THE GOLF 100

A SPIRITED RANKING OF THE GREATEST PLAYERS OF ALL TIME

MICHAEL ARKUSH



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To Pauletta,

my bride, my friend, my life

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Author's Note

In March 2022, I introduced myself to Jim Furyk at the Hoag Classic, a Senior tour event in Newport Beach, California, sharing with him my idea to rank the top one hundred golfers, men and women, of all time. (Memo to PGA Tour commissioner Jay Monahan: Get rid of the name *PGA Tour Champions*. Not every member of the Tour, and I mean no disrespect, has been a champion.)

Furyk, the 2003 U.S. Open winner, didn't have much to say.

"Tough task," he told me.

Gee, thanks a lot, Jim.

About three hours later, as I was stuck in traffic on Interstate 405—one is always stuck in traffic on the 405—it dawned on me:

This is not a tough task. This is an impossible task.

I thought of the profound changes the game has undergone over the past 150 or so years with better balls and clubs, more manicured courses, and, most significantly, the players themselves.

Today's golfers employ extensive support groups, which include agents, managers, trainers, instructors, psychologists, hypnotists (I made the last one up . . . I think).

How then could I stack up the accomplishments of Old Tom Morris or Young Tom Morris, who won multiple British Opens in the 1860s and '70s against Tom Weiskopf, who starred in the 1960s and '70s? Or compare Johnny Farrell, the 1928 U.S. Open champion, to Johnny Miller, the 1973 Open champion?

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Maybe I needed to give back my advance from the publisher and find another project.

Or find a psychologist myself. It wouldn't be difficult. You can't go two blocks in Southern California, where I live, without running into one.

Bobby Jones summed it up perfectly after Ben Hogan won the British Open in 1953:

"I think we must agree that all a man can do is beat the people who are around at the same time he is. He cannot win from those who came before any more than he can from those who may come afterward."

Thanks, Bob. You're as helpful as Furyk.

Even so, once I arrived home and glanced at the dozens of golf books and tattered magazines in my office, I stopped worrying about what Furyk or Jones thought. I was too curious—obsessed, my wife would say—to see which golfers would make the top one hundred and in what order, and, just as important, whom I would leave out.

So now that I had decided to proceed, the question was how.

From the start, it occurred to me that I needed a formula to measure the credentials of every potential candidate. To explain, for example, why I put Ernie Els ahead of Vijay Singh. Or, better yet, John Ball, a legendary English amateur, ahead of Rory McIlroy.

One aspect of a player's career would be valued more than any other: how he or she performed in the game's biggest events.

The majors.

That's how, for the longest time, we have determined who the best golfers were, not by where they finished on the money list or, in recent decades, how they fared in the FedExCup playoffs. (If God were to grant me one wish, it might just be to rid the world of the FedExCup.)

Rick Reilly, the former *Sports Illustrated* writer, put it best when Fred Couples broke through in the 1992 Masters: "If he never did [win a major] he would get thrown in the heap over there with Tom Kite [who would end his long drought two months later in the U.S. Open at Pebble Beach] and the rest of the very good players who got off the bus one stop short of greatness."

The majors feature the strongest fields and, more often than not, are staged on the most demanding courses.

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When history is on the line.

Thus, I chose to award a player 2,000 points for each major victory; 500 for second place; 250 for third; 100 for fourth; and 50 for fifth—

a rather substantial gap, I know, between first and second, but that's how much emphasis I place, as Tiger Woods would say, on getting the "W."

Only, which tournaments should count as majors? And in which years?

That's not as easy to determine as you might assume. The four in the current rotation—the Masters, U.S. Open, British Open, and PGA Championship—obviously qualify, but what about the United States Amateur and British Amateur (now known as the Amateur Championship but I'm going to stick with its original name. Nor will I refer to the British Open as the Open Championship)? For decades, they were among the most prestigious events in golf, comprising two of the four majors Jones won in 1930 to attain the Grand Slam.

Except they don't possess the same luster today. Not even close.

Can you name the five most recent U.S. Amateur champions? Of course not. Don't feel bad. I can't, either, and I've been writing about the sport for more than thirty years. The question became: When should I stop counting the Amateurs as majors?

At first, I figured the cutoff would be the 1920s, when more top players began turning pro. Until I took into account the caliber of those who prevailed in both amateurs during the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, and factored in how much the events still meant to the game itself.

Besides, they were considered majors back then. So who was I to mess with tradition?

Ultimately, I chose 1961, which was when Jack Nicklaus captured his second U.S. Amateur at Pebble Beach. He was, after all, the last amateur with the potential to make it big as a pro to give serious consideration to maintaining that status. When he applied for membership in the PGA of America a few months after Pebble, it marked the end of an era.

At the same time, to discount the U.S. Amateur and British Amateur entirely over the last sixty-plus years didn't seem appropriate.

Consider the golfers who have won one or the other Amateur during that stretch: Lanny Wadkins, Craig Stadler, Jerry Pate, Mark O'Meara, Hal Sutton, Justin Leonard, Sergio Garcia, Phil Mickelson, and, of course, Tiger Woods. Therefore, I counted a victory in either Amateur, starting in 1962, as worth 1,000 points, half as many as in previous years, 250 for the losing finalist, and 125 for the other semifinalists.

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Whoever fell in the quarterfinals, as was the case before '62, didn't earn any points.

As for the non-major tournaments, I awarded only the champion, and with 300 points. To close with a 65 with no pressure on to squeeze into the top five of, say, the John Deere Classic, isn't worthy of receiving points. Again, it's about the "W."

I also decided not to allocate official points for performances in the Ryder Cup or Presidents Cup. Think of all the golfers who, because they were born too early or in the wrong part of the world, didn't compete in those team events.

Still, I didn't ignore those performances, either.

