

Moe Knows What Nobody Else Knows

by David Owen

(Photos courtesy of the Royal Canadian Golf Association.)

Part One

Sam Snead played an exhibition match with Ed (Porky) Oliver and Moe Norman in Toronto in 1969. On one par-4 hole, a creek crossed the fairway about 240 yards from the tee. Norman, a Canadian pro who lived in the area, reached for his driver.

"This is a lay-up hole, Moe," Snead warned him. "You can't clear the creek with a driver."

"Not trying to," Norman said. "I'm playing for the bridge."

Snead's and Oliver's tee shots ended up safely on the near side of the water. Norman's drive landed short and rolled over the bridge to the other side.

Every golfer hits a lucky shot from time to time. But Norman, who recently turned 66, has hit so many lucky shots during the last half-century that you begin to search for a different adjective.

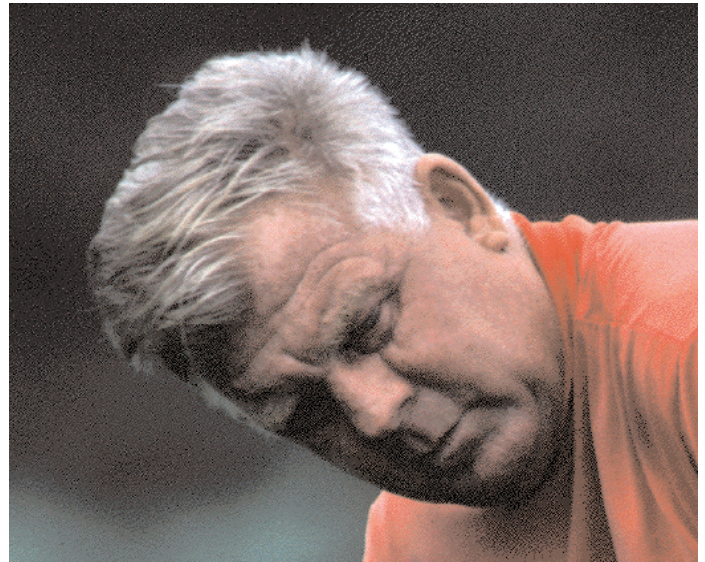
Consider Norman's experience during a practice round before the 1971 Canadian Open. A week earlier, at the Quebec Open, he had come to the final hole with a one-stroke lead, but had four-putted the final green to finish second. (His playing partner, Gary Slatter, explained later that Norman putted poorly on the hole because he was upset that the crowd had not applauded him for being the only player that day to reach that green in two.) "Any four-putts today?" a reporter asked Norman as he came to the tee of a 233-yard par 3. Norman teed up a ball in silence and hit it straight at the pin. He watched the ball's flight a moment, then turned to the reporter and said, "Not putting today." The ball landed on the front of the green and rolled into the cup.

Norman is mostly unknown to American golf fans, but he has long been a nearly mythical figure among tour professionals. Paul Azinger first saw him hit balls on a driving range in Florida 15 years ago when Azinger was a college player.

"He started ripping these drivers right off the ground at the 250-yard marker, and he never hit one more than 10 yards to either side of it, and he hit at least 50," Azinger told Tim O'Connor, a Canadian writer whose forthcoming biography of Norman, *A Feeling of Greatness*, is excerpted in the December issue of *Golf Digest*. "It was an incredible sight. When he hit irons, he was calling how many times you would see it bounce after he hit it--sometimes before he hit it--and he'd do it. It was unbelievable," said Azinger.

At an exhibition once, Norman hit 1,540 drives in a little under seven hours. None was shorter than 225 yards, and all landed inside a marked 30-yard-wide landing zone.

Norman doesn't look like a legend. His graying red hair stands more or less straight up, giving him a look of perpetual surprise. He wears long-sleeved shirts in even the hottest weather, and he buttons them up to his chin. His pants don't fit very well; during his playing days, they often gave out just south of mid-shin.



He likes bright colors and enjoys mixing stripes and plaids. His teeth would give an orthodontist pause. A huge proportion of his daily caloric intake is in the form of Coca-Cola. His voice is high; he speaks rapidly and often repeats himself, especially when he's nervous.

But Iron Byron doesn't have much star quality, either. Professional golfers' high regard for Norman has always been based primarily on his phenomenal ball striking. Lee Trevino ranks Norman with the game's very best, including Ben Hogan and Byron Nelson.

Ken Venturi agrees: "Because Moe is kind of eccentric, he never got the credit he deserved or played the kind of golf he was capable of. You had to ignore the way he looked over the ball and judge his ball striking. Hogan, Snead, Nelson--they all look esthetic. Moe looked very awkward. But he could do anything. He is one of the premier ball-strikers I have ever seen. Hell, I'd give Moe three strokes a side just to watch him hit the golf ball."

In his heyday, Norman translated his ball-striking genius into an impressive competitive record. In the late '50s, he won dozens of amateur tournaments in Canada, including the Canadian Amateur two years in a row. His best year as a pro was 1966, when he won five of the 12 Canadian tournaments he entered, came in second in five, finished no lower than fifth, and won the CPGA scoring-average title by 2 1/2 strokes, with 69.8.

Beginning in 1979, when Norman turned 50, he won seven consecutive Canadian PGA senior championships, finished second in the eighth, and won the ninth by eight strokes. He has set more than 30 course records, including three with scores of 59 and four with scores of 61. (He shot his most recent 59 four years ago, at the age of 62.) Last August, the Royal Canadian Golf Association inducted him into the Canadian Golf Hall of Fame.

These are considerable accomplishments. Still, there are conspicuous gaps in Norman's record. He played almost exclusively in Canada and made only a brief attempt, in 1959, to play on the U.S. tour. If Norman is one of the greatest ball-strikers in history, why doesn't he also have one of the greatest records?

The reasons are complex. One of them, paradoxically, has to do with the very foundation of his game: his golf swing. Simply put, Moe Norman's swing doesn't look like the ones you see on TV. He grips the club in his palms rather than his fingers, stands

far from the ball with his legs spread wide; he soles the club as much as a foot behind the ball, squeezes the grip almost unbelievably hard with his left hand, takes the club back scarcely past the level of his right shoulder, makes only a moderate shoulder turn and virtually no hip turn, and finishes with the club pointing up at the sky.

