

ARTS & CULTURE

Montague the Magnificent

He was a golfing wonder, a dapper strongman and the toast of the Hollywood smart set—then his past caught up with him

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On the golf course, Montague would bet on anything, even if it involved equipment not usually found in a golf bag. Bettmann/ Corbis



The man who called himself John Montague seemed to appear out of nowhere, simply popping up at the first tee of the public golf courses around Hollywood,

California, in the early 1930s. He was a squat and powerful character, somewhere in his late 20s, and he came armed with a pleasant disposition, good looks and a curious set of oversize clubs that featured a driver that weighed nearly twice as much as normal, a monster of a club with a huge head that sent golf balls well over 300 yards down the fairways.

Or at least it did for him. He knew how to make that driver work.

"My brother Bob first met Montague when he was playing out at Sunset Fields," Bud McCray, a local golfer of note, once said, describing his first sighting of the new arrival. "There is a dogleg where the city of Beverly Hills turns into the city of Los Angeles on Wilshire Boulevard, and at two in the morning, Montague used to stand there and hit golf balls down Wilshire Boulevard."

There was a touch of unreality, a mystery about him from the start. He wasn't one of those casualties from the first stages of what would become the Great Depression, wandering into town battered and bankrupt, following a last-chance dream of palm trees and prosperity. He wasn't part of the perpetual stream of tap-dancers and cowboys and lounge singers hoping to find celluloid stardom on the back lots of the movie studios. He was a golfer. He wanted to play golf.

Where did he come from?

He never said.

What did he do for a living?

He never said.

He just wanted to play golf.

Far from indigent, he dressed well, drove fast cars and within a few months was breaking course records. No one ever had seen a man attack this game, this sport,

quite the way he did. His long drives set up easy approach shots, which set up birdie putts, which he made more often than he missed. He could sculpt shots around trees or over buildings, step on a ball in the sand, bury it, then blast it out to the desired location. He was a golfing wonder.

Rumors soon circulated about how he had pointed at a string of birds on a telephone wire 175 yards away from a tee at Fox Hills Country Club, picked out a bird in the line, unleashed his three wood and smacked a shot that not only hit the bird, but struck it dead, broke its neck. Broke its neck! He supposedly would open a window in the clubhouse, any clubhouse, prop it open with a water glass, then knock a succession of chips through the small space, never breaking the window nor whacking the wall. He supposedly hit a box of matches off a cocker spaniel's head. The dog never blinked.

The stories and the record scores accumulated in a fast pile. Not only did this John Montague play great and goofy golf, he seemed able to outdrink, out-eat, out-arm wrestle the world. His appetites and abilities seemed almost superhuman. He routinely showed off his strength. Need to change a tire? No jack was necessary. Montague could simply hold the proper end of the car aloft while someone else attached the spare.

In a town of interesting characters, he moved rapidly toward the top of the list. He became someone to know.

"I think I met him the first time in Palm Springs," actor Richard Arlen said. "We played at the only course there was at the time [O'Donnell Golf Club]. Par was either 68 or 70. The latter, I think. O'Donnell was a nine-hole course that put a premium on accuracy. This was one of Monty's strong points. His rounds were 61-61-61-59!"

Arlen, a leading man, star of *Wings*, which won the first Academy Award for best picture in 1928, became an early friend. The actor was an avid golfer with a low

handicap, fascinated by Montague. He played often with him, took him to different courses around the area, eventually suggested that Montague join him as a member of his home course in Burbank. Montague agreed.

The course was the Lakeside Golf Club.

Lakeside Golf Club seemed to have been created by a popcorn-filled imagination. Within hailing distance of no fewer than three movie studios—so close to Universal that it bordered the company zoo, golfers able to hear the lions, tigers and elephants kept on the premises for jungle movies—the club was filled with celebrated faces. Oliver Hardy, Johnny Weissmuller and Douglas Fairbanks were members. Howard Hughes was a member. Charles Coburn. Adolph Menjou. Humphrey Bogart. Randolph Scott. Don Ameche. Guy Kibbee.

W. C. Fields was a member, lived on the other side of Toluca Lake, and sometimes would row across, flask of gin in his pocket, to make his starting time. Bing Crosby was a member. Mack Sennett was, too. Lakeside was a movieland refuge, a playground, a reward for wealth and fame.

John Montague inserted himself nicely into the picture in 1933. In no time at all, he became the club champion. He hit shots that no one ever had seen, drove greens that seldom, if ever, had been driven. He would bet on anything, bet that he could drive a golf ball three-quarters of a mile in five shots, bet he could chip onto the practice green through the clubhouse window, bet he could stack and bury three balls in a sand trap and hit only the middle one out of the trouble.