I was similar to a juror who, despite a stern warning from the judge not to let evidence deemed inadmissible be a factor in the verdict, couldn't help its affecting his thinking in one way or another. That goes, too, for players who excelled in individual events outside the United States.

Case in point: Bernhard Langer's forty-two victories on the European Tour. Only Seve Ballesteros, with fifty, won more.

On the other hand, with all due respect to Langer's record forty-seven wins on the Senior tour, that is something I most definitely could ignore. Congrats to the players fifty and over who have been able to take a "second bite of the cherry," as the late Scottish golfer Brian Barnes referred to the tour in the late 1990s. Yet success as a senior has nothing to do with true greatness. True greatness was what they had hoped to attain in the first bite.

In any case, no matter how many points a golfer accumulated in majors, or non-majors, the total shouldn't solely determine if he or she belongs in the rankings, or where. A number of deserving players would be left out entirely or wind up in the wrong spot. Other variables needed to be factored in; most significantly, an individual's impact or contributions to the game.

A prime example is Francis Ouimet, whose shocking win as a twenty-year-old amateur in the 1913 U.S. Open at the Country Club of Brookline over English stars Harry Vardon and Ted Ray gave golf on this side of the Atlantic the boost it sorely needed. Bobby Jones is another. He was an enormous figure in the 1920s, and not just because

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of what he achieved on the course. Jones was the epitome of class, setting a standard that will probably never be matched.

A quarter century later, Arnold Palmer arrived, right out of central casting: handsome, talented, charismatic, and fearless. He won eight majors—I'm including the 1954 Amateur—but also lost his share, no loss more gut-wrenching than the seven-shot lead he squandered to Billy Casper on the back nine of the 1966 U.S. Open at the Olympic Club in San Francisco. No matter. Arnie's Army loved him just as much for his failures, if not more.

Finally, toward the end of the twentieth century, when golf needed another shot in the arm, along came Woods. Even those who couldn't tell the difference between a three-iron and a nine-iron knew who Tiger Woods was. As Roger Maltbie, a longtime NBC commentator, put it: "Tiger Woods doesn't just move the needle. He *is* the needle."

I also gave additional weight to the elite players who would have put up more impressive numbers but left the game prematurely—some voluntarily, others the victims of fate.

They include: Byron Nelson, who quit the Tour at age thirty-four to buy a ranch; Tony Lema, killed in a plane crash at thirty-two; Young Tom Morris, who passed away—some say of a broken heart—at twenty-four; Willie Anderson, a four-time U.S. Open champion in the 1900s, who died—I'll fill you in later—at thirty two; Lorena Ochoa, who retired at twenty-eight to start a new life, and England's Joyce Wethered, who rarely competed after turning twenty-four.

Only, how would I incorporate such subjective elements into my final calculations?

Bonus points, that's how. Which I tacked on to roughly thirty players, male and female.

On the flip side, I took away points from those who, while piling up victories in regular Tour events, didn't come through in a single major. Like Harry "Lighthorse" Cooper, who won twenty-nine tournaments in the 1920s and '30s but could do no better than four second-place finishes in majors.

Perhaps my toughest task was how to integrate into the list the top female golfers of all time, given that they competed in entirely different events—and against entirely different opponents.

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Initially, I thought of compiling separate lists but women have been marginalized enough already. Ultimately, I elected not to compare women's totals (including the bonus points) to the men's—only to other women—and I relied on my expertise as a golf writer to determine where they belonged. I'll go to my grave wondering whether I put Joyce Wethered high enough. She was incredible.

Let me be clear: I'm under no illusion the list is perfect. Far from it.

Many will make a case for a player to be ranked higher or lower, and I might agree with them. Or for someone who isn't on the list at all, such as Scotland's Colin Montgomerie, who won the European Tour's Order of Merit eight times, the equivalent of the money title in America. I have nothing personally against Monty, who might be a fine bloke, for all I know.

Only, he never won a major.

Or any tournament on the PGA Tour. In 142 starts.

In conclusion, please keep the following in mind:

Just because someone is ranked number 40 doesn't mean that person would defeat number 80 in a head-to-head match. All it means is that the player at number 40 racked up more total points.

I hope you enjoy the trip down memory lane. See you on the other side.

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John McDermott

Leave him out, I kept telling myself.

Leave out the poor soul who spent much of his life in a psychiatric hospital. All you will do, Michael, is raise more questions than you can answer. Let him rest in peace. He had too little of it when he was alive.

I didn't listen. I couldn't.

John McDermott, in 1911, was the first American-born player—no, not Francis Ouimet, as many would assume—to win the U.S. Open and, at nineteen, the youngest ever (he still is). He took the title again a year later. McDermott needs to be given his due, and it wasn't his fault he lost his way . . . there but for the grace of God go us all.

Let's pick up the trail in the 1910 Open when McDermott, the son of a mailman, and who dropped out of high school to turn pro, lost by four strokes to a Scottish immigrant, Alex Smith, in a playoff at the Philadelphia Cricket Club. One would expect that McDermott, who regularly attended mass, would show respect to the better man that day.

Not exactly.

"Hard luck, kid," Smith said.

"I'll get you next year, you big tramp," McDermott replied.

Well, as Muhammad Ali used to say, it isn't bragging if you can back it up, and that's what McDermott did against Smith and everyone else in 1911.

First in the Open at the Chicago Golf Club, where, after starting out with an 81, he prevailed in a playoff (despite hitting his first two shots out of bounds) over Mike Brady and George Simpson, and then in three challenge matches against other top pros in Philly in which he

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put up $1,000 against their $100. (Phil Mickelson would have loved a piece of that action.) And once McDermott won the first three, according to longtime golf writer and editor Robert Sommers, "the competition dried up."

A year later, at the Country Club of Buffalo, when he became the first to win the Open while breaking par, he outdueled the 1909 runner-up, Tom McNamara, by two.

