

Michigan's Six PGA Championships



Photo courtesy of PGA of America

PGA Championship, 1953, Walter Burkemo, Felice Torza.

By Jack Berry

Michigan's rich golf history is highlighted by six PGA Championships, three of them in a nine-year span, and the post-World War II heritage of the Motor City Opens and the great players who lived, played and taught here.

Think Walter Hagen and Horton Smith, Walter Burkemo and Chick Harbert, the 11 Motor City Opens, Gary Player's 9-iron over the willows, David Graham outputting Ben Crenshaw, and Ireland over Spain, Pdraig Harrington over Sergio Garcia.

Hagen, Oakland Hills' first professional, was instrumental in putting Detroit on the map of big-time golf. He won a record five PGA Championships (since tied by Jack Nicklaus with Tiger Woods one back) and settled in Detroit.

Then, as the war broke out and Ryder Cup competition between the United States and Great Britain and Ireland went into mothballs, a Challenge Cup was devised. Hagen, who captained every American team since the first Ryder Cup in 1927, captained a team of Americans against another team of Americans to raise money for the USO and Red Cross.

Two matches were played at Oakland Hills and one at Detroit Golf Club and the final one at Plum Hollow. Gene Sarazen cap-

tained the 1940 Challengers, Bobby Jones the 1941 team which defeated Hagen's team, and Craig Wood captained the Challengers in 1943. Sam Snead and Ben Hogan played before going into military service. Al Watrous, appointed Oakland Hills professional in 1944, also played in the matches.

Hagen and Jones had retired from competitive golf so they didn't renew some of their famous duels of the 1920s, after one of which Jones, the precisionist, said "When a man misses his drive,