Nearly every time Norman teed it up in a tournament, he had to endure the laughter of spectators. He was often viewed as an amusing sideshow, not as the main event, and he reinforced his own reputation as a clown by playing to the galleries.

Norman is different in other ways as well. His personality is eccentric, to say the least. He is uncomfortable with strangers and has difficulty making eye contact with people he doesn't know. He does not like to be touched. He has never married or had a serious relationship with another person, and he has essentially no interests outside golf. He suffers from a crippling shyness that was often interpreted by others as arrogance or rudeness. Despite all he has accomplished, he has always been plagued by a fear that he doesn't measure up.

That Norman managed any sort of competitive career can begin to seem astonishing. His upbringing was modest in the extreme and did little to prepare him for the U.S. tour, where he felt conspicuous and inadequate next to famous players who dressed better and had more money than he did. He spent much of his 40-year competitive career in obscurity and poverty. He never had a mentor, a manager, or a sponsor. He sometimes carried his own bag in tournaments because he couldn't afford a caddie. When he had money, he kept it in a wad in his front pocket and sometimes had to move it to one side so it wouldn't interfere with his putting stroke.

He spent 14 winters--including the one before the 1956 Masters, to which he had been invited as the reigning Canadian Amateur champion--setting pins in a bowling alley for a few cents a line. As recently as eight years ago, he was so broke that only the last-minute intervention of friends prevented his car from being repossessed. At that time, he was eking out a subsistence living by giving golf clinics for a couple of hundred dollars apiece. Even today, Norman lives in a \$400-a-month motel room and has no telephone. He keeps his clothes in the back seat of his car.

Norman might be destitute and forgotten were it not for the efforts over the years of a few close friends. Among those friends are Gus and Audrey Maue. Gus Maue has known Norman for more than 40 years, and for a time was the pro at a golf club where Norman had caddied as a boy. Today, Maue owns Foxwood Golf Club, in Baden, Ontario, where Norman spends most of his days during the warm months. (He spends his winters in Florida, where he plays at a golf club owned by the Canadian PGA.) In 1987, the Maues conducted a golf tournament at Foxwood, which raised \$25,000 for Norman and put him back on his feet.

For Audrey Maue, the key to understanding Norman came several years later, in a movie theater. "We went to see *Rain Man*," she said, "and suddenly it came to me: that's Moe. It just seemed like a light was turned on. I had always known that Moe was different, and I had known a little about autism, but I had never thought about it in connection with Moe. I don't know that he's ever seen a doctor, about that or anything else, but everyone who knows him who saw the movie felt the very same way.

"Most people don't understand where Moe's coming from or why he is like he is. Life has always been a struggle for him. Just to be around people, period, made him feel uncomfortable. What he accomplished, he accomplished on his own."

Part Two

When you first see Moe Norman hit a golf ball you wonder, Why on earth does he swing the club that way? After you have watched him hit half a dozen 250-yard drives out of a divot, though, you begin to wonder, Why on earth don't I?

On the practice tee at Foxwood Golf Club not long ago, Norman warmed up with a pitching wedge, although "warming up" doesn't really describe any part of Norman's practice routine. The first shot was perfect, the second was identical to the first, the third to the second, and so on. Then he switched to his 4-iron. His swing--for all appearances, a nearly effortless half-swing--was the same with the 4-iron as it had been with the wedge. The shots came one after another, just three or four seconds apart.

"How far you hitting those?" a spectator asked. "One-eighty," Norman said. Every shot was within a few degrees of dead straight, despite a stiff crosswind, unless he announced ahead of time that he was going to hit a draw or a fade. The divots were identical (surreally rectangular scrapes that Norman calls "bacon strips.")

Norman switched to his driver. Once again, the swing was the same. If you watched only his arms and hands, you wouldn't know that he wasn't still swinging his wedge. After hitting one ball, he would watch it a moment, then bend over and place another on the tee--and I mean place it. The tee never came out of the ground. In fact, it didn't move a millimeter.

"I hit balls, not tees," he explained. On a driving range once, he hit 131 drives in a row from the same tee without having to straighten or adjust it. In tournaments, he sometimes entertained galleries by hitting drives from the mouth of the bottle of Coke he had just been drinking.

"When was the last time you hit a bad shot, Moe?" I asked him.

"Thirty years ago," he said as he bent over to tee up another.

After he had been hitting drives awhile, a friend of his asked if he could try. The friend took Norman's driver and placed a ball on Norman's tee. The shot wasn't too bad, but the tee came out of the ground and tumbled into the long grass 20 feet ahead.

"Oh, dear, I loved that tee," Norman said wistfully. "I had it for seven years."

Before Norman's demonstration on the practice tee, he and I had spent some time together in Foxwood's unpretentious dining room. It was there, about a month before, that he had been inducted into the Canadian Golf Hall of Fame. The audience at Norman's induction was limited mostly to friends. At his request, the dinner was served family style.

As we talked, Norman held a putter and fiddled with his grip, or rolled a golf ball in his palm. He often finds it easier to be with children than with adults, and if a child is present he will sometimes pull a ball from his pocket and start an impromptu game of

catch. I had been told that it might be hard to get him to talk, but that once he had started, it might be hard to get him to stop. He didn't look me in the eye at first, but gradually he seemed to relax. Bit by bit, with numerous digressions--all of them related to golf--he told me about his life.

"It's tough to do things when you're broke," he said. "Hitchhiking to tournaments, sleeping on park benches, sleeping in bunkers. I slept in bunkers all over Canada. You name it. I'd go and shoot 61 or 65, win the tournament, then hitchhike back on the highway with my TV set or whatever my first prize was, soaking wet. Couldn't afford an umbrella then. Sometimes I had to put my golf bag over my head. Nobody would come to my rescue, not back then. This was back in the early '50s. I was born in '29."

Norman grew up in a small house in a working-class neighborhood in Kitchener, an industrial city about 1 1/2 hours outside Toronto. The house was just 1 1/2 blocks from a Uniroyal Tire factory. The sky was often black, the air smelled of burning rubber. Money was very tight.

