

"[Kennedy] is worth a number of stories. Few persons achieve their ambitions in this world, and rarely one as—well, you might call it bizarre, as Mr. Kennedy's." —O.B. KEELER

GOLF'S IRON HORSE

THE ASTONISHING,
RECORD-BREAKING LIFE OF
RALPH
KENNEDY

JOHN SABINO



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The Gatun Golf Course in Panama, adjacent to the Canal. (Photo courtesy of University of Florida)

After passing through the Canal Zone, the ship's itinerary featured various South American Pacific Coast cities. The scheduled ports of call were Cristobal, Canal Zone; Guayaquil, Ecuador; Callao (Lima's port), Mollendo, and Iquique, Peru; and Valparaiso, Chile. Six leisurely days after departing New York, the Kennedys had arrived in Panama, and on August 11th Ralph was itching to play golf. His most dramatic request for a tee time was from on board his ship. A ship-to-shore "Radiogram" message was sent from the Santa Inez at 9:52 a.m.: "Can Mr. Kennedy play golf in Gatun at 2:30 this afternoon?" Although a record only survives of the outbound message, we know from card No. 756 that Ralph was indeed able to get up a game that afternoon.

American Golfer described the Gatun Golf Club in 1916, jokingly calling it "The most expensive golf course in the world" because of the cost of constructing the canal. Built on dredged land and located between the Gatun Locks and the spillway near the Atlantic end of the canal, it was a verdant course kept in good condition by a herd of four hundred sheep. With a tropical climate. Panama gets one hundred inches of rain a year, ideal growing conditions for Bermuda grass, which thrives there. President Warren G. Harding, an avid golfer who played there a decade before Ralph visited, was among the early golfers to enjoy Gatun. A fairly rudimentary course, by 1922 American Golfer described its 2.778 yards as golf of the "poor man variety."

Ralph played an expanded version of 5.787 yards, accompanied by the professional, George Dewar. The Gatun Golf Course gave new definition to the term "water hazard," since the spillways and locks surrounding the course played as out of bounds. Although the first hole was only 351 yards long, it was eclectic, because it was 300 feet wide and situated between the seventy-foot-high canal locks as hazards on one side and a steep slope on the other. When the course was built it wasn't fully excavated, so beneath the lush grass golfers sometimes hit buried rocks. Ralph's card explains the myriad of hazards outlined by the local rules that give relief from a host of man-made obstructions, including spillways and lock chambers.

GATUN GOLF CLUB

GATUN

CANAL ZONE, PANAMA

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GOLF RULES

The Rules of Golf as approved by the United States Golf Association will govern all play, subject to the local Local Golf Rules.

1. If any of the following objects interfere with stroke or stance, ball may be lifted and dropped away from such objects, not over two club lengths, and not nearer the hole, without penalty. Railroad tracks, and drain alongside same, grade stakes, concrete work, steep embankment left of No. 18 fairway, Spillway slopes, flower garden, and shrubbery right of Nos. 1 and 8 fairways, and shrubbery near No. 9 green.
2. Ball landing on Spillway slopes of holes Nos. 4 and 6 must be dropped across the tracks to the left not nearer the hole.

OUT OF BOUNDS

3. Lock Chambers. Gatun Lake, and Lake rough. Spillway. Hydro-station; in or right of ditch, and stakes right side of No.11 fairway, lower borrow pit, and slope leading to same, right side of No. 12 and No. 13 fairways, wire fence right of No. 3 fairway, right of upper track on No. 9 fairway, and all cyclone fences except, when playing on No. 11, the tee side of this fence is out of bounds.

(a) The penalty for out of bound is distance only.

(b) The penalty for lost ball is stroke and distance.

4. When a ball is lost the match immediately behind has the right to pass through AT ONCE. The match losing the ball may not upon finding it RESUME PLAY UNTIL THE MATCH BEHIND HAS PASSED THROUGH.

5. **PLAYING RIGHTS.** – Saturdays, Sundays and Holidays – All matches of 2, 3, or 4 balls have Equal rights. On all other days, any 2-ball match HAS INSTANT RIGHT TO GO THROUGH ANY OTHER MATCH. A player practicing, or a match of 5 balls or more, have no rights as to Precedence of play on the course.

6. A ball resting on putting green may be lifted and cleaned without penalty.

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Boyd Stalsburg
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CANAL ZONE, PANAMA

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Ralph's card from the lost golf club in the Canal Zone. (Photo courtesy of USGA)