Jim Ferrier, receiving Wanamaker trophy, PGA Championship 1947

Photo courtesy of PGA of America

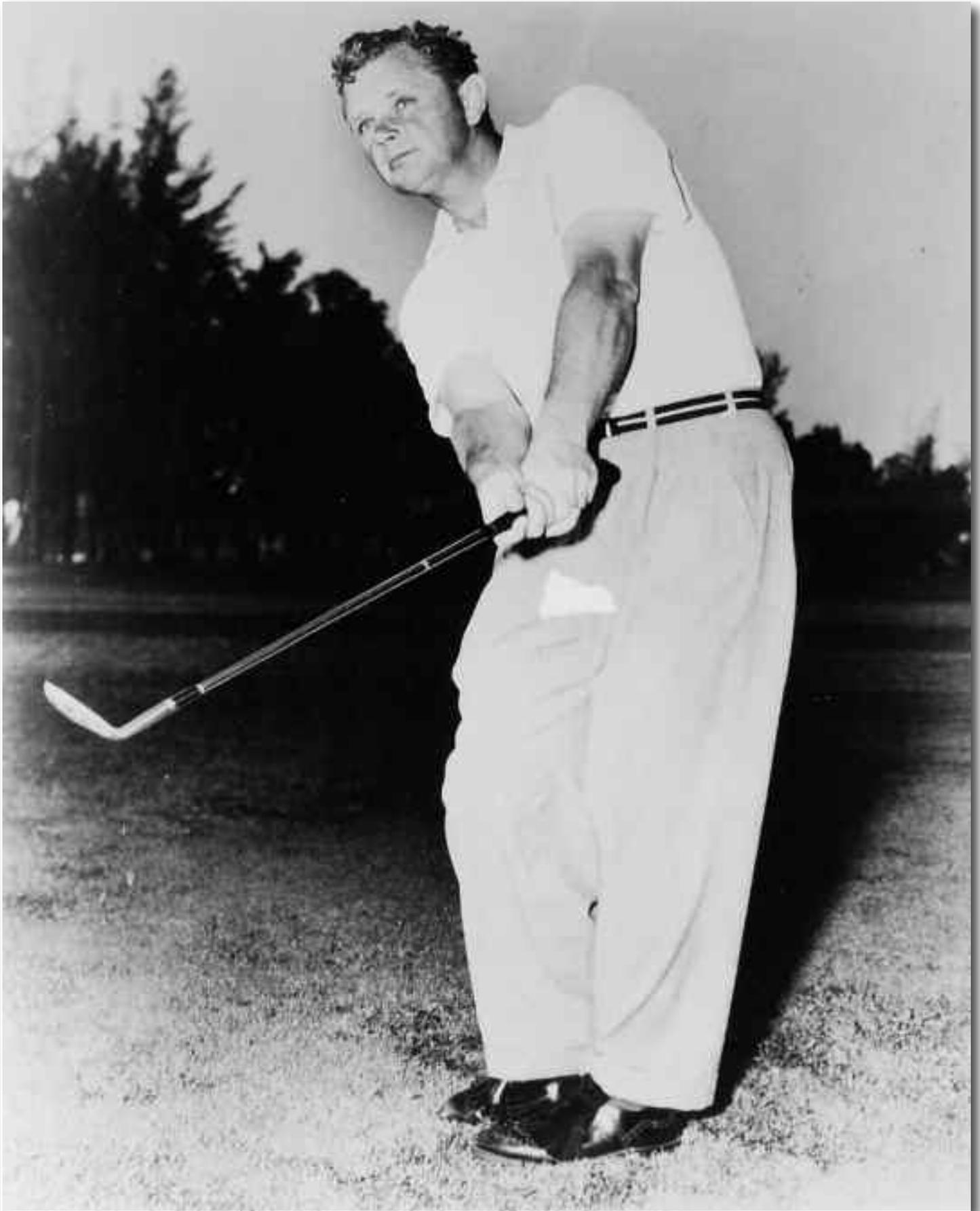


Photo courtesy of PGA of America

Walter Burkemo, 1953 PGA Champion

then misses his second shot and then wins the hole with a birdie, it gets my goat.”

Before there was Arnold Palmer, before Seve Ballesteros

and before Tiger Woods, there was The Haig, the great escape artist with a deadly putter and showman’s flair for big crowds and his favorite words to live by: “I don’t want to be a millionaire, I just want

to live like one,” and “Stop and smell the roses along the way.”

“It was Walter who made professional golf what it is,” Gene Sarazen said.



Photo courtesy of PGA of America

Gary Player smiles as he looks at the PGA’s Wanamaker trophy after winning the PGA tournament in Birmingham, Michigan. Player finished the four rounds with 281 to win the tournament that he last won in 1962.

Hagen made Detroit his home, Watrous, a top internationalist of his day, was at Oakland Hills and Horton Smith, winner of the first and third Masters Tournaments, was appointed professional at Detroit Golf Club in 1946. Detroit was home to three of the great players of the game and the war’s Arsenal of Democracy turned into a national golf center with the 1947 PGA Championship at Plum Hollow.

Australian Jim Ferrier met hometown favorite Chick Harbert in the final and Harbert, one of the biggest hitters in the game, winner of the 1937 Michigan Open as an amateur and winner again as a pro in 1942 before going into service, definitely was the favorite.

