

Photo by Bob Keyes



50 Years of the Buick Open

By Jack Berry

**Dave Hill, 1969 Buick Open Champion
and Member, Michigan Golf Hall of Fame**

I hate to think of this being the 50th anniversary of the Buick Open. A half century! It's a little disconcerting because I was a 26-year-old sports writer for the

United Press wire service and that means I'm 76 going on 77.

It also means I've seen and covered some great golf at Warwick

Hills, known some great characters like Waldo McNaught, the Buick public relations director who came up with the idea of Buick sponsoring a golf tournament which since then has brought the best golfers in the world to Michigan year after year, inaugural winner Billy Casper to Arnold Palmer, Gary Player, Sam Snead, Champagne Tony Lema, Tom Weiskopf, Lee Trevino and Jack Nicklaus to today's Tiger Woods and Vijay Singh.

McNaught was one of a small group who bought a residential plot on land in Grand Blanc formerly owned by a GM vice president. McNaught suggested a golf club and then tournament to the other investors and they bought into. The home McNaught built at Warwick Hills is the first one on the left side of the first fairway.

McNaught was a perfect PR man – friendly and funny. The Buick attracted swarms of people, not just golf fans, because of incredibly low prices. When writers asked McNaught what the crowd count was, it became a joke. There aren't turnstiles at golf tournaments and he had no idea but he always came up with a number. And it got printed.

The Buick changed the face of tournament golf. It was the first major corporation to put its name on a tournament. Until then, tournaments were known by city names – the Motor City Open was a fixture in Detroit. There was the Los Angeles Open, the Texas Open, Phoenix Open, Portland Open and the Insurance City in Hartford. And tournaments were



Photo: Michigan Golfer archives

Arnold Palmer, The King, finished 2nd in the first Open, 1958.

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Photo by Mark Arpin

Dan Pohl uncorks one of his massive drives on the 17th hole at the 1987 Buick Open. He finished 2nd to Robert Wrenn who shot an amazing 262.

named after the host club, the Colonial in Fort Worth, the Inverness Four Ball in Toledo, or an association like the Western Golf Association.

At United Press I used the tournament name – the Buick Open. The other wire service, the Associated Press, called it the Flint Open even though it never was played in the city of Flint. The A.P. loftily said it didn't use commercial names. Eventually it ran a little line at the end of the story and said "The commercial name of the tournament is the Buick Open." The A.P. eventually gave in to the proliferation of commercial sponsors that followed Buick's lead.

The first Buick raised the bar for professional golf by offering the unheard of purse of \$52,000 and first prize of \$9,000 plus a new Buick. That was double the size of most other purses. The Motor City Open that year, at Red Run Golf Club in Royal Oak, had a purse of \$25,000 and Doug Sanders earned \$5,000 for winning.

Warwick Hills was the longest course on the PGA Tour at 7,280 yards and Snead called it a long, boring walk but said for the money Buick was offering, he'd play it on the Dort Highway. It wasn't the tree-lined course it is now. Trees didn't divide the first, ninth, 10th and 18th fairways as they do now and the eight southernmost holes had been laid out in a former farm field. Now they're fairly heavily treed. And there wasn't a pond at the par 5 13th green.



Fred Couples' smooth swing launched thousands of balls before his back problems. He was really into his "Boom Boom" days when he won the Buick in 1994.

Initially every green looked the same, basically Y-shaped with a sand trap on each side. Joe Lee, one of the game's top designers, worked on it in 1969, took out much of the sameness and cut then yardage to 7,000. Some modifications since have it at 7,127 yards. The first Buick started what seems to be a tradition – a rainy day. It cost Palmer the tournament. He rallied from a first round 76 with a five-under-par 67 on the morning of the second round. But rain pre-

vented the afternoon half of the field from finishing and, unlike today, all scores were washed out. Palmer then shot 71 the next day and the four strokes cost him the championship. Casper beat him by one shot.

Unfortunately that rainy day carried lightning too and a spectator was killed. There have been some monsoon-like rains since and once water flowed through the press tent and everyone rushed to

pull plugs and turn off computers.

The cars flowed too. Buick was the first to give players complimentary cars for the week and, full disclosure, writers got them too. It was a little perk that, as Ernie Harwell might say, is "long gone." Now there are 10 pages of "Media Regulations" in the media guide. Buick brought in writers from across the country, San Francisco, Atlanta and New York. Jerry Rideout, who succeeded McNaught as Buick PR director, was a United Press alumnus, and convinced Leo H. Petersen, U.P.'s national sports editor, and columnist Oscar Fraley to come out. They were legendary characters, inveterate gin rummy players in post-round gatherings and Fraley was a "star" for his book, "The Untouchables." He had bumped into Eliot Ness, the federal agent who nailed Al Capone, in a bar at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York and they collaborated on the book. The book sold 1.5 million copies and led to a movie and then a TV series.

