American Open | Tam O'Shanter CC | 1 | \$10,100 |
| 1945 | Chicago Victory | Calumet CC | 1 | \$2,000 war bonds (plus \$400 unofficial bonds) |
| 1945 | All-American Open | Tam O'Shanter CC | 1 | \$13,600 war bonds (plus \$625 low-round money) |
| 1946 | Chicago Victory | Medinah CC, No. 3 | | \$2,000 |
| 1946 | All-American Open | Tam O'Shanter CC | T7 | \$1,233.34 |
| 1946 | World Championship | Tam O'Shanter CC | 2 | \$0 ((\$10,000 winner-take-all)) |

Overall, Nelson made 15 appearances here as a pro, recording seven wins, 10 top-3s, 14 top-7s, 70.3898 scoring average, earning \$37,367.84 cash, bonds (plus \$1,187.50 unofficial).

11th holes to tie Dodson. A par on the 12th brought him the lead when Dodson bogeyed.

Nelson parred in, and Dodson could only match him, missing a 25-foot birdie putt on the final green. Nelson, at 10-under-par 278, had a one-stroke victory over Dodson and Hogan, who also missed a birdie putt to tie at the last. Handed the \$2,000 winner's check by May, Nelson quipped, "Thanks, George,

for the buggy ride. I hope to return here next year and to have the same good luck, as the income tax will be higher."

So was the purse. The following year, May offered \$15,000, added an amateur tournament, and invited black pros and amateurs who were then routinely barred from virtually all tournaments. The locker room remained segregated.

Before Tam's renewal, however, came the Hale America National Open, a substitute for both the U.S. Open and the Chicago Open. The CDGA today considers the Hale America of 1942 the Chicago Open under another name, but in the months following Pearl Harbor, it was touted as a pinnacle event. Nelson scored 278, 10-under par for Ridgemoor Country Club's stylish course. It wasn't enough to beat Hogan, whose second-round 62 catapulted him ahead of the field. Nelson tied for fourth.

A month later, Nelson was back at Tam, and back in front. He ruled much of the 1942 Tam O'Shanter Open, leading by five strokes after three rounds after a 7-under-par 65 on Saturday. That adventure included an eagle and a hole-in-one on successive holes, the 10th and 11th.

When Nelson reached the 18th green, May was there. Nelson had eight feet left for a birdie 3 on the 18th for that total. May, who had a standing offer of \$500 for a course record 64, met Nelson and whispered in his ear.

"Know what May said?" Nelson told reporters after missing the putt. "He offered me \$1,000 if I canned that putt. Boy, the pressure was just too much."

The pressure increased Sunday. He ballooned to 77 for 8-under-par 280. Clayton Heafner's par 72 gave him an identical total. That meant an 18-hole Monday playoff. Nelson returned to form, scoring 4-under 67 to whip Heafner by four strokes for the \$2,500 first prize.

Nelson and Tam O'Shanter had a thing going.

"The course was fairly hard, and the fairways were narrow," he recalled in his 1993 biography. "I played well there for two reasons: one, it was a big money tournament so I tried harder, and two, I played those clover fairways well. Not that they planted the fairways in clover, but there was a lot of it on the course, and there were no chemicals to control it back then.

"Having learned to play on Texas hardpan, I always clipped the ball off the fairway and didn't take much turf like some of the other boys. That clover had a lot of sticky juice if you hit very much of it, which would cause you to hit fliers. Fliers have little or no spin and you can never be sure what they'll do, except it's usually something you don't want."

Nelson was sure in the clover at Tam. In 1943, May changed the tournament's name to the All-American Open, adding a women's tournament for a literal three-ring



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Golf legends Ben Hogan (left) and Nelson share Texas roots and great Chicago legacies.

circus. This one, favorite Nelson didn't win. He was 3-under after 10 holes, but topped his drive on the 11th and thereafter scrambled to a par 72. A third-round 65 helped him finish at 5-under-par 283, a stroke behind Harold "Jug" McSpaden and O'Neal "Buck" White, who tied at 282. McSpaden won the playoff 71-72, and took the \$2,000 first prize. Nelson settled for \$900, plus \$100 in bonus money.