For McDermott, who endorsed clubs and balls and played in exhibitions, "the world," Sommers wrote, "was a lovely place."

In 1913, he won the Western Open, a huge tournament in those days (although it's not considered an official major), tied for fifth in the British Open at Royal Liverpool, the highest finish to date for an American, atoning for his failure to qualify the year before, and beat Harry Vardon by thirteen and Ted Ray by fourteen in the Shawnee Open shortly before the U.S. Open at Brookline.

If only McDermott hadn't opened his big mouth. And hadn't had the audacity to bring his U.S. Open trophy to the presentation ceremony.

"There's been a lot of loose talk about 'the great English champions' coming over here and competing in our Open," he said. "Mr. Vardon, I understand you won this baby [in 1900] once before. But let me tell you this; [McDermott was addressing both Ray and Vardon] you are not going to take our cup back!"

The Brits hadn't heard fighting words like that since . . . I don't know, the War of 1812?

The other players couldn't believe what they had heard and apologized to Vardon and Ray. So did McDermott, but the damage had been done, the United States Golf Association warning it might not allow him to play at Brookline. McDermott, according to *The New York Times,* was "worried greatly over the affair and has almost broken down under the strain." In the end, the USGA backed off, though McDermott could fare no better than eighth. America anointed a new hero in Ouimet, with another, Walter Hagen, who tied for fourth, on the horizon.

McDermott, with one setback after another, starting with heavy losses in the stock market, would soon be a factor no more.

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Some point to the summer of 1914 as the beginning of the end. Missing a ferry, he missed his tee time to qualify for the British Open at Prestwick Golf Club in Scotland. He was told he could still give it

a go, but rules were rules and McDermott, to his credit, wasn't willing to be an exception.

On his way back to the States, the vessel he was on, the *Kaiser Wilhelm II,* a high-end liner, collided with a grain ship in the fog. It was badly damaged—McDermott was among those put in lifeboats—but reached land in England.

In August, he tied for ninth in the Open at Midlothian Country Club outside Chicago. Two months later, his "mind cracking," as one writer put it, McDermott collapsed at the pro shop in Atlantic City where he worked. In June 1916, he was sent by his family to the State Hospital for the Insane in Norristown, Pennsylvania, where, according to Philadelphia golf historian James Finegan, he didn't speak to the other patients, reportedly spending "endless hours scribbling unintelligibly in notebooks, claiming he was writing his mother's and father's names."

McDermott was gone but not forgotten. At least not by his peers.

In 1928, Hagen played with him on a short six-hole course on the hospital grounds. His swing, according to Hagen, was "as fluid as ever."

As the years rolled on, McDermott got opportunities to play.

"I'd pick him up at Norristown," said Bud Lewis, a club professional from Philly. "He'd have his golf shoes on. He'd come down ready-made, wearing a suit and tie.... He would shoot in the 80s. He had big grips, still the biggest I've ever seen."

Fast-forward to June 1971 and the U.S. Open at the Merion Golf Club outside Philadelphia, where an elderly, poorly dressed McDermott was ushered out of the clubhouse by an assistant pro who had no clue who he was. Just then, who happened to come by but Arnold Palmer?

Palmer, who knew exactly who he was, put his arms around McDermott and brought him back inside.

"They talked golfer to golfer, champion to champion," wrote historian John Coyne, "and Palmer then arranged for McDermott to stay at the tournament as his special guest with all clubhouse rights and privileges."

I hope you now understand why I can't leave John McDermott off the list.

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"There isn't any question," Grantland Rice, the famous sportswriter, claimed in 1916, "but that McDermott would have been to American

golf what Vardon is to British play if John J. had not been forced out through fate just at the moment when he was coming upon the uplands of his career."



Roberto De Vicenzo

Argentina's Roberto De Vicenzo, who had won dozens of tournaments around the globe, couldn't believe what just happened.

No one could.

Which led De Vicenzo, in the best broken English he could muster, to deliver a response almost as memorable as the incident itself.

"I play golf all over the world for thirty years," he told the press, "and now all I can think of is what a stupid I am to be wrong in this wonderful tournament."

What a stupid, indeed.

This wonderful tournament was the 1968 Masters. The Masters he lost. Not by a mistake he made with his clubs. By a mistake he made with his card.

In the final round, on the day he turned forty-five, he failed to notice that on the card kept by Tommy Aaron, his playing partner, the number jotted down for the par-4 17th hole was a 4 instead of the 3 he had recorded. But because De Vicenzo signed it, he was forced to accept the higher score and miss out on what would have been an eighteen-hole playoff with the now-declared champion, Bob Goalby.

Those, ladies and gentlemen, were the rules.

That doesn't mean everyone agreed with the rules.

"In an event like the Masters," suggested the esteemed writer Herbert Warren Wind, "with hundreds of spectators lining each hole (and millions more watching on television), no one is going to 'win with the pencil.' . . . The score that the player makes on the course is the score that he should be credited with. . . . If an error is discovered, the important thing is to see that it is corrected. No penalty should be imposed. Golf, like every other sport, is meant to be a test of athletic ability, and not of bookkeeping."

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Wind made a good point, but the club had no choice. "There was enough body of evidence of players getting penalized before Roberto," said David Fay, the longtime executive director of the United States Golf Association, "and if Augusta National had waived the rule, the outcry would have been pretty dramatic."

In any case, it's impossible not to feel sorry for De Vicenzo.

Not just for throwing away an opportunity to win a major, which doesn't come along too often. Also, for one lapse in concentration being how he would be remembered forever. The first sentence of his 2017 obit in *The New York Times* mentioned how he committed "one of the game's most storied gaffes." Ouch.