Doug Ford was in those early Buick fields and Rideout took care of that with a touch that brought publicity and pictures across the country. Instead of FORD on the back of Doug's caddie, Rideout made it BUICK. Doug Buick.

Also in the early press corps, although his golf outshone his writing, was Gary Player. In his early days on Tour Player would finish his round and go to the press center where he'd type a story on his play and send it via Western Union to a South African newspaper. Another star in the making



Photo: Michigan Golfer Archives

Payne Stewart finished second in 1984

was Chi Chi Rodriguez who holed his 6-iron second shot on the par five 13th for a double eagle. The shot by the virtual unknown Chi Chi was met with some skepticism and unfortunately never was officially recorded because the round was washed out by rain.

Rideout was Buick tournament director during good times and then during the bad times when the then-chairman of General Motors thought Buick was getting too much publicity so he pulled the plug after the 1969 tournament which was won by Jackson native Dave Hill.

Buick dealers across the country were shocked – they loved the tournament and many played in the Wednesday pro-am which included Hollywood stars recruited by Bing Crosby’s recruiters for his Pebble Beach tournament.

Flint PGA pro Larry Mancour tried to keep the Buick alive with a pro-am but it wasn’t until 1977, with a new chairman at the GM helm, that Rideout was able to convince the corporation to renew the Buick. It had a two-division name for a few years, the Buick-Goodwrench, and South African Bobby Cole won the renewal at the Flint Elks, where Mancour was pro. Two of today’s TV golf voices, Peter Oosterhuis and Gary McCord, finished in the top ten. The tournament went “home,” to Warwick Hills in 1978 and has been there since.

Julius Boros and Tony Lema were the early days favorites and Boros’s 1963 victory was especially delightful for Buick. The Big Three – Palmer, Nicklaus and

Player – skipped the Buick to prepare the U.S. Open which was the next week at The Country Club in Brookline, Mass. Boros beat Palmer and Jacky Cupit in a playoff, Nicklaus, the defending champion, missed the cut and Player wasn't a contender.

It was the first of two Buick victories for Boros whose swing was as easy and smooth as a rocking chair, and Lema followed Julie's 1963 Buick by winning the next two. When Lema won, he sent champagne to the press tent. Lema had a chance to make it three in a row but lost by three shots to fellow Californian Phil Rodgers. Lema had champagne iced, however, and sent it to Rodgers with his compliments.

There wasn't a more popular Buick champion than Lema who was killed, with his wife, later that summer in a small plane crash when he was going from the PGA Championship in Akron to a Buick dealers outing in Illinois.

After Boros and Lema the Buick didn't have any multiple champions until Singh won three times, in 1997 and 2004-05 and Woods in 2002 and 2006.

But there were plenty of other



Photo by Carter Sherline / Frog Prince Studios

Jim Furyk - crazy swing, but sane results. Furyk won in 2003.

major championship winners who added the Buick to their resume – Art Wall, Weiskopf, Hale Irwin, Lanny Wadkins, Ben Crenshaw (with one of the greatest Buick shots, a turned-over 9-iron, played left-handed from next to a pine tree by the 13th green that resulted in a birdie), Larry Mize, Fred Couples and Jim Furyk.

Ironically, the Buick 72-hole record of 26-under-par 262 was set

by Robert Wrenn in 1987. It was the only victory of his Tour career.

While other sponsors came and went around the Tour, Buick increased its presence, signing on as the Tour's "official car" and sponsoring the San Diego tournament at Torrey Pines and, for a time tournaments in New York and the Deep South. Instead of the Buick division public relations director acting as tournament director, as was so well done by McNaught, Rideout and then Tom Pond, the additional tournaments required year-round attention and Larry Peck has served that role since 2002.

Buick signed Tiger Woods, golf's No. 1 star to a long contract, one that has been extended, and he's been the com-

pany's spokesman in its television commercials, BUICK is on his golf bag and since he's a contender in every tournament he plays, the Buick name always appears on television. And Woods has won two Buick Opens and six Buick Invitationals at Torrey Pines.

That's the Buick. For a half century it's rolled out one victory after another. **MG**