

Catching up with Calvin Peete

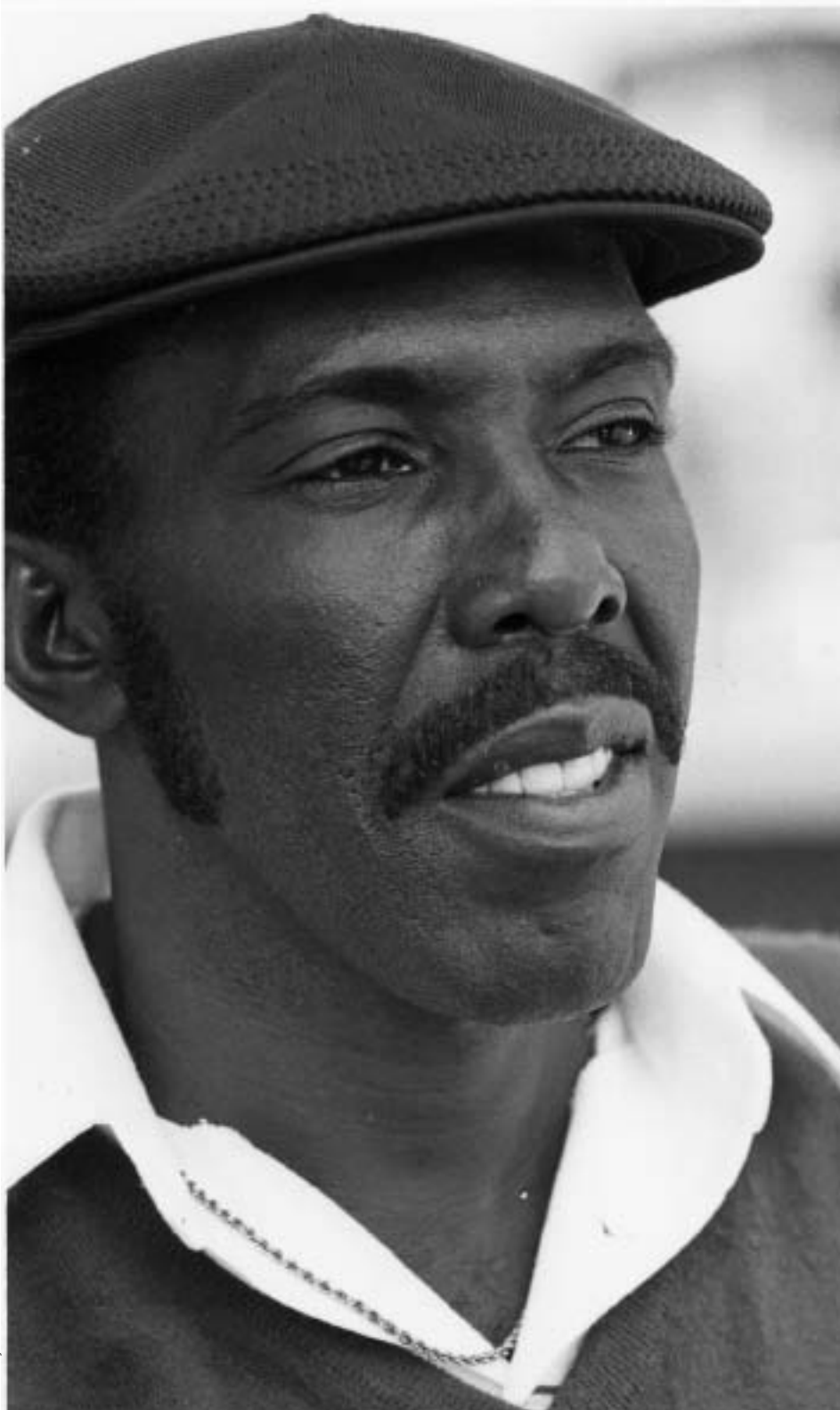


Photo by Paul Stano

by John Berkovich

Every day is Father's Day for Calvin Peete. The winner of 12 PGA Tour events is now a stay at home dad for his

