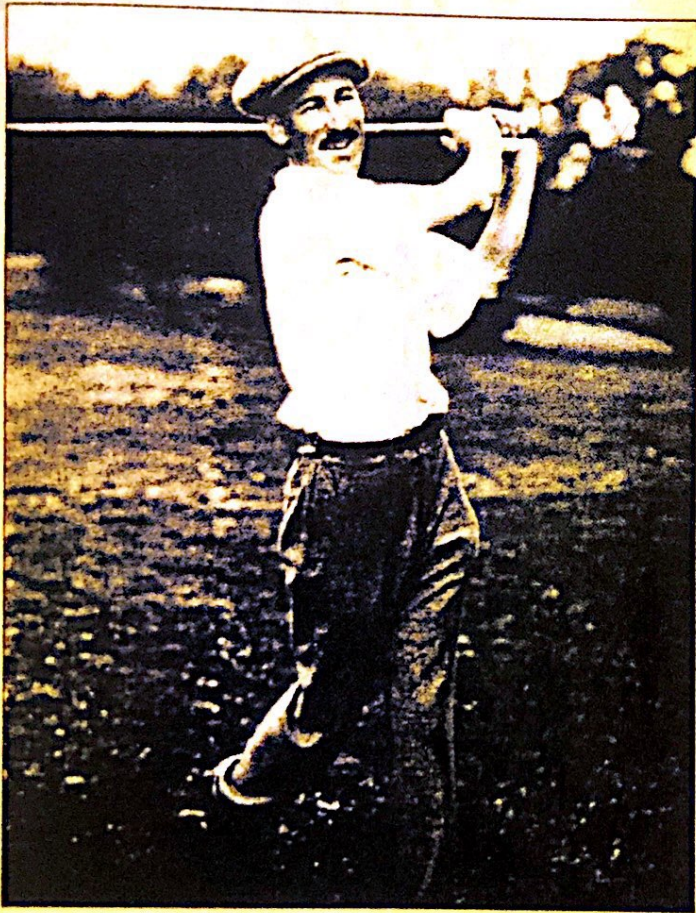


The Great Unknown

George Sargent's playing career peaked during his brief tenure in Vermont.



George Sargent

The U.S. Open golf championship and the state of Vermont are not commonly mentioned in the same breath. The tournament—perhaps the most prestigious in the golfing world—has never been held here, and though the state has more than its fair share of talented players and terrific courses, Vermont could never fairly be considered a hotbed of professional golfing talent. Patty Sheehan, hailing originally from Middlebury and winner of the 1994 U.S. Women's Open, is the sole connection between Vermont and U.S. Open championship golf in the modern era.

Vermont's relationship to high-stakes golf was all the more tenuous during the sport's beginnings in America, a fact reflected in the newspaper accounts of the 1909 U.S. Open: "UNKNOWN PLAYER FROM UNKNOWN COURSE WINS THE OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP." Unbelievably, the most famous golfers of the era—Harry Vardon, Willie Anderson and Walter Travis, among other greats—were upstaged in that year's Open by a mysterious stranger. *The New York Times* of June 26, 1909 summarized the stunning nature of the tournament's outcome, proclaiming a "sudden leap to fame" for an "unknown golfer" from, of all places, Vermont: "An unknown golf club up among