Two of 1943's three tour stops were here. The Chicago Victory Open, the CDGA's patriotic renaming of the Chicago Open/Hale America, was played at Beverly Country Club a month after the Tam tempest. Nelson, returning to his first Chicago destination, scored even-par 284 on the difficult Donald Ross course. That placed him fifth, and fifth was out of the money. The CDGA offered \$2,000 in war bonds, with expenses and caddie fees covered for all 41 players.

In 1944, the tour was back in business, and Nelson was back in the money. He opened the Chicago Victory Open with a dazzling 6-under-par 65 at Edgewater Golf Club, the north side course where Chick Evans grew up. Nelson then faded to third at 8-under-par 276, which was three strokes behind McSpaden and Hogan. While McSpaden scored a 70-73 playoff victory, Nelson settled for \$1,250 in war bonds, plus, he noted in his little black book, \$422 in cash.

Saving the Best for Last

The best was to come. Byron Nelson won his next four Chicago-area starts, the last four legs of his Magnificent Seven. In order, they were the 1944 All-American Open at Tam O'Shanter, the 1945 Chicago Victory Open at Calumet Country Club, the 1945 All-American at Tam, and the 1946 Chicago Victory on Medinah No. 3.

In those four tournaments, Nelson was 45-under par, in the 60s in 12 of 16 rounds and over par only twice; he won \$30,200 in cash and bonds.

It started at Tam. Nelson, fresh from losing in the PGA Championship final the week before, rebounded with a first-round 4-under-par 68 in the All-American, capped by a curling 35-foot birdie putt on the 18th green. He was three off Johnny Bulla's pace, close enough to make the Eastern Airlines pilot uncomfortable. The 2-under 70 that followed gave Byron the lead, Bulla fading to 79. Nelson led by two strokes after a 1-over 73 on Saturday, his fourth over-par round of the year.

It didn't hurt. Nelson's final round of 3-under 69 on a wet track, keyed by three front-nine birdies, drew him five strokes clear of runner-up Ed Dudley. Nelson was now three for four in the Tam/All-American.

"Yes, sir, I played me a round of golf today," he said later. Then he picked up the first prize, a war bond worth \$13,462.50, which converted to \$10,100 if cashed in.

(Most wartime tournaments paid in bonds. Nelson usually cashed them immediately, at 75 percent of the face value.) The largest prize in golf history, it made Nelson golf's single-season money leader—in August. His cash total of \$25,464 broke Sam Snead's record of \$19,534, a gaudy sum back in 1938.

Nelson, his accountant and the IRS hadn't seen anything yet. Next was 1945, Nelson's year of years, the most dominant year ever—achievements by Nicklaus, Woods and Singh included.

1945: Year of the Streak

Nelson reckoned his 18 wins in 31 starts earned a record \$47,600. Much of it was earned in Chicago. He swept the Chicago Victory at Calumet Country Club in Homewood and the All-American at Tam O'Shanter, and did so spectacularly, dissecting Calumet with rounds of 69-68-68-70 to total 13-under-par 275, then humbling Tam with a 66-68-68-67 outburst for 19-under-par 269.

He won at Calumet playing hurt. Nelson told officials before the 36-hole finale he was ailing.

"My back hurts so, I don't think I'll be able to play today," he said.

Mayo Clinic doctors later diagnosed the pain as stress-related, brought on by the streak's pressure. Nelson started anyway, and not only held off old pal McSpaden—they were dubbed "the Gold Dust Twins"—and fast-closing Ky Laffoon in the final round, but pulled away to win by seven, collecting the \$2,000 war bond first prize. It was Nelson's fifth Chicagoland victory in 11 pro starts, and the eighth of his 11 straight.

Fifty-six years later, Calumet's centennial celebration featured Nelson's return. The course had been remodeled in 1957, when the Tri-State Tollway played through, but Byron recalled one hole vividly.

"I remember the 14th hole, a par 3, because of the difficulty, the slope of the green," he said during the 2001 gala. "When I played the hole, I didn't have any problem. I was hitting my irons well. And I remember the first hole. There was a modest clubhouse and a screened-in porch. We ate our lunch there. But look at it now. The way they've done it, it's absolutely excellent. I'm very proud of it."

Nelson won the PGA Championship to make it nine straight, then returned to Chicago for another madcap Tam



PHOTO BY PETER WAGNER

In 2001, Nelson visited Calumet C.C. to relive one of his 1945 triumphs.