daughters Aisha and Aleya and he wouldn't have it any other way. "I love being there for my kids now," says Peete. "When I was on the PGA Tour I was away from home so much that it was difficult to be there." Peete turns 63 in July of this year and although it has been twenty years since he was arguably America's best, yet definitely its most unappreciated golfer, he is much happier now. Peete and his second wife Pepper live quietly in the Jacksonville, Florida area. While Pepper manages the local First Tee facility, Calvin is the quintessential stay at home dad. His days consist of managing the household, keeping in touch with his children from his first marriage, and occasionally hitting balls at Sawgrass where he has a lifetime membership from winning the

story has been told before but given the mountains he has conquered and the attitude he has displayed, it bears repeating.

One of nine children born to a Detroit automobile factory worker, Peete's parents separated when he was 11. He, along with two younger sisters, was dropped off at his maternal grandmother's home in rural Missouri along the Mississippi. His mother headed to Chicago to search for employment but never returned to pick up her brood.

When he was 12, Peete fell out of a cherry tree and shattered his left elbow and although surgeons repaired the elbow, it remained fused so that Peete could never fully straighten his arm. His father

farmer. Years later, Peete said that he didn't mind getting sweaty on the golf course since it made him feel like he was doing honest work.

Desperate to move forward, Peete got his peddlers license and went on the road. "I bought from the wholesalers and would hit the migrant worker camps during sugarcane season," recalls Peete. "A lot of the workers were from Barbados and Jamaica. I sold jewelry, clothing, and stereos, basically whatever they wanted I got for them. They liked me because I was one of them and didn't over inflate my prices." Traversing the dusty farm roads from Florida to New York, Peete put diamond chips in each of his front teeth to make himself memorable while continu-

His fellow pros used to kid him about constantly being in the middle of the fairway with the nickname Mr. Accuracy.

1985 Players Championship. He is on disability and continues to receive a pension from his days on the PGA Tour. Peete also gives back to the community with the Calvin Peete Recreation Complex in St. Augustine, Florida. The center keeps kids off the streets after school and gives them an opportunity to hone their sports and life skills.

The inspirational Calvin Peete

eventually came for Calvin and his sisters along with three children from his second marriage and moved the kids to Pahokee, Florida on the southeast corner of Lake Okeechobee.

Dropping out of school in the eighth grade, Peete spent his days hustling pool and pulling various scams to help support the family in addition to the backbreaking work of pulling crops as a migrant

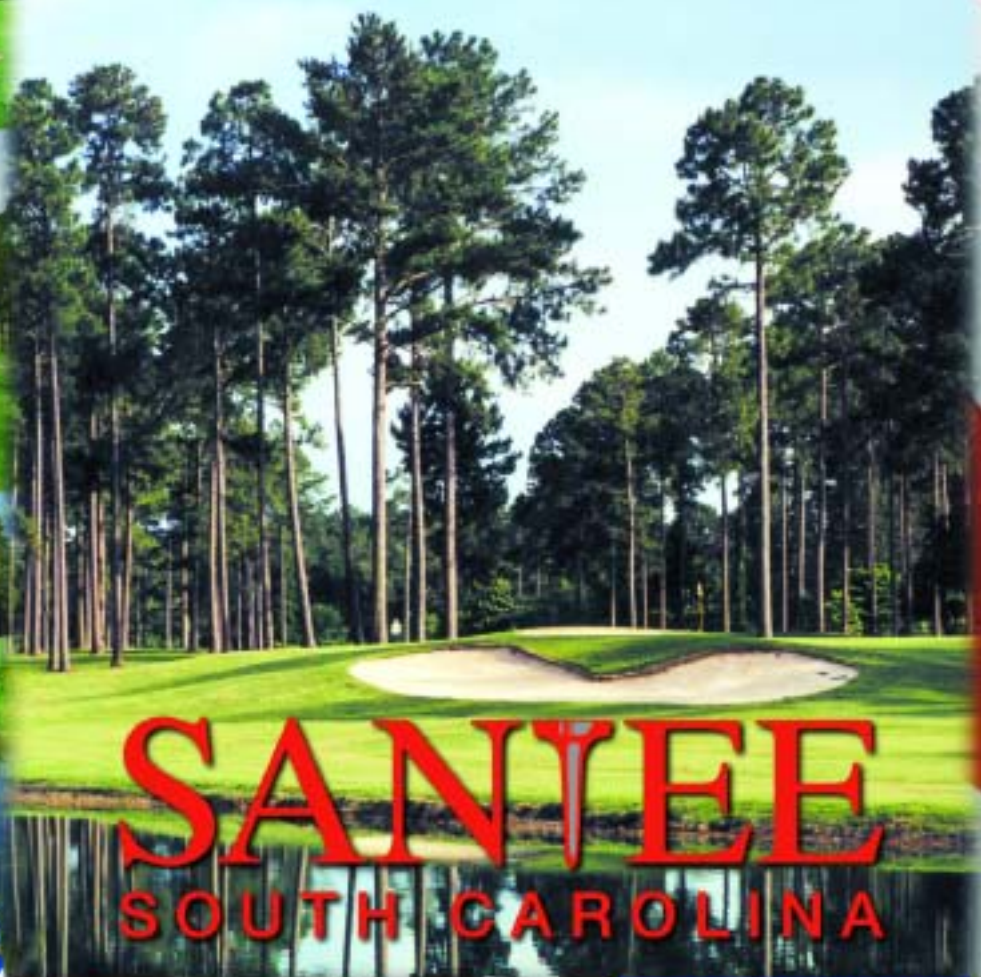
ing to hustle any game he could.