If not for the gaffe, this is how Roberto De Vicenzo would have been remembered, and still should be:

As the winner of 231 tournaments—that's not a typo—highlighted by the 1967 British Open at Royal Liverpool.

"I saw very few golfers in my lifetime who were better than Roberto," Gary Player told me. "He was physically strong, was an aggressive player, and had a marvelous swing. If he had been born in America, there's no telling how many majors he would have won."

In the '67 Open, De Vicenzo beat Jack Nicklaus, who was at the height of his powers, by two to become, at forty-four, the oldest to take home the Claret Jug in the twentieth century, his 10-under 278 only two shy of the Open record. He arrived at Royal Liverpool so confident that he placed five hundred pounds on himself to win. At odds of 70-to-1.

The club that won it for him was the putter, often his most glaring weakness.

De Vicenzo tried a new one that week. He was always trying a new one. The putter, which he had found on a visit a few months earlier to America, featured a gray mallet head. He made one big putt after another.

The fans were pleased with the outcome. "The English were tired of Americans winning [four of the previous six Opens]," he suggested, "and in this case they wanted De Vicenzo to win. In the final moments, that helped me."

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The British Open was very good to him. In his first two appearances, in 1948 and 1949, he came in third, and only once in fifteen

starts through 1971 did he finish out of the top twenty. Not too bad for the fifth of eight children born to a house painter in Villa Ballester, a suburb of Buenos Aires, and who used to pick up lost balls in the pond from a course across the street.

When he was six, he became a caddie at a local club.

"Even though I liked other things in life," De Vicenzo said, "I could not tear myself away from golf."

He dropped out of school at fifteen, landing a job at the Ranelagh Golf Club, about forty miles away. By the early 1940s, De Vicenzo was winning tournaments all over the country—nine Argentine Opens before he was done.

The time came to see if he could take his act on the road.

The answer was yes.

In 1951, he won the Palm Beach Round Robin and the Inverness Invitational Four-Ball with Henry Ransom. Even so, he didn't feel comfortable in America. "The greens were faster, especially at Augusta and the U.S. Open, and would give me trouble," he pointed out. "Some years I did not go at all. It was a choice I made."

Prior to 1968, his best finish in the Masters had been a tie for tenth the year before. In '68, De Vicenzo trailed Player, the leader, by two when he teed off on Sunday.

Not for long.

He holed out for an eagle on 1 to tie him and birdied 2 and 3. At 17, he hit his approach to within three feet. He made the putt, and once Goalby eagled 15 the two were tied, and that's where they stood after Goalby putted out on 18 . . . until, well, the mistake with the card.

De Vicenzo went to his grave believing Goalby should have apologized for how things turned out. "Of course, it was my fault for signing the incorrect scorecard," De Vicenzo said, "but the way the public reacted wasn't my fault. It was his [Goalby's] fault. . . . All he had to do was say one thing before they presented him with the green jacket: 'Sorry, I prefer that we play off tomorrow.' That would have been sufficient. Then, everything is fixed."

Maybe so, but we shouldn't come down too hard on the late Goalby, an eleven-time winner who received hate mail over the incident. He didn't make the rules.

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"The presentation ceremony wasn't what it could have been," he said a half century later. "I sat next to Roberto and did what I could to console him. There's video of me patting him on the leg. I felt no elation, nothing like you'd expect from winning the biggest tournament of your life."



Tony Lema

Champagne Tony Lema—I'll explain the story about the nickname later—had gotten his act together. At last. He won three tournaments in 1962, one in 1963, five in 1964, including the British Open at St. Andrews, two in 1965, and another in 1966.

At first, Lema wasn't sure about playing in the '64 Open. It was a long way to go for a first prize of only $4,200. Urged on by Arnold Palmer, who wasn't in the field, he arrived thirty-six hours before the tournament kicked off on Wednesday morning. He got in ten holes on Monday and eighteen on Tuesday, hardly the way to prepare for a major.

And for a course he had never seen.

Lema did have one factor in his favor, and it was huge. His caddie was Tip Anderson, a Scot, who carried Palmer's bag when he won the Open in 1961 and 1962. If anyone could navigate Lema around the subtleties of a links course, Anderson was the man.

"At the British Open, you really need a good caddie," Gary Player said. "When you're on an American course, you can see everything, but over there you can see nothing. That year, Tony had the best caddie."

The fans on the Old Course took a liking to Lema, and the sentiment was mutual.

"I feel like I am back visiting an old grandmother," he said. "She's crotchety and eccentric but also elegant, and anyone who doesn't fall in love with her has no imagination."

The golfing gods were on his side, as well. On Day One, he teed off when the conditions were at their most benign, posting a one-over 73. By contrast, Jack Nicklaus, the tournament favorite, was stuck with the

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worst end of the draw, the winds gusting up to sixty-five miles per hour. Known for taking his time, he took almost three minutes for a shot on number 11 when he had ended up short of a bunker.

"Every time I was ready," Nicklaus said, "sand from the bunker would swirl out and hit me in the eyes. My eyes were watering so badly I could hardly see." He did well to turn in a 76. On Day Two, Lema, also using a putter that Palmer had given him, shot a 68 to go up by two over England's Harry Weetman, and more importantly, by nine over Nicklaus.

On Friday, the third and final day—the Open wrapped up with thirty-six holes back then—Nicklaus made his move while Lema headed in the opposite direction, the lead suddenly down to one. The two spotted each other from different fairways, Lema on the 6th, Nicklaus on the 13th. If ever there was a moment for Lema to be intimidated, this was it.

"I felt lousy," he said. "I thought, 'here he goes again.' We grinned at each other after glancing at the scores. Mine was sickly. His was happy."

Lema, however, proceeded to record five 3s in a row, three of them for birdies, shooting another 68. Nicklaus matched the course record with a 66 but still trailed by seven going into the final round. He wasn't about to catch Lema. No one was.

