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## FAILURE IS IMPOSSIBLE

By Geoffrey Dunn

A champion throughout her life,  
Marion Hollins on the tee at her  
beloved Pasatiempo.

### Marion Hollins' Vision Shaped the Legacy of Pasatiempo



**I**n many respects, the life of Marion Hollins personifies the Jazz Age. She was as ambitious as she was talented, refusing to bow to the stultifying conventions of the Victorian era into which she was born and raised. She was most certainly the greatest all-around woman athlete of her era and arguably of the 20th Century—a standout not only in golf, but also in tennis, steeple chase, polo and carriage driving. She was also an impassioned suffragist and advocate for women's rights.



In terms of personality, Hollins was a rebel and a bon vivant, embracing not only the promise and energy of the Jazz Age, but also its tragedies. Her spirit and determination leap straight off the pages of an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel—indeed there is a direct biographical link to her life and *The Great Gatsby*—while her triumphs spanned the continent, quite literally from the Atlantic seaboard to the shores of the Pacific.

In the spring of 1927, headlines appeared in the Santa Cruz Evening News declaring: “Huge Development Planned by Marion Hollins Taking Shape; Clubhouse Planned.” The Santa Cruz Development Company announced its intentions to realize “not only one of the most beautiful courses in the country,” but one that “will tax the skill and patience of even the most ardent golfer.”

The Pasatiempo Golf Club and Estates (taken from the Spanish word for pastime) was Hollins’ dream come true. In the end, however, like many a Jazz Age reverie, she would lose it, watching it slowly slip through her fingers. And while her name is still attached to the club’s elegant restaurant—The Hollins House—her complex and fascinating life story has been all but forgotten by the community in which her most significant legacy still thrives on a sylvan terrace overlooking Monterey Bay.

Born in 1892 in East Islip, Long Island, Marion Hollins was raised among wealth and privilege on a 600-acre estate, replete with a nine-hole golf course nearby. By the age of 10, she was an accomplished player.

In 1921, the broad-shouldered Hollins claimed her first Women’s National Golf Championship. The following year she worked to establish the Women’s National Golf and Tennis Club on Long Island, the first all-woman club in the country, proving herself an accomplished entrepreneur as well. According to her biographer, David E. Outerbridge, “Failure is impossible” was her lifelong motto.

In 1924, Hollins defeated Edith Cummings (the model for Jordan Baker in Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby*) in match play at Pebble Beach to secure her third straight West Coast women’s title. By then, S.E.B. Morse of Del Monte Properties on the Monterey Peninsula had hired Hollins as a sales agent



Marion Hollins  
local bon vivant and entrepreneur

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and “athletic director,” assigning her the task of developing the Cypress Point Golf Course. She hired famed British course designer Dr. Alistair MacKenzie, and together they mapped out the Cypress Point links, with Hollins putting the definitive stamp on the course with her vision for its fabled 16th hole.

After completing Cypress Point, Hollins set out on a new endeavor—Pasatiempo. It was to consume the next decade of her life. Once again, she brought in MacKenzie to design the course (see accompanying article on page 35), to which she later added tennis courts, a swimming pool, riding stables, bridal paths, a steeple chase track and polo field. She also purchased eight acres of beachfront land along the western edge of Woods Lagoon (today’s

Small Craft Harbor) as a beach club for Pasatiempo’s members.

Hollins herself made a fortune during this era investing in San Joaquin Valley oil wells—reportedly \$2.5 million—and she lived her life accordingly. She threw lavish parties at her Pasatiempo home (designed by famed California architect William Wurster), hosting a steady stream of Hollywood stars and athletes—Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Helen Wills Moody, Will Rogers, Claudette Colbert, Clark Gable, Jean Harlow, Walt Disney, Spencer Tracy and Jack Dempsey.

“She had an egalitarian personality,” says Pasatiempo historian Bob Beck, a bastion of knowledge about Hollins. “And she had a tremendously optimistic point of view.”

The dynamics of her private world were apparently every bit as complex as her exploits in athletics and business. Although she was never to marry—in those days athletes’ personal lives were kept out of the pages of the tabloids—there were whispers of affairs with everyone from Bobby Jones to Babe Didrikson Zaharias to MacKenzie (Beck discounts these rumors, but acknowledges they persist). She was also said to like French champagne for breakfast.

As the Great Depression stretched into the mid-1930s, however, Hollins found herself in serious financial trouble. With revenues down—land sales at Pasatiempo had slowed to a trickle and green fees on the golf course were in decline as well—she nonetheless kept a full staff at the golf club and continued to spend extravagantly. Both her loyalties and passions turned against her.

On the eve of her 45th birthday, December 2, 1937, Hollins’ Buick Phaeton convertible was broadsided by a drunken driver. She suffered a serious concussion and was bedridden for several months. Those who knew her said she was never the same afterwards (Beck views this as a critical turning point in her life), and she became increasingly reclusive and delusional as her empire began to crumble. Hollins (with considerable help from family members) burned through not only her once-vast land holdings, but also her stock and cash. The creditors began to circle. First they took her golf course; then her home.

Finally, on November 4, 1940, the *Sentinel* reported on Hollins’ fate, though





Polo was one of Marion Hollins (right) passions. She established both a race track and polo field at Pasatiempo which later become known as the Graham Hill Show Grounds.

it did its best to conceal the depths of her financial disaster. "It was with genuine regret yesterday that we bade Miss Marion Hollins good-bye," the paper declared, "as she prepared to leave the Pasatiempo she loved... Miss Hollins, as fine as sportswoman as they make, has taken her share of hard knocks in the last decade and always come up smiling."

Hollins returned to work for the ever-loyal S.F.B. Morse at Del Monte Properties. While her physical and mental health continued to deteriorate, Hollins was to have one final athletic hurrah: In 1942, just before her 50th birthday, she captured her eighth Pebble Beach women's championship, a record that still stands.

Two years later in August of 1944, she died alone and penniless in a Pacific Grove nursing home. A secondary cause of death was listed as "involutional melancholia," a psychological depression that eventually engulfed her spirit but not her legacy. She was buried with little fanfare at Cementerio El Encinal in Monterey—directly across the bay from her beloved Pasatiempo. ♣

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Marion Hollins and architect William Wurster, circa 1930, looking over plans for one of several buildings that Wurster was to design at Pasatiempo. Hollins' beloved dog and constant companion "Carlos" looks on.