



Robert Tyre "Bobby" Jones Jr.

A Winged Foot Caddie Reflects on the 1929 U.S. Open and Grand-Slam Winner Bobby Jones' Conversion to Catholicism



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THE UNITED STATES GOLF OPEN WILL BE PLAYED FOR THE SIXTH TIME THIS SEPTEMBER 17-20, 2020, AT WINGED FOOT GOLF CLUB IN MAMARONECK, NY (WESTCHESTER COUNTY) AND WILL BRING WITH IT MANY VERY POWERFUL MEMORIES AND FLASHBACKS FROM MY YEARS AS A CADDIE THERE. ¹

I first went out to caddie at Winged Foot in the spring of 1972 between sixth and seventh grade. My friends and I had heard that you had to wait on the caddie bench for a couple of days before the caddie master let you have a bag. This was a test of your commitment and whether you would stick with caddying.

Eventually, after waiting about 12 hours over two days, we were given bags. We learned how to carry and walk with the bag and how to lay it down quietly. We learned about proper etiquette, stance and silence at the tee.

We learned how to rake sand traps with precision

and how to pause the raking when a nearby golfer was hitting.

We learned how to work with our golfers during the putting process as they were reading the fascinating, lightning quick and sharply breaking Winged Foot greens designed by the legendary golf architect A.W. Tillinghast (1876-1942).

We learned the permissible and approved caddie short cuts at the 5th, 10th and 15th holes on the East Course and the 5th, 6th, 14th, 15th and 16th holes on the West Course. We learned about caddie teamwork and communication.

We appreciated when our golfers would bring us an ice-cold Coke with a plastic cup of Planters Dry Roasted Peanuts at "the turn."

We learned a lot about our golfers over the course of a four hour "loop." We observed the relationships of the golfers themselves, their treatment of us, their caddies, their conversations, laughs, stories and references to life on Wall Street.

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Young people can be quite intuitive about adults. Sometimes you could sense at the first tee what the day was going to be like.

This made caddying a real education about human nature. Being with a golfer for four plus hours, sharing his or her experience of the ups and downs, glories and tragedies in a round of golf, allows you to pick up character strengths and weaknesses. You pick up emotional shifts (good and bad) and mood changes. You react and work through them.

In the end, you gathered wisdom, intelligence and experience of human nature — what in golfers you liked and perhaps could emulate and what you disliked and made a mental note to yourself to never be that way.

Some of my caddie highlights at Winged Foot include:



1) Caddying in a foursome that included Joe Garagiola (1926-2016), the baseball announcer and former St. Louis Cardinal: Over the four hours, I discovered that Joe Garagiola was as authentic, kind and gracious a human being as he always projected in Baseball's "Game of the Week." I later discovered that Garagiola was a devout Catholic.

2) Caddying in a foursome that included Claude Harmon (1916-1989), Winged Foot golf professional and 1948 Masters Champion: He was older and wore elegant blue knickers. Father of Butch Harmon who mentored Tiger Woods early in his career, Claude Harmon was known for being a great teacher of innovative golf shot making. I can still remember his pitch around the green at the 8th hole on the East Course. It was magical. The mystic spin produced by his sand wedge put the ball right next to the hole.

3) I remember being in the caddie yard about 3:30 p.m. one afternoon in my first summer and the caddie master assigning me a single golfer, "Mr. Kardation." He was a very kind and gracious man — a true gentleman. He built your confidence as a caddie and he had me choose his club into the green and read his putts. He was in a hurry and only played the 10 holes on the East Course and paid me a record \$7. That was a great memory. "Mr. Kardation" — wherever you are, thank you! You taught me during those 10 holes how important it is to gently build the confidence of young people.

4) Watching in person the entire 1974 U.S. Open. I especially remember in the second round on Friday finding a spot behind the 17th green with my friend Richie under the pine trees (which have since been removed) and watching Arnold Palmer curl in a long putt to tie for the lead and



Winged Foot Golf Club



Wikimedia Commons

Arnold Palmer

being part of his “Army” as the crowd exploded in a roar that reverberated through the course, the entire Town of Mamaroneck and across the Long Island Sound!

As my caddying experience unfolded, I began to understand Winged Foot’s significance in the history of golf.

Winged Foot hosted the U.S. Open in 1929 (won by the immortal Bobby Jones), 1959 (Billy Casper), 1974 (Hale Irwin), 1984 (Fuzzy Zoeller) and 2006 (Geoff Ogilvy) as well as the 1997 PGA (Davis Love III). It will host the 2020 U.S. Open on September 17-20, 2020.

At the 1974 U.S. Open, I had a chance to immerse myself in golf history when, as an eighth-grader with a caddie badge pass, I watched every round of what became known as “the Massacre at Winged Foot,” chronicled by sportswriter Dick Schaap, when former University of Colorado football player Hale Irwin won the U.S. Open at 7-over-par.

I normally do not associate the U.S. Open with the Mass and the Eucharist but Dick Schaap tells a story about Bobby Jones at the 1929 U.S. Open that involved the Mass:

After Bobby Jones’ twelve-foot putt forced the 1929 Open into a playoff, USGA officials notified Jones and co-leader Al Espinosa that their thirty-six-hole playoff would start at 9:00 a.m., the next day, a Sunday. Jones,

always the gentleman, suggested that the starting time be pushed back until ten so that Espinosa, a Catholic, could attend Mass. Sunday morning, at St. Vito’s Church near Winged Foot, Al Espinosa was at Mass; so was Bobby Jones, who was not a Catholic. After Mass, Espinosa didn’t have a prayer. Jones won the playoff by an incredible twenty-three strokes; he shot 72 and 69, Espinosa 84 and 80. The following year, Jones won his fourth Open and his unmatched pro-am Grand Slam (the U.S. and British Opens, plus the U.S. and British Amateurs), then retired from competitive golf.²

What an extraordinary story of what it means to be a Christian gentleman. Bobby Jones not only arranged for the tee time to change so that Al Espinosa and his wife could attend Sunday Mass but, as a non-Catholic, Jones attended the Mass himself at St. Vito’s parish, an Italian ethnic parish in Mamaroneck just down the road from Winged Foot, with his Catholic wife Mary.

The story does not end there.

On December 15, 1971, three days before his death, Bobby Jones entered the Catholic Church and

received the sacraments on his death bed.

I like to think that Bobby Jones’ generous, magnanimous and ecumenically thoughtful and considerate Eucharistic gesture at the 1929 U.S. Open at Winged Foot helped prepare and open his soul to embrace our beautiful Catholic faith and the grace of receiving Our Lord in the Eucharist three days before he died.

May the immortal soul of the immortal Bobby Jones rest in peace! †

¹This column is an expansion of a section entitled “Caddie at Winged Foot Golf Club” in a chapter entitled “Bishop John Barres: From College Point Guard to Point Guard for the Church” in the book *Apostolic Athletes: 11 Priests and Bishops Reveal How Sports Helped Them Follow Christ’s Call* (Collected by Trent Beattie), (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press, 2017). The section is on pages 91-93. The chapter is on pages 85-106.

²Dick Schapp, *Massacre at Winged Foot: The U.S. Open Minute by Minute*, (New York: Random House, 1974), 62. See also Mark Frost, *The Grand Slam: Bobby Jones, America, and the Story of Golf*, (New York, Hyperion Books, 2004), 474.