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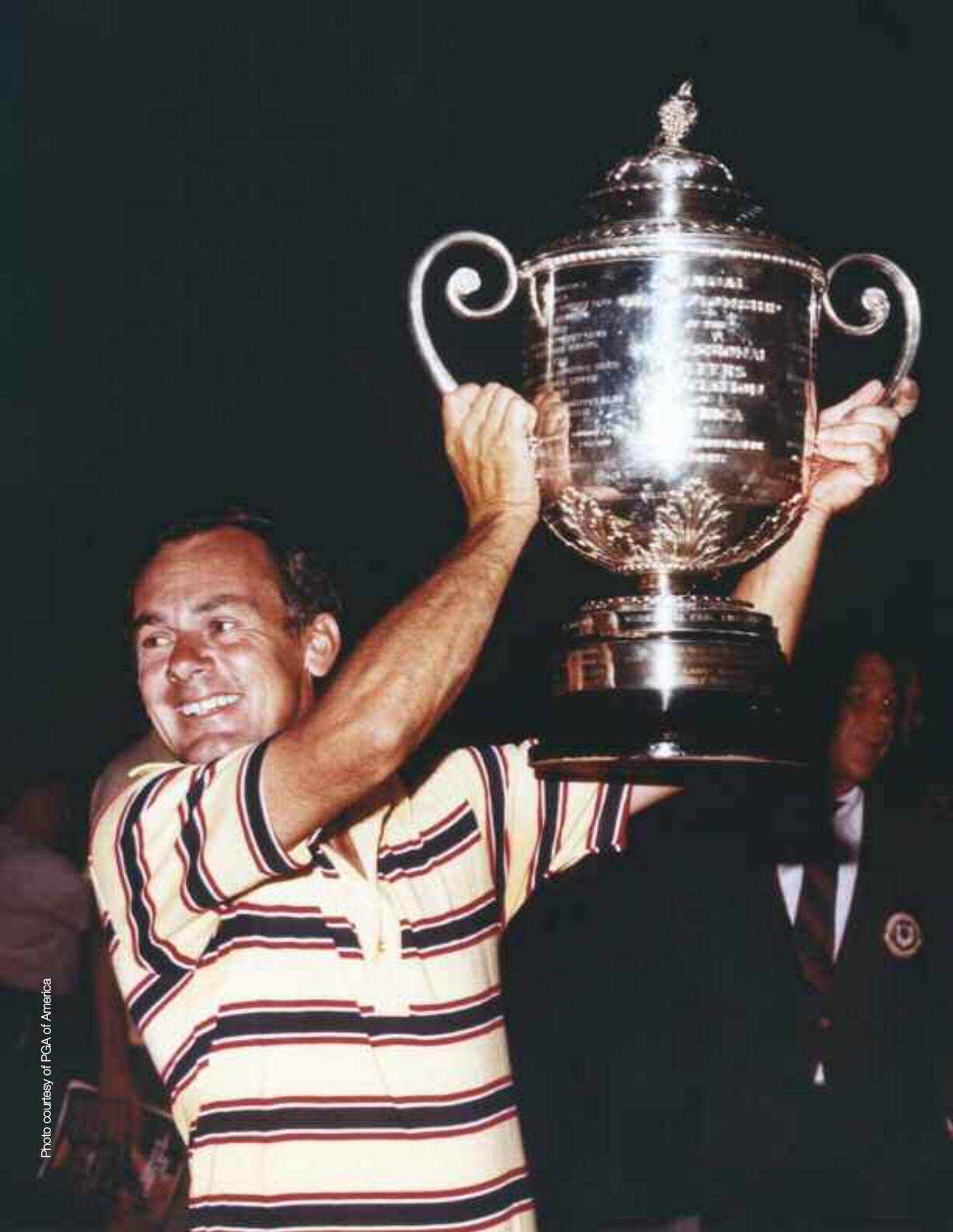


Photo courtesy of PGA of America

There weren't gallery ropes then and the fans followed right out in the fairway and crowded around the greens. It's said that Ferrier and his wife thought fans might step on his ball so that they hired "protection" to make sure no fan got too zealous. True or not, Ferrier defeated Harbert, 2-1, in the 36 hole match.

The success of the PGA led to the birth of the Motor City Open in 1948 at Meadowbrook Country Club. Ben Hogan beat Dutch Harrison, 73-74, in a playoff – no sudden death in those days. Harbert and Horton Smith tied for eighth with Al Watrous tied for 12th.

Meadowbrook, now Harbert's home club, hosted the Motor City again in 1949 and Cary Middlecoff and Lloyd Mangrum set a record that still stands. Tied at the end of the fourth round, they began a playoff that lasted 11 holes and was halted by darkness. So they split first and second money, \$2,250 each.

Horton Smith was elected PGA of America president in 1952. The practice then was that the PGA Championship would be played in the president's city so the 1953 Championship was set at Birmingham Country Club. At the time, American pros didn't enter the British Open in large numbers and little thought was given to scheduling. Consequently the PGA was played July 1-7, (it was all match play then) and it overlapped

Photo left: David Graham wins the 1979 PGA Championship at Oakland Hills

the July 6-10 British Open so there was no chance for a professional grand slam, not that Hogan would have tried.

Despite not liking the food, his accommodation or the golf course (Carnoustie), Hogan won the Open just as he had won the Masters and the United States Open earlier that year. Hogan's legs were severely injured in a 1949 head-on crash on a foggy west Texas highway with a Greyhound bus.

The PGA format then was two rounds of match play every day and Hogan's legs couldn't take that so he didn't play the PGA again until after it went to stroke play in 1958. He'd won the PGA twice before the accident including 1948.

The 1953 PGA at Birmingham was a killer for favorites. Gene Sarazen, Vic Ghezzi, Porky Oliver, Lew Worsham, and 1952 finalist Harbert were first round morning victims and the afternoon saw defending champion Jim Turnesa, Sam Snead, Tommy Bolt and Middlecoff eliminated.