His feats of strength were just as remarkable. He would walk into the bar, spot Oliver Hardy, grab the 300-pound comedian by the shirt with one hand and *lift him onto the bar*. ("What'll you have, Babe?") In the clubhouse, he wrestled George Bancroft, a character actor of some renown, a big guy who specialized in playing villains. *He*

stuffed George Bancroft into a locker. He pulled a drowning woman from Henshaw Dam Lake near San Diego. There seemed to be no stopping him.

"We were out one night and somehow or another there was an altercation with the driver of another car," Johnny Weissmuller reported. "Seems like he thought Monty should have stopped and let him ahead of us. The guy started cussing and generally harassing us and walked up to the car and kept it up. Monty didn't say anything, he just got out of the car, walked up to the front of the guy's Lincoln, picked it up yea high and let it drop. One of the lights fell off and Monty just walked back to the guy and said, 'What did you say?' The smart guy almost fainted as we drove off."

Weissmuller was a former Olympic swimming champion, the reigning Tarzan in the movies. Even Tarzan of the Jungle was impressed.

The most storied incident on the Lakeside golf course was the one-hole match Montague staged with Bing Crosby. Already the country's most famous singer, not to mention a top movie star, Crosby was a constant and good golfer. He lived on Toluca Lake, sometimes played 36 holes in a day. Always looking for a match, one more round before sunset, he played against the Lakeside caddies, played against the members, played against Montague.

At the end of one encounter, sharing drinks in the bar, Montague the winner again, Crosby bemoaned his luck. A bad bounce here, a bad lie there had ruined his game. Montague disagreed. He said a turn of luck would not have changed the result of the match. To prove it, he bet he could beat Crosby without even using golf clubs. He said he could beat him with a baseball bat, a shovel and a rake. Crosby jumped at the offer.

Montague went to his car—and maybe Crosby should have suspected something if his opponent just happened to have a baseball bat, shovel and rake in the car—and returned with the implements. He then proceeded to hit a golf ball 350 yards into a

sand trap with the baseball bat, shovel the ball to within eight feet of the hole, then get down on all fours and make the putt for a birdie using the rake handle like a pool cue. This beat Crosby's par 4, which was executed with a normal drive, chip and two putts, all with standard clubs.

"That was enough for me," the singer said. "I went back to the clubhouse for a little more conviviality."

The Crosby story was wildfire. The tale was told and retold around Hollywood, exaggerated often, the match stretched to 18 holes in some accounts, the shots made longer and more difficult. The amount of the bet—the two participants always claimed it was five bucks—turned into thousands. Montague was now forever "the man who beat Bing Crosby using a baseball bat, a shovel and a rake."

The stories grew. Birds of all descriptions were now felled from telephone wires at all distances. Weissmuller said he had seen Montague kill a *sparrow*. George Bancroft was not only stuffed into a locker, but the door was shut and Bancroft had to beg to be released. Montague, it was said, could light a wooden match with a golf club, the match placed in the teeth of a caddie lying on a tee. Montague could hit carom shots off oak trees, the ball landing on the green. Montague could do anything. George Von Elm, the 1926 U.S. Amateur champion, called him "the greatest golfer I ever saw."

The strange part of all this was that the man in question did little to encourage it. He was shy, almost secretive. In a town where fame was a career goal, he wanted no part of it.

He refused to enter any tournaments other than club championships. He rejected all offers to turn pro, to take on the famous names like Bobby Jones or Walter Hagen. He didn't play for championships, only for "other reasons"—for fun.

Even with the closest of his new friends—and he lived in Oliver Hardy's house for a while—he shared little of his own story. No one knew where he was from, what

forces had driven him to Hollywood. No one knew where he made his money or how he supported himself. (It's still unknown.) He was a mystery and apparently wanted to stay that way. If someone took his picture, he would ask for the film. He would pay for the film, then destroy it.

The role of local legend suited him fine. He could have—and would have—lived this way forever. No pictures. No publicity. Except this was Hollywood. Except this was the Lakeside Golf Club.

Grantland Rice was a member of the Lakeside Golf Club.

Rice was not just the most famous sportswriter in the country, he was a one-man sports conglomerate. By one estimate, he probably had made more money in the Roaring Twenties than any sports figure except Jack Dempsey. His column was printed in more than 100 newspapers, read by more than ten million people. He wrote books, feature articles, scripts for movie shorts, had his own radio show, edited a magazine called *American Golfer*.

He was based in New York, now at the *Sun* newspaper, but he spent two months of every year in Los Angeles. The slow time in sports ran from the end of the football season until the start of baseball's spring training, so every December Rice and his wife would head west. They would visit their only daughter, Floncy, an actress who lived in Hollywood, and Rice would cover the Rose Bowl.

He would also play some golf in the winter sun. He loved golf.

