

# THE TRIUMVIRATE DEFENDED

By R. STANLEY WEIR

UNDER the metaphorical but not very felicitous title of "The Soul of Golf" Mr. P. A. Vaile discourses in the *Century Magazine* for May upon golfing theory and practice. I must confess to some difficulty in grasping what Mr. Vaile precisely means by the "Soul of Golf;" but for this I may perhaps be excused seeing that the author of the phrase admits that the Soul of Golf is something "vague and intangible." Strange to say, however, although intangible, the soul of golf may yet, in Mr. Vaile's words, be "reached and truly appreciated." To reach the intangible is so extraordinary an exploit that one need not be surprised that Mr. Vaile is moved to this little burst of rhapsody which lovers of the occult may perhaps take time to ponder:

"He who would have within him the spirit of golf, who would know it to its very core, must seek the soul through the body; for in no other way can it be found."

The intangible soul of golf, then, may be "reached" but it is desirable to have the spirit of golf within; but what these are; and what the core of a spirit is like; and what the body is through which the soul must be sought, are conundrums.

When Mr. P. A. Vaile abandons metaphors and dualistic philosophy he is vastly more successful in making himself understood, but whether more convincing is open to question. He sharply accuses Braid, Vardon and Taylor, professionals who, as all the world knows have each five British Open Championships to their credit, of preaching one method of golf and practising another. By quotations from their books which have delighted and instructed thousands, quotations which he opposes by mere dicta of his own, Mr. P. A. Vaile denounces the triumvirate for confusing their readers by false instruction. "The sad feature of this instruction," says Mr. P. A. Vaile with mock pathos, "is that none of these great players does what he advises his readers to do." Now the things that Braid, Taylor and Vardon advise their readers and pupils to do, contrary to their own actual practice, are declared to be two in number. In our critics parlance they are "fetishes"—a word which is constantly at the tip of his pen.

The first so-called fetish is that at the top of the swing the major part of the weight of the body is borne by the right leg to which it has been transferred as the club has been swung back. The second alleged "fetish" is that during the whole stroke the left arm controls and supplies the greater power. These are the doctrines which are declared with scant courtesy, to be false; and "the sad feature

is that none of these great players does what he advises his readers to do." This charge is not made by Mr. P. A. Vaile for the first time; he has repeatedly made it; it amounts to an accusation of ignorance and folly so gross that after some hesitation I have decided to essay the task, by no means difficult, of showing where the fetishes lie. My contentions are that assuredly they are not with Braid, Taylor and Vardon; that these great players are sufficiently familiar with the meaning of plain words and sufficiently conscious of their own bodily motions and action to describe them with accuracy; that to charge them with preaching one thing and practising another is the height of hardihood; and that Mr. Vaile's alternative methods are special, not normal, golf, and his generalization defective and unsound.

Mr. P. A. Vaile has written a good deal about golf; but, really, this latest article contains assertions so extraordinary that one is tempted to question the extent of his practical acquaintance with the game. For instance, he quotes Vardon as saying that the head during the back-swing should be kept quite still, the body alone pivoting from the hips; and then affirms in the most positive manner that Vardon here advises an *impossibility*. Mr. P. A. Vaile then goes on to say: "It is surely obvious that if one starts with one's weight equally distributed between the feet, and does not thereafter sway either at the head or the hips it will be impossible to get one's weight on the right leg at the top of the swing." But why should one sway at all if one pivots properly? For if one pivots properly nothing is easier than transferring weight to the right leg. Vardon prescribes pivoting from the hips, with bend in the knee and a raised heel, in order to *prevent* swaying. Incidentally, we perceive how this action must throw the weight on the right leg. The sentence we have quoted from Mr. P. A. Vaile makes it "surely obvious" that he has grasped neither Vardon's exposition of the swing nor the characteristic pivoting that every golfer understands and practices.

But, "in a correctly executed drive at golf the weight should *never* be on the right foot." This is another oracular generalization from Mr. Vaile's article. With the chorus in "Pinafore" we are tempted to exclaim, What, never! What about J. H. Taylor to mention no other? Or, how would Mr. P. A. Vaile carry the hills at Sandwich or Ekwanok if not allowed to have his weight on the right foot? Would he have the temerity in such case to attempt a low skimmer such as weight on the left foot would promote? Mr. P. A. Vaile's bold statement that the weight should *never* be on the right foot in a correctly

executed drive is simply another of those rash and untenable propositions far too common in his pronouncements on golf.