Burkemo, who rose from East Side Detroit caddie ranks to become one of the best match players of his day, cruised. He didn't reach the 36th hole until his quarterfinal and then he beat Dave Douglas, 2-up. He then went 36 again in the semifinal for a 1-up victory over Claude Harmon.

A hometown gallery of 10,000 followed Burkemo in the final as he defeated Felice Torza, 2-1, in 35 holes.

The PGA crown stayed with the

Motor City pros when Harbert defeated Burkemo, 4-3, in the 1954 final at Keller Golf Club in St. Paul, Minn.

Harbert, who was to captain the 1955 Ryder Cup team, was the host professional when the championship was awarded to Meadowbrook that summer. But after winning his first round morning match, 3-1, over Eric Monti, Harbert lost in the afternoon to Johnny Palmer, 1-up. Burkemo also was a first day victim, losing to Middlecoff, 2-1, and Snead and Sarazen went down before the sun set.

Middlecoff, who'd found the Northville course to his liking with his 1948 Motor City Open victory and shared 1949 title, reached the final although he had to go 40 holes to beat Jack Burke in the quarterfinal. He then beat Tommy Bolt, 4-3, who had four very comfortable victories.

Doug Ford, playing in his first PGA Championship, was a different matter. Ford, who was medalist in the 36-hole qualifier, beat George Fazio and Ted Kroll by 2-1 margins in his first day matches and then rolled, 12-10, over Wally Ulrich, then 5-4 over Fred Hawkins and 4-3 over Shelly Mayfield.

Ford, one of golf's fastest players, opened the final with a 66 but a couple bogeys left him 1-down to the rather deliberate Middlecoff's 67. Ford evened it at the 26th with a birdie and shot ahead with birdies on the 29th, 30th and 32nd holes for a 3-up lead and finished a



Champion Padraig Harrington with the Rodman Wanamaker trophy at the awards ceremony on the 18th green following the final round of play at the 90th PGA Championship at Oakland Hills Country Club in Bloomfield Township, Michigan, USA, on Sunday, August 10, 2008.

4-3 victory with a par on the 33rd hole.

The PGA dropped the 36-hole stroke play qualifier in 1956 and the field expanded to 128 players. That lasted just two years before the PGA joined the Masters, U.S.

And British Opens as 72 hole stroke play events. Television abhors match play and TV was beginning to be a serious factor although it still took some years before the U.S. And British Opens did away with their 36-hole Saturday finishes and stretched to four days.

The Motor City Opens kept Detroit in the top echelon of tournament golf with events at Red Run, Plum Hollow, Western and, over the 11 tournament run, Meadowbrook hosted four Motor Cities. Champions were led by Middlecoff's three with two of them overtime. Hogan, Mangrum,

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Ford, Bob Rosburg, Doug Sanders, Mike Souchak, Stan Leonard and Bruce Crampton were the other winners.

The Buick Open teed off in 1958 and offered double the purse, \$52,000, the Motor City Open was able to raise and the final MCO was played at Knollwood in 1962.

And in the late 1960s a movement began by touring players to form their own association, separate from the club pro-dominated PGA of America. Money was getting better on the circuit and players didn't also need a club job to make a living.

During that period a tournament was scheduled for Shenandoah, the 1969 Michigan Golf Classic. The big name players didn't enter and without major financial support – the lone sponsor owned a trophy shop – crowds didn't show either. Larry Ziegler beat Homero Blancas in a playoff but the sponsor vanished and not only took the trophy with him, but left an empty pot.

It took a little time but the fledgling PGA Tour paid the players and henceforth tournaments were required to have the money in the bank before a ball was struck.

Warren Orlick, the longtime head professional at Tam O'Shanter Country Club, was elected president of the PGA of America in 1971, and Oakland Hills, Michigan's premier championship course, designed by Donald Ross and updated by Robert Trent Jones who turned it into Hogan's "Monster" in the 1951 U.S. Open,

signed on for the 1972 PGA Championship. The purse was \$224,087 and it was a hit. Michigan's golf honor was restored, everyone was paid and Orlick presented the huge silver Wanamaker Trophy to Gary Player. Perfect.

The superstars were in contention — Jack Nicklaus, who had won the Masters and U.S. Open earlier in 1972; Lee Trevino who'd won the British Open; Arnold Palmer and Billy Casper – and they finished in the top 16. Amazing Sam Snead, 60 years old, tied for fourth.