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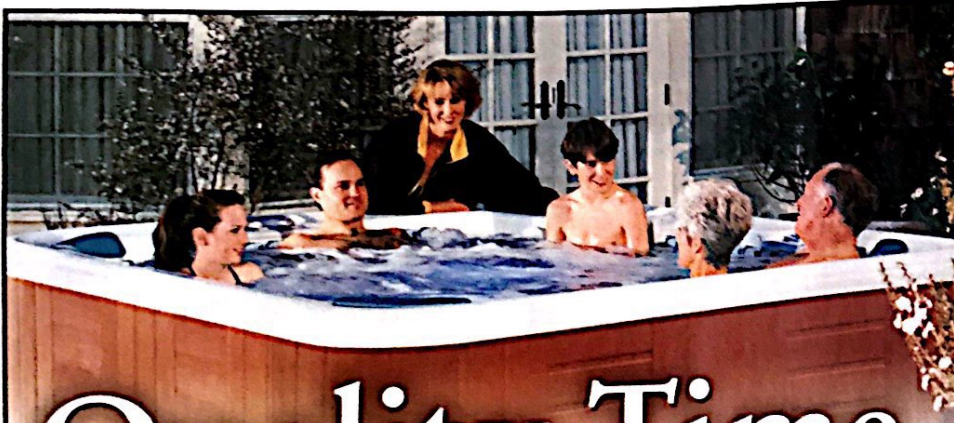
the Green Mountain hills of Vermont has the honor of furnishing the new National Open golf champion for the coming year. The club is the Hyde Manor Golf Club, and the new champion, who was hitherto hardly better known than the club itself, is George Sargent."

Even the hometown papers had to admit the relative anonymity of both the player and the course he hailed from. Vermont's *Burlington Daily News* reported that "the outcome of the tournament could hardly have been more surprising," and acknowledged that the Hyde Manor Golf Club in Sudbury "is not listed in any of the [golfing] guides."

"An unknown golf club up among the Green Mountain hills of Vermont has the honor of furnishing the new National Open golf champion for the coming year."

A closer look reveals that Sargent's victory was the natural result of several years of careful study and painstaking devotion to improving his skills, and Sargent's quiet nature and tendency toward humility, rather than his pedigree and home base, were the true reasons for the "surprising" nature of his victory. Similarly, there was a good explanation for the intrigue surrounding the Hyde Manor Golf Club.

Media accounts to the contrary, Sargent did not magically appear from nowhere to claim the 1909 Open. The mystery surrounding him was so pronounced that when the editors of *The American Golfer* asked him to give an account of his victory, Sargent felt compelled to emphasize his background and dispel the myths regarding his identity. "There were so many different stories going round