If further demonstration is necessary to prove how oblique Mr. P. A. Vaile's point of view so often is, and how reckless he is in assertion, it is supplied by the following sentences also taken from his article on "The Soul of Golf," which we venture to think are unique to a degree:

"Nearly all golf-books and most professionals tell the golfer to pivot on the side of the left foot and to bend his left leg inward toward the other leg. *This is rank bad advice and quite unsound golf.* The pivoting should be done so that the weight is distributed from the ball of the big toe *right across the front portion of the foot*, and the weight should not be borne by the inner side of the foot."

I have put certain words in italics to illustrate both our critics small reverence for great names, and his remarkable notion about pivoting. If, Mr. Vaile, were desirous of *preventing* pivoting he could devise no more effective means than putting the weight "right across the front portion of the foot." Let anyone make the experiment. It is impossible to cite in any book on golf that ever was written the slightest authority for this fantastic conception or quote any reputable professional in support of it. It is pure fantasy. Nor does any golf book or professional tell the golfer to "pivot on the side of the left foot." The golfer does not get so wide a margin as the whole side of the foot. Strictly speaking the pivoting is done on the body's central axis accommodated by the well-known bend of the left knee and the raising of the left heel so often described but never before described as Mr. P. A. Vaile describes it.

It has never been denied that there are occasions when the weight of the body may be borne chiefly by the left leg, and that the power may sometimes be advantageously exerted in a major degree by the right arm. Nay, more. I do not think any sound authority will deny that a very good ball may be driven by the right arm being allowed to dominate,

even if the weight is allowed to rest chiefly on the left as Mr. Vaile contends it should. But that admission, which I readily make, does not concede that Mr. Vaile's methods are the better for standard purposes and certainly does not concede that the methods recommended by authority and tradition are fetishistic.

Every golfer knows the push shot and the running-up shot with the ball nearer the right foot call for a distribution of weight different from that called for by ordinary shots. They may also call for more pronounced right arm action. Every golfer knows the facsimile of these strokes may on occasion, be effectively brought off by wooden clubs; and it needs no professor to tell a player with a down-hill stance where his major weight perforce must be. But these are special shots chiefly called for by conditions of stance, lie and wind and sometimes by individual idiosyncrasy. Mr. Vaile generalizes from these special shots and as a result, borrowing a metaphor from him, flounders hopelessly in a quagmire of fallacy.

If Mr. Vaile had been content to emphasize the features of what Duncan calls "forward" shots—such as the push shot and

the run-up; had he been content to show that the features of these shots may be, at times, usefully adapted to certain wooden clubs; had he, as he might have done with a certain measure of truth, pointed out that the "perpendicular" swinger (the term is purely relative of course), is inclined to bear more on the left foot than the horizontal player whose round-the-body swing necessitates a more complete transfer of weight to the right;—had he done any of these things he would have made a useful contribution to the science of the game; but instead he has endeavored not merely to make a special shot which is sometimes characteristic of the headsman type of player, the chief shot in the game, but attacks names and reputations, that are highly respected and honored, in the language of vituperation.

Now, the particular kind of shot which Mr. Vaile declares to be the only true one has been fully explained by each of the three professionals whom he



(Courtesy of D. Appleton & Co.)

Notwithstanding this conclusive proof Mr. Vaile contends that Taylor's left leg chiefly sustains his weight at the top of the swing

denounces for giving false instruction. They have each explained when and why the weight may usefully be kept forward, when and why a little more right-hand power may be employed. But they distinguish between these special strokes and the ordinary full shot. Mr. Vaile has therefore done them the great injustice of measuring them by a wrong standard, and has incidentally wrought some degree of confusion in the minds of those who may be prone to mistake all positive statements in print for true gospel.

But in still another way our critic betrays how narrow his point of view is and how absurd his efforts to confine us to his weight-on-the-left-leg and power-in-the-right-arm method. He writes as though Braid, Vardon, Taylor, Duncan and the rest all swung their clubs in the same way. For Mr. P. A. Vaile there is only one swing possible. According to him all the great players adopt it but most of them, as he very boldly declares, describe it wrongly and actually play in a manner which contradicts their doctrine. Now the truth is the masters of the game do not all play it in precisely the same way. They differ in respect of the plane of their swing. What a contrast in this respect between Taylor and Vardon! Observe the vertical swing of the one and the flatter swing

of the other. How absolutely indisputable it is, after a glance at the picture of Taylor, herewith reproduced, that his considerable weight has been transferred to the right! The left foot shows not a sign of pressure. His horizontal swing necessitates the transfer of weight. How absurd, then, to generalize as Mr. Vaile has done and to ignore the essential feature of those flat swingers of which Taylor is the shining exemplar! Even if we admit for the sake of argument, that Vardon and Duncan bear chiefly on the left at the top of the swing the method of Taylor and the host who adopt his style would conclusively show Mr. Vaile's sweeping generalization to be wrong. But, quite apart from this, to argue that the left heel may

be raised, the left knee bent and both arms swung to the right side of the body while the preponderance of weight still remains somewhere across the toes of the left foot is surely the most amazing and fatuous absurdity that temerity has ever proclaimed.\*

After all, what is Mr. Vaile's authority for saying that the weight-on-the-right and the power-on-the-left theories are fetishes. Has he yet converted Braid, Taylor and Vardon from the error of their ideas?