The champion, though, was the smallest man in the field, Player, who hit one of the greatest shots of his career on the 70th hole, the water-guarded dogleg right, par 4 16th.

Player's drive landed in the right rough and, because of a tall, bushy willow, he couldn't see the flag. But he ripped a 9-iron that soared over the tree, over the water and finished four feet from the cup. The little South African holed the birdie putt and finished two shots ahead of Tommy Aaron and Jim Jamieson.

Oakland Hills and the PGA enjoyed that show so much that the PGA returned in 1979 and after some heavy rains, the greens were vulnerable and it seemed everyone was breaking par on the suddenly tamed "Monster." David Graham, the fastidious Australian, appeared headed for a PGA record seven-under-par 63 as he stood on the

72nd tee on a brilliant, warm Sunday afternoon.

Nerves got to Graham and he drove in the rough, his next was in the rough and he made double bogey, forcing a sudden death playoff with Ben Crenshaw. This was before the PGA went to a three hole total score playoff format. As it was, it did go three holes.

Crenshaw, one of the purest putters ever to play the game, was favored by the huge gallery as it streamed to line the first hole. Graham looked dead, in mind and form, after blowing the lead on the 18th. He came up 50 yards short of the green on the first hole but pulled himself together and sank an 18-foot par putt to match Crenshaw's par.

Then, on the par 5 second, Graham again "out-bladed" the master putter, making a 10-footer for birdie to match Crenshaw's bird. Crenshaw, twice seeming the winner, lost it on the par 3 third when he bunkered his tee shot, came out short of the hole and missed the putt. Graham, a fine iron player, had a birdie putt, made it and Oakland Hills had its second straight champion from the bottom of the globe.

It seems foreign players are very comfortable on Oakland Hills' roller coaster greens. Europe crushed the United States by a record 18-1/2 to 9-1/2 in the 2006 Ryder Cup and Ireland's Pádraig Harrington and Spain's Sergio Garcia, both Ryder Cup mates, duelled for the 2008 PGA title.

It wasn't quite the benign course as it was during the weather-perfect Ryder Cup. Rees Jones had lengthened it, moved some bunkers, deepened some, and removed a number of trees including the willows Player's 9-iron flew over in 1972. The changes gave the course a big airy look, more like the way it was when Ross designed it nearly a century before.

Blue sky and 25 mile an hour winds from the west made the huge American flag stand out as though it was starched. And it never let up the first two rounds, hardening the greens and turning the into-the-wind 257-yard par 3 ninth and 498-yard 18th into bogey holes.

Heavy rain Saturday prevented the third round from completing and made it a long day Sunday. There was some rain in the morning and then that wind but the Saturday rain softened the greens and Harrington, who was six shots back after 36 holes, finished 66-66 to beat Garcia and Ohio native Ben Curtis by two shots at 277, three under par, and Oakland Hills members were very satisfied with that.

Harrington, who nearly withdrew before the start of the British Open because of a sore wrist, felt lethargic in his first two rounds at Oakland Hills. He telephoned his trainer back in Ireland who said he probably was dehydrated so Harrington hydrated and hydrated

and you get the idea, and was back at his brilliant-play self.

"I love the idea of the back nine of a major on a Sunday," Harrington said after his third major title in 13 months. He made a tricky downhill 12-foot par putt on 16, a 10-foot birdie on 17 and 16-foot par putt on the 18th.

Meanwhile, Garcia, beaten in the 2007 British Open playoff by Harrington, started the final round birdie-eagle. But down the stretch he was snakebit. His approach on the 15th hit the flagstick and spun out. Instead of a tap-in birdie, he took two from 10 feet for par. On 16 his second shot hit grass but caromed into the lake and he made bogey. After Harrington drew a tremendous roar for his shot to 10 feet on the uphill par 3 17th, Garcia bettered him with a shot to four feet.

But, as it so often happens, the player who is outside sinks his putt and the cup shrinks for the near player. He misses. Then, after Harrington drove into a bunker on 18 it appeared Garcia had an opening. It closed. He missed the green, Harrington made another improbable par and Garcia missed again and bogeyed.

However it turned, a foreigner was to win the PGA at Oakland Hills for the third straight time and Harrington was the first European winner since Tommy Armour in 1930. And he matched the Haig who was the first to win the British Open and PGA in the same year. That seemed just about right. A full circle. **MG**

