

IS AUGUSTA NATIONAL'S BILLY PAYNE GOLF'S MOST INFLUENTIAL PERSON?

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In 2007, Billy Payne oversaw his first Masters as chairman of Augusta National Golf Club, a position he assumed from Hootie Johnson a month after the 2006 tournament. Since then, Payne has emerged as perhaps the most impactful person in golf. His decade in charge has been one of immense progress that extends far beyond the very private walls of Augusta National to the global golf community.

Since ANGC was founded by Bobby Jones in 1931, the club has leveraged its role through the Masters to become a quasi-governing body. Just think of it: Of the four men's majors, the U.S. Open is run by the USGA, the British Open by the R&A and the PGA Championship by the PGA of America. The Masters alone is the property of a private club.

There have been six chairmen of ANGC starting with Clifford Roberts, who held that title from 1931 until 1976. He was followed by William Lane (1976-80); Hord Hardin (1980-91); Jackson T. Stephens (1991-98); Johnson (1998-2006) and then Payne.

I've known the last four and have had memorable interactions with each. Once, when I wrote they might have lost No. 11 green, letting it become too firm and fast, Hardin called me in and gave me a lecture on Jones' theory of golf and how Bob would have played the hole.

In 1996, when I wrote everyone will remember the final-round 78 by Greg Norman but what they really should remember is the closing 67 by Nick Faldo, one of the most brilliantly conceived and executed rounds

under pressure that I've witnessed, Stephens sent me a letter saying he agreed.

I wrote him back, he wrote me back, and then I was thinking I'd write him again saying, "How's next Tuesday at 10 work as a tee time for you" but thought I better leave well enough alone.

And when Johnson oversaw the first "Tiger-Proofing" of Augusta National, I wrote that it was a knee-jerk reaction to the distance explosion in the wake of bigger drivers, kinder balls and stronger players. Hootie took me aside – out the back door of the old interview room, actually – and firmly told me: "Nothing we do at Augusta National is a knee-jerk reaction."

Actually, he was right. From the outside, it appears Augusta National is slow to change, especially when it was late to the table with both minority and female members. But the truth is that ANGC is constantly changing, evolving really, and evolution, unlike revolution, unfolds slowly and with a plan.

And that brings us to Chairman Payne. His tenure has been a decade of decisive and impactful action. Here is part of what ANGC has accomplished under his leadership.

- 2008 – Partners with ESPN as its cable TV outlet, greatly expanding viewership of not only the Thursday and Friday rounds but also the Wednesday Par-3 Contest.
- 2009 – Teams with the R&A to create the Asia-Pacific Amateur Championship with the winner invited to the Masters. The second and third competition were won by Hideki Matsuyama of Japan, now one of the best players in the world.

- 2010 – Opens a state-of-the-art practice range on land that once was a parking lot.
- 2012 – Invites former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and South Carolina banker Darla Moore to be its first female members.
- 2013 – The Drive Chip & Putt Championship starts with junior players qualifying in all 50 states to get to the finals at Augusta National.
- 2013 – Opens Berckmans Place, a more than 90,000 square feet hospitality facility adjacent to the fifth hole.
- 2015 – ANGC, along with the R&A and the USGA, creates the Latin America Amateur Championship, which also gets the winner in the Masters.

Also weaving through the Payne Era have been massive land purchases that allowed the club to better control the environment around the golf course and created room for expanded facilities. Quietly, and unobtrusively, corporate housing appeared on the left side of the tenth fairway and this year a new media center opens.

Yet, the Masters remains perhaps the purest event in all of sports in terms of maintaining focus on the competition and not selling its soul to greed. It has never lost sight of the vision by Jones that the experiences of the players and the patrons are paramount. Ticket prices – for those lucky enough to get them – are the best bargain in any major sporting event. Food concessions are run on a break-even basis and TV commercial time remains limited to four minutes an hour on CBS, its only network partner ever, and ESPN.

Yes, the Masters makes a lot of money in merchandise sales, international and domestic TV rights and corporate entertaining. But it could make much more if it wanted to. And it gives back. Opening the facility to the Drive, Chip & Putt Championship is a significant grow-the-game initiative and it's only a matter of time until someone who competed there slips on the green jacket. All of this is a conscious effort by a man with a plan.

"The professional game, I believe, is in very good shape, and its continuing health and prosperity depends upon the collaborative effort of many organizations and institutions who provide opportunity and encouragement to young players," Payne says. "We at Augusta National Golf Club are trying to do our part, as we feel a continuing and genuine obligation to give back to the game. This mandate from our founders is every bit as important as the conduct of the tournament itself."

Asked how long he would remain chairman, Payne wryly answered: "Well, that committee hasn't met yet." And asked about his accomplishments, he said: "I didn't have any specific goals. My goal is to serve whatever tenure that I serve and then fade into the background, because, as I've said multiple times, Augusta National has only two people who forever will be a part of their culture, and that's Clifford Roberts and Bobby Jones."

History may write itself differently, adding Payne on a line just below Jones and Roberts, remembering him as one of the most influential individuals of his era in the game of golf. Augusta National, for decades seen as the status quo, is now a beacon for growth and progress. Billy Payne should get a lot of credit for that.