
100 YEARS OF THE CPGA



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The Fifties Explosion

by Lee Pace
Author & Historian

Grant Bennett (tall man, back row, left of center) took a group of juniors from Florence Country Club to Pinehurst every year for the Donald Ross Junior.

The decade of the 1950s was one of the launch pads to the vitality and health of the sport of golf we all know and enjoy today. President Dwight D. Eisenhower was a rabid golfer and played some 800 rounds while in office from 1953-60. The first nationally televised golf tournament was the 1953 Tam O'Shanter World Championship, and the explosion of TVs in American households over the decade dovetailed perfectly with the emergence of an exciting young golfer from Wake Forest College named Arnold Palmer. The LPGA was founded in 1950, and Golf Digest launched in 1953.

Golf in the Carolinas was popping as well, and there were a number of talented and passionate club pros to shepherd the game along. Many worked their club jobs year-around. Others split their time giving lessons and running member-guests with forays into the pro golf tour and the premier Carolinas PGA competitions such as the Carolinas Open and Carolinas PGA.

Two of the most respected South Carolina club professionals and instructors of the era lived and worked within 80 miles from one another — Melvin Hemphill at Forest Lake Club in Columbia and Grant Bennett at Florence Country Club.

Bennett wore several hats with aplomb – head professional, green superintendent and high school golf coach at McClenaghan High in Florence. His teams at McClenaghan lost only one dual match from 1957-70. Bennett’s junior clinics every Saturday helped produce a vaunted talent pool for the high school team and the amateur tournament circuit, with Jack Lewis, Randy Glover, Buddy Baker Jr. and Bobby Womack among the many talented young golfers to come out of Florence.

Bennett would send his juniors into the woods and make them practice recovery shots, and he placed hula hoops on the ground fifty yards away and counted the shots that landed within the hoop – giving each junior a quota of shots to nail within a certain number of attempts. He also believed that young golfers needed to learn to “take their game on the road,” so he organized annual bus trips to Pinehurst for the Donald Ross Junior.

“He was ahead of his time in bringing pressure into practice,” says Columbia’s Bobby Foster, a leading amateur of the day. “He would simulate various situations and put you under the gun to perform. That’s commonplace today but it wasn’t done in those days.”

Hemphill became head pro at Forest Lake in 1931 and served in that capacity for 33 years. Two of his teaching tenets were that a draw beats a fade any day and that golfers should reduce tension in the swing by never setting the club on the ground before the backswing. Tempo was important to Hemphill, and he used the swings of Sam Snead and Julius Boros as illustrations of outstanding rhythm. The PGA of America frequently called upon Hemphill to conduct clinics, most often dealing with the short game.

Johnny Palmer was born in 1918 and grew up in the small town of Badin, N.C., learning the game as a caddie at Stanly Country Club. After serving in the Air Force in World War II, Palmer turned pro in 1946 and became known as a magician with the wedge and putter during the heyday of his pro career over the next two decades. He won five PGA



Skip Alexander at Mid Pines

Tour events, including the 1952 Canadian Open and 1954 Colonial Invitational. Palmer was sixth in the 1947 U.S. Open, fourth in the 1949 Masters and a member of the 1949 Ryder Cup team. He also won five Carolinas PGA titles and three Carolinas Opens. For his accolades, the “Johnny Palmer Trophy” is now awarded to the Carolinas PGA Professional who has the lowest stroke average in a given calendar year in the Players Championship, Carolinas Open, NC Open, SC Open, and Section Professional Championship.

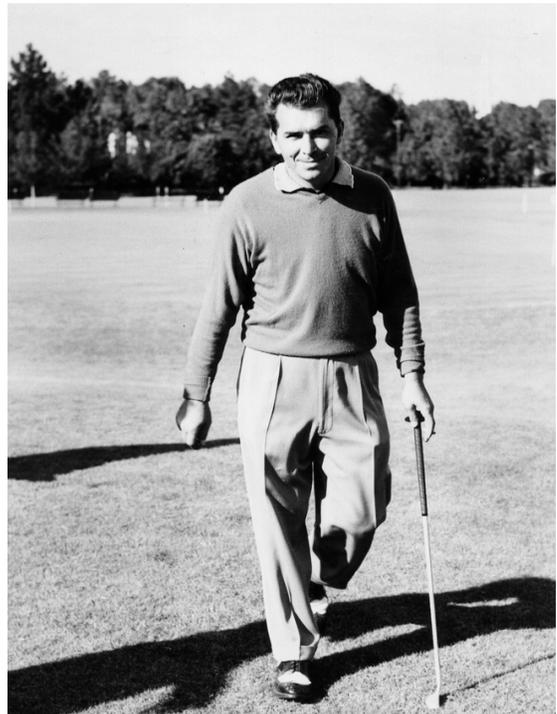
Skip Alexander was born in 1918 in Philadelphia, and his family moved to Durham when he was a boy. Alexander was captain of the Durham High golf team and played golf at Duke University, winning two Southern Conference championships and helping the Blue Devils win four team titles. Alexander won the North and South Amateur in 1941 and went to work for Dugan Aycock at Lexington Country Club as an assistant and playing pro. Alexander moved to Mid Pines in Southern Pines from 1947-49 and was the touring pro there while playing the PGA Tour. He won the Carolinas Open in 1946 and three PGA Tour events and was on the 1949 and '51 U.S. Ryder Cup teams.