Norman's grade-school years were difficult. He had trouble getting along with other children and with other members of his family. He struggled in all subjects at school, except math, at which he was a prodigy. He also had a phenomenal memory. Today, he can recite the yardage of virtually every golf hole he has ever played, and he remembers every golf shot from every tournament that meant anything to him. He has a reputation as a deadly cribbage player because he remembers all the cards.

When Norman was a child, other children teased him mercilessly over his academic difficulties, his shyness, his big ears, his highvoice, and his tendency to repeat himself.

An expert quoted in O'Connor's book speculates that Norman's speech and personality quirks, and even his unusual mathematical ability, may have arisen not from the mild autism that Audrey Maue suspects, but from untreated head injuries he may have suffered in a sledding accident when he was five. In that accident, he was dragged under a car a long distance, and he says he remembers seeing a tire roll over the side of his face. His parents could not afford to take him to the hospital, and his mother worried for the rest of her life that the accident had made a permanent change in her son's personality. Whatever the reason, Norman's childhood was mostly lonely. He found refuge in sports, and especially in golf, which he pursued with a devotion verging on mania.

Norman's first golf club was a tree branch he and his older brother used to knock balls around their yard; his second was a hockey stick. At the age of 12, he began caddying at a local club called Westmount. He bought his first real golf club, an old 5-iron, from a member who let him pay it off at 10 cents a week. "Oh, I was as happy as a pig in s---," he told me. "I had a steel-shafted club." Norman was left-handed, but the member was right-handed, so he switched.

Norman practiced in his family's tiny backyard by hitting balls against a neighbor's garage. He rapidly developed a local reputation as a golf terrorist. When he would break a neighbor's window--as he did 11 times in two years, usually because he was aiming at one--he would shout, "Bull's-eye!" He built his golf game against enormous odds. The other members of his family

made fun of him for playing what they viewed as an effeminate game and called him a sissy at the dinner table.

Norman told me: "My father used to say, 'Come on, play a man's game. Play hockey or baseball.' I said, 'No, Dad, I'm too light.' I was a little skinny kid then, wasn't over 130 pounds. I couldn't play any other sport and be good at it so I kept playing golf. But my father wouldn't let me bring my clubs into the house. I had to hide them under the front porch."

When he wasn't aiming at the neighbors' windows, Norman practiced in a field at a nearby public course. When I referred to this field as a driving range, Norman laughed. "Nobody had ranges then," he said. "It was only a field, maybe 200 yards long. I had to wait till there was nobody playing to hit my driver. And the grass was tall. We had to use our irons to cut the grass down to fairway height, in a little square, and hit our balls from that."

Norman carried his cherished collection of battered golf balls in an old canvas bowling bag. After he had hit them all, he would drop the bag among them and chip into it. Fear of losing his balls in the tall grass increased his desire to hit straight shots. He often hit balls until his hands were bleeding. When the blood made his grip slippery, he wiped hands on his golf towel and his pants, and kept hitting balls until it was too dark to see. When he got home, he looked as though he had spent the afternoon slaughtering chickens.

Norman assembled his swing by feel, with a few clues gleaned from photographs in newspapers and magazines, and occasional encouragement from a kindly local pro. His progress was not immediate; he didn't break 100 until he was 16. But gradually his golf game fell into place. By the time he was 19, he felt he had his swing "trapped." From that point forward, he says, "I knew I could hit a golf ball where I wanted it to go for the rest of my life."

Part Three

The first significant step in Norman's competitive career came in 1949 at the St. Thomas Golf and Country Club, at a one-day amateur event later known as the Early Bird. He had not been invited. He showed up the day of the tournament and was given an empty slot. He was wearing sneakers. He had just seven clubs and carried them in his own bag, which was falling apart. Against a field that included several of Ontario's amateur stars, he shot 67 and won by two strokes. Too shy to attend the awards dinner, he slipped away after finishing his round. A friend had to make apologies and bring him his prize.

Norman wasn't like the other golfers in the tournaments he played. For one thing, he played fast. He would sometimes lie down and pretend to sleep in the fairway, waiting for slower players to hit. "I always thought the day was going to come when I'd get penalized two strokes for playing too fast," he told me. "They had a meeting about it at one tournament. They said that people were complaining because they had taken off work to come to the tournament, and I was four under after five holes and they hadn't seen me hit a shot. They said, 'Please don't walk so abruptly to your ball. Walk like you're drunk.'"

At the Masters in 1956, Norman hit his first tee shot while the announcer was in the middle of introducing him. Asked by a playing partner why he took so little time to line up his shots, he

said, "Why? Did they move the greens since yesterday?" He once putted between the foot and outstretched arm of a competitor who was marking his ball.

Norman's background also set him apart. Unlike most of the other top amateurs, he didn't belong to a country club. He often hitchhiked to and from tournaments, and he had to juggle his competitive schedule with a succession of dreary factory jobs, including one stitching rubber boots. He had to play hooky in order to compete in weekday tournaments, and he was fired five times. "There was no sense saying I was sick," he says, "because they'd read the headline NORMAN SHOOTS 65 AGAIN AND WINS." He liked night jobs best, because they left his days free for practice.

Norman also supported himself by selling the prizes he won in amateur events. As his confidence in his playing ability increased, he sometimes sold the prizes before the tournaments began. According to friends, on at least five occasions he intentionally finished second because his customers hadn't wanted the first-place prize.

In 1955, with a birdie on the 39th hole in the final match, he won the Canadian Amateur--the first Canadian to do so since 1951. His victory was widely viewed as a fluke by those who felt that no one with such an unconventional swing and seemingly frivolous attitude could really play golf at the highest levels. But then the next year he won it again, and even more decisively.

At the age of just 27, Norman had now laid the foundation for what might have been one of golf's greatest amateur careers. But his clowning on the golf course and his penchant for selling his prizes had long infuriated the RCGA. Taking money under the table was a common practice among amateurs, but no player was as open about it as Norman was. The RCGA threatened to strip him of his amateur status. Afraid that he would lose his two national titles, he announced he was turning pro.

This was harder than it sounded. He didn't have a club job and was an unlikely candidate for one, and thus could not qualify for a Canadian PGA Tour card. Finally, in 1958, under pressure from the public, and with the help of a driving-range pro who had hired Norman as an assistant, the CPGA relented. His first tournament as a card-carrying pro was the three-day Ontario Open. He shot 68-69-74 and won by three.

