

PLAYED WITH RAKE, SHOVEL

John Montague, Golf's Mystery Man, Dies

BY DWIGHT CHAPIN

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Anybody who could use a rake, a shovel and a baseball bat to beat Bing Crosby in a golf game figures to be a character.

John M. Montague, who died in Studio City Thursday at 67, was a character . . . one of the most familiar in California sports and movie circles in the 1930s and 1940s.

He was known by various names . . . La Verne Moore (his real name), "The Sphinx of the Links," "The Mysterious Monty," "The Phantom of the Fairways," "The Garbo of Golf." And he was also known by various numbers on police department blotters.

Some called him the world's greatest strong man. Some called him a con man.

Grantland Rice said he was "the greatest golfer on earth." Westbrook Pegler dubbed him "a combination John Henry, Paul Bunyan and Popeye the sailor." Walter Hagen, in a serious moment, said that "Monty is the most amazing golfer in the world."

The Crosby incident? Bing explained it to ex-Times writer Braven Dyer recently:

"We'd finished playing at Lakeside Golf Club one afternoon and were in the bar, arguing, as golfers will, about proper handicaps. Monty said he could beat me, using a bat, a shovel and a rake.

"This appealed to me—if for no other reason than it was an outlandish proposal—and I offered to take him on at a dollar a hole (some said the bet was a flat \$1,000).

"We went down to the 10th tee at Lakeside—now No. 1, I believe—and he produced a fungo bat, threw the ball up in the air and hit a prodigious wallop. It rolled into the bunker, directly in front of the green, a distance of about 350 yards from the tee.

"I bumped a girlish effort down the fairway about 210 yards, and then threw it up on the green about 15 feet from the hole with a 7-iron. Montague then produced a shovel, strode into the bunker, and shoveled the ball up on the green about six feet from the hole.

"I putted first, and missed. He then took a rake, turned it upside down and with the back of the rake, pushed it



John M. Montague . . . lines up a putt.

in for a birdie three. I'd seen enough. I went back to the bar for a little more conviviality."

There are other reports that Montague:

—Killed a bird sitting on a telephone line 175 yards away with a golf shot. Intentionally.

—Played the Palm Springs course on a 30-day marathon (640 holes) and broke the course record four days in a row.

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MYSTERY MAN OF GOLF DIES

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—Took four shots to drive a ball three-quarters of a mile on a sandy beach and one shot to sink a ball one mile on ice at Lake Placid.

—Lofted a ball over a 14-story building on his first try.

—Shot par on crutches, while recovering from a broken hip, the day after his release from the hospital.

But nearly all of this was accomplished—if it was—out of public view. Montague did not often enter public tournaments and shunned the pro tour.

"I don't care for professional golf and I have no intention of playing in it," he said. "If I don't want to play—isn't that my own business?"

He did enter the National Open at Cleveland in 1939, shot an 80 in the first round and dropped out.

But for side money, he would take on anybody for just about anything at any time. He was best known for his golf tricks shots, which included a brassie shot through a window open just three inches; lighting a match held in a caddy's mouth, with a full iron swing; driving a match box off the head of a pet dog sitting up for

food; turning on a light switch with a golf ball and chipping shots into glasses placed on dresser tops.

But despite those talents and his bulk—Montague reportedly weighed more than 300 pounds in later years—he was a shadowy figure in many ways.

Arthur Abrams, a Los Angeles photographer with whom Montague was formerly associated, says that he was a rum runner on the St. Lawrence River in the Al Capone days.

In the same era, he reportedly passed himself off as a policeman in a minor extortion racket in New York state, drawing a suspended sentence.

In 1937, through use of newspaper photographs, he was identified as La Verne Moore and charged with participation in a roadhouse robbery in New York in 1930. He was acquitted.

Some of Monty's friends included many of Hollywood's biggest names—Oliver Hardy (with whom he lived for some time), Crosby, Spencer Tracy, Bob Hope, Richard Arlen, W. C. Fields, Guy Kibbee and Johnny Weissmuller.

They played golf with him, socialized with him, and marveled at his feats of skill and strength.

As a youth in Syracuse, N.Y., he allegedly could pick up pianos all by himself and hold up cars while his friends changed tires.

He had baseball tryouts as a pitcher with both the Boston Braves and New York Yankees. Babe Ruth befriended him and Monty reportedly beat him with his rake-shovel-baseball bat routine on the golf course, before the match with Crosby.

In 1938, Montague married Mrs. Esther Plunkett, a wealthy Beverly Hills matron. She died 25 years—almost to the day—before Montague, and friends said he "started to go downhill" after her death.

But he was active in investments, land deals, mining claims and as a contractor.

"He made and lost a million dollars several times," said Abrams.

At the time of his death, he was living in a Ventura Boulevard motel, not far from where he helped out as an unofficial instructor at Joe Kirkwood's driving range.

Funeral services are pending at Utter-McKinley's Valley Mortuary on Lankershim Blvd.