Alexander was eighth on the money-winning list when he was injured in a plane crash outside Evansville, Ind., in September 1950 and suffered a broken leg and burns on his hands, arms, face and legs. He underwent a number of operations, including seventeen skin grafts, and had doctors shape his left hand into a permanent grip that would hold a

golf club. He still made the 1951 Ryder Cup team and won his only match, barely being able to walk as he beat Great Britain's John Panton, 8-and-7. He later became a club pro in St. Petersburg and won the 1959 PGA Club Professional title.

Tommy Bolt grew up in Oklahoma and first came to the Carolinas in 1950 when he was told of a driving range operator in Durham named Leamon Couch who might need some help giving lessons. Bolt hocked his golf clubs for gas money and drove from his home in Oklahoma to Durham. Couch asked Bolt if he wanted to join him for golf that afternoon at nearby Hillandale Golf Course, and Bolt shot a 67 playing with borrowed clubs on a course he'd never seen before. After a year in Durham of playing and giving lessons for three dollars an hour, Bolt's game was solid enough that he drove to Michigan for a tournament, won \$650 and was off to a successful touring career, winning fifteen tournaments over the next decade, most notably the 1958 U.S. Open, and earning a spot on two Ryder Cup teams.

Another U.S. Open titleist with some connections to the Carolinas was Julius Boros. An accountant coming out of college in Connecticut, he moved to Southern Pines in the late 1940s to run the books at Southern Pines Golf Club, and he developed his golf game between crunching numbers and met his future wife, the daughter of the owners of Mid Pines Inn & Golf Club. Boros turned pro in late 1949 and went on to win 18 tournaments between 1952 and 1968, including two U.S. Opens and one PGA Championship; he also added the 1956 Carolinas PGA title to his resume. Boros loved to fish the lakes on the Mid Pines golf course and for years stayed in Southern Pines



Julius Boros at Mid Pines

when the PGA Tour came through Greensboro.

Clayton Heafner was born in Charlotte in 1914 and began playing the pro tour in the late 1930s. After a solid touring career — seven PGA Tour wins, two Ryder Cup Matches and runner-up finishes in the 1949 and '51 U.S. Opens — Heafner settled into post-tour life in Charlotte by purchasing and operating Eastwood Golf Club. Heafner collected wins in the CPGA's major events (the 1939 Carolinas Open and 1950 Carolinas PGA), before dying at the age of forty-six, less than a week after suffering a heart attack the day after Christmas in 1960. His son Vance became an outstanding golfer and enjoyed a PGA Tour career in the 1980s.

Jim Ferree was the son of Purvis Ferree, the longtime pro at Old Town Club in Winston-Salem, and won the 1953 Southern Conference championship while competing for the University of North Carolina. He played the PGA Tour from 1956-66, winning the 1958 Vancouver Open and three events on the Caribbean Tour in the early 1960s as well as the Carolinas PGA in 1966. He capped his career off by winning two Senior Tour events. He was recognized for his stark white head of hair and his trademark knickers; a silhouette of Ferree in full swing wearing the plus-four britches was used to create the PGA Senior Tour's early logo.

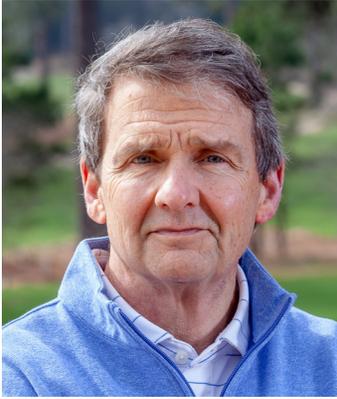
Ferree died at his home in Hilton Head in March 2023 at the age of 91.

"Jimmy had the perfect swing to emulate and with the iconic knickers that he wore, how could it not be the perfect emblem for the early Senior Tour years?" says Mike Harmon, now retired as Director of Golf at Secession Golf Club. "He had one of the finest golf swings I've ever seen."

"Driving home from Chapel Hill, my brother and I would stop in Hilton Head on the way to Sea Island and get a lesson from Mr. Ferree," says Davis Love III, a fellow UNC golf alumnus with Ferree. "He was a special guy. We've been losing a lot of legends recently."

There certainly have been plenty of those around the world of the

Carolinas PGA.



LEE PACE is a Chapel Hill-based golf writer who has written about the history, architecture and great golfers of the Carolinas over four decades. He has written more than a dozen club histories and in 2021 released along with UNC Press his book, "Good Walks--Rediscovering the Soul of Golf at 18 Top Carolinas Courses."



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