



Pilgrimages for Golf Course Superintendents: LATROBE COUNTRY CLUB

By Monroe S. Miller

For forty years Arnold Palmer has been an all-American hero. No one has held him higher, liked him more or extended more respect than I have. Golfers and non-golfers alike have revered him and his strong values, his bold go-for-broke style that was his signature and his respect for those who made him what he was—golf fans. He has been an exemplary, eminently commendable individual of great accomplishment.

Latrobe Country Club has been associated with Arnold Palmer from the very beginning of his career. It was to him like the Milwaukee Braves were to Eddie Mathews, the Green Bay Packers to Vince Lombardi and the Yankees to Mickey Mantle.

Yet this association was somewhat unique. For example, can you name the golf course Jack Nicklaus or Sam Snead or Byron Nelson grew up on? It is likely there is not another golfer whose name and a golf course are so closely related as Arnold Palmer and Latrobe Country Club.

It was only after I had become interested in a career as a golf course superintendent that I learned why Latrobe CC was so important to Arnold. His dad, Milfred "Deacon" Palmer, was the heart of that club. He was the superintendent and golf pro at LCC for 55 years, from 1921 until his death in 1976.

Arnold Palmer was guided by a wise, strong and principled father. Deke worked alongside his employees and respected them, believed in God, loved his country, respected all people and possessed great humility. It is no wonder his son found ready acceptance by Americans.

Deke gave his children—Arnold was one of four—limits on the Latrobe golf course and at the club. They couldn't swim in the club pool, and his very talented son wasn't allowed on the course when member play was heavy.

It seems to me a good bit of Arnold's appeal was his

humility and a commoner touch, a grasp of his own roots. He is the kind of guy most would like to drink a beer with.

Arnie bought Latrobe Country Club in 1971 and his father continued on as the pro and the superintendent.

The GCSAA recognized Deke Palmer when Arnold was chosen as the first Old Tom Morris recipient. Deke's picture was on a cover of *Golf Course Management* magazine, as I recall.

Is it any wonder I have wanted to visit this golf course for thirty years?

The day I finally made the pilgrimage to Latrobe Country Club was a perfect day. It had rained the entire day previous, giving my visit a high, bright and blue sky. It was cool, around 50 degree F for a high temperature, and there was no wind. It was the kind of day golf course superintendents dream about.

I took a route that passed beneath the Oakmont CC bridge over I76. It seemed symbolic since the 1994 US Open was held there and it was the last Open Arnold Palmer would compete in. Not only did it sadden Palmer; many golf fans will miss seeing him at the Open competitions.

Only now do I know why he felt so strongly about Oakmont. I didn't realize how close Latrobe was to Pittsburgh nor how close Oakmont was to Pittsburgh. Why wouldn't a kid who was a great player from a rather humble background want to play one of the world's greatest golf courses, especially when that course was so close?

Exit 7 from I76 led me east on Highway 30. The ride through Greenburg to Latrobe is pleasant, up and down the hills, through the valleys and across the ridges. I drove into Latrobe and looked around before surrendering to the reality I could not find the golf course on my own.

In Middleton where I live there is a "new concept" development underway where the lots are narrow, the garages



A beautiful place—the clubhouse and its surrounds.



A look at the clubhouse across the pool area. The pro shop is to the right.



A look at the golf course through the oak woods south of the clubhouse.

are behind the houses and there is an alley dividing back to back homes. Funny, that new concept describes a lot of the Latrobe neighborhoods I drove through looking for Arnie's club. A gal in one of the neighborhoods gave me directions to the course although she confessed "I've never been by it myself."

She was obviously not a golf fan!

I backtracked, crossed Highway 30 and turned left at the big Kennemental buildings across from the Latrobe airport. It was named "Old Highway 30." The airport reminded me that Palmer is a pilot and for years has flown his own small jet around the country. The location of the airport made a lot of sense to me.

Old 30 takes you past the Latrobe High School. Down the hill from there you catch a glimpse of what you think is a golf course. I slowed down, turned my head to read the sign at what appeared to be the club entrance and read the three words I hoped for—Latrobe Country Club.

Old Highway 30 runs parallel to a golf hole and just past that was the shop area. I kept going, hoping to drive around the entire golf course before coming back to the shop to see the superintendent, as our GCSAA code of ethics dictates.