Norman's obvious next move was to the U.S. tour, to which he won a partial exemption with a third-place finish in a Canadian qualifying event. His U.S. debut took place at the 1959 Los Angeles Open, which was held that year at Rancho Municipal. He putted poorly--a recurrent affliction--but was thrilled to be playing alongside Hogan, Sam Snead and his other golf idols. He continued to play indifferently, with occasional flashes of brilliance (among them a 62 at the San Diego Open) until the tour reached New Orleans. There he shot four solid rounds, played in the final group on Sunday, led briefly, and finished fourth.

Gus and Audrey Maue were in Daytona, Fla., at that time. On Monday morning, Gus saw in the newspaper that Norman had played well and finished fourth. He predicted to his wife that Norman would win the following week in Pensacola.

"About two hours later," Maue told me, "there was a knock at my door, and it was Moe. I said 'Moe, why are you here? You're

supposed to be in Pensacola.' And Moe said, 'I will never play that tour again.' I asked him what had happened, but he said he would never tell me. He was distraught.

"He would come over each night with six Cokes, and we would play cribbage until the wee hours, and the next morning Audrey would wake up and there would be Moe's six empty Coke bottles. His heart was broken, but he wouldn't talk about it; then he went back to Toronto.

"A few weeks later, a young tour player I knew came through Daytona, and I asked him what had happened to Moe in New Orleans. He said that some of the big names on the tour--and I'm not going to say who--were upset that Moe was hitting the ball off the big tee, and they were upset with the way he dressed, and they didn't like his appearance. That's the bottom line."

Part Four

What had happened was that several well-known pros had cornered Norman in the locker room and chewed him out. They told him to stop clowning around, said he had to dress better and have his teeth fixed. It was a harrowing experience for someone who was already painfully shy and socially ill-at-ease, and Norman never went back. He doesn't like to talk about it now. When Maue told me the story, Norman looked at his feet and said quietly, "It stopped me from having fun."

The conventional wisdom about Moe Norman's golf game is that he hits the ball extraordinarily well despite an extremely peculiar golf swing. "Moe's swing is not fundamentally sound," Bob Toski told me recently. "He gets away with it, I think, because by intuition and by instinct he played that way when he was young. He has great hand and eye coordination, and he has great hand and arm strength. But he doesn't have the posture of a good player, where the arms look more relaxed and hanging from the body. He has very little bend from his waist. I think he's another Lee Trevino--he's a freak. And I use the word in a complimentary sense. He learned his golf swing intuitively, he learned it by trial and error. He didn't understand the fundamentals."

Trevino is an interesting comparison, because if you asked other pros to name the best ball-striker among active players, Trevino would get a lot of votes. Are he and Norman really freaks? Or could there possibly be an advantage to having a golf swing that doesn't look like Bob Toski's?

Similar thoughts occurred to a Chicago businessman named Jack Kuykendall. In the early '80s, Kuykendall was a middling middle-aged golfer with Walter Mittyish fantasies of making it as a pro. The senior tour was beginning to attract a lot of attention. Kuykendall's handicap was 12. At 44, he decided to devote the next six years of his life to finding out once and for all whether he had the right stuff to play for money on TV.

Two years later, after many hours of hard work, Kuykendall's handicap was two strokes worse. Frustrated and discouraged, he decided the problem lay not in himself but in the golf swing. "I was convinced," he says, "that there had to be an easier way to hit a round object on the ground with a stick."

Kuykendall had been a physics major in college, and he had put in two years toward a master's before deciding there wasn't enough money in academics. Examining the golf swing from the

point of view of basic physics, he decided the problem was the modern grip. Holding a golf club in the fingers, as virtually all golfers are taught to do, creates a complex mechanical system involving so many different angles, axes, and planes that for most players hitting the ball squarely is an accident, Kuykendall believed. He redesigned his golf swing based on the principles he had discovered. After a month of practice, Kuykendall told me, he shot three consecutive subpar rounds. The next day he started a company, which today is called Natural Golf.

Overthrowing the modern golf swing is a major undertaking. Kuykendall peddled his system for several years without much success. Then, one day, after a clinic in Florida, Kuykendall was approached by a Canadian pro named Mark Evershed. "Mark came up to me and said, 'You're talking about Moe Norman.' I still remember my reaction. I said, 'What's a Moe Norman?'" Evershed sent Kuykendall a videotape of Norman's swing, and Kuykendall was flabbergasted. Point by point Norman's swing matched the one he had devised.

"Scientifically, what Moe does is perfect," Kuykendall says. "It's what we call an ideal mechanically advantaged golf swing. It is maximum force with least effort. It's as perfect as a human being can do. Incidentally, the second best is Lee Trevino's. Most people think of his mechanics as unorthodox, but that's only because it's not what they're used to seeing.

"But Lee Trevino and Moe Norman are very, very close in their swings. If Trevino moved his right hand under the club a little more, he and Moe Norman would be identical. The closest on tour right now would be Paul Azinger. He has a single-axis right-hand grip, like Moe's, but he also has something that hurts him--a super-strong left-hand grip. Moe's left-hand grip is about as weak as you can make it. Azinger, because of his strong left hand, has to block the ball by spinning his hips to get the clubface square at impact, to keep his left hand from shutting the clubface down. If he moved his left hand to neutral and stopped spinning his hips, he would be almost unbeatable. He would be Moe Norman."

Kuykendall set out to get in touch with Norman, but had no luck for two years. Norman seldom talks to people he doesn't know. Kuykendall persevered, though, and eventually Norman agreed to meet him in Florida, where Norman was spending the winter.

"I spent an hour going through the science with Moe," Kuykendall says. "When I finished, Moe stood up and pulled some film out of his pocket and threw it on the table. He said, 'Here, take this. You can help someone with it.' It was some old black-and-white pictures, from 1966, of what he called his best swing ever. He said, 'All my life I've wondered why I can do what I can do with a golf club. And you are the first person who ever explained it to me.'"

