

Job well done

Jones rides (his Harley) into sunset after 40 years of innovative leadership

JERRY JONES LEARNED EARLY IN HIS 40-YEAR CAREER AS A PGA GOLF PROFESSIONAL THAT, WHEN DEALING WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF THE VARIOUS GOLF COMPANIES, IT WOULD BENEFIT HIM TO KEEP THEM A LITTLE OFF-BALANCE. A CRUSTY OPENING REMARK MIGHT LEAD TO A BETTER DEAL AT THE END OF THE DAY.

“WHAT’S WITH THAT JERRY JONES?” THE REPS WOULD ASK ONE OF HIS CONTEMPORARIES. “WHY IS HE ALWAYS PICKING ON ME?” **BY KEN MacLEOD**

As time wore on, the reps came to realize Jones was just testing them a little. Now, on the eve of his retirement from the director of golf position for Tulsa County, they join a chorus of other golf industry leaders and former employees in singing his praises.

“Jerry Jones is one of the top five outstanding golf professionals I’ve ever dealt with in my entire career,” said longtime Titleist rep Dale Davison. “He’s always stood his ground for what he thought was right. He was flexible and changed his marketing over the years to meet the needs of his consumers. And he’s just as service-demanding of his employees now as he was 25 years ago. He never got lazy with success.”

Jones, now 63, had plenty of success. He has been the head professional or director of golf at LaFortune Park, located in the heart of Tulsa, since 1975. His duties expanded to include the oversight of South Lakes Golf Course in Jenks when it opened in 1989.

During that time, Jones’ shops have always had a reputation for providing excellent service and an extensive selection. The pro shop at LaFortune Park has been named one of the top 100 in the United States seven times by Golf Shop Operations magazine. Jones has a keen eye for quality and kept a

sharp lookout for bargains which he would pass along to his customers.

He is also somewhat of a visionary. It was Jones, along with South Central pros Steve Ball and Larry Fryer of Oklahoma City and Don Farquhar of Wichita, who worked with Titleist to form its custom-fitting division, which

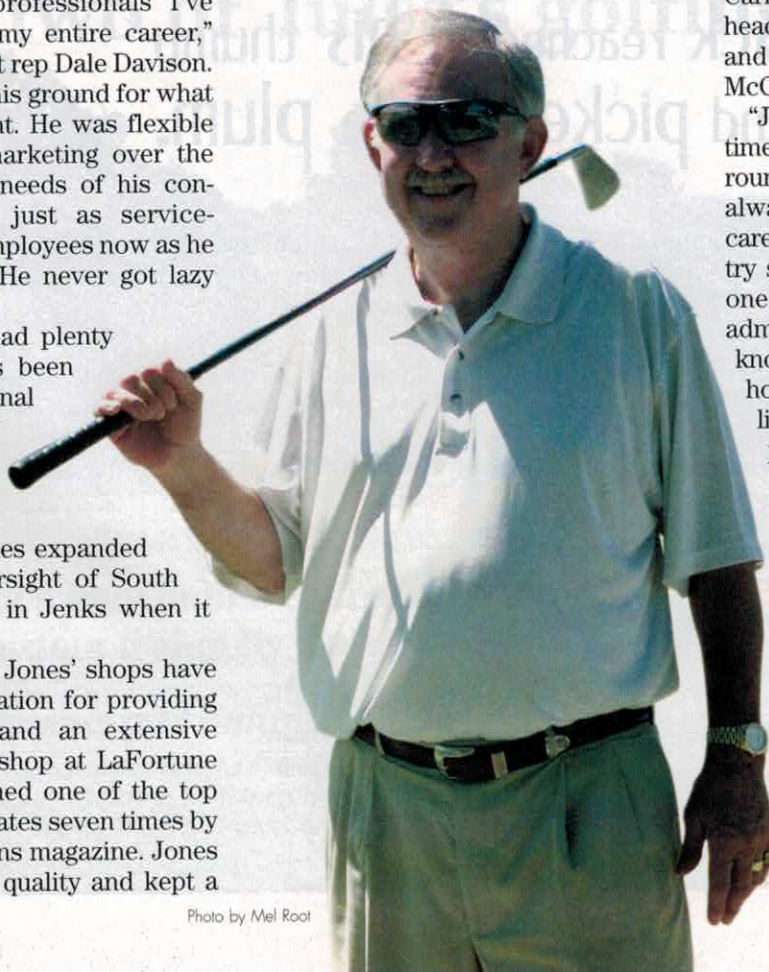


Photo by Mel Root

turned into a successful national program emulated by all the other major golf companies and the last line of defense for golf pros against the hordes of discount shops, sporting good stores, catalog retail outlets and component club makers.

“You can’t fit golf clubs without ball flight and you don’t have ball flight at any of the discount stores,” Jones said. “If you were going to buy a new suit of clothes, you wouldn’t go to a Med-X. The guy who goes to a discount store for a new set of clubs is going to a Med-X for golf clubs.”

In addition to his knack for merchandising, Jones has always been a solid player and teacher. He won the section championship in 1977 and played in the PGA Championship at Oakmont in 1978. His students have included former LPGA tour player, NCAA champion and current University of Tulsa golf coach Melissa McNamara and PGA Tour star Bill Glasson.

But what Jones is most proud of is having helped the careers of many young professionals, some of whom have gone on to success in different fields and many who are now head professionals at other courses. Among them are Dan Langford, Doug Adams, Barry Cheek, Jeff Cooper, Tim Johnson, Brent Lauber, Lance Allen and Russ Carlson. And, of course, the current head professionals at LaFortune Park and South Lakes, respectively, Pat McCrate and Paul Ridings.

