

When the Boys Play Through

By Tim Cronin



Never win a hole with a nine.

This warning is not based on firsthand knowledge, but it is solid advice.

Bad things can happen when you win a hole with a nine.

You could get shot on the next tee. Five times.

Honest. It's one of the many strange but true tales of the connections between the mob and golf in the Chicago area.

We start with the most recent and most heinous, what happened to Alfred Pilotto at Lincolnshire Country Club back in 1981, on an otherwise lovely Saturday morning in July. He and three pals – at least he thought they were – were out for a friendly round. Pilotto had just managed the uncanny on the seventh hole of Lincolnshire's West Course.

"I can't believe I won the hole with a nine," Pilotto said. His fellow competitors had played like a trio of hacks en route to the hole.

Thus Pilotto, an accomplished mobster for decades and at that moment under indictment – and the man in the south suburbs in control of various and sundry businesses that the authorities held in high dudgeon, plus a pal of Tony "Big Tuna" Accardo – should have suspected something, but he blissfully went to the eighth tee, and teed off first, having won the honor.

At which point Daniel Bounds introduced himself to Pilotto. Rather, he jumped out of some bushes with a revolver in hand and with nefarious intent. Authorities later estimated that he fired up to seven times.

Pilotto dropped to the tee. Bounds ran off, eventually hooking up with a getaway car. The others in the foursome, showing remarkable dedication to their games, proceeded to tee it up and kept playing.

SCARFACE AL CAPONE IS ACCIDENTALLY SHOT BY OWN GUN AT GOLF LINKS

Chicago—(AP)—“Scarface Al” Capone, ruler of Chicago’s gangland, has been shot, but not by the gangland which months ago decreed his death.

The gang lord, whose every move is guarded by no less than twelve of the most watchful gunmen ever assembled, shot himself, accidentally, according to reports today.

Capone today lies in St. Margaret’s hospital at Hammond, Ind., suburb of Chicago. He is wounded in the right and left legs and in the groin.

According to the current story, Capone shot himself last Saturday morning after he and a familiarly known as ‘Machine Gun’ Jack McGurn had a round of golf on the Burnham.

Reports say that McGurn was discharged a few days ago.

Sam Giancana, seen here in a court hallway, was an avid golfer who didn’t hesitate to take midnight lessons to improve his game.



Jack “Machine Gun” McGurn, was a good enough player to tee it up in the 1933 Western Open using his real name, Vincent Gebhardi, when he was head pro at Evergreen Golf Club.

This aroused suspicion.

It’s bad enough when someone gets shot on the golf course, but for his fellow competitors to neither notify someone in the clubhouse – or in a nearby home, in this case – nor at the very least drag him along, was considered both uncouth by the police, and a sign of a conspiracy.

Given that this is a golf magazine, this is the point where it would be written that, like Harvey Penick, Bounds, revolver in hand, took dead aim. Only he did not. Bounds was as good a hit man as Pilotto was a golfer. He hit Pilotto, 70 years old but still strong, five times, in the right thigh, left arm, elbow and shoulder.

Pilotto survived the barrage. It was the following group which found Pilotto, gasping for breath, on the tee, and went for help.

Two of Pilotto’s foursome that day were indicted and convicted of plotting what would have been a classic mob hit, were it not for Bounds’ poor aim. The other guy, Sam Guzzino, an underling in Pilotto’s realm who ran a dive in Chicago Heights?

A few months later, he was found by a farmer in a ditch one Saturday morning with his throat slit and shot in the head. Unlike Bounds, who was Guzzino’s son-in-law and quickly went into the federal witness protection program, Guzzino’s assailant made no mistakes. Guzzino was very much dead when the farmer found him.

Appeals court judge Harlington Wood Jr. wrote in his opinion affirming the convictions of Richard Guzzino and Robert Ciarrocchi, the two survivors in Pilotto’s foursome, “This ... demonstrates that in some circles golfing is a very serious business. It appears that you cannot always trust the other members of your foursome, not just because they may fudge a little on their scores, but because one of them may have you murdered before the game is over.”

Pilotto had the last laugh. He lived until he was 88, dying of natural causes at home seven years after serving a prison term for the white-collar crime he was suspected of when he was shot.

