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Golf with Jack
A Tribute to my Father

By
Peter Smolens
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Although John (Jack) H. Smolens, my father passed away in 1981, I feel his presence every time I step onto a golf course. It was because of him that I play golf. He instilled the love of the game in me at an early age. He was my most significant influence on golf and life.

Far from a natural, my father was your regular hacker with a big banana ball and a 16 handicap. But you would never find a more dedicated golfer than my father. I think he discovered the game like many through the big three, Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player and Arnold Palmer. It was because of them; he joined the local country club.

I was ten years old when he asked me to caddie for my mother. A struggling beginner she played on Sunday afternoons with my father. Because of the lack of available caddies, my mother wanted to make sure she had a bag toter. Being the middle one of the three boys in the family, (older brother John was already showing promise as a tennis player and my younger brother Michael was too young) I was the logical choice.

I spent the afternoon walking around the hilly New England course pulling my mother's cart. At the end of the round, my father gave me two dollars. Getting money for spending the afternoon with my parents, my employment future was set. I couldn't wait for the next Sunday!

In the beginning, everyone thought it was cute, that my mother would have her son carry her clubs. Mom told one of her friends, "at least I know he's not getting into trouble."

Once school let out for the summer, I went to the club to caddie. Although I didn't know it at the time, this simple act of a youthful teen wanting to make some money caused quite a stir with some of the club members. A member son who wished to be a caddie?

Thankfully my father and Les Bond, the golf professional at the club, came to my rescue. They had the insight to be rational about the situation. The club needed caddies (this was before golf carts took over) and here I was willing to work. So it was decided that when I was a caddie, I was to be treated like a caddie. When I came to play, I was a member. It worked out because club rules stated only adults could play on the weekend mornings (Little did they know I would later break that rule when I qualified for the Club Championship at 16).

By high school, I became one of the top caddies in the club. Club members would request my services. Still, one of my proudest moments was being asked to caddie for my father in the annual

member-guest tournament at the club.

Through caddying, I learned how to play the game of golf. Throughout my teens, when I was not caddying, I worked on my golf game. By my junior year in high school, my handicap was in the single digits.

It was that spring that I played my first "real" golf tournament with my father. His regular partner for the annual "Spring Cup" golf tournament at the club was injured. Needing a partner, he asked if I would consider playing with him instead of working as a caddie. I jumped at the opportunity.

We did ok. The "Spring Cup" was the best ball tournament based on handicap. We played pretty well, qualifying for the first flight. Over the next few weekends, we moved through the field only to lose in the finals to a man who while getting 16 shots off my handicap shoots a lifetime best 83 on his ball. Although I played well, shooting 75 on my ball, we lost two up with 1 to play.

The few times I played golf with my father during high school was always a treat. He had a way of making me feel relaxed - to enjoy the game of golf. In my senior year in high school, I was regularly shooting in the low to mid 70's, but I could never break the par barrier. It finally happened while playing with my father. During qualifying for the club championship I finally broke par, shooting a two-under-par 70.

A once in a lifetime round, the drives were staying in the fairway. The irons were heading at the pin, and even some of the putts were dropping. As we played the last few holes, I started to realize what was happening. But Dad always knew what to say to keep me level-headed. Sinking the short birdie putt on the 18th green, I don't know who was happier. All I know is I will never forget the smile on my father's face when I looked up after hearing the ball fall into the cup.

In the 70's I had moved on starting on a road to becoming a professional golfer working at country clubs in New England.

My father was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease - a deadly form of cancer. With his health slowly deteriorating, rounds of golf with my father became special. I made it an annual event to have Dad join me for one afternoon of golf at the club where I worked. Those days became cherished memories that I will remember for the rest of my life.

The last round of golf we had together was in 1979 while I was Assistant Golf Pro at Nashawtuc Country Club in Concord, MA. Although he didn't play very well, as I recall, I remember every time I looked over he was smiling. During the round, I asked him why he seemed happy.

"The circle was complete," he said as we road in the cart. "Seeing the way you hit the golf ball, I know that golf will always be in our family."

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