Meeting Kuykendall was a major turning point for Norman. Natural Golf pays Norman a modest fee for the use of his name and image, and he and Kuykendall conduct several dozen clinics a year. Their alliance led to an article in the Wall Street Journal last year, and the article caught the attention of Wally Uihlein, who is the president of Titleist and Foot-Joy Worldwide. Uihlein got in touch with Kuykendall and Gus Maue, and arranged to meet Norman at the 1995 PGA Merchandise Show.

"Mr. Uihlein told Moe that Titleist would like to shoot a video," Kuykendall told me, "so that his swing would never be lost. The Titleist booth had one of those big blocks of video monitors, and Moe said, 'Can I be on there next year? Can I be on there next year?' And Mr. Uihlein said he could."

Uihlein then told Norman that Titleist would like to pay him \$5,000 a month for the rest of his life.

"Moe looked kind of funny," Kuykendall says. "He took a step backward and said, 'I've played your balls all my life. I've played your balls all my life. What do I have to do for that money?' And Mr. Uihlein said, 'You don't have to do anything. You've already done it. We just want to thank you for what you've already done.'"

"Mr. Uihlein said that Moe was in the same league as Ben Hogan and Bobby Jones and that he deserved the same kind of respect. Moe didn't say anything. He just went kind of limp, and he almost went into shock. I thought he was going to pass out. By that time, the hair was standing up on my arms, and all of us who were there were about to cry. Moe and I had to go do a clinic right after that, and in the car on the way there, Moe said, 'Jack, I don't know if I can hit the ball.'"

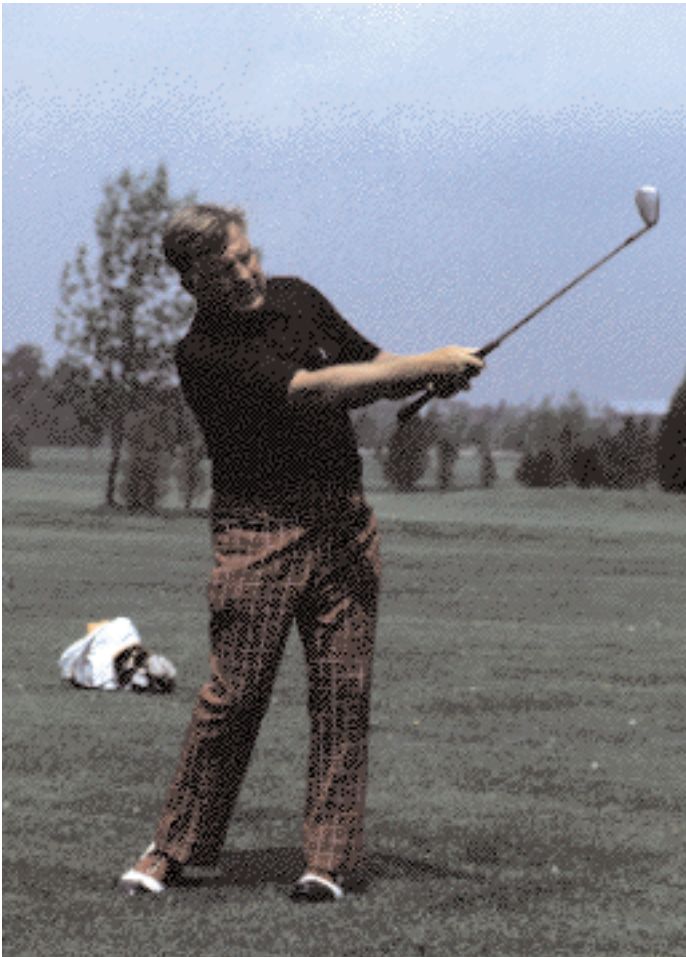
The Titleist stipend has made a huge difference in Norman's life. He still lives in the same motel room, eats all his meals in inexpensive restaurants and keeps his clothes in the back seat of his car. But he doesn't have to worry about money anymore. Eight years ago, Norman told Gus Maue that he was worried he'd never be able to afford to get back to Florida, saying, with deep sorrow, "My days are through." Today, he can go anywhere he wants.

Even more important, Norman has finally received the kind of recognition that throughout his playing career he felt he was denied. He sometimes grumbles that his induction to the hall of fame came 20 years too late, but he is nonetheless pleased to be there. Recently, he has even begun to talk about returning to competitive golf, perhaps by playing some events on the U.S. senior tour.

Although the hall of fame induction was a great honor, most people who hear Norman's story end up feeling that a huge opportunity was missed. If circumstances had been different--if he'd had a sponsor, if he'd had a mentor, if other players had been kinder, if he had worked harder on his putting--could he have dominated the PGA Tour?

The more I think about it, though, the more I think the question misses the point. The most striking fact about Norman's competitive record is not that it falls short of Hogan's or Nelson's or anyone else's but that it exists at all, especially if Norman is disabled in anything like the way people who know him speculate that he may be.

Norman overcame gargantuan obstacles as a young man and then went public with a golf swing that provoked titters. He set out to learn how to hit a golf ball, and he worked at it until he could do it better than anyone else--maybe better than anyone else who ever lived. His succeeding required skill and courage and self-assurance on an almost inconceivable scale.



there to make the course look nicer. All I see is the tee, the middle of the fairway, and the middle of the green. That's golf. I hit my 18 fairways and my 18 greens, and go on to the next day."

"Gee, Moe," I said, "it must be boring for you."

"Like heck it is," Norman said. "That's fun."

At Home on the Range, June 25, 2003

Reviewer: Stephen Sykes (see more about me) from Rockville, MD USA

As recently as 10 years ago, Moe's Norman's very existence was considered apocryphal. A few American golf pros, Paul Azinger and Lee Trevino come to mind, told stories about an eccentric Canadian with a strange swing so accurate he could stand on a driving range and hit the 250 yard sign repeatedly with his driver. Or they told of the time he hit three balls off the tee that were later found huddled together like mushrooms in the middle of the fairway. Then there's the time that, upon hearing someone in the gallery say he was a poor putter, he proceeded to hit a hole-in-one, boasting "I guess I won't be putting today." They said he was so good that if a hole called for a 3-wood and an 8-iron, he'd play it 8-iron/3-wood just to keep it interesting. The stories always held the not-so-subtle claim that if Norman had played the US tour, no one would have ever heard of Jack Nicklaus.

