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Opinion

Allen Mendenhall: Putt by faith

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 06.13.25



Byron Nelson, Dwight Eisenhower, Ben Hogan, and Clifford Roberts (Picryl)

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This weekend marks the 10th U.S. Open held at Oakmont Country Club, that ecclesiastical monument to golf's most punishing virtues, where the rough grows thick as a penitent's hair shirt and the greens roll faster than gossip through a small town.

Oakmont. The very name conjures images of grown men reduced to tears, of dreams shattered against the thick walls of merciless bunkers. It was here, in the summer of 1953, that Ben Hogan achieved something approaching the sublime.

More on that momentarily.

I was perhaps nine years old when I first encountered Hogan's "Five Lessons," that slim volume promising to unlock the mysteries of golf with mathematical precision. Other children my age were absorbed in comic books and television, but I was mesmerized by Hogan's clinical dissection of the swing, accompanied by Anthony Raveilli's anatomical illustrations, capturing each position with the stark beauty of a medical primer.

Later came the biography, a tome too dense for a boy of my tender years, yet I devoured it with hungry intensity. Here was a man who had, it seemed, transformed himself through sheer force of will, bending a game to his iron discipline. The car accident that nearly killed him in 1949 only seemed to sharpen his focus, like a blade honed to its finest edge.

Then came 1953: Hogan's miracle year, his triple crown. The Masters in April, when he played with the cold perfection of a master craftsman. The U.S. Open at Oakmont in June, when he tamed that savage course with rounds that defied its difficulty. And finally, the British Open at Carnoustie, his only appearance in golf's oldest championship, where he conquered both the course and the howling Scottish winds with the same methodical precision he brought to everything else.

Back to that special U.S. Open at Oakmont.

Hogan had to qualify for the event because the United States Golf Association (USGA), in its infinite wisdom – or perhaps cruelty – made everyone qualify except Julius Boros, the defending champion. He did so, shooting 77, 73, not

stellar numbers but good enough to qualify with ease among the 157 qualifiers. Such was Hogan's reputation that even his mediocre rounds carried the weight of inevitability.

Hogan studied Oakmont on paper before the tournament, much like a general might examine battle plans, meticulously marking distances and angles. He showed up that first morning looking like nobody else, the only one wearing a sweater, as if he alone understood some secret about Pennsylvania weather, or perhaps about the chill that victory requires.

The field included legends-in-waiting: Arnold Palmer, only 23 years old and still an amateur, golden and eager but destined to shoot 84, 78, and miss the cut entirely. Sam Snead was there, smooth as bourbon, and Jimmy Demaret, dapper as a haberdashery model.

But it was Hogan who commanded attention, not through flash or charm – he possessed neither in abundance – but through something more unsettling: absolute certainty.

He shot 67 in his opening round. The number fell like a thunderclap across the golfing world, a score that seemed to mock the very architecture of the place. While others struggled against the course's notorious severity, Hogan moved through it like a man reading sheet music, each shot placed with the precision of a pianist's fingers finding the correct keys.

Overcoming physical struggle with every step, he limped noticeably, his vision compromised by the eye damage he'd incurred during that car accident, his depth perception a cruel betrayal that turned simple putts into exercises in faith. Huge crowds followed him like pilgrims enveloping a wounded saint, sensing perhaps that they were witnessing something both magnificent and fragile.

Hogan shot 72 in his second round. Suddenly, George Fazio and Sam Snead were breathing down his neck, just two shots back.

We're accustomed now to leaders enjoying the luxury of late tee times, but on day three, Saturday, Hogan found himself teeing off at nine in the morning: a full hour

before the trailing Snead. Some players in the field whispered darkly that the USGA wanted Hogan to win, that the scheduling was no accident but design.

Hogan shot 73 on Saturday; Snead countered with 72, picking up a precious shot. Fazio stumbled to 77, falling six shots behind, while Lloyd Mangrum, who had opened with 73, 70, carded a 74 and found himself alone in third, five strokes adrift of the limping leader.

Sunday arrived like Judgment Day. Hogan started his final round with a birdie and ended it with two more, carding 71. But victory came at a price: he looked haggard and spent after the round, his body having paid the toll that greatness demands. Snead shot 76, six strokes behind but retaining second place by three strokes.

The final moment was pure theater: Hogan took what seemed an eternity over his last putt, analyzing it from every conceivable angle. Later, he would confess that because of his damaged eyes, he couldn't see the ball drop into the cup. He knew it had fallen by the roar of the crowd, victory announced not by sight but by sound.

Recall, now, that nine-year-old boy bent over Hogan's textbook, straining to decipher the enigma of the perfect swing. What I was really learning, though I couldn't name it then, was something more essential: that grace arrives not as a windfall but as a slow accrual – shot by shot, read by read, day by day, inch by inch, one painful step at a time.

Hogan's triumph at Oakmont was a lesson in tenacity and faith, for it is only in the absence of sight that we come to rely, finally, on memory, muscle, and the hard-earned shape of character. It would be easy – too easy – to take from this account the alluring myth that perfection lies just beyond repetition, that Hogan knew his final putt would drop, even if he couldn't see it, because he had done everything correctly and had practiced, practiced, practiced.

This, perhaps, is the narrative we want to believe about ourselves, our jobs, our families, our country: that preparation is protection, that if we just work hard enough, hurt long enough, want it badly enough, we will be rewarded with certainty. Of course, this isn't always the case. But that summer at Oakmont, for 72 holes, it was.

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