"Golf is 20 percent mechanics and technique," he once wrote. "The other 80 percent is philosophy, humor, tragedy, romance, melodrama, companionship, camaraderie, cussedness and conversation."

A scratch golfer at one time, he had played in foursomes with most of the greats. He was a friend and great admirer of Bobby Jones, the winner of golf's Grand Slam in

1930. Not only did Rice cover major tournaments, he also wrote columns on technique, on the importance of the left arm or a good grip in the golfer's swing.

Floncy had joined Lakeside when she moved to town, so Rice followed her. He played rounds with most of the famous faces at the club. It was inevitable that he would play with John Montague.

Rice's usual Lakeside partner was Guy Kibbee, the comedian, and they journeyed to the Riviera Country Club in Los Angeles one afternoon to be part of a sixsome with actor Frank Craven, Northwestern football coach Dick Hanley, Oliver Hardy and, yes, Montague. Rice had heard the stories about the incredible drives, about the dead birds and the baseball bat, shovel and rake, but he said he believed "only about 20 percent of them."

Within four hours, he believed them all. Montague's drives were the longest Rice ever had seen. The chips, the putts were almost perfect. Stepping onto the 18th tee, Montague needed only a par to shoot 61, which would set the Riviera course record. He then did the strangest thing. He purposely hit a ball deep into the woods, told the caddie to pick it up and retired for the day.

Why'd you do that? Rice asked. You would have had the record.

I don't want the notoriety, the golfer explained.

The sportswriter had never seen anything like it. He left the course amazed. He had the thought, crazy as it seemed, that he had played a round with the best golfer in the world. Could that be? Could the best golfer in the world be someone who had never played in a tournament, someone unknown to the sports public, someone unknown even to Grantland Rice? He had to play with this guy again. And again. And again. And he did. And the feeling would not leave him.

John Montague was the best golfer in the world! Rice sat on his opinion for as long as he could, then did the only thing he could do. He was a sportswriter. He started writing.

"I have played several rounds with John Montagu in California and I'll take him as an even bet against any golfer you can name—over a championship course," Rice wrote in his column of January 18, 1935, misspelling Montague's name. "In the first place, he is around 30 years old. He is 5 feet, 10 inches in height and weighs 205 pounds. His physical power is amazing; a strength that is combined with liveness and muscle looseness. He is built like [wrestler] Jim Londos and is just about as strong.

"I played with him at Lakeside, Riviera and other hard courses around Los Angeles and he handled most of the long par-4 holes, from 430 to 450 yards, with a drive and a niblick [9-iron] over soft fairways. He has the grip of doom in his hands, which are like active steel. He has the ability to concentrate with a keen, alert mind.

"He would be murder in an amateur championship—here or in Great Britain—and a distinct threat in any open."

The door to the outside world had been quietly unlocked. No great rush at John Montague came through, but his name and deeds were now on the public record. Like it or not, the process of scraping away his anonymity had begun. Rice wrote about him again before the year was out, claiming that the U.S. Amateur champion of 1936, whoever it was, would not be the best amateur in the country because John Montague was not entered.

Westbrook Pegler, a friend of Rice's, added a second, more dramatic voice. He brought the wonder story about the match with Crosby onto the printed page in September 1936. A former sportswriter, now a syndicated columnist with a brash and conservative voice, Pegler was enthralled by the mystery more than by the golf.

"Reports are to hand of a mighty man of sport who would seem to combine the fabulous prowess of Paul Bunyan, John Henry and Popeye the Sailor with the remarkable social knacks of Ivan Petrovsky Skovar, the Muscovite hero of the old college doggerel who could imitate Irving, tell fortunes with cards and sing to a Spanish guitar," Pegler reported. "The man's name is given as Johnny Montague and his field of operations is Hollywood, but it seems unlikely that our story is a publicity plant, for he avoids publicity and will not permit anyone to take his picture if he can prevent it."

Pegler's breathless account brought more attention. ("Can he make toast?" the columnist asked a source at the end of the column. "Can he make toast?" the source exclaimed. "Give him an egg and he will churn you up the best fried chicken you ever tasted.") Montague's name was soon appearing in the Los Angeles papers. People began asking questions.

Who was this guy? Was he as good as these two famous writers said he was? Where did he come from? What did he do for a living? *Time* magazine was among those who wanted to know.

The 13-year-old newsweekly sent not only a reporter, but also a photographer to the West Coast to bring back the story. The photographer hid behind a tree with a telephoto lens, captured a couple of fuzzy images. The reporter, rebuffed by his subject, compiled what facts or rumors he could.

