

A Hill Who Became A Mountain

Each doctor brought the same bad news. Severe kidney infection. Further complications from anemia. Incurable.

Even with the best medical care available to her in 1923, the doctors gave Opal Trout Hill three years to live. She was 31 years old. At the time it seemed Hill's life story would end unremarkably, just another unfortunate early death that would weigh heaviest on her husband and their young son.

The doctors' diagnoses were correct but their prognoses were wrong—or rather, Hill proved them wrong. Later, approaching her eightieth birthday, Hill would recall her thinking at the time of her death sentence: “If I'm going to die, I might as well do it on a golf practice tee.”

In between her doctors' grim predictions and the recollection of her defiant thoughts, Hill lived a stunning life. She would enjoy international recognition as the best golfer ever to come out of Kansas City, at least until a kid named Watson came along. Her influence on the game of golf is unsurpassed by any other local figure; through her outstanding play, sharpened by an unmatched work ethic, Hill did as much as anyone to legitimize the sport of women's golf.

When Hill was at the top of her game from the late 1920s to the early 1940s, she was the standard against which Kansas City measured all golfers, male or female.

Adventures in Illness

Sickness of one kind or another had always lurked around Hill's life, though it was those she loved who were sick. Until her kidney infection, Hill was always the caregiver.

Hill was born June 2, 1892, in Nebraska, according to Jane Flynn, a Kansas City historian and author whose contributions to the preparations of this article were invaluable. According to Flynn's book, *Kansas City Women of Independent Mind*, Hill's father died when she was two, leading her mother to move the family to Minneapolis, Kan.

One can imagine the difficulties for a fatherless family in rural Kansas in the late 19th and early 20th century. In addition to daily household chores, Hill cared for her mother who was ailing most of her adult life. Despite these hardships, Hill grew into an optimistic young woman, a trait that would serve her as she faced her own illness later in life.

"I learned to work and help my mother," Hill told the now-defunct Kansas City Times in 1968. "That was one of the best things that ever happened to me. You have to work at anything if you're going to succeed. Whatever I went into, I tried to do the very best I could do. I was taught as a child to work hard and excel if possible."

In the late 1910s Hill, not yet 18 and fueled by praise from her mother's physician for her attentive nursing skills, applied for a nursing position at a new hospital being built in Kansas City, Swedish Lutheran Hospital, later renamed Trinity Lutheran. Her application was denied on the basis of her age.

But Hill persisted, was accepted and moved to Kansas City, eagerly launching herself into her new career. Plans to continue her training in New York were derailed by a 24-hour nursing shift on a mild surgical case.

"It changed my destiny," said Hill. "In three months, I married my patient, Oscar Hill."

Despite her marriage to Oscar, an attorney, Hill remained a registered nurse throughout her incredible golf career. It wasn't until 1969, after 55 years of caring for the sick, that Hill finally retired from nursing.

In 1923, shortly after the Hills' only child, Stuart, turned nine years old, Hill mysteriously began losing weight, more than 50 lbs. in a few weeks. The caregiver found herself in need of care. She consulted with five doctors, each confirming the bleak diagnosis and prospects of the other. The only shred of optimism was offered by Dr. Franklin D. Murphy, who prescribed fresh air and light exercise, a novel remedy at the time.

So Hill, ever the optimist, took up golf, a game she had never seen, let alone played. But who among us, when given a fatal deadline, wouldn't try something new?

Hacking

Seemingly it's always been difficult to get a tee time in Kansas City, ever since two Scots improvised a crude tee box and green at the Hyde Park Club near 36th and Gillham Road in 1894. This was a mere six years after the sport reached the eastern shores of the United States, according to *When Golf Came to Kansas City* by the late Kenneth Krakauer, and the game caught on quickly in Kansas City. According to Krakauer's book the first golf course in Kansas City opened in 1894. By 1910 there were 14 courses in the city; by 1920 there were a total of 27.

Certainly, golf was popular in Kansas City—for men at least. Women, nattily attired in the long golfing skirts, heeled shoes and hats, were welcomed on the golf courses only at certain times.

The historian Flynn says that from golf's 19th-century beginnings and reaching well into the 1960s, women in Kansas City were barred from playing on Saturday mornings, to make room for the men descending on the courses to kick off their weekends. Of course, Thursday afternoons were out too. That was the day doctors took off the afternoon to hit the links.

In the early 1920s when Hill took up the game at the Meadow Lake Country Club – her husband was a member though he didn't play golf – the game was much different than it is today. The courses were shorter. Golf club shafts were made of wood; hence they were called golf sticks. Perhaps the biggest difference between the game now and then: women were not taken seriously as golfers.

There was no obvious reason to take Hill seriously the first time she stepped up to the tee. Hill started out as an atrocious golfer, just like the rest of us. She lacked a natural swing. Sick as she was, she could only play a few holes at a time before growing weak. She even lacked an understanding of the game, which was to reveal itself awkwardly in her first golf tournament.

