



The Tri-Cities Edifier

Volume 9

November 20, 2022

No. 47

Arnold Palmer

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On September 25, 2016 golfing legend Arnold Palmer passed away at the age of 87. I have always been a huge Arnold Palmer fan. When I was in my early teens I attended an exhibition golf match in which Mr. Palmer participated. The occasion was the opening of the new golf course built on the grounds of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in the early 1960's. My uncle was the superintendent of the golf course so I was able to get in free.

I can still remember that day very clearly even though it's been over fifty years ago. Four golfers participated in the match. Mr. Palmer and fellow PGA Tour professional Doug Sanders, a prominent local amateur golfer Ed Tutwiler (If you are familiar with Indianapolis, Mr. Tutwiler owned the largest Cadillac dealership in town.) and a local club professional. The course was not roped off, so the spectators could walk right alongside the golfers. I even got Mr. Palmer's autograph, but, unfortunately, managed to lose it over the years.

The only sports letters I received in high school were in golf. Arnold Palmer was my golfing hero. He was noted for his aggressive style of play and for having tons of charisma. He had an uncanny ability to pull off the "miracle shot" when his ball was in the rough, in the trees, etc. He was also known for his "charges" where he would shoot a phenomenally low score on the last day of a tournament to come from behind to win. His style and magnetic personality were magical and his fans became known as "Arnie's Army." He was, as much as any professional golfer, responsible for the great rise in popularity of televised golf.

Palmer's record in golf is impressive. He was a topflight amateur, winning many prestigious amateur tournaments including the 1954 U.S. Amateur. He won seven professional "majors" including two British Opens, one U.S. Open and was the first to win four Masters titles. He is ranked fifth all-time with 62 PGA Tour wins. Others golf professionals have more stellar statistics. However, more than any single individual, Arnold Palmer is most responsible for the current popularity of golf worldwide and the PGA Tour in particular.

For example, when Mr. Palmer won his first PGA tournament the winner's prize was only \$2,400. Now first prize money is usually over \$1.8 million. Arnold's lifetime earnings on the PGA Tour amounted to the winning prize money for one tournament today. In Arnold's day a PGA Tour professional lived like a gypsy, traveling from tournament to tournament by car and often living out of their car.

But Arnold had a keen eye for business and self-promotion (in a good way). Arnold died with a net worth reported to be \$675 million. He made a good living by playing professional golf, but the bulk of his fortune was made by turning his celebrity into an industry. More than any other professional athlete, Arnold invented sports marketing, product endorsements, etc. When Arnold was in his eighties he still netted \$42 million per year (2015) from his business and product endorsement interests. Not bad for a guy who started off with next to nothing.

Mr. Palmer had a "Midas touch" when it came to business. He designed and built over three hundred golf courses all over the world. For example, he was the first person to build a golf course in China and designed and built golf courses on every continent except Africa and Antarctica. He manufactured a line of golf equipment and clothing, endorsed everything from Pennzoil to Hertz Rent a Car. He had his own line of iced tea products and his multi-colored umbrella logo gives instant recognition of his "brand." He is also the co-founder of the wildly popular Golf Channel.

He was a very accomplished aviator. As his stature and earnings as a professional golfer grew, Arnold took flying lessons so he could fly his own plane to tournaments and return to his family more quickly and more often. Mr. Palmer and I

share an enthusiasm for aviation as I was once a flight instructor. But my flying experience cannot hold a candle to his. He logged almost 20,000 hours as “pilot in command.” That puts him at the elite level of veteran military and airline pilots. He flew everything from Cessna 172’s to Boeing 747’s to F-16 fighter jets. Over the years he owned, at one time or another, about a dozen business jets. In 1976 he set the world’s record for circumnavigating the earth in a business jet when he flew a LearJet 36 around the world in less than 58 hours.

