



Joyce Wethered: 'The poise and balance of a ballerina.'

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JOYCE Wethered, who has died at the age of 96, was not only the supreme woman golfer of her time but no less a judge than Bobby Jones, man or woman, he had ever seen, and Walter Hagen praised her game for its "feminine characteristics of grace, timing, and touch".

Miss Wethered, who in later life became Lady John Heathcot-Amory, restricted her achievements within the remarkably brief period of six years. She won the English women's title for five successive years from 1920 and the British championship, for which she was runner-up in 1921, three times in the next four years and again in 1929, having at only 28 come out of retirement.

Bernard Darwin subsequently noted that if, following her defeat in the semi-final of the British cham-

pionship in 1923, Miss Wethered had watched the next day's deciding match it would have been the only final of any championship in her career for her to be a spectator rather than a player.

In fact, Miss Wethered did not watch only because, instead, she travelled overnight from Burnham to Deal to see her brother, Roger, win the Amateur Championship. Her presence was appropriate, for she developed her game playing from men's tees in the company of men amateurs, who were Oxford undergraduate friends of her brother's - frequently after the First World War at Dornoch.

Their enthusiasm and critical appreciation of style were unusual and exacting training for a teenage girl. Although many pictures of Miss Wethered show her on her toes at the moment of impact, she had,

one observer declared, "the poise and balance of a ballerina." Her height and long reach enabled her to swing in a big arc and her timing was "the epitome of grace".

It was calculated that in the six British championships for which Miss Wethered entered, she would have needed to win 43 matches to take every title and in fact won 38, and in winning her five consecutive English championships she went 33 games without defeat. No player before her or since so commandingly occupied the heights of the game.

The key to Miss Wethered's domination lay in her determination to reduce the strain of competition by concentrating on her score and disregard what her opponents were doing. This obvious detachment tended to baffle them and generate a feeling almost of hopelessness that

she would out-golf them no matter how well they played.

The most celebrated example of this mental isolation - one which, indeed, passed into legend - occurred in the final of the 1920 English championship at Sheringham, the first and least expected of her victories. Having been congratulated on her imperturbability when holing out on a green next to a railway line just as a steam train snorted past, Miss Wethered replied: "What train?"

Miss Wethered could out-distance opponents by as much as 30 yards, but, in those days of the hickory shaft, never gave the impression of hitting hard. But such was her superiority that, apart from her victories in the English championship, she won, in only six attempts at the British title, four gold medals, one silver, and one bronze.

Very much a player of her time, when amateurs held as much sway as professionals do now and match-play was more frequent, Miss Wethered began to confine her appearances to the Worplesdon four-somes competition. She won it eight times with seven different partners, all of whom were "astounded by her accuracy and appalled by the number of times she had to play from places into which she never would have got herself".

At the age of 19, when she beat the then dominant woman golfer Cecil Leitch in the final of the 1920 English championship, Miss Wethered was described as "known, if she was known for anything, as Roger Wethered's sister". That encounter was, in fact, the first in what became a series of epic confrontations, which held the fascinated interest of the golfing public.

They met five times, only once not in a championship final, and Miss Wethered prevailed by three matches to two - coverage of which in the newspapers of the day rivalled the attention nowadays given to the professionals. A contemporary account declared that "Miss Wethered's class shone through for as long as she was able to make best use of her almost casual ability".

Miss Wethered returned to competitive golf to play in the first Curtis Cup match, at Wentworth in 1932, and three years later, having worked in a London sports shop, she again came out of retirement to turn professional and play in a series of exhibition matches in the United States. She regained her amateur status after the Second World War.