But nobody had seen him recently. He was a ghost. Finally, in 1995, Golf Digest ran a cover story that brought Moe and his strange swing back to life. By that time he had become the poster boy for a new golf movement called Natural Golf, and the leaders of that company were splashing Moe's image around as much as they could. This biography soon followed.

Fortunately, readers of "The Feeling of Greatness" will discover not an advertising piece, but a balanced look at a complicated man. Because of a childhood head injury, or perhaps just because genetics occasionally breeds the strange and unusual, Moe Norman represents obsessive-compulsion applied to golf. He is described as golf's "Rain Man", a savant-like creature of habit who found solace in striking golf balls -- hundreds a day for thousands of days -- but who was so shy, he wouldn't appear at awards ceremonies. He muttered a continuous stream-of-consciousness monologue and played so quickly that he often struck his shot before his partner had pulled his tee out of the ground. He never paused over putts, but rather hit them in full stride. He was not your typical golf pro.

However, while he was very successful on the Canadian tours of the 50s and 60s, he was a flop on the US PGA tour and, in fact, was reprimanded by fellow pros for boorish behavior. The book is honest enough to make it clear that any notion of his tearing up the US tour if only given a fair chance is just false. While he is generally regarded as one of the finest ball strikers of all time, he never came to terms with the real scoring clubs in his bag - his wedge and putter. In the end, Moe Norman was most at home on the driving range, where he gives impressive demonstrations to this day. --This text refers to the Paperback edition

The difficulties Norman endured undoubtedly took a toll on him. "When the sun goes down," Gus Maue says, "Moe is a very, very lonely man. He goes back to his motel room and turns on the TV. He's fine during the day, because he can play golf, but at night he doesn't know what to do."

That's Maue talking, not Norman. Norman speaks freely about injustices he feels he's suffered, but he doesn't dwell on the dark side of his life. For all he's been through and all the hard times he has seen, it is not his sorrows that stand out.

Norman with a golf club in his hands looks to me like a happy man. Even back in the days when he practiced till his hands were bleeding, golf for him was a source of joy. It was that attitude, as much as anything, that got him into trouble with various authorities--as in the tournament in which he came to the final green with a three-stroke lead, intentionally putted into a bunker, and got up and down to win anyway. It was also that attitude that sustained him.

"Golf is to have fun," he told me toward the end of our conversation, repeating a theme he had brought up before. "What do you have to lose? A lousy ball, that's all. If you lose yours, grab another one out of your bag and hit it. That is what the game's about, and that is the first thing I was taught 55 years ago: have fun. Most golfers don't see the bright things. All they see is the bad things.

"But if you see the bad things, that's where your mind will take you. If you drive a car down the road and look at the sidewalk, where do you think you're going to put the car? It's the same thing on a golf course. People see only the trees and the water. But I don't. To me, they are only there as an ornament. They are

My first encounter with the great Moe Norman

by John Hamarik

It all began during a 1980 collegiate golf tournament in Columbus, Georgia. I was paired with Paul Azinger, a good friend of mine from Florida State. During a twenty minute wait on an unfair 225 yard, into the wind, uphill par three, a shot that none of us was looking forward to playing, Paul started telling me some stories about a little Canadian guy who he claimed to have met in Florida the past Summer. Paul began describing this somebody as the best shotmaker he has ever seen. When I asked Azinger what this guy's name was? He replied, "Moe Norman". Hell, I had never heard of a Moe Norman before. Who was this mysterious golfer? Could he just be fictitious character, created by golfers and passed along the line 'til Paul Azinger advanced some of these most unrealistic stories my way? I knew about Hogan. I have seen him on video and read that he was the best in the business as far as hitting shots and hard work on his game, but to hear what Paul was saying about this short, stocky Norman character was beyond belief. He revealed how Moe had played in tournaments and had hit every green. I told Paul, "I think you are a victim of an overzealous storyteller. No human can hit every green in a tournament, not even the great Hogan." Paul assured me that he had personally witnessed this man hit balls straighter than anyone he has ever seen and had actually played a couple rounds of golf with him. I just smiled and said, "Sure Paul, where did this guy come from, another planet?" Azinger just laughed and said, "Hammer, one of these days you're going to meet Moe."

Four years later while I was playing in the 1984 Canadian Open at Glen Abby near Toronto, it happened. I made the two-day cut and was especially excited about playing on the weekend in such a big tournament with so many great players. Saturday's round was even better. I shot a 70 under some pretty intense windy conditions and passed up a ton of players. After my round, I was totally unaware that I was about to experience something that I never imagined possible.

First though, I had a great lunch in the men's grill room and I do mean a GREAT lunch. The Canadian open is famous for providing the pros with excellent food. Carved prime rib and steamed vegetables was a normal lunch at Glen Abby. Yea, I know what you're thinking; "wow, those Tour Pros are spoiled!" And I have to tell you, yes we are and I enjoyed every minute of it. Ok, let me get back to the story.

My next stop after lunch was the putting green. I spent about thirty minutes working on five footers and after feeling comfortable with the short stroke, I yelled to my caddy Speedway, who was resting on my bag, "Hey, lets go to the range and work on the long iron and the driver!" A few minutes later, I was looking at a hundred brand new Titleist Tour 100 compression balls to hit on Glen Abby's range. Yea, I know what you're thinking, "I wouldn't hit a new Titleist on a par three over water and you Tour guys use them as range balls?????" I thought I told you that the Pros were spoiled! Anyway, I started hitting a few seven irons, just trying to get the "feel" after spending a couple hours having lunch, BS-ing with the players and putting. I felt pretty good about my swing and asked Speedway for the knife. (That's

a one iron for Tour Pros). I was just getting ready to hit my first shot with the toughest iron to hit in any one's bag when I heard a voice say, "Hey, there's Moe Norman!" I turned around and began looking into the gallery just outside the ropes. Was I about to meet the most exceptional golfer in the world? My heart began to pump harder and my palms began to sweat. Where is this guy?