Tony Lema was on top of the golfing world, and what a journey it had been to get there.

When he was three, his father, a factory worker, died of pneumonia. His mother, supporting four kids in an industrial section of Oakland, California, worked as a department store clerk, shoe salesperson, and drugstore cashier. Lema, as you might imagine, got into his share of trouble. One time, he and a friend siphoned gas from a patrol car.

Golf entered his life, and not a moment too soon.

"Those are years I would love to have the chance to do over," he wrote. "We would sit around and booze it up from time to time, then start talking big and pump ourselves full of a lot of false courage. Phew! Talk about close calls!"

He became a caddie at Lake Chabot, a municipal course, when he was twelve. Six years later, he won the Oakland City Amateur Championship, though trying to make a living in golf wasn't on his mind.

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The Marines were.

"I was at loose ends," Lema wrote, "and couldn't think of anything better to do."

With the fighting in Korea coming to an end, he spent much of his tour on courses in Japan and, upon returning to the United States, became an assistant pro at the San Francisco Golf Club.

Now trying to make a living in golf was definitely on his mind.

In 1956, Lema finished fiftieth in the U.S. Open at Oak Hill Country Club near Rochester, New York. A year later, he won the Imperial Valley Open, an unofficial event in El Centro, California. There's a story that goes with that victory. There's a story that goes with everything in the life of Tony Lema. Figuring the leader, Paul Harney, had the tournament wrapped up, Lema headed to the clubhouse bar.

He figured wrong.

Still, he gathered himself together to defeat Harney on the second playoff hole.

After a fine season in 1958, he struggled in 1959 and 1960. In his memoir, Lema referred to that period as *Two Years in Purgatory.*

"I had reached the point," he wrote, "where I hated to look at a golf club or a golf ball or a golf course."

Enter television writer and producer Danny Arnold to the rescue.

Arnold, who would later create the hit comedy *Barney Miller,* became good friends with Lema after they were paired together for a pro-am in Palm Springs. "He convinced me," Lema wrote, "that . . . if I stayed calm and kept the ball in play, the breaks would come my way."

Speaking of breaks, Lema, known as a playboy, met Betty Cline, a flight attendant, on a trip from Dallas to San Francisco in 1961, and they were married two years later. "I feel I am a better person, a more complete person and even a better golfer," he wrote. "I'm now playing for someone besides myself."

So anyway, how did he get the nickname of Champagne Tony Lema?

Another story. Of course.

In October 1962, when Lema, leading by two, was interviewed after the third round of the Orange County Open at Mesa Verde Country Club in Costa Mesa, California, he indicated he wasn't thrilled with the beers in the pressroom.

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"If I win tomorrow," he promised the reporters, "it's champagne, not this stuff."

Lo and behold, Lema defeated Bob Rosburg, the 1959 PGA champion, for his first official tour victory, sinking an eleven-foot birdie putt on the third playoff hole.

Only, he forgot his promise.

Good thing Lester Nehamkin, a photographer for the *Los Angeles Times,* didn't, and as a result, the press was able to enjoy three bottles of champagne.

From then on, Lema ordered the bubbly for members of the fourth estate whenever he won.

Given everything he'd been through, success couldn't have tasted any sweeter.

"I wonder how I had the nerve to start out on the tour or stay with it as long as I did," he wrote. "Most of the players at least got in on the ground floor. I climbed in through a basement window."

In July 1966, on the way to a pro-am only hours after tying for thirty-fourth at the PGA Championship in Akron, Ohio, he and Betty, who was pregnant, were killed in a plane crash. The private charter, running out of fuel, went down, in the cruelest of ironies, in a water hazard near the 7th green of a course in Lansing, Illinois.

He was thirty-two.

No one can say what Lema, still in his prime, would have accomplished in the years ahead. The game is too fickle. One week, you're hitting every fairway and green. The next, you're grinding to make the cut. Yet, given how talented he was and where his priorities were, there would have been few limits.

"I don't think he really found himself until right before the accident," said Dave Stockton, a two-time PGA champion. "He would have won more majors. There is no question about it."



Macdonald Smith

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He was the youngest of the five Smith brothers to immigrate from Scotland to America around the turn of the twentieth century, and considered the most talented. So in 1910, when Macdonald Smith lost

in a three-way playoff in the U.S. Open to his brother Alex, it was hard to feel sorry for him.

Mac Smith was twenty years old. There would be plenty of opportunities to win a major.

Unfortunately, he didn't cash in on those opportunities—would I have started the chapter this way otherwise?—although he had an outstanding career: twenty-five victories, including three Western Opens (the first in 1912, the last in 1933), four Los Angeles Opens, and a Canadian Open.

Smith did everything but win a major championship.

Boy, did he come close. In twenty-nine tries, he posted seventeen top tens . . . twelve top fives.

"Dame Fate took a particular delight in mocking his genius," one writer suggested, "encouraging him with lesser prizes but always refusing his demand for stellar honors."

Let's start with the Open in 1910, the first major he played in, coming just two years after he arrived in the States. Smith turned in a 71 in the final round to tie Alex and, you may recall, eighteen-year-old John McDermott.

Too bad Mac Smith shot a 77 in the playoff to come up six short. There is no telling how his career might have unfolded if he had gotten the first major out of the way and at such a young age. No less a figure than Harry Vardon stated in 1913 that Smith, who would be in the hunt on the back nine of the Open at Brookline—he tied for fourth, three shots back—was the best golfer he had seen in America.

Before long everything changed. With the world. And with Smith personally.

Word is he lost a good deal of his hearing fighting for the Allies in France during World War I, or perhaps it happened after the war while working at a shipyard in San Francisco, where he hit the bottle.

"He was such a drunkard that his [future] wife picked him up out of the gutter, and I mean the gutter in the street," claimed Bill Mehlhorn, a top golfer in the '20s.

