

For Sale:

The Old Tom Morris Award



The incredible story of how the late Byron Nelson's industry honor ended up on eBay, but later was returned to Nelson's wife **BY CHRISTOPHER S. GRAY SR.**

IT started out so innocently. My son CJ wanted an iPod Touch for his birthday. So rather than paying the full price, I went to eBay to find a pre-owned iPod at half the price. After finding and paying for it, I decided to browse a bit. I looked for a shiny, new putter, but anything with Scotty Cameron's name on it was way out of my price range. Then, on a whim, I entered the search term, "GCSAA," more out of pure curiosity than anything else. There was only one listing, but what a listing it turned out to be. The title read:

"Byron Nelson The Old Tom Morris Award 1994 from GCSAA"

Huh? I *had* to be reading this wrong. There's no way our association's most prestigious honor could be up for grabs on the world's largest online auction site, alongside used Pez candy dispensers and a Ruffles potato chip shaped like the Virgin Mary. But there it was, accompanied with nine photos of the award,

including one of the brass plaque on the book's slipcase, which read:

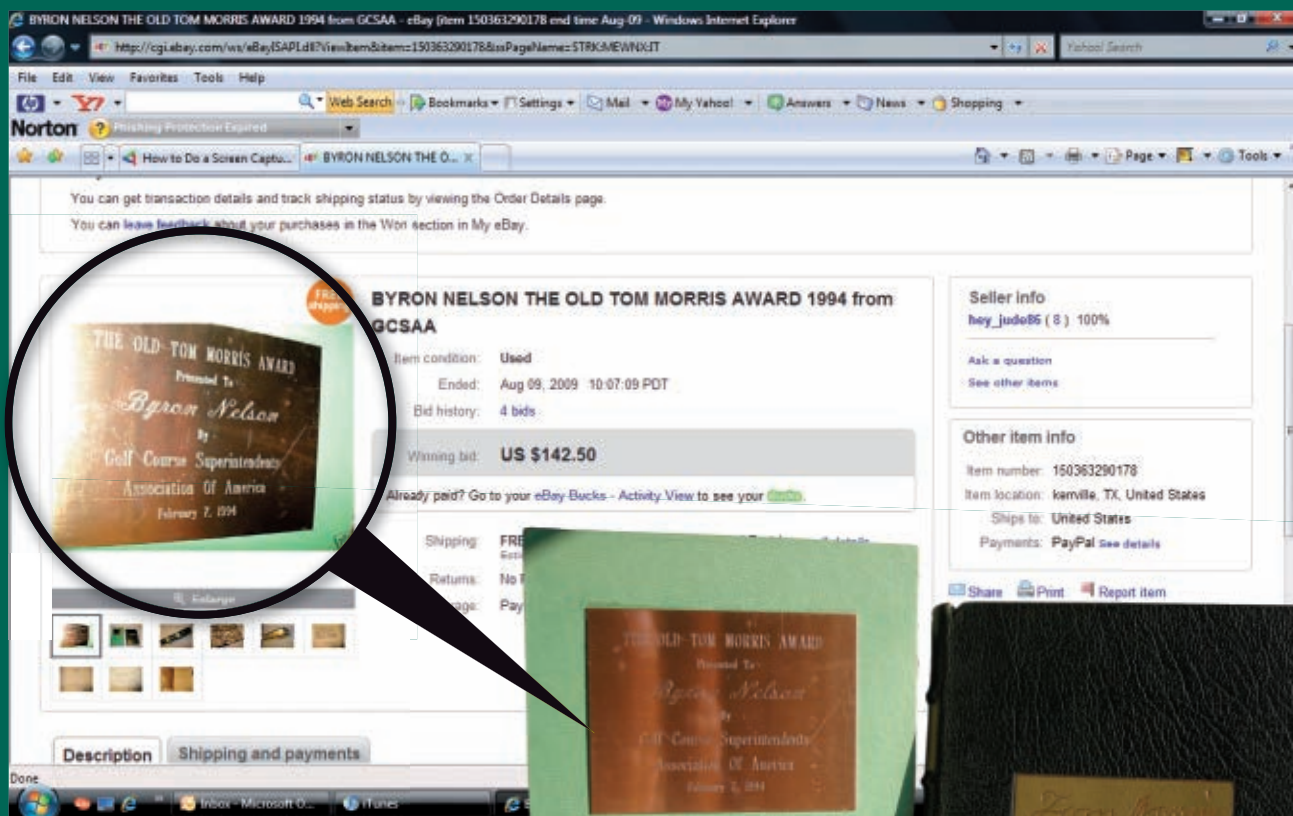
*"THE OLD TOM MORRIS AWARD
— Presented to Byron Nelson by the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, February 7, 1994."*