Some fellow gamesters encouraged Peete to join them for a round of golf and he was hooked. From that day forward his goal was the PGA Tour. He practiced and played any chance he could, often staying on the range until the lights went out near midnight.

Three attempts and seven years later, Calvin Peete had his tour

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card. "The first time through q-school I wasn't disappointed to miss out because it was all new for me," explains Peete. "I was ready the second time but didn't play well. I finally got it the third time and never went back." There was no Nationwide Tour to fall back on but there was Monday qualifying. The Top-60 and previous tournament winners were exempt for the year while the rest - including Peete - were known as the rabbits. They earned the moniker from hopping from city to city at their own expense in search of a spot in the field. Every Monday the rabbits would battle it out for the remaining spots in the tournament. Peete earned his way in three times in 1975 but didn't pick up his first check until the 1976 Phoenix Open - a tournament he would win nine

road, Calvin Peete's heart was at home. "Dad always had time for us," observed daughter Nicole Peete, an Atlanta third grade teacher. "He still does even though we're apart. Dad always loved to talk and some of my fondest memories are of sitting around the dinner table just being a family and talking. I don't ever remember dad yelling at me-he's always been so soft-spoken. I used to love watching him fiddling with the grips on his clubs when he was home and just listen to him talk about life."

Calvin Peete Junior, an Elkridge, Maryland realtor, echoes his kid sister. "Dad always had a great rapport with me. I still remember the time when I was 16 and just him and I went to New York. I wanted to get a car so we

solid play and earned over \$100,000 in 1980 and 1981 - a tidy sum in those days. "People knew what dad was earning because of what he did and everyone thought we were so rich," laughs Junior. "I really didn't grasp the impact of what dad was doing until years later."

Over the next four seasons Calvin Peete's golf game was in the stratosphere. He won 11 times - including the 1985 Players Championship - and the undying respect of his peers as possibly the best American golfer during that time and certainly the most accurate. His fellow pros used to kid him about constantly being in the middle of the fairway with the nickname Mr. Accuracy. He played on two Ryder Cup teams and cap-

“The press wasn't ready for a black man to dominate the PGA Tour and some of them expected me to self-destruct.”

years later. He averaged about \$20,000 those first few seasons, most of which went straight into tour expenses.

"I had a few top-tens in the early days and knew it was only a matter of time before I won so winning Milwaukee in 1979 wasn't a surprise," says Peete of his maiden victory.

Despite his many weeks on the

visited a dealership," says the gregarious 37-year-old. "Dad was teaching me how to drive standard and instead of getting all impatient like most people would as I struggled with the gears, he just calmly explained it to me and never raised his voice. At that moment I found it hard to imagine my dad hustling product on the road."