Smith, according to Mehlhorn, hit a thousand balls a day for a whole year to get his game back in shape.

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The hard work paid off. In 1924, he won his first Tour events in twelve years, the California Open and the Northern California Open.

Yet he still came up short in the majors: third in the British Open at Royal Liverpool and fourth in the U.S. Open at Oakland Hills outside Detroit.

Leading to the heartbreak of all heartbreaks: the 1925 British Open at Prestwick.

All Smith, up by five heading into the final round, needed to take home the Claret Jug was a 78. "A 78 for a golfer like Mac Smith," Herbert Warren Wind wrote, "was as simple as stirring sugar."

So much for the simplicity of stirring sugar.

Smith shot an 82 to finish fourth.

His fans didn't do him any favors, either.

"They killed Old Mac with their ardor," Wind went on. "Whatever chance he might have had for coming home in 36 was smashed in the unruly rush of unmanageable thousands, strangling the pace he wanted to play at, forcing him to wait ten minutes and more before playing a shot until they had filed across the narrow foot bridges and pounded through the bunkers ahead and grudgingly opened an avenue to the greens."

Smith wasn't done teasing us just yet: two more seconds in 1930, in the U.S. Open at Interlachen Country Club outside Minneapolis and the British Open once more at Royal Liverpool.

Then one more heartbreak for the road: the 1931 Open at Carnoustie in Scotland.

Now forty-one, he went five over his last three holes to hand the Claret Jug to another Scot, Tommy Armour.

"At no other moment in all the time I've played and won in golf tournaments," Armour wrote, "was I so depressed as when I saw Mac Smith walk into the clubhouse at Carnoustie, again the patient victim of the unkind gods of golf."

Give Smith credit. He kept up his winning ways—five victories from 1932 through 1936, including two L.A. Opens—even if the gods, when it came to the majors, would remain unkind forever.

It could have been worse.

"Mac's comeback is something unique in sports," Armour wrote. "At one time he was through—through as completely and conclusively as an athlete can be. The jitters had him. There was hopelessness in his

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carriage and in his eyes. He pulled himself together. . . . He won something far more important than a dozen National Open Championships. He won Mac Smith."

Charles Price, the distinguished golf writer and historian, watched Smith hit balls one day on the range.

"Mac Smith was well past 50 then," Price wrote, "but the balletic sweep of that swing was still there. He had a certain flair just holding a golf club that I had seen before only in Hagen, Jones and Snead and that I had seen off a golf course only in the way Ted Williams handled a bat, Leopold Stokowski a baton and Franklin D. Roosevelt a cigarette holder. . . . Merely by addressing the ball, Mac Smith gave the impression that he could bring off a golf shot if he had to stand barefoot on a cake of ice."

Yet, believe it or not, Smith isn't in the World Golf Hall of Fame.

Granted, not winning a major is a factor against him, as it should be. That's why I have him this low on the list. On the other hand, what about those twenty-five victories, including the three Western Opens?

I reached out to someone familiar with the selection process, who assured me Smith's name has been brought up and that he will get in "eventually."

Eventually can't come soon enough.



Padraig Harrington

Padraig Harrington was pulling a Jean van de Velde. On the same course, amazingly enough, and in the same event.

For those not familiar with the story, van de Velde was the French fella who, with one lapse in judgment after another—you think Roberto De Vicenzo was a stupid?—threw away the 1999 British Open at Carnoustie after leading by three on the final hole. You can catch the entire meltdown on YouTube. Viewer discretion advised.

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For Harrington, from Ireland, the first mistake he made on the 72nd hole of the 2007 British Open was, like van de Velde, with the tee shot.

Not the choice of club. The execution.

"I got to the top of my backswing, and I got a little doubt," said Harrington, who was leading Sergio Garcia by a stroke at the time.

Don't hit it left, he thought.

He didn't. He hit right.

Right into the Barry Burn, a water hazard, and if that weren't disturbing enough, Harrington found the hazard again with his next shot.

He was beside himself, certain he had lost the Open.

"That's probably the first time in my whole career," he said, "I would have been quite happy if the ground had opened and swallowed me up."

Even so, his caddie told him the tournament wasn't over.

"For 50 yards I wanted to kill him," Harrington said. "The next 50, I was listening to him. The last 50, I actually believed him."

His caddie was correct. It wasn't over.

From about fifty yards away, Harrington, given the circumstances, hit the shot of his life, the ball coming to a rest about five feet from the cup.

"I chipped it exactly as I would have done as a fourteen-year-old showing off to my mates," he said.

And once he knocked in the putt for a double and Garcia made a bogey on 18 roughly fifteen minutes later—his eight-footer for the win hit the lip—the two headed to a four-hole playoff, which Harrington won by a stroke.

Jean who?

The problem with the errant tee shot on 18 was that he was too complacent. "You're told by the psychologists that fear is a terrible emotion, but I think fear is a great motivator," he said. "I play great with fear. I play terrible with complacency."

That wasn't the case with the pitch shot. He was in no position to be complacent now.

The 2007 British Open was only the beginning.

Over the next thirteen months, he won his second Claret Jug and the PGA. He was on a roll no one saw coming.

Harrington learned a lot about himself in the 2006 U.S. Open at Winged Foot, where he recorded bogeys on 16, 17, and 18 to finish fifth, two behind the champion, Geoff Ogilvy. In the final round, "I couldn't have left more shots on the course," he claimed.

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Dr. Bob Rotella, the renowned sports psychologist, waited for him afterward.

"Bob was there to talk me off the ledge," Harrington said.

There was no need.

"I came out with the biggest smile on my face," he explained. "I said to Bob, 'I know I can win a major.'" Prior to that, Harrington assumed that "for me to win, I'd have to get some help. I [now] knew it was within my control."