Taking The Cure

So desperate for \$2 entry fees were the organizers of a ladies tournament at Meadow Lake that they begged Hill to enter though she scored in the high 150s for 18 holes.

As Hill would later tell writer Bob Jares, she was paired with a Mrs. Southwick of the Topeka Country Club in a match play event. The two women were playing the course, enjoying themselves on a pleasant day when Hill rolled in a long putt on No. 16, and Southwick offered her congratulations. Hill was puzzled.

"My dear, you won," said Southwick. "You beat me!"

All along Hill had thought she was playing with Southwick, not against her.

The winner of the tournament shot in the mid-80s. Hill, finishing the round with a 142 including two whiffs, couldn't imagine that any woman could play so well. She approached club professional Al Lesperance, she recalled in a 1972 interview with The Times. She told him she wanted to shoot in the 80s.

"It will take seven years of hard work," Lesperance told her.

"I may not have that long," Hill shot back. "I'll double up."

In June, only months after taking up the sport, Hill began practicing daily, working with Lesperance to improve her game, building her stamina until she was practicing six hours a day. By July, Hill's scores had dropped into the 120s. By August, the 100s. By September her scores were in the 90s, and she won her first tournament.

As her game improved, so did her health. Within months, she regained 20 of the 50 lbs she had lost. Then in 1925, when according to medical wisdom she should have been rapidly approaching her deathbed, Hill won the women's city championship.

Storied Career, Lasting Legacy

Hill didn't hit the ball far but her short game was uncommonly accurate. "We used to say she (Hill) would pick out the blade grass she wanted the ball to land on," says the historian Flynn, herself a good golfer fortunate to play a few rounds with Hill in her later years.

Hill developed into a confident golfer, says Flynn. People who knew Hill described her in news articles as "quick to laugh" and quite social, "introducing someone she met five minutes ago to someone she met just ten minutes before that."

Krakauer's book on golf in Kansas City even reprints a thank you note from a player beaten by Hill, attesting to Hill's graciousness as a winner, postulating that most people are not gracious winners because they haven't had much practice at it. Hill had a lot of practice at it.

From 1925 through 1938, Hill won more than 200 amateur women's tournaments nationally and was consistently ranked among the best golfers, male or female, in the country. In 1932, Hill led the American team to victory in the first Curtis Cup, a bi-yearly women's amateur tournament pitting a team from the United States against a team made up of players from Great Britain and Ireland. She led them to victory again in 1934 and 1936, never once losing a singles match.

In 1938 her husband Oscar was incapacitated by a heart attack. In her mid-40s, an age when most golfers consider retiring as their game declines, Hill turned professional to support her family, becoming just the second professional woman golfer. She secured a sponsorship from the Wilson Sporting Good Company, which was looking to attach their good name to a golfer who would inspire women golfers and, hopefully, sales of golf equipment.

Over the course of Hill's career, other tournament victories included the Women's Western Amateur (3 times) – after her third title, the tournament organizers simply gave her the original trophy and began handing out replicas to future winners – the Women's Western Open (twice) and the Women's Trans-Mississippi (4 times). Hill won the Kansas City Women's Medal Play Tournament an astounding 12 times. The only major tournament to elude her grasp was the women's National Open, though she was a medallist four times.

Hill played in and won tournaments around the world. She played with and had the respect of the greatest golfers of her era, including Bobby Jones and Ben Hogan. Yet Hill saved her finest round of golf for her hometown.

In the 1937 Missouri Amateur tournament, Hill stepped onto the course at Indian Hills Country Club and fired a 12-under-par 66, this at a time before ladies tee boxes were implemented. Hill was teeing off from the men's tees. The round, including a hole in one No. 3, was the lowest round of competitive golf ever by a woman. It equaled the men's amateur record and was one stroke off the men's professional record. It was a remarkable round, standing as a record in women's golf for 12 years.

Records fall but a legacy is unbreakable. In 1950, while playing in Wichita, Kan. in the U.S. Women's Open, Hill and 12 other professional women golfers met off the course to review and adopt a few articles of incorporation. They were attempting to start a national women's golf organization that would survive where others had failed. The organization they formed, the Ladies Professional Golf Association, stands as the longest-running women's sports association in the world.

Though Hill retired from competitive golf in the 1950s, she remained close to the game that saved her life. Well into her 80s, wearing a red bandana and accompanied by her brown French poodle, Gigi, Hill could be found at driving ranges around town giving lessons, some paid, some for free, never missing an opportunity to pass along her knowledge and passion for the game of golf.

Nor did her skills erode much with age. She consistently shot in the 80s when she herself was in her 80s. At the time of her death in 1981 at the age of 89, *The Kansas City Star* sports editor Joe McGuff wrote that Hill was "the most remarkable athlete in the history of women's golf."

In a 1973 interview with *The Star*, Hill summed up what it takes to be a champion. Though she was talking about world-class golfers, in the process, she distilled the essence of her own personal and athletic success.

“A champion outplays others by determination and desire,” she said. “By always going a bit beyond.”

Indeed, Hill went more than a bit beyond the predictions of those doctors in 1923.

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