

ARNOLD AND WINNIE

As everyone knows, the golf phenom named Arnold Palmer died last fall at 87 years of age. "The King," as he was both affectionately and reverently known by his fans and the sports media, was unquestionably the person most responsible for bringing golf from a country club game to a major worldwide sport, in both its amateur and professional arenas. His contribution to golf is legend indeed.

At golf, he was a hard charger, but charismatic and very much the friendly guy next door in his personality, both on and off the course. And with help from his family and business partners, he also became very financially successful. For years, there wasn't a golf-associated item of any kind that you could buy without his name on it. He even had his own golf course, at which the USPGA (U.S. Professional Golf Association) conducted an annual well-respected golf tournament in his name. What few people know, however, is how important his wife Winnie was to him and his success, both on and off the golf course. Shortly after they were married, Arnold's father said that "Winnie was the best thing that ever happened to Arnie."

But I get ahead of myself. When I was still on active duty, I commanded an Army unit headquartered at Fort Belvoir, VA. The Command Inspector General was a lady by the name of Lois Jean Palmer Tilley. (Arnold had three younger siblings – sisters Lois and Sandy and brother Jerry.) Lois was Arnold Palmer's younger sister and often went by her family nickname of "Cheech." Despite the nickname, Lois was a very well respected, professional and dedicated civil servant. I thought very highly of her and her staff; and for over a year, I had no idea of her connection to Arnold Palmer.

Then one day, I had to go on a business trip to the greater Orlando, FL, area very near the famous Bay Hill Country Club owned by Arnie and Winnie. I was lucky enough to be flying round trip to Florida in an Army twin-engine Beech (Bonanza, I believe) which was going there as part of the Army Reserve pilot training – a real treat, my own plane!

It was then I learned of Lois's relation to Arnie when she asked if she could go with me and visit her brother while I was attending a meeting. I thought, "Why not?" So she came with me on the trip. As a serendipitous result, I was later invited to spend the evening with her and her brother and his wife, Winnie – not at the clubhouse, but in their home along the first fairway. When I arrived there at five, drinks were just being made; and there was a table full of marvelous appetizers, all made by Winnie. During the cocktail hour, Arnie showed me his workshop – an entire three-car garage – full of golf clubs and parts of all sizes and shapes, from real antiques to the most uniquely modern. The accompanying picture shows me with one of his antiques – an old Scottish wooden "wood" almost five feet long! The shop also contained a couple of work benches with a variety of vices and any tool you could think of. I found out later that he never used a club he hadn't made himself!

The remainder of the evening couldn't have been nicer. The drinks and dinner were outstanding. Except for the steaks which Arnie broiled on the grill, it was all homemade by

Winnie and scrumptious indeed. Winnie admitted they had no servants except a part-time maid –never did have, even when their two daughters were growing up! It wasn't that they couldn't afford them, of course; Winnie just "didn't want them in the way!"

The trajectory of Arnold Palmer's life was forever changed in August 1954 when, at the age of 25, he had just won the U.S. Amateur Open in Detroit and was about to turn pro, was playing in a tournament in Shawnee-on-Delaware, Pennsylvania where he met Winifred Walzer. Winnie was 19, studying interior design at Brown University's affiliated design school at Pembroke College. The two connected at dinner the next evening.

He wrote about that first meeting in his autobiography, ***A Golfer's Life***: "As I was coming back into the inn from playing a practice round, I saw a couple of pretty girls coming down the stairway that led to the main lobby. It was the quieter, prettier, dark-haired one that caught my eye. She had smoky good looks, and her demeanor had a clear sheen of class."

Palmer wrote that he said to her, "If you don't have anything to do, why don't you come out and watch the golf." He said she replied, "Perhaps I will."

"Winnie, I began to learn that night, was unlike any girl I'd ever met, not just pretty and comfortable in almost any situation, but also smart, well-traveled (she'd just come home from a big European trip), engagingly independent minded, even something of a would-be rebel."

"I met him on Tuesday; he asked me to marry him on Saturday," Winnie once said. The two were instantly smitten with one another, and Palmer walked away that week with two trophies – he won the tournament, and Winnie accepted his marriage proposal. They were married that same year.

"They were very close," Cori Britt, vice president of Arnold Palmer Enterprises, said. "He always called her 'lover.' 'Hey, lover, how you doing?' They were hand-holders; they were huggers; they were very close. It was sweet."

Arnold and Winnie originally planned on a spring wedding and a honeymoon in England after the 1955 Walker Cup (in which Palmer was set to play in St. Andrews, Scotland), but the two grew impatient and plans changed. Winnie wasn't old enough to wed without her parents' permission, and her father never liked the idea of Winnie marrying a future struggling golf pro, who he doubted could properly provide for his daughter.

With help from Cheech, who was living with her husband Ron in Alexandria, VA, all the arrangements for an elopement were taken care of – the church, the minister and the reception – and Arnold and Winnie got married five days before Christmas in 1954.

"That was the beginning of a 45-year journey of learning." Winnie was the business manager of the family. She kept the books, and it was her idea to build the Bay Hill Club and to host the Palmer Invitational there.

The Winnie Palmer Hospital for Women & Babies, a 285-bed hospital located in Orlando, was one of her many charitable projects. Greg Norman, who lived near the Palmers at Bay Hill in Orlando, once described Winnie as "a phenomenal woman." Unfortunately, she died in 1999 at age 65 of ovarian cancer. In his book, Palmer wrote, "through the usual marital ups and downs,

through Tour triumphs and personal disappointments she'll never speak of, all magnified by my evolving success ... I was just beginning to discover what I'd really found."

– ***Don Lasher*** –

