Why Arnold Palmer Mattered

By Tim Cronin

Arnold Palmer ceased to be a competitive factor in championship golf in the late 1980s, when he was still a semi-regular on the senior tour. Yet when he died on September 25 at 87, the world of golf shuddered, and the rest of the world took notice.

What was it about this man that so compelled us to watch his every shot, long after what he shot mattered?

It was because you, and every member of Arnie's Army, mattered to him. The simple act of being interested in him brought forth a connection between Arnold Daniel Palmer and each of his fans, one at a time, and that would be everlasting.

It is said the man signed a million autographs. He probably shook thrice that many hands. He was a man of the people because he liked people, wanted to be around people.

Every one of those people who met Arnold, spent even five seconds with him, has a story.

That's because, unlike many people and most athletes, Arnold Palmer looked you in the eye, and for those five seconds, you were the most important person in his world. He was magnetic in that way, drawing you in.

Mark d'Ercole, a friend in San Francisco, recalls going to the Lucky International at Harding Park in 1963 as a kid with his dad, specifically to see Palmer.

"As we get to the Arnie group he makes a birdie," Mark wrote. "I had never been to a golf tournament to begin with and all I remember was it was highly electric and the buzzing was intense. The next hole is a par 3 uphill. Arnie hits his drive to about four feet and the crowd just goes nuts. For the next ten minutes it built up to Arnie's birdie putt. He lined it up from everywhere and then gets ready to putt when just as he pulls the putter back there's this loud crack of a tree branch now populated by spectators.

All because he smiled, shook some hands, signed some autographs, and, in his day, hit the living hell out of the ball.

"Arnie misses the putt and the crowd gasps and then groans. I was back from the crowd surrounding the green and, without realizing it, directly in the path from the green to the next tee.

Arnie's breaking through the people and heading straight towards me with a sour look on his face. Reflexively, I held a Lucky International Program along with a pen I brought out to him and said, 'Mr. Palmer, can I have your autograph?' And he blurted out, 'Not now.' I was crushed as my hero brushed me aside but in retrospect lucky I didn't get swatted aside as he went past me.

At the opening of Harbor Shores, Benton Harbor, Mich., Aug. 10, 2010 (Tim Cronin/Illinois Golfer)

"At the end of the day, my dad took me over to this area where the players seemed to be coming off the 18th. Arnie, when I approached, him said something like, 'Oh, you're the boy from the par 3.'

That memory from 53 years ago is one more bit of evidence that he was the gold standard for personality, for interaction with spectators, for providing a moment to remember. And so we all remembered, and shed a tear or two, when the news – inevitable though still unexpected – came hours after Rory McIlroy won $11.5 million for capturing both the Tour Championship and FedEx Cup in Atlanta.

Think that kind of money would not have been had Palmer not arrived on the scene in the mid-1950s, right when network television was in need of something to show besides opera and ballet on summery Sunday afternoons?

No. Without Palmer and his tryst with television – he married Winnie but also romanced the image orthicon cameras of CBS at Augusta National – golf might still be a sport consigned to the back pages, no bigger than professional bowling. Delightful enough to play, but for $100,000 purses and a couple hours of the majors televised on weekend afternoons.

Palmer remained relevant because he remained approachable.

Arnold Palmer is directly responsible for the growth of golf in terms of players – doubled in the 1960s from five million to 10 million – as well as that decade's boom in course building, to say nothing of bringing the British Open back to relevance and eventually, once he turned 50, making the senior tour something to watch.

Speaking of something to watch, Palmer's partnering with businessman Joe Gibbs on a venture called Golf Channel opened doors and got the network precious space on cable and satellite TV when dozens of other channels foundered and faded to black.

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Arnold Palmer could play. He combined the power of a blacksmith – though things went haywire at the Olympic Club in 1966 – with the touch of a diamond-cutter on the greens.

Palmer hitting a shot out of trouble was dramatic. He'd come to the ball, look at the lie, hitch up his pants, toss away his cigarette, and belt it in the general direction of the green. The army would roar or groan, depending.

Meanwhile, squirrels and butterflies watched the rest of the field. As it later would be with Nicklaus or Trevino or Woods, the toughest tee time in golf was in the group following Arnold Palmer. It was like playing in the aftermath of a tornado.

Palmer made golf athletic, not technical in the sense of Ben Hogan or Byron Nelson. When Palmer made impact, he was as precise and technically accurate as the rest of them – there's really only one absolutely correct way to strike the ball – but getting there and after, Palmer was one of a kind.

He'd lash at it like he was cracking a whip, then come through with the helicopter finish that seemed to will the ball down the fairway. He hit low, darting shots that somehow were able to check up on greens. He took divots the size of small foundations. He kept course workers around for overtime to fill them on ranges.

You'd watch that swing, and the result, and think you could do that too.

He reveled in life. As Dan Jenkins famously said, "Nobody has enjoyed being someone more than Arnold Palmer enjoys being Arnold Palmer."

The first of his eight major championships was the 1954 U.S. Amateur, which he always considered the most important because it convinced him he could play as a pro. His last major victory was the 1964 Masters. It was televised in black-and-white. But through the next five decades, Palmer remained relevant because he remained approachable. Businesses recognized that, and until Tiger Woods came along, he was the top golfer in endorsement revenue.

Palmer didn't horde his money. The children's and women's hospitals named for him and Winnie in Orlando, Florida, his winter base, for which he led the fund-raising campaigns, may be his greatest legacy.

But he lived for golf, and even in his dotage, loved to play the game well. Sitting down with Jeff Rude for a *GOLFChicago* story a few years ago, Palmer bemoaned the state of his game.

"I played yesterday and I hate myself," he said, smiling. "It's very humiliating not to be able to play golf the way I once did.

"But it's better than being on the other side."

Next time you play, offer a toast in his memory. Make it an Arnold Palmer.

After beating Sam Snead to win the 1961 Western Open at Blythefield Country Club near Grand Rapids. (Courtesy Western Golf Association)

Distinguished Kingship

What made Arnold Palmer special as a golfer was his drive to prove himself to his father and his go-for-broke, aggressive style that coincided with the advent of the TV age. He was the right man at the right time. What made him special as a person is that he always seemed to enjoy spending time with people, was always nice, and that also traces to his father, Deacon, the Latrobe, Pennsylvania, greenskeeper. He told me in a lengthy 2012 interview in his Bay Hill office, "You can be congenial and nice and it'll work. That's all I've ever done. My father always said to me, 'Don't be nasty. To anybody.' " Palmer pounded on his desk for effect, and then added, "So I practiced that, treating other people like you'd want to be treated."

While Palmer was in Cleveland for a senior tournament about three decades ago, golf writer George Sweda asked if the golfer would join him at his high school reunion to see what reaction they would get. Palmer obliged, and the two hopped into a courtesy car and went to the party for a few minutes. Previously, Palmer had joined Sweda in a Sears men's department to see if anyone would recognize him.

Another time, former *Golfweek* editor Dave Seanor asked if Palmer would say happy birthday to Seanor's father. So Palmer grabbed the cell phone and talked with the editor's father for several minutes, making the day of more than one man.

Palmer's longtime agent, Mark McCormack, thought Palmer overdid things and was too nice. As a college student covering the Western Open in Chicago in the mid-1960s, I saw Palmer's grace first hand. I did a 15-minute interview with him, only to discover I had not turned on the tape recorder. When Palmer learned of the problem, he told me "Turn it on and we'll do it again."

Point is, a lot of people could learn from Arnold Palmer's affable behavior.

—Jeff Rude