He outlived Accardo, in fact, who was suspected of ordering his demise in the first place. Accardo was the odd mobster in that he wasn’t into golf, unlike most of his contemporaries, including his wheelman Jackie Cerone, and Accardo’s flamboyant underling, Sam Giancana. He was a

regular player at Fresh Meadow Golf Course in Hillside, and his foursome had regular company – a following foursome from the FBI.

“At the golf course, I’d follow him to the men’s room and stand next to him,” retired FBI agent Bill Roemer once said. “He had shy kidneys, so when I was there he couldn’t go. Sam was about a 14, although he cheated a lot. Kicked the balls out of the rough.”

Roemer’s group would hit into Giancana’s group, properly yelling “fore,” and eventually Sam got tired of it. But rather than pull a 15th club out of his bag and shoot back, Giancana went to federal court and won an order keeping the FBI two foursomes behind, Roemer said, “even though I told the judge that I never once hit Sam with a ball.”

Giancana might have been a 14, but he desperately wanted to improve. Sometimes his methods were unorthodox, as in the late night in July of 1963 he placed a call from the Chez Paree nightclub. The phone rang at the home of Mission Hills Country Club head pro Harry Pezzullo at close to midnight.

“Get your ass down to the club,” Giancana barked.

“Now?”

“Now.”

Pezzullo, used to hanging out with the likes of Bing Crosby and Perry Como, wondered about the timing until his wife said, “Get your ass down there. I don’t want them coming here.”

Yes, dear.

When he arrived, he found eight cars with their headlights shining on the range. Seven black Cadillacs and a Ford.

“Sam always drove the Ford,” Pezzullo recalled in a 2002 interview with the *Palm Beach Post*.

Dave Kindred wrote in a 2003 issue of *Golf Digest* that Giancana was stylishly attired in a silk shirt and tie. Pezzullo watched him swat a few, then adjusted his grip. Sam hit a few more. The ball began to go straight. He hit a few more. Lesson over. Sam handed him a single bill. Pezzullo thought it was a \$100 bill. He was miffed.

“Think I’d come out here at midnight for a golf lesson for \$100?” Pezzullo said.

“Give me my change,” Giancana said.

Pezzullo looked again. It was a thousand-dollar bill, featuring a fine portrait of Grover Cleveland. He had to open the clubhouse safe to get change. Giancana gave him \$300 for his troubles.

Mobsters are eager learners, it seems. A few decades earlier, Vince Gebhardi was an up-and-coming player. In 1932, an Oak Park Country Club member told professional

Horton Smith, who recently had come off the pro tour, that his friend Gebhardi might happen by. One day, Gebhardi called and asked for a lesson. Smith beckoned him over. A friend came along but never pulled a club from his golf bag on the lesson tee.

“Gebhardi was a good player and very keen about golf,” Smith and Marian Benton wrote in *The Velvet Touch*, Smith’s autobiography. “He returned for several more lessons. The friend was always along but he just stood nearby. Soon, Horton realized he was giving lessons to ‘Machine Gun’ Jack McGurn.” The friend? He kept an eye on traffic along Thatcher Road, ready to pull a tommy gun out of his golf bag to take care of a threat.

McGurn was an alias that exposed rather than hid. Gebhardi was the football player-sized man’s real name, and Smith quickly found reasons to no longer school an Al Capone cronic who was tabbed as a leader of the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre of three years earlier.

This hardly dissuaded Gebhardi’s golf interest. He found honest work – so it was written – as the head pro at Evergreen Golf Club on the edge of Chicago’s southwest side, next door to Beverly Country Club. This, with countless other courses, was said to be a Capone hangout, though Capone was more likely to frequent Burnham Woods, where it was said the guns used in the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre were buried.

Capone wasn’t a good player, hooking everything and putting poorly, losing more than he won even when a friendly caddie found balls far closer to the fairway than a neutral observer might have suspected, but his worst day on a golf course came when the .45 he kept in his bag somehow went off when he picked up the bag. The bullet went through his right leg and stayed in his left leg. He was in the hospital and off the course for a week. Gebhardi, meanwhile, fancied himself a player, so he entered the 1933 Western Open at Olympia Fields Country Club. He opened with an 83 on Course No. 4, today’s North Course, and was in the process of climbing within the range of the 36-hole cut in the second round, played on No. 1, most of today’s South Course. He was 1-under through the first six holes when Chicago’s chief of detectives, with a coterie of Chicago and Cook County police in tow, arrived on the seventh green.

