Photo by H. Jones
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A STAR IS REBORN
PGA Winner Lanny Wadkins
THE BATTLE OF THE AGES

It was sudden death as 47-year-old Gene Littler faced 27-year-old Lanny Wadkins in the National PGA at Pebble Beach—and Lanny killed a dream by Dan Jenkins

For most of the 59th PGA Championship in Pebble Beach, Calif., some madcap foolishness over the grooves in the faces of the golfers' irons was far more captivating than anything Lanny Wadkins or Gene Littler or Jack Nicklaus was up to. Or so it must have seemed to those meandering around the drought scarred but still lovely shores of Carmel Bay, the wrapper that Pebble Beach comes in. But in Sunday's final round, events slowly conspired to force the first sudden-death playoff in the history of the Big Four classics, and by the time the three extra holes were completed the golf club groove nonsense had been long forgotten. What will be remembered is 27-year-old Lanny Wadkins breaking the high-jump record for golfers who have just dropped a four-foot putt for a par.

No Masters or U.S. Open or British Open or National PGA had ever got itself decided at sudden death—well, at least not since the PGA switched from match play to stroke play in 1958. Sudden death had only been adopted—obviously for the benefit of television—by the Masters a couple of years ago and this year for the PGA. A playoff was bound to happen eventually, but not until Sunday afternoon at Pebble Beach did this seem to be the time and the place. Instead, that old smoothie Littler, 47, seemed ready to add still another comeback to the many in his career. With nine holes left, he held a five-stroke lead, and it was his PGA, even more than it had been on Thursday, when he opened up with a 67 to lead by one, or on Friday, when he shot a 69 and led by two, or on Saturday, when his third-round 70 had left him four ahead of Nicklaus, who was playing steadily but not making anything happen. Where Wadkins was jubilant as his 12-foot par putt rolled into the cup on the first extra hole; Littler was grim, having lost his lead and momentum.
kings was all of this time was shooting 69–71–72, which could be considered as staying in contention only if Littler did exactly what Littler did—leave his short game in the Del Monte Lodge on a plat­
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Then Nicklaus did what he has now
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the 17th, Nicklaus, who had teed off
under 70 and a total of 282.

The question that underlay the whole
disappearance of Littler and the new
Nicklaus seemed to be, "Where did Littler
make the putt—except Lanny did.

But in the locker room, he was the old
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I didn't know golf was so hard. I went from long and straight to short and crooked."

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The controversy began innocently and
simply enough the week before, at the
Greater Hartford Open. There was an in­
terlude during the second round when
players were stacked up on the 2nd tee,
chatting and killing time by fooling
around with each other's clubs, which
is what pros do when they aren't complain­
ing. As it happened, Jerry Head looked
at an iron belonging to young George
Burns and said, "Nice looking club,
George. Too bad it's illegal."

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Then Nicklaus did what he has now done for the past two years. He found another way to lose a major when he was within throat-clearing distance of it. At the par-3 17th hole, where he had once taken a U.S. Open with one of the most brilliant one-irons anyone ever struck, Jack hit a three-iron that achieved something less than the desired result. In fact, it took a lousy bounce, leaving him with an impossible chip and putt to rescue his par. He suffered the bogey and failed to make up for it with a birdie at the last green, when still another putt refused to obey the rap he gave it. Minutes earlier Wadkins had jammed a fine wedge onto the 18th green and then staggered a birdie putt into the cup to close with a two-under 70 and a total of 282.

As the so-called “leader in the clubhouse”—Lanny was in fact standing under a tent by the green—Wadkins could only wait to see what Littler would do on the last two holes. Gene collected himself enough to make a difficult par putt on 17, and he parred the last hole comfortably enough, but he was not a lively fellow. Better than anyone, Littler knew he had blown to a 76, and the momentum, if such a thing exists in golf, had swung to Wadkins.

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True enough. Wadkins, who had come on the tour in 1972 with an almost unheard of boastfulness and had set a rookie record for earnings ($116,616, to be 10th on the money list), had practically disappeared from the game for three years after a gall bladder operation.

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On the first extra hole, Wadkins made an almost indescribable par 4 to match Littler’s and keep himself alive. His second shot landed in the deep fringe. One out of 20 golfers could get it down in two from there, and nobody could get it close. Few people could realize what a good shot Wadkins hit, a kind of gouge actually, in order to get the ball within 12 feet of the cup. And nobody could make the putt—except Lanny did.

Both Wadkins and Littler played the 2nd hole perfectly, reaching it in two blows and two-putting for halving birdies. And after they both hit beautiful drives at the 3rd, one could not escape the feeling that the playoff might last until next year’s Crosby. Each missed the green, however, Littler short and Wadkins over. Neither had a bargain of a chip, but Littler made his even worse by catching it fat. He was still a woeful 20 feet short. Wadkins gouged again from the thick fringe, and the ball trickled down to within four feet.

