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*It's still the lowest score ever posted at a major. But was Johnny Miller's rout of Oakmont really as good as we remember?*

By Adam Lazarus and Steve Schlossman
Johnny Miller’s 63 in the final round of the 1973 U.S. Open doesn’t linger in our imaginations in the way that, say, Jack Nicklaus’s 1986 Masters win does. Film footage of Miller’s “miracle at Oakmont,” a round that many still consider to be the greatest played in the history of championship golf, is so sparse we’ve had to rely on other people’s memories to bring it to life.

**THE MYTH** Miller’s 63 on Sunday was comfortably stress-free because he entered the round out of contention and was on the course an hour before the leaders.

**THE REALITY** At age 26 in 1973, Miller had yet to win his first major title and, by his own admission, had choked away victories in previous years, so he very likely felt some pressure heading into the final round of that year’s Open. A wobbly 76 the day before had left him six shots off the lead, behind 12 players, including multiple-major-winners Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer and Lee Trevino. But a birdie-birdie-birdie start put him only two strokes back before the last group teed off. The pressure, at least beginning with hole No. 5, was most certainly on.

**THE MYTH** Over the years, revisionists have made the case that Miller’s record-setting round was shot on a defenseless Oakmont, a course whose lightning-fast greens were made gettable by several downpours and a sprinkler malfunction. In pieces penned for The New Yorker in 1973 and 1983, Herbert Warren Wind, one of golf’s most respected and illustrious writers (he coined the term “Amen Corner”), remembered Miller’s 63 with comparatively fresh memory and considerably greater reservation than most. How, Wind wondered, would Henry and William Fownes (the father and son who, respectively, created and rigorously maintained the famously difficult Oakmont, now 113 years old) have viewed Miller’s “glistening 63” if they were still alive? “Being so deeply appreciative of good golf,” Wind wrote, “they would have been properly bowled over...” But I also think that they would have pointed out as politely as possible that the course he had done this on was not the real Oakmont but a helpless, waterlogged facsimile of the genuine article.”

**THE REALITY** A closer look at historical records and newspaper reports tells a different story. True, Miller’s white-hot round was played after Wednesday and Saturday rains had soaked Oakmont, and after a Friday-morning sprinkler malfunction had left several greens drenched. Still, Wind’s assertion that buckets of water made the 63 possible doesn’t bear scrutiny.

Scores on Thursday (the day after the week’s first rain) were a half-stroke higher than even the opening round of the 1962 Open at Oakmont,
when the course played notoriously hard and fast. And yes, the field went shockingly low during Friday’s round—it’s almost certain that the much reported sprinkler malfunction is to blame for the record number (12) of sub-70 rounds shot that day, more in one round than in any previous U.S. Open. But by Saturday the course had again toughened up. Miller’s sky-high 76 on Saturday (which he blamed in part on a missing yardage book) wasn’t a fluke. Despite an early-morning downpour that delayed play, scores that day were the highest of the week. Contrary to the myth of its toothlessness, Oakmont was, by Sunday, back to its old impossible self, yielding just four rounds in the 60s, including 23-year-old Lanny Wadkins’ remarkable 65, which Miller’s feat has obscured over the years.

Conventional wisdom has it that consistency characterizes the round-to-round play of U.S. Open champions, but up to and including the 1973 tournament many of its winners had performed erratically after making the cut. For every comeback kid—most famously, Arnold Palmer, who, in 1960, overcame a seven-stroke deficit at Cherry Hills with a final-round 65 following a third-round 72—there was a Bobby Jones. During his Grand Slam season of 1930, Jones shot 68 in his third round at Interlachen, then faltered to 75 in his fourth, a collapse his victory has all but erased from the history books.

Another thing distinguishing Miller’s 63 is the scale of his improvement from Saturday to Sunday: a remarkable 13-shot turnaround. Miller’s ability to shed the disappointment of his 76—he was just three off the lead when he began the third round—and rebound is as great as any comeback story in sports. So how did he do it? Miller’s 63 was 8-under Oakmont’s par of 71. It included nine birdies and one bogey. He shot 4-under par on both nines: 32–31. He hit 16 of 18 fairways (missing the 12th and 14th by only a few yards) and all 18 greens—though just barely. Which leads us to...

**THE MYTH** Miller’s iron play was flawless that day, and he threw nothing but darts.

**THE REALITY** Johnny was locked in but far from perfect. He knocked it to six feet or less on holes No. 1, 2, 4 (par 5, from the greenside bunk-ker), 7, 9 (par 5, on the green in two) and 13. He made five of those six putts for birdies. On Nos. 11, 12 (par 5, on his third shot), 14, 15 and 17, his approaches were inside 15 feet, and three of those five putts dropped. But on the remaining seven holes he was outside of 20 feet, most egregiously leaving himself a 40-footer on the 10th and a 70-plus-footer on the 16th. Given Oakmont’s brutally slick greens, however, it remains one of the game’s greatest displays of ballstriking—and the subject of the last and most mysterious of Miller mythologies.

**THE MYTH** He heard “a voice.” In 2007, during NBC’s coverage of the eighth U.S. Open played at Oakmont, Miller got peculiarly paranormal about his historic performance when he claimed that a disembodied voice had played a key role in his round. “It was on the practice tee,” he explained, “and I had about five balls to go, and I just had this clear thought or voice say to me, ‘Open your stance way up. Way open.’ And I never had that before, and have never had it since. I was thinking, What was that?... And it just said, again, ‘Open your stance way up.’ And I thought, Well, I’ll try it.”

**THE REALITY** A less dramatic and divinely inspired explanation of his swing adjustment that day exists, one that Miller himself served up to the press at Oakmont immediately following his 63. “I remembered earlier in the year, when, in [an eight-week stretch], I was 70-under par, and I shot a 63 in the Hope Classic,” he said. “I was playing with an open stance. I had my stance slip closed, [and] allowed my left foot to slide around too far. So I opened it up on the practice tee.”

The impetus for the simple yet momentous change in Miller’s setup can only be debated to a point. What we know for a fact is this: His was the first 63 ever shot in a major (a feat that has since been repeated 26 times), the first of only four 63s posted in a major on a Sunday, and still the only Sunday 63 in a major to result in a win. The voice that we now hear most often in golf comes from Miller, whose folksy reflections on NBC flood the airwaves, and whose go-to word as an analyst is “pure”—sort of like his legendary round at Oakmont.