Although he wouldn't win again for three years, Peete continued his

tured the Vardon Trophy in 1984 for low scoring average. The only knock against him was his failure to win a major, yet he collected a handful of top-five finishes. "I was at the top of my game at The Players and I consider it my major," explained Peete of those golden years. "I always felt comfortable with my fellow pros and winning brings you the respect of others. When I first came out I developed a good rapport with Lee

Elder, Charley Sifford and Jack Nicklaus. Tom Kite, Lanny Wadkins and I became good friends. We all got along but let's face it, we wanted win."

Inexplicably, some golf instructors have credited Peete's legendary accuracy off the tee to his bent arm while at the same time ignoring golf's cardinal rule: keep your left arm straight. "Dad was one of the best ball strikers that ever lived and certainly the most accurate, yet some people refuse to give him the credit he deserves," chimes in Calvin's son Rick, an IT consultant and actor. "I think dad was very underrated as a player and I wonder if some of the reason is that he's African American. I don't think people were ready for him when he started winning tournaments." His father agrees. "It was different when Tiger Woods came along because everyone was waiting for him. They had been hearing about him since he was a child. The press wasn't ready for a black man to dominate the PGA Tour and some of them expected me to self-destruct."

Even with his success, dark clouds were looming on the horizon. "Even though I continued to play well and win after 1982, I started finding it tougher to focus," explains Peete of what would years later be diagnosed as Tourette Syndrome. "I was constantly changing my grip and what was left became right on the golf course. I literally had to think in reverse when hitting a shot. He picked up a pair of victories in 1983 but wouldn't win again until the tail end of 1984. "I think I tried too hard for a while there and the

Tourette's made it worse although I didn't know what was happening at the time. Naturally since I hadn't won in a while I was accused of taking drugs. You know, every time a black athlete has a slump it's always drugs," stated Peete sarcastically. "Those comments really hurt."

He won twice in 1985 and 1986 - his last victory at what is now the Zurich Classic of New Orleans - before it all started to unravel in 1987. His marriage to Christine collapsed, sending him into a depression. Feeling as if he failed, his game plummeted - exacerbating his neurological disorder.

After a brief stint in Phoenix, Calvin Peete remarried and moved back to Florida, playing the Champions Tour for eight years with moderate success while fighting the disease that eventually forced him to retire. "I thank God for Pepper and my family," says Peete. "She's been a real blessing as have my kids." He stays in constant touch with his grown children and is supportive of their varied careers.

"Dad and I are very close. I always remember sitting on the couch with him and watching cartoons. He used to take me for ice cream and we would just talk about things. He tried to teach me golf but all I ever wanted to do was drive the golf cart," reminisced daughter Calvinetta, a Washington D.C. law school graduate. "I remember at school once I turned in a paper and the law professor saw my name and asked if I was related to Calvin Peete. When I told him who I

was he wanted to know everything about dad rather than me."

Over the years Calvin Peete emphasized the importance of a good education and the kids have taken dad's advice. "I grew up in a church and consider myself a spiritual man," says Dad. "My wife and kids attend church every Sunday. I know about love and have passed that on to my children. I have seven children from my two marriages and I have always wanted what's best for them. When I was playing I used to think that with each dollar I earned I could send my kids to college."

"What's interesting about dad is that although he never got the type of education we did, he has a life education," explains son Calvin. "What he has accomplished and learned and passed on to us is ten times greater than anything that can be written about him. He was on medication for a while with Tourette's but he came off it and is doing great. His mind is extraordinary and his advice to us is always right on. He once said to me 'Just remember, you are your wife and children.' It really made me realize the importance of marriage and family."

Nicole Peete concurs with her siblings. "I talk with dad every week. He's a very smart man and I'm extremely proud of him. Dad grew up poor and how he has risen above all the obstacles in his life is amazing. It shows what you can achieve despite what life throws at you. Not only is he a wonderful father, he is the greatest and wisest man I have ever known. I love him so much." **MG**