Play golf at Pebble Beach only once or twice and you would miss Lanny’s putt four inches to the right. It was hardly a tap-in. But Wadkins nailed it, and the leaping began. One leap. Two leaps. Three leaps. No, it wasn’t the beer, he would say later on. It was the title.

For Wadkins, it was his second national championship. He took the U.S. Amateur in 1970, a title Littler had won 17 years before. Gene was a whiz kid of the ‘50s, and Wadkins was expected to be one of the ‘70s, but during the 1974 season he began to feel weak and bloated. “I would get tired and think it was because I was out of shape,” he says. “I’d run and get even more tired. Then that December I had the operation.” He fell from fifth on the money list in 1973 to 54th that year to 88th in 1975 with just $23,582. “I never played bad in my life until 1974,” he says.

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played, golfers have been needling one another about their clubs. Usually the comments are on the order of "Where'd you find that wedge? Why, you could back the ball down the highway toward Birmingham!" But Burns started to worry about the remark. He did not know that with the naked eye no one can determine the width of grooves in a golf club. "I don't know anything about golf clubs," Burns admitted at Pebble Beach. "I thought, 'Well, what if they are illegal? I don't want to win any money like that.'"

What Burns did next at Hartford was what turned the PGA into a scientific convention. He took his clubs to Deputy PGA Commissioner Clyde Mangum to have them examined. Mangum got out his gauge and he looked at the faces of Burns' clubs. The device told Mangum the grooves were too wide. How much? About the width of a baby's fingernail. Nevertheless, rules are rules, and Burns disqualified himself at Hartford.

A minor incident at the time, it seemed. Except that a few other pros use the same irons as Burns, clubs made by the Ram Corporation of Elk Grove Village, Ill. And those few other players happened to be Tom Watson, Raymond Floyd, Littler and Gary Player. At Pebble, the Ram troops took their clubs to Mangum's eyepiece. No rule says you have to. There had not been a club check that anyone could remember since the 1948 U.S. Open at Riviera.

Well, of course, Watson's were too wide (.037 instead of .035), Floyd's were too wide, several of Player's were too wide, but Littler's were O.K. Next, other competitors asked for a check. Nicklaus, for example. His clubs were fine. But Hale Irwin lost a couple of Wilson irons, John Lister lost some Australian-made irons, Tom Weiskopf was denied his wedge, and so on. Meanwhile, Watson had sent for the MacGregors he used to win the 1975 British Open. When they arrived, they, too, failed to meet specifications. Which is how it came to be that an hour before tee time on Thursday Watson wound up with a spare set of Roger Maltbie's MacGregors. "Anybody got any clubs?" Tom hollered on the putting green. "I'll take anything." Maltbie came through. And this was the set that Watson used in his opening 68, proving how much difference grooves make. He hit a total of eight practice shots with them.

All of this brought up the question of how clubs are made, what the grooves are good for, and why there are "specs" in the first place. Grooves basically are for control, and grooves on the short irons are there for backspin. Grooves can help get the ball up, which is good unless you want to keep the ball down in the wind. The rules governing grooves were adopted in 1941 by the USGA because certain guys had designed wedges that could make a golf ball dance with the Russian ballet.

But consider what happened after the 1948 club check at Riviera. In those days MacGregor had a powerhouse staff including Ben Hogan and Byron Nelson. Before that Open all of the MacGregor irons had to be filed down. With that disadvantage, Hogan shot 276 and broke the Open record by five strokes. Grooves have little to do with drivers and putters, and those clubs have always been where the money and titles are.

So after all was said and done, it became a joke. There was only one answer for the headlines, which said pros were using illegal clubs, the insinuation being that they were cheaters. Ed Sneed, the Ryder Cup member, wrote it out: "When you consider that the golf ball, which is either of solid or wound construction and has a Balata or Surlyn cover and must not exceed 1.62 ounces or be less than 1.68 inches in diameter, is struck with a club, the shaft of which may be made of aluminum, titanium, graphite, hickory or moon rock, and is tipped ¾ of an inch and is ¾ of an inch longer than standard, especially when most manufacturers on the deflection board drop it 4.3612 inches with a one-pound weight placed two inches from the end, and when the grip on that shaft, which is either rubber, cord or leather is ¾ of an inch over standard or perhaps ½ under standard, and such a shot is struck off of fairways mowed at ½ onto a green that is cut to ½ on Thursday or Friday and then ¾ on Saturday and Sunday, it is then of course very easy to see how a groove in an iron club that is a thousandth of an inch off can be one hell of an advantage."

And so it went at the PGA, until those final hours on Sunday when an old fellow and a young one, both of them making comebacks, turned the attention of everyone back to what players can do with a golf club, and not what a golf club can do for a player.