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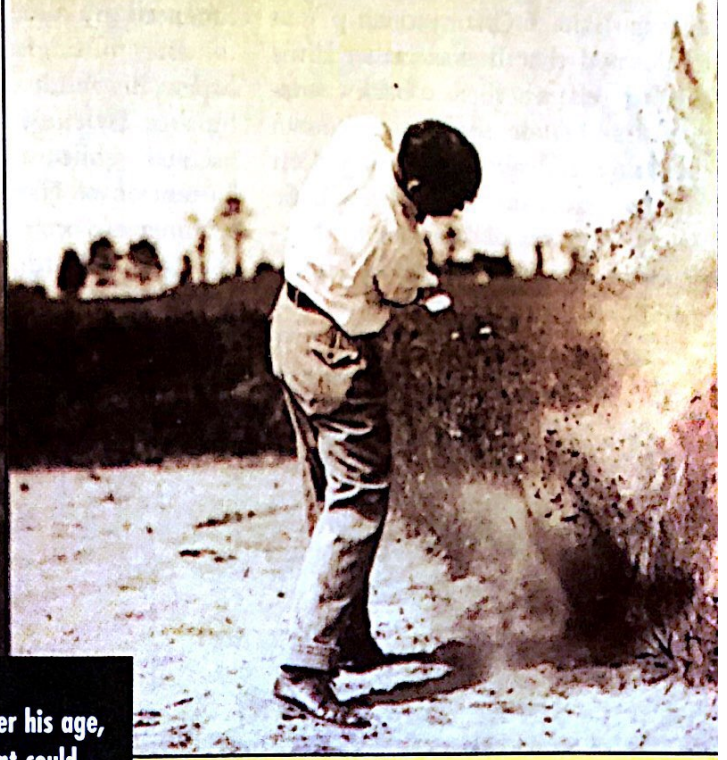
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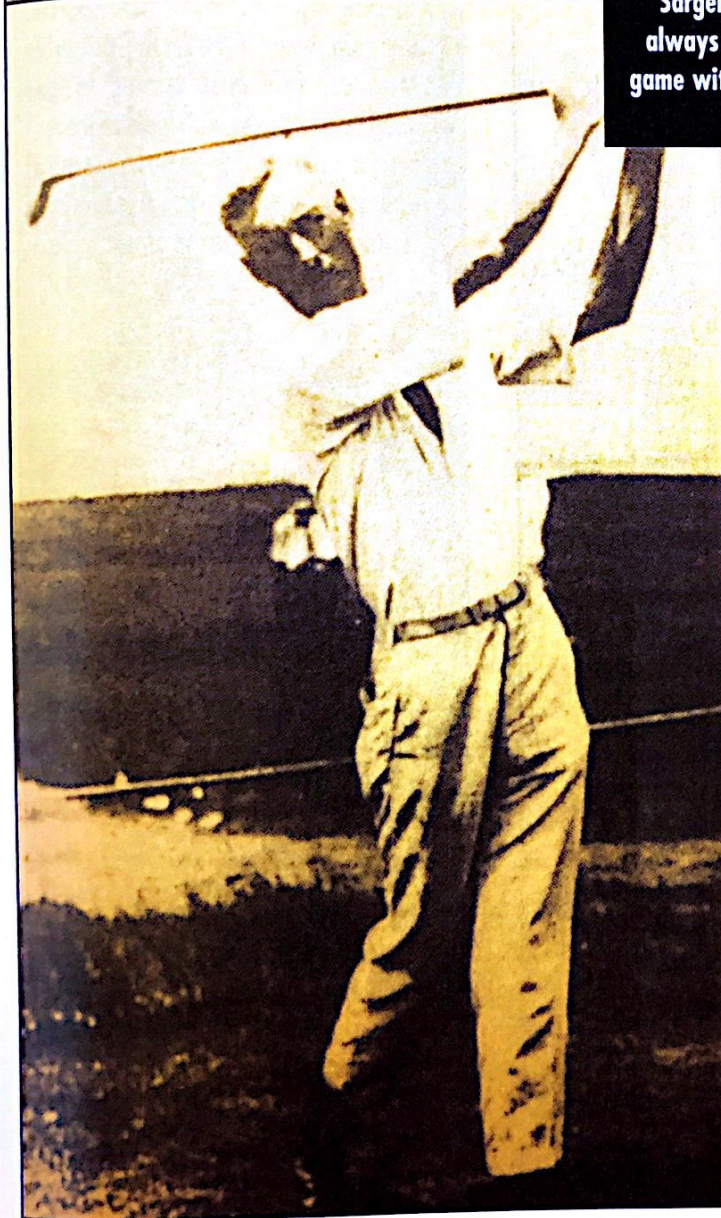
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No matter his age,
Sargent could
always play the
game with aplomb.



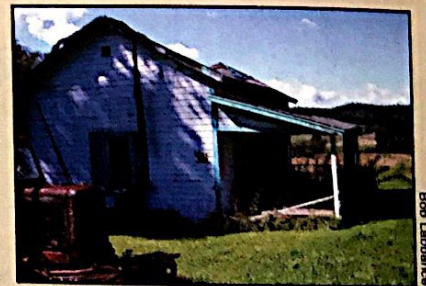
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during the Championship at Englewood that it was rather difficult to tell whether a backwoodsman, caddie, or some well-known champion in disguise had carried off first honors. I am sure they will be pleased to know it was not a backwoodsman at any rate, but like nearly all prominent professionals, I com-