With five days until the end of the auction and a starting bid of \$100, I watched and waited to see what type of interest the award/book would draw. It also gave me some time to investigate the book's authenticity.

I contacted the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America and asked who could answer some simple questions about the Old Tom Morris Award and its history. I was directed to Past President Mel Lucas, who championed the creation of the award back in 1981. When I contacted him, Lucas told me that, after the board of directors approved the establishment of the Old Tom Morris Award, he proposed the idea of presenting recipients with a special-edition, leather-bound copy of

"The Life of Tom Morris," by the famed author W.W. Tulloch. The board passed the proposal. Lucas recounted that Ellesborough Press in London printed 100 leather-bound editions with slipcases and 300 cloth-bound editions of the book — each hand-numbered and containing a special prologue on the GCSAA's history. J.H. Neill, the captain of The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews at that time, signed each of the leather-bound editions. The first 15 leather-bound copies were set-aside for the future recipients of the award, with the remaining books offered to the membership.

Armed with this vast treasure trove of knowledge from Lucas, I returned to eBay to see if this book was, indeed, the real thing. I enlarged one of the photos and it showed the signature of J.H. Neill clearly and a hand-numbered "14" on the limited-edition statement page. There was also a place for the GCSAA president's signature, yet oddly it was not signed. Other than that, everything else lined up perfectly. I was convinced



the book was the actual award Nelson received in Dallas more than 15 years ago from the GCSAA. I knew I had to win the auction.

The listing was scheduled to end on a Sunday morning. I arranged my work schedule so that, after setting up the course for play that morning, I could do some paperwork in my office. I logged into eBay with two hours remaining and discovered the book had garnered some interest, with bids up to \$140. Somewhat concerned that others had discovered this diamond in the rough, I decided to employ a sniper tactic, a commonly used eBay technique to be the last bidder so as not to run up the bidding needlessly before the auction ends. The only trick to this particular maneuver is to bid high enough to outsnipe other potential snipers, because you only get one shot at it.

With two minutes left in the auction, I refreshed the listing page and found no new bidding activity. As I watched the clock tick down, I had to determine the highest price I would spend for the book, hoping it was more than anyone else who

After studying the photos on eBay, the author was convinced the award was the real deal.

might also be contemplating the same thing. One minute left and my heart actually started beating faster with anticipation. I clicked on the bidding amount and entered my high bid — \$350. The clock ticked down to 15 seconds and I entered the bid. When I refreshed the page, the bidding was over. The book sold for the winning price of \$142.50 — to me!

I was so excited about winning that I called my wife, Colleen, and told her what I had just won on eBay. Being the wonderful pragmatist she is, she asked, “What are you going to do with it?”

Instinctively, I replied, “Give it back.”

Until I actually said the words, I really hadn’t given any thought to what I was going to do with it. All I knew is I wanted to win it. Initially, I was focused on finding out if the book was genuine. Now, after winning, I was more interested in learning how it went from being presented to Byron Nelson to being offered up for bid on the Internet’s largest garage sale. But after speaking to my wife, I realized the award didn’t belong to me, it belonged to Byron Nelson.

I paid for the book through PayPal and patiently waited for it to arrive from seller “hey_jude86.” When it did come, it was simply incredible and exactly as described. I spent the better part of

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an hour carefully flipping through the pages of the book, trying to decipher what journey this book had taken to find itself in my hands.