LCC is actually in the small village of Youngstown. I turned right off Old 30, drove past the Methodist Church and navigated around the beautiful landscape that contained Arnold's club. I stopped here and there to drink in the view, take a picture and to get my bearings. I completed the trip around and drove back to the shop area. I'd seen lots of employees around the golf course and hoped to find one of them in the shop. Deep down I was admittedly anxious to see the old Toro tractor that appeared in the Pennzoil ads with Arnie. No one was there and I resisted the temptation to nose around. I backtracked and headed up the entry road to the club parking lot.

There are some similarities between LCC and my club. The most obvious was the clubhouse location—on a promontory for both. Latrobe has some severe grade changes, just like we do. But ours are strictly amateur hour compared to those on that Pennsylvania property. Whereas we look off to the rolling landscape of Wisconsin, over and past Lake Mendota, Latrobe is facing some impressing old and weathered mountains. Both views are beautiful. The clubhouse area is fairly expansive, but shaded. There are lots of mature oak trees and just as many evergreens. It really is very beautiful and pleasant.

The clubhouse is stark and pure white with some black trim. I parked, feeling a little self-conscious. But I was buoyed by my past experiences with golf players and club members—mostly they are friendly and civil people. I went into the clubhouse and stopped at the office to ask if it was appropriate for me to be there to look around the place where Arnold Palmer started his career. The woman I asked smiled and said "we get lots of visitors like you. Feel free to look around."

So I did. At length. By myself. It was late enough in the year that no players were present. No one was on the course and there were only a few cars in the lot. That told me there weren't many people in the clubhouse either.

I made an obligatory stop in the pro shop since I wasn't able to find anyone in the golf course shop. The pro was very pleasant, offering me some scorecards and answering questions about Arnie.

Palmer has a home close by—I didn't bother to find out



Welcome to Latrobe Country Club!



The clubhouse occupies the highest spot on the golf course. The golf shop is to the left.



A view through the woods gives only a glimpse of the course.

where—and spends the summers in Latrobe. He is, as I understood it, around the club a lot of the time. He has a workshop where he relaxes by repairing and modifying golf clubs.

Arnold's GCSAA membership plaque which many of us saw him receive when he received the Old Tom Morris award in 1983, hangs on the wall behind the shop counter for all to see. Also on the wall was his dad's and his brother Jerome's GCSAA member plaques. Jerry Palmer is now the general manager of LCC.

Two pictures are also on the wall. One is of Deke Palmer and one is of Arnold. They were taken at about the same age of each man. The similarity was striking—same

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A freshly aerified fairway leads strongly uphill to the clubhouse. This picture gives you a sense of the many evergreens there.



This view is from the east side of the golf course, away from the clubhouse area.

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hairline and color, same rugged and leathery skin, same nose. There is no mistaking that they are father and son.

There are only tasteful references in the clubhouse to Arnold's importance in the club history. All point to enormous pride, but it isn't overdone. My favorite was a picture of golf's greatest player of all time, holding a club when he was four years old. Someone had written on it something like "some of us knew you when..." It was great!

It was no wonder I couldn't find any staff people or the superintendent in the golf course shop. They were too busy with leaves and with aerifying. It isn't often any of us have so little player interference as they had this day. They were getting a lot of work done.

On one corner of the clubhouse lawn, adjacent to the cartpath where all players walk, are two small bronze markers, honoring Arnie's mother and father. Clearly his parents were highly regarded by the members.

I wandered freely around the clubhouse surrounds and the greens and tees near the clubhouse. I sat on a bench at one of the tees and thought how many times I had dreamed to come here. I wondered how many others have thought of travelling to Latrobe and how many had actually been able to make the visit.

And I wondered why. I haven't wanted to see where Ben Hogan or Jack Nicklaus or anybody else learned to play golf. If I had, I wouldn't have known where to go.

I finally concluded it wasn't any one thing but rather a lot of different reasons. Palmer is a singular person in the world of sports, always has been and always will be. His story and his life are interesting and intimately associated with Latrobe and the area around it. The influence of his father and the fact that his father did the same kind of work I do is no small factor. Arnold's interest in our GCSAA is especially appealing to those like me who have labored long on a golf course. He knows a lot about us and has done some of the work we do.

Palmer's prominent role in the history of golf drew me to Latrobe, as it has others I have seen him play several times, at Bay Hill and Rio Pinar in Orlando. I have had my picture taken with him. And I've gotten his autograph several times, including on a quart can of Pennzoil. I have read all the books about him, and many of the endless articles.

About all that was left for me was to see where his grand career began and continues yet today.

Now, finally, I somehow feel satisfied. It was quite a pilgrimage. 🏏



The golf course shop is beyond this heavily shaded golf hole.



The LCC Women's Organization honored Deke and Doris Palmer with this memorial on the front lawn of the clubhouse.

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