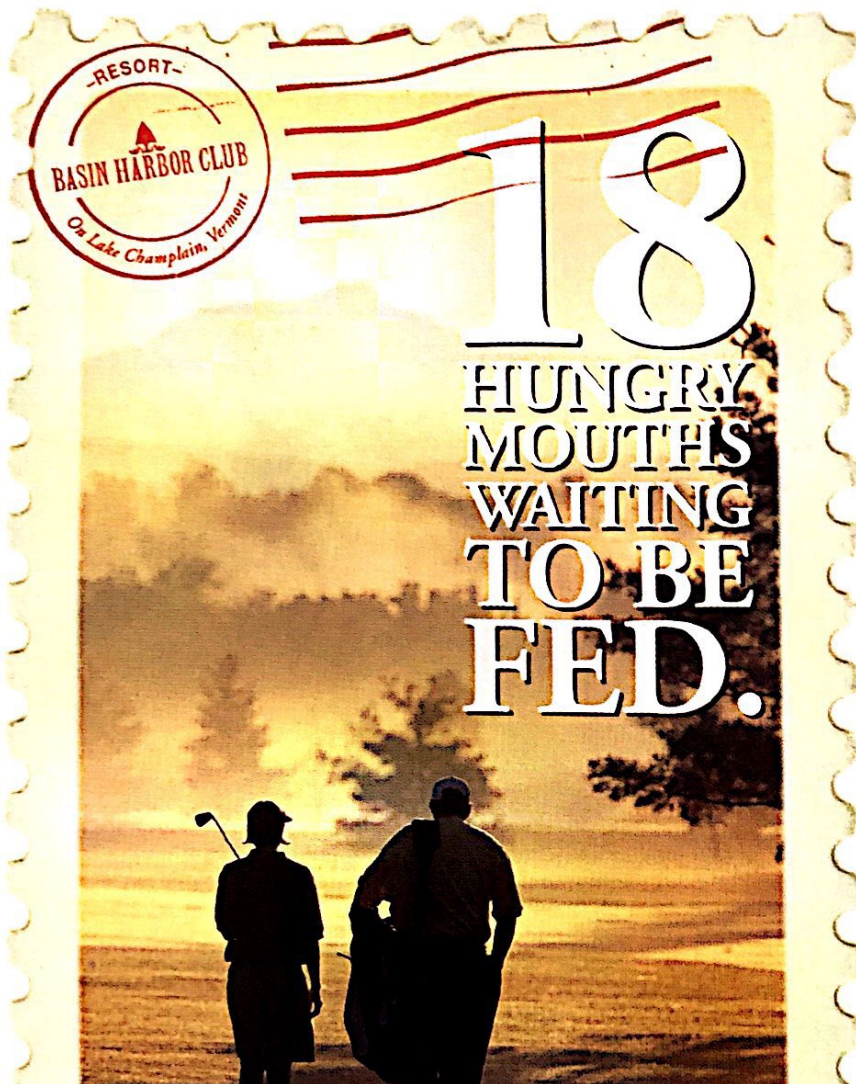
menced my career as a caddie lad." Born in England in 1882, Sargent spent his youth as a caddie and club-maker. By age 16, he had become a scratch golfer and had caught the attention of Harry Vardon, six-time winner of the British Open. Sargent accepted Vardon's invitation to apprentice for him at a club in

Top to Bottom

Sadly, Hyde Manor no longer exists, and there is scant historical information to suggest that it ever lived up to its owners' aspirations. Some portion of the original layout eventually became the Top 'o the Seasons Golf Club, another course on the list of extinct Vermont layouts. A trip to Sudbury, Vermont, however, reveals far more than the scant documentation which survives the course. Amidst the beautiful rolling hills, one can still see the outlines of tee areas, fairways and greens, and a recent visit even turned up an old Top 'o the Seasons score card in the decaying structure that once served as golf shop, seemingly waiting for a mysterious player to show up out of nowhere, like the unknown stranger from Vermont who once captured the U.S. Open.



A rusting tractor and decaying former pro shop are sad reminders of Hyde Manor's hey day.



annual salary and whatever he could earn from making and repairing clubs and from lessons, for which he charged fifty cents for an hour of his time. His duties at the club left little time to devote to his own game, although he entered a few tournaments and at times displayed the ability that would eventually win the U.S. Open. He was runner-up at the prominent Canadian Open in 1907, but could not break 90 in the opening round at the 1908 U.S. Open, held at Myopia Hunt Club in Massachusetts. The poor showing, however, taught Sargent an important lesson about perseverance. "Certain it is I could do nothing

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right, and I was too disgusted to return my card for the first round. When I cooled off and saw how bad almost everyone else was I realized my mistake, and promptly made up my mind I had torn up my last card."

