

A Masters Without Palmer

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AUGUSTA, Ga. – Maybe it was the brisk breeze blowing across Augusta National on Thursday morning that sent shivers through those watching the ceremonial opening tee shots at the Masters. Or maybe it was something more. Maybe it was the cold reality of loss.

Appropriately, the sun beamed with the intensity of an Arnold Palmer smile, but the chill in the air reflected the “unbearable sadness” referenced by chairman Billy Payne as he welcomed patrons to the first edition of the tournament played without Arnold Palmer since 1954.

As a competitor, a club member and participant in the ceremonial opening tee shot, performed this year by Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player without him, Palmer was as much a part of the Masters as the Eisenhower Tree, also now gone, the green jacket and a pimento cheese sandwich.

It felt wrong that Arnold was not here.

“This is a wonderful but in many ways very difficult day,” Payne said. “He was more than The King. He was my friend; he was your friend. He always had time for all of us.”

Arnold's wife Kit stood by wearing his green jacket. Those on hand bowed their heads when Payne asked for a moment of silence. Hats came off and more than a few brushed away a tear. The shudders had more to do with emotion than with the temperature.

Palmer liked to say that golf made him, he didn't make golf. And while that is true, Palmer made golf better, he made it more popular and he made it grow.

And while the Masters is part of the incredible legacy of Bobby Jones, Palmer also made it better, more popular and helped it grow.

The timing was perfect. The first Masters on TV was in 1956, a year after Palmer played the tournament for the first time. He picked up his first green jacket in 1958. And for 11 years, from 1957 through 1967, Arnold was never outside the top-10, winning again in 1960, '62 and '64.

As they like to say in the trade, the camera loved Palmer. His movie-star good looks, dockworker's forearms, magnetic smile, engaging manner, attacking style of play and powerful swing ending in a corkscrew follow through captivated audiences.

People loved to watch Palmer play. He became the first golfer people rooted for. Everyone wanted to be part of Arnie's Army. At a time when it was still possible to get tickets to the Masters, Palmer made it a tournament people wanted to attend, wanted to watch on television.

It is not an overstatement to say the marriage of TV and Palmer played an enormous role in making the Masters the huge success it is today. And it is not an overstatement to say those who run Augusta National GC have done a brilliant job managing that growth.

The Masters remains a uniquely pure sporting event – perhaps the last event with such a level of purity in all of sport – with TV commercial time limited to four minutes an hour, the course absent of corporate logos and patrons not gouged on ticket prices or concessions.

But the fact the Masters has been sold out since the early 1970s reflects the importance of Palmer to the tournament. It rode his coattails through the 1960s to achieve that popularity and the fact he played the event until 2004 and participated in the opening ceremony until last year maintained that magic long after he stopped winning.

And Arnold had what every great star needs – a supporting cast. In fact, he became a part of the greatest ensemble cast the game of golf has every known. They combined to form The Big Three of Palmer, Player and Nicklaus.

Yes, there were Vardon, Braid and Taylor; there were Jones, Hagen and Sarazen; and there were Hogan, Nelson and Snead. But they didn't have TV. This Big Three did. And it had Palmer.

“Arnold took the Masters from being a tournament to being one of the four biggest events in golf,” Nicklaus said. “Then Gary came along and won in '61 and of course I won '63. We came along and added to that. But I think it was Arnold who took it to that. So my feeling was that, yes,

the Masters made Arnold in many ways... but I think Arnold made the Masters.”

Player conjured up a memory from last year, when Palmer attended the opening ceremony but was too weak to hit a tee shot. Gary nailed the gracious down-to-earth decency of Palmer.

“Arnold was a great stickler for manners,” Player said. “But Arnold could hardly walk to the first tee and he put his arms up like this (lifting himself a few inches up from the chair using his arms) because he had been taught to stand up. And he gave a little wave and that was very touching to me. I could see him doing it in that chair today. Its funny how things come back to your mind.”

A lot of things about Arnold will come back to our minds as the years pass. We will remember the thumbs-up gesture, that contorted follow through and the way he ducked his head as he followed the ball in flight. We will remember his smile. And we will remember that the most important person to golf in its history was more than a great player. He was a good man.