Gruver, Ed, *Bringing the Monster to Its Knees: Ben Hogan, Oakland Hills, and the 1951 U. S. Open*. Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2021. XXV + 224 pages. Photographs, Sources, Index. $29.95.

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An avid golfer, Dad emigrated from Kilwinning, Scotland to New York City in his early 20s. Perhaps his biggest regret in life, after watching the Brooklyn Dodgers move to Los Angeles in 1957, was that none of his three sons, of whom he always bragged to anyone who would listen, shared his passion for golf. Dad never lacked for playing companions; he and Ed Jorgensen regularly played the city’s course at Kissena Park, in Fresh Meadows, Queens. Though short at 4,665 yards this hilly course with demanding greens presented them a challenging game. Open to the public, he would get me up alternate Saturdays to drive over around 6:00 a.m. to book a tee time; on the other Saturdays Ed would drag one of his kids out for the same excursion. Later when Ed and his family moved out to Nassau County, they had access to county parks there. Dad and Ed occasionally went up to Westchester where they played Saxon Woods, Dunwoodie or Mohansic. They played all the courses at Bethpage, including the famed Black course. Dad knew many of the pros, and when he retired, he picked up a part time job selling golf clubs and equipment at different pro shops.

As a result, when *Bringing the Monster to Its Knees* came in, I put it out on the list thinking surely someone would request it. To my surprise, and if I’m being honest, my joy, no one did, so here are the thoughts of a duffer, and a tribute to my father. Ben Hogan was perhaps Dad’s favorite golfer, followed in no particular order by Sam Snead, Arnold Palmer, Gary Player, Gene Sarazen and Byron Nelson, all among the golfers mentioned by Gruver. I’m sure Dad followed others, but these are the names I remember.

As the subtitle indicates, beyond Hogan the stars of the book are the Oakland Hills South Course and the 1951 U. S. Open. Oakland Hills was designed by Donald Ross, born in 1872 in the Scottish Highlands town of Dornoch. He learned golf in his hometown, winning several notable championships. Not content just to play, Ross apprenticed under Old Tom Morris, the pro at St. Andrews who had built courses throughout the British Isles, including Royal Dornoch where his greens are still played today. After two years Ross returned to Royal Dornoch where he became greenskeeper, pro, and a builder of golf clubs and gutta percha golf balls. In 1899 he emigrated to the United States, bringing this knowledge of British golf across the pond when he became the pro and greenskeeper at the Oakley Country Club in Watertown, Massachusetts

In 1916 Ross focused his attention on course architecture, establishing Donald J. Ross Associates. Connections led him to Pinehurst, North Carolina, where he designed its first four courses, forever changing golf history. That same year as the automobile industry was growing in southeastern Michigan, a couple of business executives were looking to establish a classy country club where they and others could meet and greet business associates. They bought 450 acres of farmland which they proposed to turn into two golf courses, hiring Ross for the task. A practical designer, he used topographical maps to lay out the South Course, remaining as true to the natural contours of the land as possible. Moving the least amount of soil, which had the added benefit of reducing costs, he gathered the rocks and stones he found to create “humps, hollows and swells . . . reminiscent of the Dornoch links” (32).

By the mid-1930s hickory shaft golf clubs and gutta percha balls gave way to steel shafts and livelier balls offering better golfers the advantage as they began hitting beyond the traps and obstacles that earlier had stymied them. As a result, Oakland Hills, one of the finest courses in the world, needed a redesign. “After witnessing a birdie fest at Oakland Hills in 1937, U. S. Golf Association officials planned a bloodbath for the 1951 Open. It was the first time the USGA had ever contrived to alter a course layout, and the result was a bunker-filled fiend that promised to play long—6,927 yards—and difficult” (57-58). In the midst of updating Oakland Hills Donald Ross died and Robert Trent Jones “stepped in to pick up where his mentor had left off” (54). Jones grew up in Rochester, New York, where at age 16 he set a record in the Rochester City Golf championship. He met Ross in 1926, entered Cornell University and built his own course of study geared toward course architecture. He designed and redesigned multiple courses during his career, including the “Monster,” the South Course at Oakland Hills.

On to Ben Hogan, who brought the monster to its knees. Born in Texas in 1912 he learned to play golf when he started caddying at age eleven. He learned from local golfers, mimicking the top players. Through determination and constant practice, he developed his deadly accurate, carefully controlled swing. Quiet and introverted, perhaps due to poverty and his father’s suicide when he was nine, Hogan remains one of the greatest golfers of all time. He dropped out of high school in his senior year to turn pro, playing though the Great Depression to become the leading money winner in 1940, 1941 and 1942 when he joined the Army Air Force. Rising to the rank of captain he trained pilots at the same time he played golf exhibitions to raise money for the war effort. After the war his career was in jeopardy when traveling to a tournament in early 1949 his car was hit head on by a Greyhound bus. Nearly killed he suffered multiple fractures and blood clots in his legs. After two months in the hospital, he regained his strength through extensive walking though for the rest of his career he played in constant pain, his legs wrapped in elastic bandages. He made his comeback on the pro tour at the 1950 Los Angeles Open where he tied Sam Snead, only to lose in an eighteen-hole playoff eight days later.

The next year the U. S. Open was played on the South Course at Oakland Hills, with Hogan and Snead as the favorites. In the first round Sam Snead took the lead with a 71, one stroke over par. At 76 Hogan was well back in the pack. Round two saw Bobby Locke move into first place with a 144 total, while Snead, 8 over par, tied with Hogan who shot a 73, giving the favorites 149, 5 off the lead and well back in the pack in 16th. At this point only two players had made par and several previous open winners failed to make the cut for the third and fourth rounds, played on the same day. For the third round, played in the morning Hogan shot a 71 to move him into a tie for 5th, two strokes behind the leaders. In the afternoon’s final round Hogan carded a blazing 67, three under par, to win.

The U. S. Open, Oakhill Hills and Ben Hogan are among the very best in golf. Oakland Hills hosted the Open five times and continues to challenge anyone who plays there. Hogan went on to win four Opens (five if you count the 1942 Hale America Open which was to be a substitute for the cancelled U. S. Open). As Gruver reminds the reader, Oakland Hills shares the limelight with the men and women who play it. In 2019, to maintain its sobriquet of The Monster, Gil Hanse gave the links its second makeover as he restored the Donald Ross layout.

*Bringing the Monster to Its Knees* should be read by duffers and top fight pros along with all who enjoy the tension and skill found in the game.