O'Shanter affair, where the streak shared top billing with Hogan's return. Nelson took notice when the "Hawk," on leave from military duties, took up residence on Tam's practice range.

"This is a rough field," he said, glancing at Hogan on the end of the range. "When I see a man come out for practice, I come out and practice too."

It paid off. Nelson scored 6-under-par 66 in the first round, including an inward 30 featuring an eagle and four birdies. He would win wire-to-wire, leading Gene Sarazen by four after 36 holes, McSpaden by six after 54, and finishing 11 ahead of

A gentleman through and through, Nelson considers his greatest achievement not glory on the links, but the positive impact of the Byron Nelson Classic, which raises more money for charity than any other golf event.

Hogan and Sarazen at 19-under-par 269.

Nelson had won 10 straight tournaments. The old record? Three.

The prize? Nelson's biggest to date, \$13,600 in war bonds, or \$10,200 in cash, plus \$625 in day money for low rounds.

It went into his "ranch" account. For some years, Nelson had planned to leave golf to raise cattle like a good Texan should. His winning streak, indeed his Chicago winnings, went far toward funding that ultimate goal.

That's why 1946 was Nelson's last full year on tour. In July, he said three tournaments remained in his season: the Chicago Victory, the All-American and the PGA

Championship. Then, with the 630-acre ranch in Roanoke, Tex., finally his, he and wife, Louise, would make their home there.

One for the Road

Appropriately, his final win in Chicago came where his first did, at Medinah. Nelson opened the Chicago Victory Open tied for 16th with an uncharacteristic 73, 2-over No. 3's strict par, five strokes behind amateur sensation Frank Stranahan and Dutch Harrison. Byron was so ticked off he talked about quitting, but improved Saturday to sixth place, six back, after a second-round 69. He was both still around

and had a chance.

Protocol called for 36 holes on Sunday. Nelson charged in the morning with a 2-under 69 to stand at 2-under 211 at lunch, two strokes behind leader Mangrum. McSpaden was between them at 210. Mangrum blew up with a 40 on the afternoon's outward nine. It would come down to McSpaden and Nelson, playing a few threesomes ahead. Nelson went out in 33, McSpaden in 34, and so were tied with nine holes left, except that Nelson was ahead on the course, and soon ahead on the scoreboard as well.

He smashed a 275-yard drive on the 12th hole—these days the 15th—and had

90 yards to the cup. Nelson took wedge in hand, swung and holed out for an eagle 2. The gallery roared. McSpaden had to hear it, had to know Nelson had done it again. Soon after, McSpaden was on the uphill 13th hole—the 16th in Medinah's current rotation. He took double-bogey 6.

Nelson, finishing at 5-under-par 279, was a winner again in Chicago. He collected another \$2,000. The Magnificent Seven was complete.

Two more area appearances followed. Nelson was the favorite in the following week's All-American, but after an opening 74, he stood six strokes behind leader Herman Barron. There was no rally this time. Barron won, Nelson tying for seventh at 1-under 287. That brought him \$1,233.

A month later, Nelson was one of four players in May's new production, the World Championship. The reward for 36 holes of toil: \$10,000, winner-take-all. May corralled three big winners, U.S. Open champ Mangrum, who happened to be Tam's head pro, British Open winner Snead, and All-American victor Barron, for his new affair. PGA winner Hogan was absent but Nelson was an eager substitute, and scored 71 in the first round at Tam, trailing the 69s of Mangrum and Snead, but ahead of Barron's 75.

Sunday, Nelson's birdie on the 500-yard par-5 15th tied Snead for the lead, but the "Slammer" sank an eight-footer for a birdie on the par-3 16th, and added a bird on the home hole to take the big prize by scoring 6-under 138. Nelson, at 140, left his last Chicago tournament empty-handed, just as he had at Beverly in 1931.

In between, Nelson ruled Chicago golf, winning titles, trophies, money and memories. His legacy here has so far been impossible to match. But he believes his off-course achievement of hosting the Byron Nelson Classic far exceeds his on-course success. Run by the Salesmanship Club of Dallas, it raises more money for charity than any other golf tournament in the world, all of it supporting the club's programs to keep children from troubled homes on the right path.

"If I continued to play, we wouldn't have the Byron Nelson Classic," explained the man himself. "That's what life's about, doing something for somebody (else)." 🌱

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