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'The Grand Slam': Fairway to Heaven

By CHARLES McGRATH

THE GRAND SLAM

Bobby Jones, America, and the Story of Golf.

By Mark Frost.

Illustrated. 493 pp. Hyperion. \$30.

Long before Tiger Woods, there was Bobby Jones, the original golf prodigy. When Jones retired from competitive golf at the end of the 1930 season, he was just 28, one year younger than Woods is now, and though the majors were different then, his winning percentage in them was more than twice as good as Woods's -- 13 victories in 21 tries, compared with Woods's 8 in 38 (he's been playing majors since 1995, but in 1995 and 1996 he couldn't compete in the P.G.A. Championship because he was still an amateur). In 1930 Jones accomplished what no other golfer ever had and, because of the way the game has changed, what no golfer today would even contemplate: in a single year he swept the Open and Amateur championships in both Britain and the United States. Those were the big-deal tournaments back then; the Masters didn't exist yet, and in an era that still frowned a little on professionalism, the P.G.A. hadn't earned full respectability.

Jones (1902-71) paved the way for Woods. He was the first golfer to attain true celebrity and to become a media superstar. An extremely appealing figure -- handsome and charismatic -- he came of age when the country was just beginning its obsession with spectator sports, and he became the darling of Grantland Rice, Al Laney, O. B. Keeler and most of the other great sportswriters of the day, all of whom conspired to turn him into legend: the soft-spoken Southern gentleman with sterling character, perfect manners and a golf swing to die for. Keeler, in particular, was practically a live-in public relations person for Jones.

In time the legend acquired so many coats of varnish that it turned into hagiography, with the result that there has never been a proper biography of Jones. With "The Grand Slam," Mark Frost -- whose last book was "The Greatest Game Ever Played," about Francis Ouimet's victory in the 1913 U.S. Open -- has finally attempted to provide one. But he has gone about the job somewhat in the fashion of an anxious course superintendent trying to make a good impression on the greens committee.

He has strewn a lot of extra seed, that is, and has not stinted on the fertilizer, so that we get long potted histories of, for example, World War I ("They expected the worst of their neighbors -- the lesson of a thousand years of European history -- and the sound of rattling sabers filled the air"), of the Wilson, Harding and Coolidge administrations, and even of F. Scott Fitzgerald's literary crackup, not to mention extraneous details about the Scopes trial, the introduction of the Trojan, the popularity of mah-jongg and the boom market in Florida real estate, very few of which have much to do with Jones or golf. (There are some fascinating nuggets, though -- for instance, that Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks hired the golf architect Donald Ross to build them a private nine-hole course at Pickfair.)

Frost also goes in for some highly dubious and portentous speculation, such as that Jones's later neurological illness might have been caused by a near lightning strike 20 years before, and that looking back on his loss in the U.S. Amateur in 1916, the 14-year-old Jones might have thought of "Moby-Dick," a book he had been required to read in school that year: "Bobby . . . hadn't appreciated what Melville was after thematically at the time. Now he'd caught an unsettling glimpse of something as slow and powerful as Melville's whale circling in the deep water: the idea that our fate awaits us, foretold like Ahab's, and there was no way of escaping it."

On the other hand, Frost understands pace and structure, and he has a gift for dramatizing historic golf matches and making them seem suspenseful all over again -- even if (as he did in the previous book) he sometimes climbs inside the players' heads to tell us what they were thinking. He has a feel for golf history, if not for the big-picture stuff, and the book is full of vivid portraits of figures like Ted Ray, fighting his twitchy putting

stroke; Harry Vardon, puffing his pipe even as he swung from his heels; and the beautifully tailored Walter Hagen, refused access to the clubhouse at Deal during the 1920 British Open (because he was a professional), hiring a footman and a limo and changing his clothes out in front.

Most important, Frost goes a certain distance toward humanizing Jones, showing us a young man who smoked and drank too much and who on occasion came close to nervous breakdown. Golf, it turns out, came easily to Jones, but winning did not. He had to overcome a violent temper and a tendency to excessive self-criticism. There are glimpses in Jones of Woods's stubbornness and isolation and of Ben Hogan's obsessive perfectionism. And if in the end Jones still seems a little too good to be true -- too humble, too decent -- that's because by all accounts he really was that way.

Frost says next to nothing about Jones's intellectual life, which is a shame, because he was one of the few great athletes who actually had one. After graduating in engineering from Georgia Tech, he went to Harvard for another undergraduate degree, this time in English, and he became an unusually fluid and graceful writer, whose autobiographies are far better than most of what was printed about him.

Frost also skims over the whole second part of Jones's life when, crippled by syringomyelia, a rare nerve disease, he steadily receded from the public eye, except for occasional appearances in the shadow of the creepy, Rasputin-like Clifford Roberts, who ran Augusta National for him. In a way this seems right; it's what Jones would surely have wanted. Yet Frost's telling slightly shortchanges Jones's achievement in building Augusta National and creating the Masters, something of which he was immensely proud, and by dwelling on the youthful glory it deprives the story of some darker coloration. There was in Jones's mostly triumphal life a hint of loss, and not just in his long, sad decline. Reading between the lines, you sense that Jones was always a reluctant paragon and that his great accomplishments may have cost him a part of himself.

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