

Bobby Jones: The Legend for All Time

By: Gene McClure

On March 17 each year, The Friends of Bobby Jones mark the anniversary of the birth of Robert Tyre Jones, Jr, with memorials and celebrations reflecting the accomplishments and special qualities of this Atlanta golfer - a legendary figure to be sure, but one whose legend is not larger than the facts of his remarkable life.

“Just as there was a touch of poetry to his golf, there was always a certain magic about the man himself”.
Herbert Warren Wind

Bobby Jones was what could be called a “sickly child”. His family moved out of the city of Atlanta to the “country”, alongside the new golf course of the Atlanta Athletic Club. Little Bobby began playing golf as a six-year-old, learning to hit the ball by watching and copying the long “Carnoustie” swing of the Atlanta Athletic Club’s Scottish-born golf professional, Stewart Maiden. By age nine, he won the junior championship of the Club and was the Men’s Club Champion at age thirteen at the Atlanta Athletic Club and the Druid Hills Golf Club.

When the Georgia State Golf Association conducted the State’s first Amateur Championship in 1916, it was won, not by a veteran golfer from far away, but by a 14-year-old, who later described himself as a “tow-headed youngster, playing for the first time in long pants and rather cocky from winning”. It was Bobby Jones’ first big championship. That victory took him to his national debut at Merion in Pennsylvania, for the 1916 U.S. Amateur. He led all qualifiers and advanced to the third round of match play. Although he lost to the defending champion, Jones was the player everyone came to watch. But he had a high-strung temper, and it took a long time to develop the mastery and self-control that would later mark his playing career. After that early introduction into the national spotlight, he could not capture a title for seven years. His temper flared up in frustration, and he picked up his ball, disqualifying and embarrassing himself during the 1921 British Open at St. Andrews. He threw a club at the U.S. Amateur that same year - reportedly resulting in a letter from the President of the United States Golf Association, George Herbert Walker, cautioning him about his conduct. Yet he conquered his temper and overcame his frustration to become a champion and the epitome of all that a sportsman should be, capturing his first major title in 1923 at the U.S. Open Championship.

“The pressure gets so great that you just lose yourself in making the shot”, Jones later told reporter Fred Russell. “I won my first Open in 1923 by hitting a 190-yard iron shot over a pond to the green on the last hole of a play-off with Bobby Cruickshank. I have absolutely no memory of hitting that ball.” Jones the Champion had transcended his earlier self.

In seven years, he would win thirteen National Championships – one British Amateur, three British Opens, four U.S. Opens, and five U.S. Amateurs, culminating with the unimaginable feat of capturing all four of those Championships in 1930, his Grand Slam. He then retired from competitive golf. He was twenty-eight years old.

Jones had entered fifty-two tournaments and won twenty-three of them. Moreover, as a part-time golfer, he had not neglected his education at Georgia Tech, at Harvard, and at Emory University’s Law School where he passed the Georgia State Bar Exam and then began practice with his father’s law firm.

After his historic victory in the four major championships of 1930, Jones retired from competitive golf, but his interest and involvement with amateur golf and promotion of the game never waned. He served a three-year term on the governing Executive Committee of the United States Golf Association. Jones encouraged and supported the prominent amateurs in Georgia, particularly those who played at the Atlanta Athletic Club, Charlie Yates and Tommy Barnes. In those days, after many triumphs, Jones needed no biography or heralding for Americans or the Scots. Merely mentioning the name Bob Jones related more about golf and character than any recitation of his record as a player. Jones’ trip to the 1937 U.S. Amateur at the Alderwood Club in Portland, Oregon to escort Yates and Barnes produced a story that demonstrates the magical aura which surrounded Jones in the minds of all golfers. Bob Jones and O. B. Keeler of the Atlanta Journal were following the final match when late in the match one player, Ray Billows, hooked his tee shot toward a large tree in the left rough. Jones suggested to Keeler that they hustle over to see what type of shot Billows would have. When they reached the ball, as is typical at tournaments, a large group of spectators had already formed a semi-circle around the ball to see the next shot. As they walked up, Jones took a look at the ball, the tree and the position of the green ahead and commented to O. B. Keeler, “There is no way that Billows can hit the ball on the green from here. In fact, no one could play a shot onto the green from here”. A burley spectator standing nearby overheard this remark and looked over at Jones and Keeler and said, “You’re wrong Mister. Bobby Jones could hit the ball on the green from here.” Jones, ever modest, looked the stranger in the eye and said “Sir, I am entirely confident that Bobby Jones could not hit the ball on the green from here”. Taken aback, the spectator replied to Jones, “Well, Mister, I can tell that you’ve never seen Bobby Jones play!”