Palmer was beloved by his fans for many reasons, not the least of which was his openness and humility. Even though his nickname was “The King,” he did not let that go to his head. It is reported that he never refused a fan an autograph or the opportunity to have their picture taken with him. He received millions of cards and letters from his fans. Amazingly he saved every fan letter he received and answered every letter. Many of the letters requested autographs. Many of those letters did not include return postage, so he gladly paid the return postage. As a result, his postage budget each year was in the six figure range. He paid the return postage because he felt the obligation to graciously reply to every fan request since they had taken the time and effort to write to him. He was also a stickler about his signature when signing autographs. He had beautiful penmanship as his autograph was very precise and legible. He preached to the younger generation of professional golfers to imitate his excellent penmanship as he felt it an obligation to the fans to have a legible autograph.

Mr. Palmer was also one of the most benevolent philanthropists imaginable. He established several hospitals including ones in his home state of Pennsylvania and his adopted state of Florida. He also kept generating funds to maintain support for these hospitals through various means including the Arnold Palmer Invitational, a regular PGA Tour event held annually in Orlando which generates millions of charitable dollars each year. Mr. Palmer has several other charitable organizations he established and supported, he also served as spokesmen for several others, including the March of Dimes. It is impossible to measure the total impact of Mr. Palmer’s philanthropy, but it certainly has generated hundreds of millions of dollars to many very worthy causes. His philanthropic efforts will continue long after his death. For all of his exploits and charity he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2004 and the Congressional Gold Medal in 2009.

Several things really strike me about Mr. Palmer. First, despite all of his fame he appeared to me to always remain humble and aware that he owed his parents, fans, and colleagues a debt of gratitude. He always remained grateful and humble concerning his fame and success. Second, I have never heard even one comment critical of him. His character was impeccable and he was universally loved and respected by all. Third, he had an uncanny ability to make everyone that ever met him feel like they were his old friend. Fourth, his philanthropic generosity was enormous and he never boasted about it or used it as a vehicle for self-promotion. Fifth, he was a family man. Most celebrities end up with multiple marriages. Arnold was twice married, but only because his first wife, Winnie, died of ovarian cancer in 1999. Several of his charities were founded in her honor, including the Winnie Palmer Hospital for Women and Children in Orlando. He had many character traits that are worthy of our imitation.

But, when I heard the news of his passing and watched his memorial service on television I became very sad. Here was a man that was so successful, so loved, so worthy of imitation but I fear for him spiritually. I know I am not his judge in this regard, and I’m glad I’m not. I’m thankful God is his judge, for I know “the Judge of all the earth” will “do right” (Gen. 18:25) when Mr. Palmer’s eternal destiny is determined. However, I also know that “those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ...shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.” (2 Thess. 1:8-9) To my knowledge Mr. Palmer never obeyed the gospel of Christ. From all I can gather he was a life-long Presbyterian; therefore, I assume, according the Calvinistic doctrine of that denomination, he was baptized as a baby and never truly “put on Christ” as the New Testament teaches (Gal. 3:27). I see him in much the same light as the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10 & 11). Like Cornelius, Mr. Palmer was undoubtedly a good man and one “who gave alms generously” (Acts 10:2). But unlike Cornelius, to my knowledge, he never heard or responded to “words by which you and all your household will be saved” (Acts 11:14). At his memorial service there was only a seemingly obligatory reading of the 23rd Psalm. There was no mention of him following Christ or of the need for Christ in anyone’s life. I found that tremendously sad.

It is important for us to imitate so many of the fine character traits Mr. Palmer exhibited so wonderfully. But we must always remember that all of that is for naught if we do not obey our Lord! (Matt. 7:21-23) We cannot receive forgiveness

and obtain the hope of heaven on good deeds alone. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." (Jn. 14:6) What a tragedy to reach the end of a life that is exemplary from a human perspective, but to be lost for all eternity because we did not obey the Lord. Jesus is the "author of eternal salvation" only to "all who obey Him" (Heb. 5:9). Are you taking your salvation as seriously as you should?! "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt. 16:26)