I walked away from the practice tee, leaving my caddy wondering what I was doing and began to approach the spectators standing behind the brightly colored gold ropes that allow the pros some sense of freedom from the sometimes rowdy and autograph seeking fans. After glancing past a couple hundred spectators, I spotted Moe standing twenty feet from me. Excitedly, I walked to the rope, stuck out my hand and said, "Excuse me, but you're Moe Norman, aren't you?" Then in a split second, a very fast voice answered, "Yes I am, Yes I am." I then asked Moe if he would hit a few golf balls so I could witness his incredible ball striking ability. His answer was a very disappointing "No, No, No, I can't. Canadian PGA Officials won't like me hitting balls on the range!" I was discouraged but did not give up as I proceeded to reach into my pocket and pulled out a fifty-dollar bill and asked again. The answer was the same, No! Finally, I begged Moe to please hit some shots for me. I said, "Moe, I heard that you are the best ever!" He cracked a smile and said, "Yes I am, me, Hogan and George Knudson!" (George Knudson was a very successful Canadian pro who had some wonderful tournaments in the United States).

Finally, Moe agreed to climb under the ropes and headed toward my golf bag. I immediately grabbed my camera and told Moe to loosen up with a mid iron. I remember him grabbing my Titleist Tour Blade five iron and what I saw next was the most amazing display of shots I had ever seen. He hit fifteen shots and not one of them was off line. Same trajectory and dead straight. Every single shot. Moe did not even have golf shoes on, he was wearing street shoes. His balance and position at impact were beyond words. His wide stance and unorthodox set-up was a bit unusual, but the ball came off the clubface exactly the same way every time. After the iron shots, Moe grabbed my driver, felt it and put it back into my bag. He obviously did not like the feel of my metal wood. So I told him to try my good friend Jim Kane's persimmon driver. He looked at it, took a few waggles and proceeded to point to a sand trap about 235 yards in the middle of the range. Moe hit eighteen out of twenty into the bunker. Not even a machine could do that. I knew that I was witnessing the absolute best shotmaker that I have ever seen. Moe was so impressive that the entire range stopped practicing, O'Meara, Fuzzy, Greg Norman, and every one else who was working on his game stood in amazement shaking their heads watching Moe hit every drive into the bunker on a fly. It was so magical watching him swing that I was waiting for Rod Serling to approach me and say, "John you have just entered the Twilight Zone." Our meeting ended when Moe handed me the driver, let out a smile as I shook his hand and thanked him for allowing us to watch him practice. I now knew that the stories Paul Azinger told me in college were for real. Moe Norman exceeded every expectation that I had. I will never forget that Saturday afternoon at Glen Abby.

Question:

June 12, 2003

I was told by a buddy that the ten finger grip was incorrect. I thought that there were 3 grips -- overlap, interlock and baseball/ten finger grip. I told him that I thought some pros use the ten finger grip and he told me to name 2 -- I couldn't. If there are any pros that use this grip on the tour could you tell me who they are?

Tim Mitchell
Roanoke, VA

Answer:

Hi Tim,
Here's a short list of well-known pros who use(d) the ten-finger grip

- * Moe Norman (greatest ball striker of all time)
- * Bob Estes (currently a top player on the PGA Tour)
- * Bob Rosburg (former PGA Champion, now golf commentator for ABC)
- * Dave Barr (PGA and Senior PGA Tour player)
- * Beth Daniel (LPGA Hall of Fame)
- * Art Wall (Masters Champion and more aces than anybody in history)

There are probably more. Thanks for visiting and best of luck with your game. MB

Moe and Von: A tribute to two great unknowns

May 9, 2000
By James McCarten
GolfWeb contributor

In sport, as in life, it's often all too easy to forget about the legions who toil in the shadow of the superstar.

For every Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus or Tiger Woods, there have been hundreds upon hundreds of players whose more modest accomplishments have long been given short shrift.

Still more spent the bulk of their careers playing the game in a country other than the U.S., earning accolades at home but never really developing an international profile.

These are the stories of just two.

Fans called him the Little Master; friends simply knew him as the Von. A flamboyantly dressed, 5-foot-5 wisp of a man, history is in danger of forgetting Australia's Norman Von Nida, who dominated golf in his native land in the years following the Second World War and proved a formidable opponent to some of the game's elite players.

Winner of the Vardon Trophy in 1947, but shut out of the majors that would have made him a household name, the Von played the game in an era before Arnold Palmer and television brought it to the world.

In *The Von: Stories and Suggestions from Australian Golf's Little Master* (1999, University of Queensland Press, \$19.99 US), Von Nida and Australian writer Ben Robertson have crafted a unique and delightful glimpse of one of the game's most interesting and largely anonymous characters.

To his immense credit, Robertson resists the temptation to write a giant, overblown biography, producing instead a modest collection of vintage Von vignettes



that perfectly capture the sense of the man.

It's an odd read at first, since there's no real continuity to the stories, swing tips and observations about the game's better-known players, some of which are just a few lines long. It also provides a less-than-complete picture of a man about whom comparatively little is known by modern golf audiences.

But The Von's simple, common-sense style of storytelling prevails, culminating in an insightful look into a one of the key figures of the evolution of professional golf.

And Robertson does a masterful job of preserving a quaint, antiquated, conversational tone that gives a reader the unmistakable sense they're

reshaping old war stories with Von Nida in the spike bar.

"Even though I could have made millions of dollars from my name over the years, such things never interested me," he says by way of conclusion. "Through golf, I have met the most extraordinary people in all parts of the world and as a result have many fine friends. The bottom line is that those friendships and memories have made me a wealthy man. Probably the wealthiest man on the planet."

After Von Nida's competitive streak began to wane in the early 1950s, and long before another Australian named Greg arrived on the scene, there was another Norman, one whose ball-striking abilities might have made him an international superstar had fate only dealt him a better hand of cards.

Less sensitive observers have long characterized Murray "Moe" Norman as golf's idiot savant, a gifted ballstriker with a bizarre, angular swing and mercurial personality who enjoyed a brief, tortured turn in the limelight before a crippling shyness forced his retreat into anonymity.

Several years ago, Toronto golf writer Tim O'Connor ventured into this peculiar Canadian's long-troubled world to tell both sides of a story the world of golf had not yet properly heard.