“You’re under arrest,” county Lt. Frank McGillen said, reading the warrant that permitted apprehending “Public Enemy No. 5” under a new “criminal reputation” statute.

Down Memory Lane

Imagine a year with no U.S. Open, no PGA, and not even a thought of a British Open being played.

That was golf life during both world wars in the last century, when the major golf associations pushed aside their regular programs in favor of winning the war. With little tournament play, something more important took its place: golf fund-raisers.

Three men made them a hit, and took golf into the charity realm that has set it apart from all other sports. Two were the great amateurs Chick Evans and Bobby Jones.

Evans, the pride of Edgewater Golf Club, was the “double crown” champion, having won the U.S. Open and the U.S. Amateur in 1916. He played Canadian champion George Lyon in a 1916 fund-raiser in Canada, that country already in the war, and thought the idea had potential. The beneficiary would be the American Red Cross.

Jones was the prodigy from East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta, a 15-year-old who had won the Southern Amateur, was the talk of the game, aside from Evans, for making it to the quarterfinals of the same U.S. Amateur at Merion that Chick had captured. They began to team up, each bringing a partner for best-ball matches. For Jones, it was often 18-year-old Perry Adair, another East Lake product, and they were sometimes joined by a third Atlantan, Alexa Sterling.

The exhibition at Flossmoor Country Club on June 17, 1917 showed the potential of their star power. Jones paired with Hinsdale’s Bob Gardner, the 1915 U.S. Amateur champion, against Jones and Adair, and a gallery of 2,500 – believed to be the largest in the 25-year history of golf in Chicago – poured in to watch the local heroes tee it up with Jones and Adair. Chick and Bob won the match, but nobody lost, for at least \$1,000 was raised for the Red Cross.

Flossmoor member Charles Thompson was impressed, and thought, as did Evans, that more could be done. Thompson was the president of the Western Golf Association, and pushed the WGA to organize a Red Cross series in 1918. Some \$5,000 was raised in one day at Beverly, and up and up the numbers went, right up to the \$35,000 raised at Lake Shore one magical afternoon.

Evans played in 48 of the WGA-connected exhibitions that summer, and was responsible for raising more than 80 percent of the \$302,713.50 the WGA turned over to the Red Cross in 1918. Charity and golf were thus paired together forever.

– Tim Cronin



These badges were auctioned for hundreds of dollars, the money going to the American Red Cross, for a Red Cross Match at Beverly Country Club in 1918. (Beverly Country Club)

Ross' Enduring Legacy

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This course is high on a ridge line and plays along areas that allow you to see for 20 or 30 miles. It’s very hilly. If you hit it off the fairway, you’re going to have a very awkward shot back.”

Colin Montgomerie, who won the Senior PGA Championship on the Pete Dye Course in 2015, called it “one of the iconic golf courses in America.” Truth is that the Pete Dye Course must be played to be believed. When Dye originally walked the proposed site for the layout, he concluded that the terrain was too rugged and the slopes were too severe to build 18 holes on the land. Not long after making the declaration, Dye returned to the property with a topographical map of the area and preliminary drawings sketched on a paper napkin. He said he would build a course on the property “whether they want me to or not.”

The resulting course showcases dramatic holes from start to finish. Its features include three man-made lakes, panoramic vistas that stretch for 40 miles in the distance, “volcano” bunkers, and dramatic elevation changes across the property.

The 534-yard No. 7 begins from an elevated tee and calls for a drive launched over wild grasses and between mounding on the right side of the landing area and trees and heavy rough on the left side. Succeed on that shot and you are still left with a second shot avoiding sand bunkers on both sides of the fairway to set up an approach to a small green surrounded by mounds, rough and an intriguing assortment of sand bunkers on the right side of the green.

The 383-yard No. 15 features wild grasses in front of the tee, a long bowling lane-like sand bunker stretching along the entire left side of the fairway, huge directional sand bunkers on the right side of the landing area, and a fairway with more drama than a Donald Trump press conference. A punch-bowl green features a bail-out area on the right side along with a pair of evil sand bunkers protecting the left side.