“Jerry has always been ahead of his time,” McCrate said. “He’s always surrounded himself with sharp people and always had qualified assistants that care. He has paid better than the industry standard and he works with everyone on their teaching, tournament administration, rules and equipment knowledge. And everyone has to know how to custom fit. We’ve always felt like LaFortune Park has been the place to learn how to play golf.”

“He’s always been a progressive thinker,” said Ridings, who has been with Jones since 1974. “When all the discount stores popped up, instead of moaning and groaning, he got in there and started competing with them and was one of the first pro shops to do it. He’s always put the customer at the forefront, offering them good products at a great price both on the course and in the pro shop. I’ve learned so much from him and I’m going to

miss his guidance."

One thing his pros learned from Jones is to stand up for what they think is right. When a talented but temperamental section pro made a fuss at the Senior Championship at South Lakes several years ago, Jones barred him from playing in the event. When he threatened to sue, Jones said fine, you're still not playing on one of his courses. To the chagrin of some, the section office moved the tournament rather than get involved with a lawsuit.

"Jerry was like a second father to me," said Langford, now the head professional at Earlywine Park in Oklahoma City. "He could make you mad as hell sometimes, make you do stuff you just didn't want to do. But just like with your dad, you would reflect on it and it was absolutely what you should be doing."

"His expectations were high and when you didn't meet those you were going to know about it. But he was always just trying to make you better. You might go kicking and screaming to a higher level, but you would get there."

A native of Frederick, Jones played collegiate golf at the University of Tulsa. When LaFortune Park opened in 1960, he applied for a job with head pro Charlie Weisner. He and Alsie Hyden, current director of golf at Lake Hefner Golf Course in Oklahoma City, were both hired as assistants Feb. 1, 1961.

The great story behind that is that Weisner had already decided to hire Jones at \$400 a month when Hyden called begging him for a job, telling him he'd work for next to nothing. Weisner said fine and gave them both \$200 a month.

Jones soon became fast friends with Alsie. They learned a lot together in those early years, even though the demands of work, which could last from 4 a.m. till well into the night, didn't leave them much time to play golf together.

"Late one summer evening the course was just dead and we still had 45 minutes of sunlight left, so we closed that place and went out to play," Hyden said. "Well, someone showed up and we got caught. Boy, did we catch it."

At that time LaFortune Park, with an 18-hole championship course and an 18-hole par-3 course, and the 36-hole Mohawk Park facility were the only public courses in Tulsa. The market has changed drastically since.

"In 1980, we did 121,000 rounds on the par-3 and the championship course combined," Jones said. "This year we'll

be lucky to do 90,000. We did a feasibility study when we built South Lakes that said we needed five more courses in the Tulsa metro area. Since then, 11 have been built. If I had all the money in the world, the last thing I would ever do is build a golf course."

In a market in which most courses would love to exceed 35,000 rounds, South Lakes and LaFortune Park are the only two consistently bettering 50,000 per year.

Jones left his assistant's position in 1974 to be the head professional at Surrey Hills Country Club in Yukon, where he dramatically increased the membership in a one-year stint that ended with his acceptance of the head pro job at LaFortune Park when Weisner retired in 1975.

In the time since, Jones has overseen renovations to the course and clubhouse. He changed the way tee times are structured (when he was hired, golfers would camp out outside the pro shop on Friday nights to receive a number from the night watchman giving them an order for tee times the following Saturday. Greens fees at the time were \$2 weekdays and \$3 on weekends.

Although golf has always been his job, his passions and hobbies are many. He loves to fish, target shoot and ride motorcycles. He is a history buff, politically astute, knows his way around an antique store and loves to travel. Except for a recent trip to Scotland with his son-in-law, he rarely takes his golf clubs on vacation.

None of those activities mean quite what they once did to Jones. Sharon, the love of his life and wife of 40 years, passed away last winter under freakish and tragic circumstances.

It was Jerry who had quietly battled liver and heart problems for years while Sharon was in perfect health. But she slipped and hurt a knee on the ice last winter. She had successful knee surgery, but on the trip home from the hospital her breathing became labored. She was rushed back to the emergency room, but died from complications caused by a blood clot.

"We had our whole life planned for the next 20 years," Jones said. "We were going to travel here and there, do this and that. Now it's cut short."

"That was devastating for him," Ridings said. "There's a lot of us who will never get over it, it was just such a tragedy. His retirement was to be their retirement."

"Sharon was just a lovely lady,"

Langford said. "She was probably one of the few people that could dish it out to Jerry and get the better of him. Not many people could get the better of Jerry, but she could."

Jones has purchased a house on the fourth tee of Decordova Bend Country Club in Grandbury, Texas, about 45 minutes southwest of Fort Worth. Some good friends from Tulsa live there and he'll be able to fish and play golf and give his heart time to mend. He'll also hop on his Harley Davidson Ultra Glide and ride to New Albany, Ohio, to visit his daughter Kristin, her husband David Ferguson and their four children. Or to Stillwater to see daughter Kelli Killam, her husband John and their three children.

Two years ago Jones and a friend rode their bikes 3,469 miles through the Northwest on an 18-day trip with the wives trailing in a car.

"It was wonderful," Jones said. "On a motorcycle you can feel and smell what's going on around you. You can see the sky and the mountains."

Jones can take great pride in his long and illustrious career. But one senses that, for now at least, he'll draw more solace from the open road.

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