Doctors of the Game : A History of the Golf Profession

The sub-title of Doctors of the Game : A History of the Golf Profession is ‘Honoring the Past – Inspiring the Future’. PGA Master Professional (#47) Billy Dettlaff has written a tome, which is the ultimate tribute to golf professionals. The professionals who serve golfers every day, that is, and not the professionals who compete on tour. The 684-page book weighs nine pounds and is a master work indeed. The book itself has three “books” within: Book One covers The Scottish Evolution; Book Two’s subject is An American Transformation; Book Three’s coverage is of the Golf Profession in a Changing World. The foreword was written by Wally Uihlein, the president of the Acushnet Company.

Dettlaff does an excellent job of making such a well-researched and compressive book not seem overwhelming. He does this by following a “vignette” format, essentially breaking each of the twenty-three chapters into scores of little stories, histories, and vignettes, each with its own heading and subject matter.

The book was published in 2016 in three versions: an Author’s Presentation Copy in a leather limited edition of 52 copies lettered A-ZZ, plus three Author’s proofs. A limited edition of 400 signed and numbered in a slipcase, and a standard trade edition.
The book was seven years in the making and sets a new standard in research and comprehensiveness in the golf book world. I don’t believe I have ever seen as many research sources in a bibliography as I have in *Doctors of the Game*. Billy was inspired to write the book because there was no comprehensive history focused solely on professionals. Although written from a US perspective, there is plenty of coverage of Scottish professionals, particularly in the early years of the game as they migrated to America.

In addition to its far-ranging coverage, the book is also elegantly produced. The picture on the front cover is of Allan Robertson, the first professional, is from the R & A’s collection and the thoughtfully designed cover was created by a Savannah School of Arts and Design (SCAD) graduate. The extensive research oozes through on every page of the book and I learned many new and interesting facts about the game. I never knew, for example, that it was Herbert Warren Wind’s idea to hold Shell’s Wonderful World of Golf at elite courses and to pair a top American with a top local player.

The historical images chocked throughout the book are also noteworthy. The picture on page 115 of the Harbor Point Golf Course in Michigan in 1899 show a raised grassy cross-hazard running through the middle of a fairway that looks like something a horse
might jump over today as part of an equestrian obstacle course. Similarly, a turn of the century picture from Henry Flagler’s Royal Palm Hotel in Miami is illuminating. It shows a sand practice putting green with twelve flags set along its perimeter (one for each hour on a clock). This was apparently a common form of entertainment and a good introduction to the game for those just learning about the emerging pastime. The book has page after page of mesmerizing images and factoids like that; they caused yours truly, at least, to say over and over again, “I never knew that.”

A circular practice putting green made of sand in an “hour glass” configuration

Dettlaff’s research of bygone facts and nuances also adds a great deal to understanding the history of the game how times have changed. Today’s jet setting deca-millionaires with their trainers, psychologists, managers, swing coaches, and short game gurus (“teams” as many players now refer to the setup) would be appalled by the events of the 1930 U.S. Open at Interlachen. The tournament competitors were denied practice rounds so that the club’s members could play over the July 4th weekend! When the Myopia 1901 U.S. Open ended in a tie on its final day, Saturday, the club denied the use of the course on Sunday because the members wanted to use it. The playoff was scheduled for the next day, Monday.

Kudos to Billy Dettlaff for a master work indeed and for honoring the underappreciated pros that serve us every day for their love of the game.

-- John Sabino