Around at the Dye Course isn’t complete without a sandwich and a cold beverage on the patio of The Mansion. Once the home of former Indianapolis mayor Taggart, this stately manor has been fully restored and leads to an outside dining area that provides a spectacular view of the property from one of Indiana’s highest points.

While golf may be the centerpiece of the French Lick resort experience for our

readers, the namesake hotel which towers above the downtown area dazzles with its array of amenities and activities. One hundred and seventy-two years ago, Dr. William Bowles built an elegant hideaway for those seeking the miraculous healing powers of the area’s mineral waters. While the classic spa wing of the French Lick Springs Hotel, built in 1901, remains part of the complex, the hotel has undergone a remarkable renaissance over the past 10 years, and now offers four-star dining, swimming pools, a world-class spa, bike rentals, hiking trails, carriage rides, and even a 51,000 square-foot casino. The French Lick Springs Hotel’s counterpart is the stunning West Baden Springs Hotel.

Known to many as the “Eighth Wonder of the World,” the hotel was fashioned after one of Europe’s great mineral spas, Baden-Baden. When the original facility was destroyed by a fire in 1901, owner Lee W. Sinclair became determined to build the hotel of his dreams. He unveiled a design complete with a 200-ft. atrium and a fireplace that burned 14-foot logs.

That hotel had its ups and downs over the years and was closed in 1989 for safety reasons. In 1994, the Cook Group, a global medical device manufacturing company headquartered in Bloomington, Ind., bought the property for \$500,000 and proceeded to inject tens of millions of dollars into the hotel with a goal of restoring its grandeur. The end result exceeds all expectations. The hotel is today considered a national historic landmark and is perennially listed as the No. 1 hotel in Indiana by *U.S. News & World Report*. In total, the group spent in the neighborhood of \$450 million to preserve, restore and expand both hotels. Beyond the resurrection of two dated properties, the French Lick community benefited with 1,600 jobs.

In celebration of the Donald Ross Course 100th anniversary in 2017, French Lick Resort offers a limited edition package available from March 15 to April 30. The package includes a one-night stay at either resort hotel, two days of unlimited golf on The Donald Ross Course with cart, breakfast at Hagen’s Club House Restaurant, and a limited edition collectible gift, which by itself has a retail value of \$299. Package prices start at \$399 per person based on double occupancy. To get the entire Ross/Dye experience, the package can be upgraded to include The Pete Dye Course for an additional charge. Visit the resort’s website, www.frenchlick.com for reservations and more information.

When the Boys Play Through

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“Can I finish my game?” Gebhardi asked.

“Sure,” McGillen said. He knew Gebhardi couldn’t get away, not with his wife Louise on hand.

An impending arrest can affect one’s game. McGurn double-bogeyed the seventh hole, then made a 7-over-par 11 on the eighth hole – today’s sixth on the South Course – with the grabbing of a photographer by the shirt after a click of the shutter during a putt added for spice.

“You’ve busted up my game,” Gebhardi growled.

“Whose bright idea was this?” cracked Mrs. Machine Gun.

So around the final 10 holes went McGurn, McGillen, his officers, the tanned Louise, and a coterie of reporters, photographers, and regular gallery who had never seen such a spectacle. Leader and eventual winner Macdonald Smith played in comparative solitude that day.

Gebhardi finished with an 86, missed the cut by 14 strokes, and was off to the station for booking.

“Just put it down that I’m booked for carrying concealed ideas,” Gebhardi said before his escort from Olympia Fields.

Less than three years later, Gebhardi was dead, killed by three gunmen seven years and a day after the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre.

Capone had several alibis for that sordid event, and one of them was created through golf. He was conveniently out of town, playing golf in Palm Island, Fla., on Feb. 14, 1929, and he had proof. Just in case, he’d called Cog-Hill Golf Club before leaving town and talked to a kid from the pro shop whom he’d met the year before in the parking lot. He needed four sets of clubs, bags, the works, delivered to the Kankakee station on the Illinois Central line the next morning.

Sixteen-year-old Joe Jemsek negotiated a price of \$110 a set, which included a golf glove and a dozen balls in each bag, then drove to Kankakee and made the delivery. Capone gave him a \$100 tip on top of the \$440.

Capone had an alibi. Jemsek had a story he’d tell for decades.

And Capone made sure never to win a hole with a nine. You never know.

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