

Why Is the Golf Hole Size 4.25 Inches in Diameter?

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How many times have you lipped out a putt and wished that the size of the hole on the green was just a smidge larger? Why is the golf hole that size to begin with? That's one of our most frequently asked questions: How did the hole come to be standardized at its current measurement of four-and-a-quarter (4.25) inches in diameter? Like so many things in golf, the standardized size of the hole comes to us courtesy of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, with a major assist from the links at Musselburgh.

THE CURRENT HOLE SIZE BEGAN ON THE MUSSELBURGH LINKS

In the early days of golf - the 1700s into the 1800s - those who tended to golf courses were called "hole cutters," rather than the term we use today, greenskeepers. That's because filling in old holes on the green and cutting new ones was their primary function. There was no standardized hole size, and the size of the golf hole varied from links to links. But in 1829, the first step in standardization happened at Musselburgh (still around today as a 9-hole municipal course on the Levenhall Links near Edinburgh, Scotland). That year, that golf course invented the first known hole-cutter, meaning an implement that cut the holes the same size every time. That ancient hole-cutter is still in existence and is on display in the clubhouse at Royal Musselburgh, an 18-hole course in Prestonpans, Scotland. (That's where the Royal Musselburgh Golf Club that used to play at the 9-hole outside Edinburgh is now based.)

STANDARDIZING THE SIZE OF THE GOLF HOLE

Although Musselburgh was using a standardized hole size of 4.25 inches as of 1829, that size took a while to catch on across the golf world. For example, the Historical Dictionary of Golfing Terms cites an 1858 newspaper article that refers to a six-inch hole. The 4.25-inch hole size didn't become standard everywhere until new rules were issued in 1891 by the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews. The size the R&A mandated? Four-and-a-quarter inches in diameter. R&A ADOPTS 4.25-INCH HOLE SIZE That first hole-cutting implement utilized a cutting tool that was, you guessed it, 4.25 inches in diameter. The folks running the R&A apparently liked that size and so adopted it in their rules for 1891. And as was usually the case, the rest of the golf world followed in the footsteps of the R&A. The exact reasons for why that first tool cut holes at the now-standard diameter are lost to history. But it was almost certainly a completely arbitrary thing, a notion supported by the story (perhaps apocryphal) that the tool was built from some excess pipe that was laying about the Musselburgh links. (That 9-hole Musselburgh links, by the way, was the site of six British Opens from 1874 to 1889.)

EXPERIMENTS WITH GOLF HOLE SIZE

The hole size has been standardized ever since at 4.25 inches, although occasionally there is a push to enlarge the hole, at least for recreational golfers. In the 1930s, Gene Sarazen spoke in favor a few times of going to an 8-inch hole. Jack Nicklaus has, a few times, cut 8-inch holes at his Muirfield Village Golf Club, for special events. In 2014, TaylorMade sponsored an exhibition played with 15-inch holes and that included professional golfers such as Sergio Garcia. While it is almost inconceivable to think that high-level golf would ever be played with anything other than the standard 4.25-inch hole size, it certainly is possible that a few golf courses here and there could cut larger holes and see how their customers react to it. Making more putts means having more fun to recreational golfers, this line of thinking goes. So expect to see experiments with hole size continue periodically. Meantime, remember: the golf hole size is 4.25 inches because that's the size the R&A decided, in 1891, to standardize.