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For many, just getting into the Open is what counts

There is, the poet said, a certain romance in futility pursued.

Obviously, the poet had just finished 18 holes of golf at the time.

Futility or not, the ultimate fantasy of everyone who has ever chased that little white ball across a parched pasture is to tee it up in the U.S. Open.

"All of us have visions of grandeur, but the golfer is a special breed," agreed Larry Adamson. "Golfers tend to be less reasonable when they discuss the game, and when it comes to our own playing ability then we lose all touch with reality."

By **BILL LYON**



Adamson is in a position to know, for his function with the U. S. Golf Association is to handle the applications and entry forms for USGA events, the biggest of which is the

Open. It will unfurl on a storied, demanding piece of suburban Philadelphia real estate known as Merion June 18 through 21.

As its name indicates, the Open is just that: it is "open," open to just about anyone who can hack it around in a reasonable number of strokes and weather the ordeal of 72 holes of qualifying. That also means it is open to every golfing fanatic who thinks he can stare down Jack Nicklaus, out-putt Tom Watson or out-laugh Lee Trevino.

"Two years ago, I got a letter from a

guy who said he wouldn't be able to play any qualifying rounds because he was in jail," Adamson said, "but he wondered if we couldn't send someone down to follow him for a couple of rounds if he got paroled. Oh yes, he was also very insistent that he was innocent of any crime.

"Well, this year we got another letter from him. He began by saying, 'I told you I was innocent.' Turns out he was acquitted. Trouble was, this time his entry fee came in late, considerably past the deadline."

Golf is more than just a game to the

zealots who play it, of course. It becomes a passion. So some will go to considerable lengths to make sure their entry forms beat the deadline.

"One man drove his all the way up here [to the USGA headquarters in Far Hills, N.J.]. He had called the morning of the final day, and I told him the deadline was 5 p.m.," Adamson said.

"He got here about 4:25. He came from Washington, D.C. It had to be at least 200 miles, one way. A lot of people drive here with them, and Federal Express does a land-office business that day.

"But for sheer persistence, my favorite is the golfer from San Diego. This year, he paid about 80 bucks to put his entry form for the Open on a plane to Newark. Then he called a cab in Newark, had the driver meet the plane and then hand-deliver the entry form to us. Incidentally, Newark is a good 30-mile cab drive from us."

Some of them miss the deadline, and then Adamson hears some of the most inventive, creative excuses ever manufactured. Working for the
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USGA on the day of the Open deadline is like working for the IRS on April 15th.

"One guy said his dog ate his entry form," Adamson said. "Some of them forget to enclose checks. Some don't even remember to put their names on the entry forms. One guy called me and said he knew his handicap was too high to meet our standards. But then he said, 'I'm only playing in a factory league, but you won't believe how well I'm hitting the ball now. How about I come up there and show you my swing?'"

For this year's Open, there were a record 5,033 entries. Of these, 4,946 were accepted. (If you don't have a 2-handicap or less, don't bother to apply.)

When they go off at Merion, the field will total 156. However, 52 spots already are taken up by those who are exempt from qualifying.

"The way it breaks down, essentially, is close to 5,000 golfers are trying for 100 spots," Adamson said. "So right off, the odds of even making it to the first tee are roughly 50-to-1."

Even that math doesn't discourage

Bill Lyon

the dreamers.

So if you're no worse than a 2-handicap, how do you become eligible for the Open? You send in your entry fee, plus \$55, and then you have to play 36 holes (in one day) in local qualifying. If you survive that, it's 36 more holes (also one day) in sectional qualifying.

"That's where we are now," Adamson said. "We're down to sectional qualifying, on June 8 and 9, at 11 different sites around the country. We're now down to about 600 golfers."

If you want some more discouraging math, in the last two decades only three golfers who were not exempt from qualifying went on to win the Open, and all three were pros — Ken Venturi, Orville Moody and Jerry Pate.

Even that won't cool the ardor of the addict, for there is a mystique about the Open. It is the one championship golfers prize above all others. It is the most prestigious even

though it is never sponsored by a show-biz personality, doesn't include a pro-am and isn't held on one of those new courses ringed by condominiums. But neither do you forget the name of the winner a week later.

The U.S. Open is built on dreams, and even the triple-bogey shooter on some scarred municipal course with sand greens can dream about winning the Open. Once a golfer is seized by the fever, there is no cure.

"I love the game," Larry Adamson confessed, "but it's amazing what it can do to us."

"I got a phone call from a guy who said his Open entry wouldn't be in on time because he and his wife had a big fight and she had left him. When she stormed out, the last thing she did was pick up his entry form and take it with her. 'She knew,' the man sobbed, 'that would hurt me more than anything else she could do.'"