

# Golf's Purest Striker Rarely Missed A Fairway

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If the track record of R4R is as successful in California as it has been in the Carolinas, it will help propel turfgrass research, education, environmental programs and scholarships state-wide. In the upcoming months when you receive a donation request from the CGCSA, please know that this is a worthy cause and we would appreciate your support.

Thank you,  
Rodney Muller

America's sports pages barely acknowledged the fatal heart attack September 4, at age 75, of eccentric Canadian golfer Moe Norman—a supernaturally gifted yet cruelly misunderstood athlete. Norman was a stocky cartoon character with thick Popeye arms and wispy Einstein hair who generations of golf superstars—from Sam Snead to Lee Trevino to Vijay Singh—have said was the purest striker of a golf ball they had ever seen.

In 50 years, Moe Norman had 17 holes in one, nine double eagles, won more than 50 tournaments and set more than 30 course records.

Not the farthest hitter. Not the greatest trick-shot artist or putter—putting bored him.

Just the most stupefying accurate golfer on the planet. Norman played competitive golf more than 50 years, and witnesses say he played 11 of those years—that's

(Continued on page 7)



1968 Canadian Press Photo

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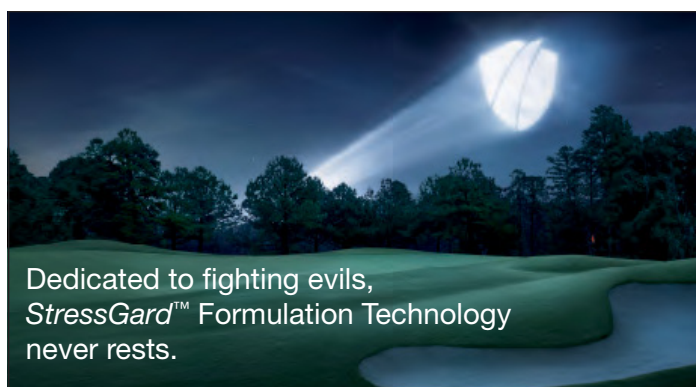
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# Golf's Purest Striker (Continued from page 5)

about 230,000 golf shots—without hitting a ball out of bounds.

A model of hand-to-eye coordination, Norman once hit 356 consecutive drives off a standard wooden golf tee without so much as disturbing it from the ground, much less breaking it. In the real world that's like saying you've never swatted at a fly and missed.

He hit everything straight. Never left. Never right. Everything perfectly arched like the cables on the Golden Gate Bridge.

When I first saw Norman give an exhibition, about 10 years ago in Florida, he began by hitting simple little pitching wedges about 90 yards. A small sunburned crowd of seniors didn't act all that impressed until they realized that the balls were landing on top of each other in a space the size of a bedspread, colliding like little neutrons when they hit. Then he did nearly the same thing with 7-irons, 4-irons and drivers. "Same shot. Same as the last," Norman chortled.

The fans started giggling with delight and disbelief, like a magician had yanked out their underwear.

## Sensation Was Self-Taught

Completely self-taught, Murray "Moe" Norman, raised in Kitchener, Ontario, swung the club like a sledgehammer, with his legs wide apart, using his sturdy forearms and wrists for clubhead speed, not the classic swing of the cookie-cutter dandies on tour. Once a physicist declared that Norman had the most scientifically sound swing in golf.

Today's greatest golfers count their career holes in one on a few fingers. Norman had 17. He also had nine double eagles and three sanctioned scores of 59, won more than 50 tournaments and set more than 30 course records.

He became a sensation on the Canadian amateur circuit, winning the amateur title twice, even as he hitchhiked to some tournaments. He shot 61 four times in 1956. His finest year as a pro was 1966, when he won five of 12 Canadian tournaments he entered, came in second five times and finished no lower than fifth. When Norman turned 50, in 1979, he torched the senior tour, winning seven consecutive Canadian PGA senior championships. One of his sanctioned 59s came at age 62.

So why have so few Americans heard of him?

Norman was so deathly afraid of strangers and stress that after winning a tournament in Canada he once hid on the banks of a nearby river rather than accept his trophy in public and perhaps have to speak. I once had an hour-long dinner with him in which he did not utter a word.

He did play in America, briefly, but it was a disaster. After twice winning the Canadian Amateur Championship, he qualified to play in The Masters but twice fell apart in the strange surroundings, overwhelmed by the Augusta aura and the sight of his heroes.

In school Norman was ostracized for being goofy and overbearing. He would pinch kids or give them brutal bearhugs, thinking it was great fun. He called himself "Moe the Schmoe" and was known as a slow student except in math, where he amazed everyone by multiplying two-digit numbers instantly in his head. If he were counting pennies scattered on the floor, he wouldn't count one by one but in groups or pictures, finding the total in seconds.

His photographic memory made him nearly unbeatable at cards, and he could remember the distance and layout of virtually every golf hole he played.

Norman would speak in a repetitive, high-pitched, Pooh-like voice. "Ooooooh, I'm Moe from Canada. It's cold in Canada. Cold in Canada. Ooooooh." He gave free golf balls to little children but often angrily snapped at adults who just wanted an autograph. He remained estranged from his parents and siblings for decades, wrongly convincing himself that they hated his only passion in life—golf.

Lately, the highlight of Norman's year was always being welcomed at the driving range at the PGA Tour's Canadian Open to hit beside the greatest young players, who uniformly stood in amazement. He died just before the event this year.

"Have you ever actually mis-hit a ball?" Fred Couples once asked Norman, in jest. Norman stopped hitting for a moment and scratched his head.

"Yes," he said softly, as if confessing. "In 1962."

## Golfer Likely Suffered From Autism

Nothing could prepare you for a visit to Planet Moe. He routinely drank 24 Cokes a day—and had the missing teeth to prove it—never had a phone, credit card or date in his life. He hid rolled-up wads of hundred-dollar bills in his old Cadillac's trunk and wore three watches on his left arm, all set to the same time. Obsessed with routine, he went to the same restaurant every day for months and insisted on being served by the same waitress.

When the movie *Rain Man* came out, starring Dustin Hoffman as a middle-aged autistic man, everyone who knew him said, "That's Moe." One of the film's screenwriters bought the film rights to his story.

Friends and physicians felt certain Norman was probably an autistic savant, a term coined in 1978 for autistics who often have exceptional math, memory or music skills, but he was never tested and refused to see doctors until his life depended on it. (A small network of loyal friends literally saved him from homelessness, bankruptcy or worse many times.)

Lee Trevino once said that if Norman had simply come along 30 years later and had had a full-time handler to insulate him from the anxiety of public life, we might be speaking his name with Hogan's and Snead's.

I never heard Norman speak about autism, but I know that he understood its cruelties. In his car, which was filled with old newspaper clippings and the motivational tapes that helped rescue his life, he once had a well-worn article about autism sitting on the front seat.

In the article the outdated term "idiot savant" was discussed at length.

Norman had crossed out the word idiot.