

GOODBYE TO THE KING:

ARNOLD PALMER GOES HOME ONE LAST TIME

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The day began with the town of Latrobe shrouded in fog, an otherworldly layer of mystery clinging to the valley as the sun climbed over the Allegheny Mountains. Hours later it ended when Arnold Palmer's private jet – call sign N1AP – buzzed Saint Vincent Basilica in a low flyover then veered sharply into a steep climb before disappearing as a tiny dot in a crystal blue sky as if on its way to heaven.

Palmer had come home one last time and the world joined him in a memorial service fit for a king – a tribute fit for The King.

A who's who of the game remembered Arnold as a great golfer and pioneer who changed the business landscape of all sports when his handshake deal with Mark McCormack created International Management Group (IMG), which invented modern sports marketing as well as player and event management.

He was remembered as a golf course designer, a world class pilot who flew jets as boldly as he attacked a golf course and as the man who looked into the TV camera and grew the game in a way it had not known before or since.

But most importantly, Palmer was remembered as a good man, a decent man, a kind man who never forgot that he was the son of a country club employee, not the son of a country club member.

"Home," Palmer liked to say, "is not where you're from; it's who you are." And where Arnold was from tells you a lot about who he was. Western Pennsylvania is a place where people work hard, play hard and look you in the eye when they talk. Arnold did all of that.

"Arnold Palmer was a common man, yet so far from common," said Annika Sorenstam, whose son Will was born nine weeks premature and saved by doctors at

the Winnie Palmer Hospital for Women in Orlando. "That sparkle in his eye made everyone feel special."

His friend and foe for nearly 60 years, Jack Nicklaus, said: "Arnold Palmer was the everyday man's hero. He made the recovery shot an art. Today, I am a proud soldier in Arnie's Army."

And the commissioner of the PGA Tour, Tim Finchem, pretty much summed up everyone's feeling. "I refuse to think he has totally left us," Finchem said. "I believe his spirit is with us today. And if he's looking down, and I'm sure he is, I hope he gives us one of those little thumbs up."

While Palmer had homes at his Bay Hill Club and Resort in Orlando and off the course that bares his name in La Quinta, Calif., he never abandoned Latrobe and its sound often crept into his speech, like putting an R in wash, making the nation's capital Warshington.

There is nothing musical about the Pittsburgh accent. Those who speak it are called Yinzers – the plural of you – as in, "What are yinz doin' after redding up the house?"

Pittsburghese does not roll off the tongue in the lyrical way a soft Southern drawl falls like dew on a misty morning. This sound clangs like iron wrapped in rust, a hard sound, hard like the work in the mills when this was the cradle of the world's steel industry back when Palmer won the 1954 U.S. Amateur.

The final farewell for Palmer on Oct. 4 was where it should be – home, on the campus of Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, where he was born and raised, the son of a greenskeeper at Latrobe Country Club. Where the airport is named for him and where he returned every summer.

In addition to Nicklaus, Sorenstam and Finchem, the speakers were long-time friend and former LPGA commissioner Charlie Mechem; Arnold's grandson and pro golfer Sam Saunders; Russ Meyer, chairman emeritus of Cessna, the kind of plane Palmer flew for decades; Jim Nantz of CBS and Peter Dawson of the R&A. Country singer Vince Gill closed the service with "You've Got a Friend" and rocker Darius Rucker opened a VIP reception after with the Star Spangled Banner. A week earlier, Palmer's ashes had been scattered at Latrobe CC in a private service for the family.

The town of Latrobe was littered with signs saying goodbye to Palmer. Outside Dino's Sports Lounge, a humble place where locals were used to seeing Palmer and his wife Kit casually consuming a Kettle One vodka – or two – a sign read: "God Bless Arnold Palmer." Inside, patrons had watched the TV broadcast of the service and were now devouring the Golf Channel documentary of Arnold, pausing to sip a beer and tell of their personal encounters with Palmer.

People in this part of Pennsylvania are passionate about sports and have a very localized sense of pride. There are 12 high school sports districts in the Keystone State and one of those is the Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athlete League – the WPIAL, or District 7, founded in 1906.

WPIAL turf turned out Johnny Lujack, Mike Ditka, Johnny Unitas, Joe Namath, Tony Dorsett, Joe Montana and Dan Marino in football; baseball Hall of Famers Honus Wagner and Stan Musial and 1964 National League rookie of the year as well as 1972 American League MVP Dick Allen. Basketball had Don Hennon, Jack Marin, Willie Somerset, Norm Van Lier and Swin Cash.

And then there is Arnold, the man who elevated golf onto a level with the Big Three sports. He moved golf from the back of the sports section to the front of the news pages. He was the perfect player to come along just as TV was discovering the commercial value of broadcasting live sports – movie star good looks, an athletic body and a dynamic style of play.

There was a sense of celebration, not sadness, at Arnold's memorial. Friend's joked about his hearing problems late in life and winked when sharing stories about his fondness for Kettle One. For every one of his 87 years, Arnold Palmer fully enjoyed being Arnold Palmer.

And when it came time to sign his scorecard, it was as if Arnold went willingly into that good night. He was too frail to hit the ceremonial opening shot this year at the Masters and too weak to travel the 38 miles from Latrobe to Oakmont for this year's U.S. Open.

This was not the way he wanted it. Palmer lived life the way he played golf: Boldly, trusting his instincts and not overthinking things. He never laid up. Few have lived life so fully and even fewer have given back as much.

The perfection with which his final goodbye played out made you feel some force much greater than IMG was orchestrating the event, from the fog to the blue-sky flyover. You could only imagine that Finchem was right and that Arnold was smiling down, giving his signature thumbs-up, the other hand holding a Kettle One, those magnificent eyes twinkling.

Long live The King.