I e-mailed “hey_jude86” and thanked him for the book, commenting on its remarkable nature. I explained to him I wanted to establish the book’s provenance by connecting the dots between Nelson’s possession and my own and any information he had would be greatly appreciated. “Hey_jude86” replied he had purchased the book from Hospice Thrift Store a month earlier in Kerrville, Texas. He also said he thought Nelson use to own a home in Kerrville. I asked him what he paid for the book. One buck, he replied.

A thrift shop? A dollar? Unbelievable.

Well, at least part of the mystery was solved. A random person, treasure hunting in local second-hand stores, ran across a nice-looking book with Byron Nelson’s name all over it and decided he could likely sell it for more than a \$1 on eBay. Well done. But the real mystery to me was how the book ended up in the Hospice Thrift Store for “hey_jude86” to stumble upon in the first place.

In order to find out for certain, I needed to go back to Byron Nelson himself and ask what happened to the book. Unfortunately, that wasn’t possible. Nelson died in 2006 after a life filled with accomplishments and good deeds that would take a warehouse full of paper to document. However, Nelson left behind his widow, Peggy, who now manages his estate.

After failed attempts to find Peggy Nelson’s contact information on the Internet, I was struck by a rare moment of genius. The Byron Nelson Championship continues to be a PGA staple tournament, and I remembered reading that Peggy Nelson is still involved with it. Who do I know who’s affiliated with the PGA Tour? Steve Mona, CEO of the World Golf Foundation and former CEO of the GCSAA.

I crafted a short e-mail to Mona,

explaining the situation, and asked for some assistance in finding any contact information for Peggy Nelson. In dependable Mona fashion, he responded in less than 15 minutes, saying he would inquire with the PGA and get back to me shortly. Less than an hour later, I had her phone number and address. Some people you can always count on. Thanks again, Steve.

Equipped with the information I needed, I threw caution to the wind, picked up the phone and dialed Peggy Nelson’s number. Seconds later, a sweet-sounding lady’s voice echoed from the earpiece. I started the conversation with an introduction and the statement, “I think I have something that belongs to you, or at least to your late husband.”

After going through the story of how I found the book on eBay, bought it, tracked its journey to the thrift store and searched for a way to contact her, I asked her, “Do you have any idea how the book might have ended up at the Hospice Thrift Store in Kerrville?”

“I really have no idea,” she said, “other than we used to have a vacation home in Kerrville that we sold in 2004. We donated a tremendous amount of furniture and books to Hospice when we left. It’s possible it was accidentally included with those donated items, but it certainly wasn’t intentional.”

I explained to Mrs. Nelson that I wanted to return the award to her be-

It made the author’s day to get this note from Peggy Nelson.

cause it rightfully belongs to Byron’s estate, and more importantly, his legacy.

“I’m tickled to death you feel that way,” she said. “I really appreciate you took all the time and effort to, not only secure the book, but also contact me to return it. Thank you so much!”

Mrs. Nelson continued our conversation by recanting stories of Byron’s uncanny ability to touch people’s lives. Forty-five minutes later, I hung up the phone filled with the sense of joy you can only get from doing a good deed.

I carefully packaged the book and mailed it to the address she gave me. I insured the package just to make sure it safely arrived in her hands. It did.

I received a note from Mrs. Nelson a week later thanking me again for returning the book. She still isn’t sure of the bizarre circumstances that led to the book ending up in a thrift store. Likely, we will never know for sure what exactly happened.

In a fitting conclusion, Mrs. Nelson loaned the book permanently to the new Byron Nelson High School in Trophy Club, Texas. There’s a display case at the school’s entrance that holds various memorabilia from Byron’s past for all the students and visitors to see.

Nelson’s Old Tom Morris Award took quite a journey, but it couldn’t have ended up in a better place. ■

9-14-09
Dear Chris,
As soon as I opened your package and saw the book, I recognized it + am so pleased you made the effort to return it + send it back to me. I know golf coach Larry Hawkins at the new Byron Nelson High School will be pleased to see it, and it will be on permanent display at the school as well. Sincerely,
Peggy Nelson