Has he converted Mr. Harold H. Hilton, one of the most acute students of the game, Mr. John Ball, Mr. G. Herbert Fowler, or any American professional or amateur of recognized discernment? No. His chief authority is himself backed by his own confident assertions. We are told that Braid, Taylor and Vardon were offered \$750 by our critic to test their theories on a machine of our critic's devising. This they were unable to do, says Mr. Vaile, but it is clear we have not the whole story before us. Duncan is claimed by Mr. Vaile as a supporter of his theories. But Duncan is a headsmen player of a most pronounced type and it would be absurd in the extreme to assume that his swing and use of weight are the methods of the one and only swing in golf. Nevertheless, although Duncan has begun to write about

the game, I am not aware that he has yet committed himself to the theories that Mr. P. A. Vaile so positively proclaims. James Sherlock, the professional at Stoke Poges, is also claimed by Mr. Vaile and the *Century* Article is illustrated at p. 113 by a picture of Sherlock and a machine purporting to show "the distribution of weight in making the swing." Of course the machine shows, as might be expected, that the left leg bears the greater weight; but it is very obvious that the swing is an incomplete one, and that the left leg has been restricted in its movement. It suffices to compare the picture of Sherlock on the

\*Taylor and Braid do not and simply could not, without completely changing their style, play their game after the Vaile manner.



(Courtesy of Longmans, Green, and Co.)

James Sherlock at Top of Swing as illustrated in "The New Book of Golf."

## GOLF ILLUSTRATED

machine with the picture of Sherlock at the top of his swing at p. 192 of "The New Book of Golf." The first picture is a pose; the second one is genuine. In his excellent contribution to that book Sherlock is a little doubtful as to whether the weight remains the same throughout as at the address, but he is quite

put it to impartial test and we shall assuredly find that golf cannot be cribb'd and cabin'd to the narrow limits to which he would confine the swing of all and sundry, while at the same time telling the masters of the game that they profess one thing and practice another.



MACHINE USED TO SHOW THE DISTRIBUTION OF WEIGHT IN MAKING THE SWING IN GOLF

James Sherlock is here shown posed at the top of his swing. He started with his weight even, but found, as shown above, that the main portion of it goes to the left. Note the different position of left knee and foot in the illustration of Sherlock upon opposite page

clear that, after the ball has been struck, the follow through carries it on to the left leg; which seems to show that it must have been previously on the right leg. At all events the picture in the *Century* is entirely unconvincing. Has Mr. Vaile, indeed, given us the full story of the result of his machine tests? Is he quite sure that it gives the theory he so confidently attacks no support whatever? For my part I am perfectly certain that while the machine may give varying results it cannot in respect of the normal swing maintain Mr. Vaile's pretensions. It would certainly show in the case of Taylor and Braid an almost complete transfer of weight to the right; in the case of Vardon a transfer probably to a less degree; possibly in the case of Duncan a more equal distribution but still with the preponderance on the right. If Mr. Vaile has his machine at hand let him

Mr. Vaile also attacks what he calls the time-honored fetish of the power of the left hand and arm. His argument is largely a verbal criticism of Taylor and Mr. Horace G. Hutchinson and the meaning of the word "guide"—a mere quibble. "The right is undoubtedly the dominant partner in the golf drive," says Mr. Vaile. But Braid, Taylor and Vardon say the contrary. And what golfer is likely to hesitate in his choice of preceptors? Mr. Vaile does not go very deeply into the subject, but advises players to forget which hand is the master when making the drive. There is a certain merit in this advice but unfortunately what is true in most of Mr. Vaile's writing is not new, while what is new is not true. There are good reasons for subordinating the right hand and arm in the drive which Mr. Vaile does not seem to suspect.

