

Michigan Golf Hall of Fame Bestows First ‘Special Award’

The Buick Open – A Hall of Fame Member

By Susan Bairley



Photo: Michigan Golfer Archives

This shot was the brinchild of our editor, Terry Moore, and was one of our gratest “Buick” covers. Crenshaw, who won in 1986, was happy to do it and we are forever grateful.

In its 2008 class of honorees, the Michigan Golf Hall of Fame inducted one woman – Meriam Bailey Leeke, two men – Ken Janke and John Morgan, and

honored one combination of both. Representing thousands of men and women, and an iconic American car brand, the fourth ‘inductee’ was an event – the

Buick Open.

The 50-year-old Buick Open was honored “for its distinguished and steadfast commitments to golf,

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community service and charitable contributions,” and received the Michigan Golf Hall of Fame’s first-ever Special Award on May 18 at Indianwood Golf and Country Club.

As it celebrates its Golden Anniversary this year, the Buick Open was cited for many things.

It was General Motors Buick Division’s first foray into the world of professional golf sponsorship – and is recognized as the PGA Tour’s first corporate sponsor. Buick officials also believe the Buick Open was one of the first events in any sport to be named for a corporate sponsor as well.

Since 1982, it has raised \$9.4 million for charities, with local chapters of Easter Seals, the American Red Cross, the American Lung Association and Whaley Children’s Center in Flint, as primary recipients. While charities are said to have benefited since the tournament’s inception, contributions were not officially tallied and recorded until 1982.

It’s considered a bonafide Michigan tourist attraction. With its added ‘Tiger power’ in the late 1990s, the tourney attracts about 125,000 spectators annually.

And the Buick Open wouldn’t happen without the volunteer efforts of approximately 1,400 men and women, who each year donate their time and energy for the love of the game and their love of the ‘Buick.’

Veteran golf writer and Michigan Golf Hall of Famer Jack Berry was at the first Buick Open



Photo: Michigan Golfer Archives

Tom Pond, one of many from Buick’s marketing department, represented the Open for a number of years. Here he is with former PGA Tour Commissioner, Deane Beaman.

at its home tract, Warwick Hills Golf and Country Club in Grand Blanc, Mich.

“There are a few survivors from that 1958 tournament,” he laughed, as he introduced Buick’s award at the Hall of Fame induction ceremony and dinner. “With its \$52,000 purse, the first Buick Open doubled what others offered and raised the bar for professional golf,” he said.

Drawing the nation’s top names in professional golf, the first Buick Open’s \$1 admission and free parking made it an instant hit with spectators. Winner Billy Casper took home the \$9,000 first prize that year. Comparatively, this year’s winner will pocket \$900,000

from the tournament’s \$5 million purse.

Waldo McNaught, then Buick’s public relations director, is credited with selling the sponsorship idea to Buick after watching the 1957 Carling Open at the Flint Golf Club. The following year, the Carling Open became the Buick Open and was moved to the new Warwick Hills. In 1959, Buick signed a six-year agreement with the PGA Tour – making it the longest and largest single financial sponsorship deal in professional golf at the time.

Gerald Rideout, who succeeded McNaught at Buick, served as general chairman of 12 Buick Opens,

starting in 1960 to his retirement in 1978. He is generally credited with keeping interest in the tournament alive throughout a hiatus that accompanied an industry downturn and suspended the tournament during most of the 1970s.

Today, the Buick Open's 'main man' is Buick Golf Marketing Manager Larry Peck. Serving in that role since May 2000, Peck is responsible for managing the Buick golf marketing program, including advertising and event management. He is the PGA Tour and PGA of America's contract negotiations point person for Buick and was instrumental in developing Buick's relationship with Tiger Woods, who was signed to a sponsorship agreement with Buick in December 1999.

It was Peck, who accepted the Michigan Golf Hall of Fame Special Award on behalf of the Buick Open.

"The tournament has hosted many all-time greats over the years, including Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, Gary Player, Ben Crenshaw, Chi Chi Rodriguez, Hale Irwin, Fred Couples, Vijay Singh, Jim Furyk and of course, Tiger Woods," Peck said. "It remains Michigan's only PGA Tour event and generates extensive regional, national and international media coverage, all focusing on the great state of Michigan."

While there are several individuals who may have had a greater impact than some over the years, Peck said giving the event the award is truly the best way to

honor 'so many different people throughout the years' who have contributed to the tournament's success.

His thoughts on accepting the Special Award from the Michigan Golf Hall of Fame on behalf of the Buick Open? Peck said it was a special moment and lasting memory. "I am truly honored to part of that history and tradition. It is very special."

This year, Buick Open Week begins Monday, June 23, with the Dealer Pro-Am. The tournament runs Thursday through Sunday, June 26-29, at Warwick Hills.

For Buick Open tickets, call 1-800-878-OPEN (6736) or go to www.buickopen.com" *MG*



The infamous 17th hole at the Buick Open.