

Caddie was Stockton's 'best friend' at crucial time

BY KEN MACLEOD
SOUTH CENTRAL GOLF

Jed Day rushed home from basic training with the National Guard in early August 1970, hoping there still might be a bag to tote in the PGA Championship at Tulsa's Southern Hills Country Club that month.

Day lucked out. He arrived on Saturday, and most of the caddie slots for the next week's championship were filled. But one little fellow was having trouble lugging the large bag of his assigned professional and had to drop out. Day's former golf coach at Tulsa Memorial High School, Doug Dugger, was serving as caddie master and asked Day if he would like to carry the bag for Dave Stockton.

"I said sure, I'd love to," recalled Day, now the vice president of F&M Bank in Tulsa. "I knew Stockton was a good player and a good putter."

What he didn't know was that Stockton, then 28 years old, was about to win his first major championship, depriving Arnold Palmer and his legion of fans of seeing The King crowned in the only major he never won.

Fans were so partial to Palmer during their final-round duel that Stockton left Southern Hills with a bad taste in his mouth, according to Day.

"He knew how popular Palmer was and that most of the cheering was a natural reaction," Day said. "There were some things he didn't appreciate, such as people cheering when he hit his ball in the water."

Stockton shot rounds of 70-70-66-73 for a 279 total. Although he finished shakily with four bogeys on his final nine holes, it was more than enough to hold off Palmer, who tied Bob Murphy for second at 281 after rounds of 70-72-69-70.

Stockton had a seven-shot lead at one point in the final round and led by three strokes going into the final hole. Still, Day recalls nervous moments.

"It was truly an exciting day," he said. "Every time Stockton got in trouble, he got out. On 13, he knocked it in the water and the crowd started cheering. He dropped behind the pond, right on the hard pan, and hit a hell of a pitch. He made the putt for a five and that closed the door on Palmer."

At the time, Day was a 21-year-old Southern Hills member with one year of college experience and professional aspirations of his own. After determining that he and Stockton hit their clubs a similar distance, he was able to provide valuable help in giving Stockton the proper club.

Day's advice proved invaluable on the ninth hole in the final round. Stockton was coming off a double bogey on No. 8, trimming two shots off his lead. He hit his drive on No. 9 into a bunker on the right side and wanted to hit a 7-

iron to the green. Day handed him a 6-iron instead, and Stockton hit the ball two feet below the pin for an easy birdie.

Day also was there to provide a sympathetic ear during the nerve-racking final nine holes.

"He made the comment walking down 14, 'I don't think these people are for me,'" Day said. "He understood that Arnie was everybody's favorite. But he was really working hard. This was his day of glory.

"He really held it together. We kept talking and when you're in that position and have someone to talk to, it helps. It's like having your wife along. When you get in that position, you go to your best friend, and I was his best friend that day."

Stockton fully agrees with that sentiment. When he first arrived at Southern Hills that week, he was assigned another caddie and the young man unfortunately knew nothing

about golf.

"Getting Jed was the biggest break I could have possibly gotten that week," Stockton said. "I had a caddie who had no idea what he was doing. He was putting the bag in a bunker, putting the bag on the green. I later found out he was the son of a guy who owned the

bar the caddie master frequented.

"I had never fired a caddie in my life, but I had to fire him. The next thing I know, I've got a guy who's a 1 or a 2 (handicap). I go from the worst I could have had to the best. Jed was great that week."

Stockton's wife, Cathy, then pregnant with youngest son, Ron, who now caddies for his dad, was watching at greenside when Stockton two-putted 18 for a bogey and the championship. Both Stocktons began crying, and Day was as happy as a caddie could be.

"I felt like I was playing the tournament," Day said. "Being a golfer, you get that excited. When he had that four-foot putt on 18 to win it, that was what every golfer hopes for."

Even though Day also was a huge Palmer fan, he had no regrets on that Sunday.

"Palmer had been my idol," Day said, "and I even told him on the first tee that I would be for him any day of the week, but not today."

Day never pursued a professional career of his own, but today he is a low-handicap golfer with memberships at Southern Hills and The Golf Club of Oklahoma. He caddied for Stockton again at the U.S. Open at Southern Hills in 1977, but the two couldn't recapture the magic and Stockton failed to make the cut.

"I was almost a little glad, because I was out of shape," Day said. "We walked 18 on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday and my feet were mush."



Jed Day
MARY BARTON LAWSON