Nonetheless, in 2008, while defending his title at Royal Birkdale in England, he needed help and from a most unlikely source—Greg Norman, who led Harrington and K. J. Choi by two heading into the final round. Norman, fifty-three, hadn't won a tournament in eleven years.

Harrington couldn't have drawn it up any better.

"Greg Norman was the story," he said, "and I was really afraid of this idea of nostalgia. The fairy tale was very much in my mind at all times."

Norman closed with a 77, tying for third, while Harrington shot a 69, to prevail by four. As elated as he had been to pick up his first major, the second was more gratifying.

"I had come from the wrong side of the draw and swung the club the best," he said. "There was no doubt this was my tournament."

In the PGA three weeks later at Oakland Hills, Harrington trailed by six after rounds of 71 and 74.

"It's hard to hype yourself up to win a major, get excited, come down, and get yourself back up," he explained.

Enter Mother Nature to bail him out. Due to rain suspending play on Saturday, he got a much-needed break and was fresher for the twenty-seven holes he needed to navigate on Sunday. After putting the finishing touches on a third-round 66, he followed with another 66 to outduel Garcia and Ben Curtis by two. All of a sudden, Harrington, who was once 0-for-36 in majors, had won three of the last six.

So what if Tiger Woods missed the British Open and PGA in 2008 to recover from knee surgery? That should take nothing away from what Harrington accomplished.

"If you want to say I was the next-best player to Tiger, I'll take that," he said.

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Harrington knows how cruel the golfing gods can be.

In the second round of the 1996 Benson & Hedges International

Open in Thame, England, only a week after he had collected his first European Tour victory in Madrid, he made a *Tin Cup*–like 13 on a par-5, finding the water four times.

"The only way I could tell what score I had on the hole," he recalled, "was to count how many balls I had and how many balls I started with."

The Times of London poked fun at him with a diagram that tracked where his shots went. His parents put it in a crystal picture frame, and while the paper has become a bit faded, Harrington gets a kick out of it every time he visits his mum.

"It reminds me of why I love the game," he said. "It tests your mental fortitude to be able to deal with the good and the bad."

Harrington, who had his first lesson at fifteen, thought so little of his prospects as a junior golfer that he took classes in accounting at Dublin Business School to have something to fall back on.

"I didn't ever expect to be a star in the game of golf," he said. "I didn't have the swing for it. Everybody said so."



Glenna Collett Vare

Her drive that day in the summer of 1917 went more than one hundred yards and down the middle of the fairway. The others in the group at Metacomet Golf Club in Rhode Island, which included her father, George, a former national bicycling champion, were blown away.

The fourteen-year-old who hit it couldn't have been more excited.

"My head was bursting," Glenna Collett Vare wrote, "with the soaring dreams that only the very young and ambitious live and know. As I came off the course after the first game, my destiny was settled. I would become a golfer. It was in retrospect as simple as that. No bypaths, no hesitations, no doubts. . . . I dreamed of some day becoming the champion! With such a goal in mind, I labored to find out the shortest route to the top."

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She made it to the top, all right, and stayed there for years to come.

From 1922 through 1930, Collect Vare won the U.S. Women's Amateur five times, with a sixth—and final—title coming in 1935 when

she defeated seventeen-year-old Patty Berg, a future LPGA Hall of Famer.

Collett Vare was known as the "female Bobby Jones" but the game didn't come easy to her in the beginning.

"My first round of eighteen holes was something of an ordeal," she wrote. "I don't remember a more unpleasant afternoon. Struggling along, missing more shots than I made, getting into all sorts of hazards, and finishing with the embarrassing score of 150, I was ready to give up the game."

Around the same time, a foursome that was playing in exhibition matches across the country for the Red Cross—the United States had entered World War I in the spring of 1917—showed up at the Wannamoisett Club outside Providence.

Providence, indeed.

The foursome included Jones, fifteen, already an important figure in amateur golf.

Watching such talented young players—she was very impressed by Alexa Stirling, the 1916 U.S. Women's Amateur champion—proved anything was possible.

Within two years, she broke 100. Though only five feet six and weighing about 130 pounds, she hit the ball a mile. When she was eighteen, one tee shot traveled as far as 307 yards—"the longest drive," according to Collett Vare, "ever made by a woman golfer."

A lot of the credit goes to her instructor, Alex Smith, Macdonald's older brother, who, you may recall, had won the U.S. Open in 1910—and in 1906, as well. Smith, the pro at Shennecossett Country Club in Groton, Connecticut, met with her twice a week.

"Alex gave me a happy philosophy as well as an improved way of handling the putter and mashie [a five-iron today]," she wrote.

In 1919, Collett Vare lost in the second round of her first U.S. Women's Amateur and came up short again in 1920 and 1921. Her breakthrough was in 1922 at the Greenbrier in West Virginia in a field that included Marion Hollins, the defending champion, and Edith Cummings, another top player. Collett Vare shot a 75, her lowest score ever, two days before the matches got under way.

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She was very pleased, although wondered: Where did *that* round come from?

Her guess was it had something to do with dinner the night before: two lamb chops, creamed potatoes, and string beans. Which would now be her dinner every night.

She was also superstitious about her wardrobe—the same skirt, sweater, and hat.

It worked. Collett Vare beat Cummings in the semifinals and took down Margaret Gavin in the final. "Even when it was over, and I had won the championship, I couldn't believe it," she wrote. "My eyes, which had been for days riveted on the little white ball sailing and rolling over the fairways and greens of the lovely Greenbrier course, were raised for the first time."

Collett Vare failed to defend her title in 1923 and fell in the semis (her only loss in sixty matches that year) in 1924 to Mary K. Browne, the U.S. Women's Open champion in 1912, 1913, and 1914—in tennis, not golf. Browne was quite fortunate. On the first playoff hole, her ball caromed off her opponent's and dropped into the cup. Players didn't mark their ball back then unless within six inches of another ball.