The result was *The Feeling of Greatness: The Moe Norman Story* (1995, Masters Press, \$16.95 U.S., \$24.95 Cdn), a complete and compelling biography of one of the game's most fascinating tragic heroes.

Every self-respecting golf fan should know the strange, sad tale of amateur sensation Moe Norman, from his troubled upbringing in the southern Ontario town of Kitchener during the depths of the Depression to what would be the highlight of any amateur career -- an invitation to the 1956 Masters.

O'Connor tells the story in an objective and sympathetic voice, relating and debunking much of the folklore that earned Norman the stinging, derisive label of "the Clown Prince of golf" in a well-written, meticulously researched defense of one of golf's most maligned and misunderstood figures.

Norman's otherworldly ability to hit a golf ball -- he was so precise and consistent he could hit three balls off the tee that would end up touching each other in the fairway, O'Connor writes -- was overshadowed by a pathological shyness and insecurity in social circles that drove Norman from the rarified air of the country-club gentry to the solitude of a swing he built from scratch.

During his first trip to The Masters, Norman supposedly spent a night on an Augusta National bench rather than waste money on a hotel room, a story tournament officials deny even though Norman himself concedes sleeping in the occasional bunker to preserve cash. Moe's debut at "golf's spring festival" ended badly, O'Connor writes. After some unsolicited swing advice from none other than Sam Snead, Norman followed a disappointing second round with a marathon practice session -- 800 range balls in four hours.

So badly chewed up were his hands that a broken-hearted Norman was forced to withdraw halfway through the third round under the disapproving glares of his fellow players. He returned to The Masters the following year, missed the cut, and never returned.

Shortly after that appearance, Norman -- who earned the scorn of the Royal

Canadian Golf Association by collecting the occasional grant from sympathetic benefactors like former Toronto Maple Leafs owner Conn Smythe and routinely selling his amateur prizes -- abandoned his amateur status and set out for the PGA TOUR.

But his penchant for entertaining galleries by hitting golf balls off Coke bottles and eight-inch tees alienated him from the TOUR brass and his fellow pros. That, coupled with a balky putter -- Norman never took himself seriously on the greens -- meant an early end to his professional career.

Today, Norman has received limited acknowledgement. He was inducted into the Canadian Golf Hall of Fame in 1995 and collects a monthly \$5,000 cheque from Titleist just for being Moe Norman.

And Canadian golf is better off, both for Norman and for The Feeling of Greatness, a forthright telling of one man's oddly fascinating story. Though out of print, readers can contact Eyelevel Golf at (800) 387-7638 or through pjack@netcom.ca to obtain a copy.

It's not just the players who sometimes get lost in the shuffle of a game that can be maddening and unjust at the best of times. There are literally hundreds of golf tales over the years that have all but disappeared, replaced on the shelf by books more modern, but no less entertaining.

The Enchanted Golf Clubs (1999, Breakaway Books, \$10.95 U.S.), first published in 1902 under the title *The Haunted Major*, is Robert Marshall's fictional tale of Major the Honorable John William Wentworth Gore, 1st Royal Light Hussars; or, as he'd rather be known, "good old Jacky Gore, the finest sportsman living."

To win the affections of a golf-smitten woman, good old Jacky takes up a game he knows nothing about in order to beat back what he believes to be her betrothed -- Jim Lindsay, the finest golfer living.

A 36-hole match ensues, with Katherine Clendenin Gunter as the prize. But before it does, our hero is summoned in the dead of night by the spirit of Cardinal Smeaton, awakened by his long-simmering detest for the Lindsay family legacy.

So anxious is the ghost of Smeaton to see Lindsay humiliated that he provides the hapless Gore with a set of magical golf clubs to help him in his cause.

If all of this sounds a little familiar, it's likely because *The Enchanted Golf Clubs* is one of those all-time classics that has helped inspire and influence a litany of other classics over the years, Michael Murphy's *Golf in the Kingdom* among them.

The Enchanted Golf Clubs is a hysterically funny, well-aged story that's fun and quick to read. Marshall uses a touch of the supernatural to push his well-paced narrative toward a final plot twist that's entertaining, if not all that surprising.

In other words, it's an oldie but a goodie, and like Norman Von Nida or Moe Norman, well-deserving of a little more attention than it's gotten to date.

Editor's note: James McCarten is a business reporter for The Canadian Press, Canada's national print and broadcast news agency. Look for his columns monthly on PGATOUR.com and GolfWeb.com.

High Spirits

Free-spirited Canadian golfer Moe Norman was as much an entertainer as a golfer, clownishly playing to the galleries by teeing balls atop such unusual items as Coke bottles. Indeed, on one memorable occasion, Norman teed off using... a woman's high heeled shoe.

["People laugh at me, but that's OK," Norman once declared. "They also reviled another reformer." The reformer in question? "Jesus Christ."]

[Trivia: The \$100,000 cost of a month's worth of personalized instruction with Norman may have been worth it: In an interview in 1996, Norman claimed to have played with the same tee since 1989]

This morning I called the above number to get a copy of the video. I talked with

Jeff Maue and ordered the video (\$29 Canadian + Postage). Jeff was very surprised to be hearing from someone in Austin, Texas. I told him about Rec.Sport.Golf ("what is an Internet?") and the Moe Norman thread. He seemed amazed, but glad to have the phone call. He knows Moe Norman (has caddied for him multiple times), and told me out the following additional Moe Norman story :

[The following is my paraphrased version of Jeff Maue's story] "He is definitely not retarded - just the most eccentric guy you'll ever meet. He has the most unusual, but effective swing I've ever seen. He hits the ball so pure, and so straight that you just can't believe it. One day about 7 or 8 years ago, while I was working on our family's new golf course [they were building a course] I was fertilizing the ladies tee of a par 4. There was a lake that the hole plays around. The distance from the ladies tee to the green (straight over the lake) was at least 300 yards. The wind was blowing straight into our face. Moe walks up to the tee and drops three balls on the ground. He hits all three balls right through the wind, over the lake and lands them within 10 feet of each other on the center of the green! Moe says "this won't work" I told him that it was the ladies tee and he just shrugs and goes on. I went back to the same spot later in the day (I'm 6'4" 245 pounds and have played all my life) I wanted to see if I could carry the water, with that wind. Not even close."