(Continued on page 44)

## THE TRIUMVIRATE DEFENDED

*(Continued from page 19)*

In the draw-back it would extend the club too much outwards; in the forward swing it would tend to produce the execrated draw. The left arm alone gives the proper line of retraction and therefore should lead on the way down. The right comes in with its added power; but, if allowed the mastery, a true swing, if not impossible, would be supremely difficult and perilous. Nobody denies that golf can be played in that way but few deny that the way of Braid, Taylor and Vardon is by far the better and safer one. Mr. Vaile makes another of his rash and reckless statements when he avers that "no professional of any reputation in England now dares to encourage belief in the old fetish of the left." What about the very professionals he has been attacking with so small ceremony?

Moreover it would seem but fair in view of Mr. Vaile's very critical attitude that he should really be more precise. After all to say that "the right is undoubtedly the dominant partner in the golf drive," or that "the left will nearly always be allowed to do its proportional share of the work," is to say nothing of any value whatever. What is the meaning of "dominant partner?" To what extent does the partner dominate—one half, two thirds or seven eighths? What is meant by "proportional share," and what by "nearly always?" These are the loosest possible kind of statements. If Mr. Vaile is going to correct the unscientific statements of Braid, Taylor and Vardon it is not asking too much that he substitute scientific and exact statements of his own; the majority of his present assertions, turn out, when examined, to be as vague and intangible as his "soul of golf."

There is one other point in Mr. Vaile's paper to which I wish to refer—his criticism of Braid's description of the function of the wrists in the full drive. Mr. Vaile both here and elsewhere makes very merry at Braid's expense on this point and denies the possibility of introducing a "whip-like snap" into a sweep. Braid according to Mr. Vaile is here victimized by another fetish; and Mr. Vaile thinks he has support from Vardon who says somewhere that he does not believe in the long ball coming from the wrists. Neither does Braid for that matter; but he thinks the wrists, properly used, may help a good deal. Vardon merely opposes the idea that there is special magic in some sudden and independent wrist action. Now it is very clear that Braid plays with somewhat looser wrists than Vardon. Every practical golfer knows that by somewhat slack wrists he can bring off the precise "whip-like snap" that Braid so vividly describes in his famous "corkscrew" passage. Vardon and Taylor do not describe this particular phenomenon, but what does that indicate? Merely a difference in style and that they play with somewhat stiffer wrists than Braid.

*(Continued on page 46)*

THE TRIUMVIRATE  
DEFENDED*(Continued from page 44)*

I feel bound to say that Mr. Vaile either completely misunderstands the action of the wrists as part of forearm action or he expresses himself with unfortunate lack of precision. He affirms that "the wrists do the most important part of their work early in the swing"—a statement which may be allowed to pass so long as we understand that the main thing after all is to despatch the ball—but when he goes on to say that "the wrists have finished their work long before they have got anywhere near the ball" we have another of those rash and uncritical assertions that no careful golfer would make. The action of the wrists, indeed, as part of the roll of the forearms is nowhere more important than at the precise moment of impact. The wrists do not finish their work to be exact, until the swing itself is finished.

Again our critic says that "the wrists are braced tightly in bringing the club down to withstand the shock of impact." The wrists are never encouraged by an intelligent player to withstand the shock of impact; the exact contrary is the fact; they are certainly not braced tightly, save in a stiff-arm shot. They perform their natural roll or return in a perfectly smooth though rapid manner, the whole purpose being to secure a swift and accurate blow. Wrists "braced tightly" would of necessity be rigid, and rigid wrists are dangerous. These remarks of Mr. Vaile again illustrate his painful habit of rash and inaccurate statement.

Mr. P. A. Vaile writes of "the quagmire of doubt and contradiction in which a student of the game finds himself floundering if he follows the teaching of the leading players." When it comes to floundering we know of no one more guilty than Mr. P. A. Vaile. His disparagement of Braid, Vardon and Taylor is entirely unjustified. These splendid golfers teach and play the game as they understand it after years of experiment and study and doubtless, after much discussion with each other as to best basis for scientific golf. Mr. P. A. Vaile may think he knows of better methods; he is entitled to his opinion; but much water will pass under Brooklyn Bridge before he convinces the world of golf that "headsman" or "forward" style of play is the only correct style, or that Braid, Vardon and Taylor do not know their own minds when they write or talk about the royal and ancient game.

(Mr. R. Stanley Weir's defense of the Triumvirate is largely based upon the fact that there really exist two Schools of Golf. One school headed by such golfers as J. H. Taylor, H. H. Hilton and J. J. MacDermott bring the club back in a flat arc compelling a movement of the shoulders, hips and feet characteristically different from that of the upright swing advocated by Harry Vardon, George Duncan and Charles Evans, Jr. In a future number these two methods of playing will be explained in detail.—The Ed.)