She won her second Amateur in 1925, beating Alexa Stirling Fraser (she had married Wilbert G. Fraser), 9 and 8, and prevailed again in 1928, 1929, and 1930.

Glenna Collett Vare—the LPGA's annual award for lowest stroke average is named after her—beat everyone at one point or another.

Except Joyce Wethered.

The two squared off for the first time in the third round of the 1925 British Ladies Championship at Royal Troon in Scotland, Wethered winning the thirty-six-hole match, 4 and 3. "After fifteen holes of the best golf I ever played—I was just one stroke over par at this stage—I was out of the tournament, beaten by four holes," Collett Vare wrote. "She is as good as it is possible to be."

The second time they met, in the final of the same tournament at St. Andrews in 1929, was like a heavyweight title bout, Wethered, the ex-champion, coming out of retirement to play a course dear to her heart. Through eleven holes—this match was also set for thirty-six—Collett Vare, who had shot a 34 over the front nine, was 5 up.

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"The finest sequence of holes I have ever seen a lady play," Wethered wrote, referring to the first nine.

The turning point came on number 12.

After Wethered three-putted, Collett Vare lined up about a three-footer to go 6 up. If she were to make it, the match might very well be over.

She missed.

Given new life, Wethered sliced the deficit to two after the first eighteen and by the midway point of the second eighteen was 4 up. Needing just 73 strokes during an eighteen-hole stretch, she prevailed 3 and 1.

Nonetheless, Collett Vare maintained fond memories of that day on the Old Course.

"The match was so exciting," she said nearly a half century later. "There were so many Scots watching the match and in those days the crowds followed the matches very, very closely. I was lucky to have a few friends, strong ones, who linked arms to keep the gallery from getting to me. Even still, I was very lucky to ever see a shot land. When I was winning, the silence was deafening. When she started to win, there was a noise like I never heard."

The two went head-to-head one last time in 1932 at the Wentworth Golf Club in England for the inaugural Curtis Cup Match, which pitted the best women amateurs from the U.S. against a squad from Great Britain and Ireland. Although the Americans took home the Cup, Wethered defeated Collett Vare in the singles, 6 and 4.

In 2022, I reached out to golf writer/author Jim Dodson, who wrote a magazine article about Collett Vare when she was in her eighties.

Dodson asked if he could caddie for her at an event in Rhode Island.

"Absolutely not," she told him. "No one should ever have to see my golf swing again."

Dodson showed up regardless and was blown away.

Just like the group on that summer day in 1917.

"She walloped the ball," Dodson said, "and it was so natural."

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Bernhard Langer

In evaluating the career of Germany's Bernhard Langer, let's not focus on what happened that memorable Sunday at the 1991 Ryder Cup, known as the *War by the Shore* (to refer, if you'll permit me to vent for a second, to a sporting competition as a war is insensitive beyond belief) on the Ocean Course at Kiawah Island in South Carolina.

Let's focus on what happened the Sunday after.

On the first Sunday, Langer lined up a par putt from six feet away. Make it and Europe, as the defending champion, retains the Cup. Miss it and the United States wins the Cup for the first time since 1985.

Langer, all square with Hale Irwin on the final hole of the final singles match, took his time. Nothing unusual there. He always took his time.

At long last, he brought the putter back.

And missed.

He was devastated. Yet after the tears came perspective.

"What really helped," Langer told me, "was the reality that we were just playing a game of golf. It wasn't life-or-death. My self-esteem didn't rely on making or not making a putt. I got my self-esteem by being a child of God."

Which takes us to the Sunday after. In the German Masters at Stuttgart, Langer, the tournament host, knocked in a ten-footer on the 72nd hole to force a playoff with Australia's Rodger Davis.

The putt meant nothing—with all due respect, who cares about the German Masters?—and everything.

He won it on the first extra hole, proving he was as tough mentally as any golfer over the past half century not named Jack or Tiger. He needed to be tough. Born in Anhausen, a village near Munich, the odds of his becoming a championship golfer were stacked against him from the start. His father, Erwin, was a bricklayer who worked twelve-hour days.

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"He built our house with his own hands, literally," Langer said.

In the mid-1960s, when he was nine years old, Langer became a caddie at Golfclub Augsburg, about five miles away. He didn't carry bags for the love of the game, mind you, but for the love of the Deutschmarks. Hanging around the course, his love for the game came soon enough.

In his early teens, Langer went with his parents to a job placement center. It didn't go well.

"I want to become a golf professional," he told the man they met with.

"What's that?" he responded.

At one point, the man left the room. When he returned a few minutes later, the news was the last thing Langer wanted to hear.

"We have no documents on the golf professional being a recognized job in Germany," he said. "I would highly recommend you learn something decent."

Langer feared the worst.

"I was thinking my dream was gone," he recalled.

He wasn't down for long, becoming an assistant pro at the Munich Country Club.

For much of the day, Langer, who rode to the course on his bicycle from a farmhouse about a mile away, operated the pro shop, set up tournaments, and fixed clubs. From five p.m. on, he practiced and played with teaching pros and the club's top amateurs. "The eighth and ninth holes," he said, "we'd play in total darkness."

He had heard of Jack Nicklaus—there was a swing sequence of him plastered on the wall in the caddy shack—but that was pretty much all he knew.

In 1976, Langer, eighteen, joined the European Tour. The early days were a constant struggle. Unable to afford a hotel, he spent more than a few nights sleeping in his car, which could get awfully cold. And when he was fortunate to find a room, "there were crawling creatures at times."

That was nothing compared to what came next: fifteen months of compulsory military service.

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One morning, around seven thirty, the group leader explained to his troops the drill for the day: "If an enemy airplane flies at you and they