Bob Jones’ priorities were his family, friends, his profession, and lastly, golf. His golf accomplishments bought him the opportunity to make a series of entertainment and instructional films for Warner Brothers, entitled “How I Play Golf”. He began the creation of his dream course, the Augusta National, leading to his own tournament, The Augusta National Invitational in 1934, which soon became The Masters. His books on golf, “Down The Fairway” and “Golf Is My Game” are still in demand. The global Bob Jones scholarship program for 40 years has exchanged students between Emory University and the University of St Andrews as well as providing fellowships for unique research degrees, such as bio medical engineering and a unique Jones Ethics study at Emory.

In contrast to his youthful temper, Jones’ sportsmanship and integrity on the course became the single most important feature of his play. Gene Sarazen, a fellow competitor who, like so many, became a lifelong friend, said, “Bob Jones, in my opinion, was the greatest man that ever walked the fairways. I was playing with him in 1925 when he called a penalty stroke on himself that cost him the Open Championship. Truly a great sportsman.” That stroke cost him an out-right victory in that 1925 U.S. Open. As the press praised him, Jones said, “You might as well praise a man for not robbing a bank. There is only one way to play this game.”

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Jones admitted that his all-too-human qualities as a young man were a struggle for him, and he later commented that he hoped to be remembered for sportsmanship. “I have some sterling regrets in golf. This is the principal regret – that I ever quit in a competition...but I was a youngster, still making my reputation. And I often have wished I could in some way offer a general apology for picking up my ball on the eleventh green of the third round, when I had a short putt left for a horrid six. It means nothing to the world of golf, but it means something to me. The quality of sportsmanship is the quality I would most want to be praised for”.

With the conviction that the integrity exemplified in Jones’ character is of paramount importance for the well being of golf, even above playing skill, the United States Golf Association established an award in 1954 to recognize someone each year whose contributions to the game emulates Bob Jones’ spirit – his qualities as a human being and attitude toward the game and those who play it, including respect for the game and its rules, a generosity of spirit, a sense of fair-play, self control and perhaps even self sacrifice - simply “sportsmanship”. This Award given annually has come to be the highest recognition in all of golf. The list of recipients is a “Who’s Who” of the great players and sportsmen in the game, and is known simply as the “Bob Jones Award”.

One of golf’s greatest moments came in an emotional ceremony in 1958 in St Andrews when the town honored him with a singular honor previously given to only one other American, Benjamin Franklin in 1759 - the Freedom of the City of St Andrews. The ceremony celebrated the affection which had developed between the people of St Andrews and Jones, a special friendship, which led Jones to say at the ceremony in 1958, “I could take out of my life all of my experiences except those at St Andrews and I would still have a rich, full life”.

By then, Jones was physically in decline. His last round of golf had been in 1948. He had a painful spinal disorder that forced him to first use a cane, then leg braces, a wheel chair, and finally as an invalid, to an eventual crippling painful death.

The Friends of Bobby Jones was organized by the late John Imlay to promote the legendary nature of Jones’ legacy. His legacy is more than his competitive record, as phenomenal as it is; more than his matchless skill at the game, as fascinating and instructive as it still is for young and old alike; and more even than his many accomplishments as an author, a lawyer, and charitable citizen. The Friends uphold his legacy of friendship, integrity and leadership — all in Jones’ examples of good character, his modesty and grace — the character and courage he showed during his times of highest achievements and, later in life, the same character and courage during the difficult times leading to his slow, painful, crippling death. As golf writer Herbert Warren Wind said, “As a young man, Jones was able to stand up to just about the best that life can offer, which isn’t easy, and later he stood up with equal grace to just about the worst.”

The legacy of Bob Jones inspires the Future — a Future now exemplified and made possible by the Jones Scholars and Fellows.

Gene McClure, an Emory graduate and national lawyer in Atlanta and Washington, is the current Chairman of The Friends of Bobby Jones. McClure has served on the USGA Executive and Rules of Golf Committees, is a recipient of the USGA’s recognition for service to golf and is a member of Georgia Golf Hall of Fame.