Sargent practiced more during the following year, returning to England

for a few months of intensive work with Britain's finest players. He returned to the United States to accept the Hyde Manor position in 1909, and six weeks later traveled to New Jersey's Englewood Golf Club for the Open. Sargent played poorly for the first few holes of the first

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round, and then watched as a fellow competitor, David Hunter, shot a 68 in the first round. This was the first time any golfer had broken 70 in a U.S. Open. Hunter could not sustain his level of play, shooting an 84 in the second round and eventually finish-

Media accounts to the contrary, Sargent did not magically appear from nowhere to claim the 1909 Open.

ing a distant twenty-third. Sargent's play, however, improved over the course of the tournament. He followed his first round 75 with rounds of 72, 72 and 71, winning the championship with the lowest score since the Open began in 1895. In victory he proved to be as gracious as ever, acknowledging his fellow competitors and the gallery and providing the material for the next day's headlines: "I had come amongst them almost an entire stranger, and I thank them all for my kind reception."

The 1909 Open performance was no fluke. Sargent continued to play quality professional golf in the following years, and he captured the Canadian Open championship in 1912. But his professional success was curtailed by his passion for shaping the growth and popularity of golf in the U.S., primarily by developing the role of the golfing professional as a teacher of the game rather than as a touring player. As a charter member of the Professional Golfers Association (PGA) in 1916, and as the association's President from 1921 to 1926, Sargent continued his efforts to improve the quality of instruction for his member professionals. He adopted a teaching method still in use today, when in the late 1920s he arranged for the

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slow-motion filming of the swings of the era's great players, including Harry Vardon, Walter Hagen and Joyce Wethered. And Sargent's quest for making the game more enjoyable and popular among the general public made him an unwitting pioneer in improving equipment technology. Decades before Karsten Solheim and Eli Callaway arrived on the golf scene, Sargent remarked in 1937 that "We should work on a type of club easier for the multitudes to use than the present type, which is far from being the most scientific tool."

True to his modest character, Sargent spent the remainder of his life emphasizing the importance of the teaching professional, even while the touring professionals were primary in the public's eye. He called on his fellow PGA members to shift focus away from tournament golf and toward the relative anonymity of teaching. Perhaps because he had once achieved fame from his skill as a

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touring player, his admonition was all the more convincing: "The pictures we see in the papers are the tournament stars. Our purpose now is to improve the games of our members, and for that we can't expect to become prominent in the press."

George Sargent's apparent disdain of the spotlight did not prevent him from enjoying the advantages that come to an Open champion. At the time of his victory, Sargent was still in the midst of designing Hyde

Manor's layout. The course was under construction and had not yet opened for play, an understandable explanation for the club not being "listed in any of the guides." The owners of the existing Hyde Manor resort property had recently hired Sargent, hoping he would design the course and remain on as head professional. Sargent prepared a design for the layout after consulting with the great Horace Rawlins, winner of the inaugural U.S. Open in 1895. The owners never dreamed they would one day be able to boast that little Hyde Manor was, at the time, the world's only golf course designed by two U.S. Open champions. But other clubs were recruiting the newly crowned Open champion and

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Sargent eventually left Vermont for the Chevy Chase Golf Club in Maryland, and he later served as the pro at such prestigious clubs as Scioto in Ohio, Interlachen in Minnesota and, on the recommendation of Bobby Jones in 1927, East Lake in Atlanta. He continued his prominent role in the PGA until his death in 1962. Because he chose the relative anonymity of teaching over the pro tour as a way to build the game into a popular pastime for the American public, he remains a relatively unfamiliar figure today.

*Rob Halpert never won the U.S. Open
and he's still unknown.*