

Suppose a fellow told you he could throw a peanut over the clubhouse roof. Would you bet against him?

Let's say you beat him at golf and he offered to come back and play you the next day left handed for 10 times the original bet. Would you go for it? Of course not. You've been around the block a couple of times, right? You'd never fall for a such a song and dance.

If such cynicism had taken a death grip on the golf and gambling populace in the 1920s, this guy couldn't have scratched out the barest of livings. But it was the "Roaring '20s," money was loose, and people like him were glad to pick it up.

He was a hustler, plain and simple. He became the subject of fact and fantasy in his day, the topic of conversation at gaming tables and golf courses all over the country. If you've never heard of him, just ask someone a little older, who's been around golf a number of years. Chances are he'll know a story about him.

He was a master with a deck of cards, able to effortlessly stack decks, palm aces, and deal seconds. He was a crack pistol shot and often hit a silver dollar in midair on a bet. He could offer you a proposition so foolproof that you'd be an idiot not to take the wager. That's when you and your money were soon parted.

And he was an excellent golfer, with the ability to hide his skill until just the right moment. He could win by a stroke by shooting 99 or 69 either right handed or left handed. He won and lost hundreds and thousands of dollars this way just before the Great Depression, when money was plentiful and people naive. The challenge was to find those people and separate them from their wallets as painlessly as possible.

By the time he was 18, he had become a full time gambler, mostly playing cards and shooting pool. He took the nickname after a famous ship, in a pool hall in Joplin, Missouri. Someone asked his name and another pool player said it "ought to be _____, the way he's been sinking everybody around here." He liked the nickname and changed his last name to _____.

He learned to play golf while on a gambling spree in California. He would practice in out of the way places and finally became good enough to take on top amateurs and club pros. He could drive the ball 280 yards or more and was a terrific clutch putter. But he was best at getting the bets right. He would set up his pigeon by losing one day and offering to have his caddie play the next day. It was usually no contest.

He once beat Byron Nelson head to head for nine holes. A number of Tour players of

Golf's greatest hustler
when asked if he
would ever turn Pro:

*"I could not
afford the
cut in pay."*

the era said he could have been an accomplished player had he played legitimate golf. But he maintained he could make more money off his pigeons, and he was right. In the days when top pros made \$30,000 in a year, he often made that in a week.

He once bet a group of players that he could hit a tee shot 500 yards: He didn't tell them it would be in the dead of winter across a frozen lake.

He liked to bet that he could throw a peanut over any body's clubhouse. Unbeknownst to his victims, the peanut shell was filled with ball bearings.

But not all of his deals paid off. He tried to fix a horse race in Mexico by bribing the other jockeys to finish behind his horse. Trouble was, his steed broke its leg yards from the finish line.

That is, until a near tragic brush with the law in 1929. He became entangled with _____, one of the nation's biggest gamblers and a man instrumental in the Black Sox Scandal in Chicago, when the 1919 World Series was fixed.

Thompson and fellow gambler _____ set up _____ to a big loss-to the tune of \$219,000-in a card game. When _____ learned of the ruse, he refused to pay and was killed by _____. _____ was a suspect until he agreed to testify for the prosecution. In the highly publicized trial, _____ suffered a sudden memory loss on the witness stand and _____ was set free. The resulting newspaper coverage made _____ into something he wanted to avoid- famous. For _____ to ply his trade at its best, it was necessary to be an unknown quantity.

Once word got out about his venous skills, locals were afraid to take him on. It didn't help that the Great Depression came along. With the economy crippled, easy money dried up. He still managed a living, but the high times were gone. He continued to travel around the country for the next 30 years, living as a nomad, content to play golf with those rich enough to be proud of the fact they were fleeced by the great _____.

Had he come along in the enlightened, savvy, information saturated '90s, he might have made his living trying to beat the stock market or the weekend point spreads. Maybe he would have tried his hand at legitimate golf on the PGA Tour, where he could have been the leading money winner in Tuesday practice rounds.

But he certainly wouldn't have suckered anybody with that throwing a peanut over the clubhouse con. We're much too smart for that.

Aren't we?