Montague "lives in Beverly Hills with Comedian Oliver Hardy..., whom he can pick up with one hand," *Time* reported on January 25, 1937. "When not in residence with Hardy, he is 'somewhere in the desert,' where he is supposed to own a silver mine or gold mine. He has two Lincoln Zephyrs and a supercharged Ford, specially geared for speed. He is about 33, 5 ft. 10 in. 220 lb. He is built like a wrestler, with tremendous hands, bulldog shoulders and biceps half again as big as Jack Dempsey's. His face is handsome, disposition genial. He can consume abnormal quantities of whiskey. He

frequently stays up all night and recently did so five nights in a row. He is naturally soft-spoken and dislikes hearing men swear in the presence of ladies."

Time liked to attach an identifying descriptor to last names: "Aviator Lindbergh," "Automaker Chrysler," "Cinemactor Gable." For Montague, it was "Mysterious Montague." The name stuck. Everyone seemed to be talking about Mysterious Montague.

There were reports of further feats. There were reports that previous feats had been greatly exaggerated. There was an invitation to play in the British Open. There were rumors of a match for \$50,000 against Bobby Jones, who would come out of retirement for it.

Grantland Rice's first crazy thought that the best golfer in the world might be someone the public had never seen, someone who had never entered a tournament, now ran through the sport. An editorial in the June 1937 issue of *American Golfer* basically dared John Montague to put up or shut up. The headline was "An Appeal to Mr. Montague."

"Today, the mystery surrounding him has reached such proportions as to become a menace to the reputations of those whose business is golf," the magazine stated.

"We ask Mr. Montague to give the golfers of this country, a large percentage of which we represent, a fair opportunity to judge the true merits of his game. Such judgment can only be made by his appearance in competition."

What next?

Could Montague continue to hold out? Could he?

On July 9, 1937, the questions became moot.

New York State Police Inspector John Cosart, based in Oneida, had read the stories about this wonder golfer on the West Coast with increasing interest. He had slowly

become convinced that John Montague, mysterious golfer, was really LaVerne Moore of Syracuse, a former minor-league pitcher, reputed rumrunner and great golfer wanted for an armed robbery in the Adirondacks almost seven years before.

Montague was arrested at his home. He readily admitted that he was LaVerne Moore. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that when booked, "he was nattily attired in brown sports coat, striped white slacks, two-tone brown shoes, brown swagger hat and accessories to blend." He had \$43 and change in his pockets.

Montague's Hollywood friends, especially Crosby and Hardy, backed him with big-time lawyers, Jerry Giesler in Hollywood, then James M. Noonan in New York. Noonan had defended Arthur Flegenheimer, better known as Dutch Schultz, and brought home a hung jury and an acquittal on charges of income-tax evasion. Montague fought extradition from California for a while, saw he was not going to win, then surrendered to New York authorities.

His trial was held in October 1937, in the sleepy Adirondacks burg of Elizabethtown. The New York City newspapers sent their best reporters and columnists, and the action was played prominently on the front pages. The *New York Mirror* called it "the first big sports-page trial since the Black Sox scandal" of the 1919 World Series. Montague was accused of being the fourth man in a Prohibition-era robbery of a roadhouse restaurant and speakeasy that netted some \$700. One of the other robbers had been killed in a high-speed chase after the event. The other two had not only been arrested but had already been tried, convicted and incarcerated.

After high theatrics in the courtroom—one of the robbers claimed Montague was part of the group, one didn't; Montague's mother claimed he was asleep, home in bed, the night of the robbery—the trial ended in acquittal. The judge in the case, Harry Owen, was so upset he told the jurors their verdict was "not in accord with the one that I think you should have returned," but the defendant was carried from the

courtroom on the shoulders of his supporters. His celebrity generally was thought to have influenced the decision.

Freed, able to speak and have his picture taken, he now promised to attack his sport and make his reputation. Alas, he was now 34 years old. He had added a lot of weight and had not played very much golf in the previous two years.

A month after the trial, he played a memorable exhibition round of golf with Babe Ruth and Babe Didrikson and amateur Sylvia Annenberg at the Fresh Meadow Country Club in Flushing, on Long Island, a charity event that attracted such a large and raucous crowd it had to be canceled after nine holes. But that was the highlight of his public career. He never went on the pro tour. He qualified for the U.S. Open in 1940 but shot 80 on the first day, 82 on the second, and missed the cut by nine shots.

He played most of his golf in exhibitions, where he hit a number of trick shots and lived on the last vapors of his fame. When they, too, disappeared, he disappeared from the scene. He died of heart problems in a room at a residence motel in Studio City, California, in 1972. He was 68 years old.

The final mystery of the Mysterious Montague—how good he was—was never answered. Grantland Rice, three months before his own death, in 1954, wrote, "A great many will tell you that Montague, originally a Syracuse boy, was overplayed. That isn't true." Rice was a believer to the end.

Leigh Montville, a former writer for *Sports Illustrated*, is the author of *The Mysterious Montague*, published last month.

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