

Chuck Kocsis – The Best There Ever Was

By Jack Berry

Looking back over Chuck Kocsis's career, his record is staggering.

Sure, we knew he was regarded as the greatest golfer in Michigan history and the Golf Association of Michigan affirmed that by naming him Golfer of the Century. And Kocsis, who died May 30 at the age of 93, played just about the entire century.

Not only did Kocsis win more than anyone, he did it over the greatest span. He was 17 in 1930 when he crushed three-time champion James D. Standish Jr., 9 and 7, in the 36-hole final for the first of his record six Michigan Amateur championships and then he shocked the national golf world when he knocked off “Greatest Game Ever Played” Francis Ouimet in the first round of the U.S. Amateur at Merion Golf Club.

Kocsis nailed his second giant of the game when he was 18. He defeated 1927 U.S. Open and 1931 British Open champion Tommy Armour in the 1931 Michigan Open playoff, the first of his three Michigan Open titles.

He played on Walker Cup teams in three different decades, 1938, 1949 and 1957, was low amateur in the 1934 and 1937 U.S. Opens and competed in nine Masters tour-

naments. He was runnerup to Harvie Ward in the 1956 U.S. Amateur.

And he was 60 years old when he decided to enter the 1973 United States Amateur at the Inverness Club in Toledo. Sixty. In a championship dominated by collegiate stars on their way to the PGA Tour. Gary Koch, Bill Kratzert, Danny Edwards, Andy Bean, John Fought and Craig Stadler were in the field.

But Kocsis, who didn't really like match play, won his first two matches, 4-2 and 6-4, and lost to Stewart Alexander (who'd eliminated Bean), 1-up, when Alexander holed a long putt on the 18th green. It was an incredible performance by the Red Run Golf Club super senior.

When I think of Kocsis I think of the title of a John Wayne movie, *The Quiet Man*. Or an advertising line, *The Quiet Assassin*. As well as being Michigan's greatest golfer he also was Michigan's Most Unassuming Champion.

Actually, he was something of a boring golfer. He wasn't a Tiger Woods or Phil Mickelson, hitting shots out of the woods. Or Seve

Ballesteros, hitting from the car park. Or Arnold Palmer, slashing and crashing.

Chuck played a game unfamiliar to most folks, and one we'd sell our souls for — fairways and greens, like a metronome.

Interestingly, Byron Nelson, relating the tale of his 11 straight victories in 1945, wrote “I had people tell me it was boring to watch me play...people get tired of that. They want to see you hit it in the woods, a bunker or water, and then knock it out and make bunches of birdies. My way was fairways and greens. Keep it straight, keep it safe and capitalize on as many birdie putts as possible.”

The two great fairways and greens proponents met in a round at Red Run and Kocsis shot 32 on the front to Nelson's 34. Nelson put his arm around Kocsis as they went to the 10th tee and said “No amateur's going to beat me.”

Kocsis responded with a 34 back nine for 66. Nelson shot 30 for 64.

Bob McMasters joined the Red Run caddie ranks in 1943 and started caddying for Kocsis in the late 1940s.

“He won the Michigan Open in

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1945 and he was a legend,” said McMasters who grew up to become one of Kocsis’s closest friends. “But he’d play with anybody at the club, choppers and good players.

“He won the club invitational 10 times and no time did he have a partner who was better than a 10 handicap. I did like to caddie for the guests in the invitational – they usually were big tippers.

“Chuck was thrifty, he wasn’t a big tipper and caddies were thinking about buying cars and taking out girls and they were looking for big tips. But I liked caddying for him. It was easy. He’d hit 15, 16 greens and never asked what club to use. He wasn’t really communicative. You followed the three rules of caddying: show up, keep up and shut up.

“I was getting into playing and watching him was like getting a lesson, especially bunker shots. He’d get his shag bag and we’d go out to 16 as long as no one was there and every shot was around the cup. It was easy to pick them up.”

Red Run’s roster was filled with low handicappers and it was known for big money games but McMasters said Kocsis never played for money although others bet on him.

Red Run members, including Kocsis, started the 72-hole Michigan Medal Play tournament in the late 1950s. Kocsis entered six times. He won each time and some grumbled why bother to enter if Kocsis was going to win all the time.

But Kocsis didn’t play a lot of organized senior golf. He won the International Seniors at Gleneagles, Scotland, three times and once used the same ball the



Photo by Art McCafferty

Bill Shelton, Chuck Kocsis and Jack Berry in the Michigan Golfer Television Studio

whole way, just for the kick of it.

“I’m mad he didn’t play senior golf,” said Glenn Johnson, five-time Michigan Amateur champion and a Michigan Golf Hall of Fame member as is Kocsis. “He had such an amazing record that he could’ve won a lot more in senior golf and there are a lot of stroke play tournaments.

“I beat Chuck twice in team events. Bill Prew and I were partners and Chuck was playing a 27-handicapper. I was just getting into golf and he looked at me on the first tee and I think he thought he’d give me a lesson. He birdied the first five holes. But we combined for eight under par and they were seven under, all on Kocsis birdies.

“The other time he was playing with Jimmy Nick who hadn’t done a thing all day but he holed a big birdie on 17 and they were celebrating. But then I holed a 20-footer on top of him and we eventually won on the first extra hole.

“I was second to him in the Michigan Medal Play at Western – he won by eight shots,” Johnson said, laughing.

Kocsis kept playing, though, right up to the end and was a lunch regular at Pine Trace and Red Run. McMasters frequently got him to play at top courses out of town.

“Charlie was quiet if there were more than six people around but if it was just a few of you he’d regale you with stories. One time we were set to go to Columbus and play Muirfield Village. The weather seemed iffy but I called Clayton Hoskins, a director of the Western Golf Association (McMasters is a past WGA president), and he said ‘C’mon, we don’t baby this course.’ We got there and it said Course Closed. I told the pro I’d brought my friend Chuck Kocsis and we were told you don’t baby the course. The pro said ‘We don’t. But Jack Nicklaus just called and said ‘Close it.’

“Just then a guy sitting in a chair said “I know that name (Kocsis). It was Phil Rodgers who’d been working with Nicklaus on his short game. Chuck and Rodgers talked for an hour,” McMasters said.

The Quiet Man’s record spoke volumes. **MG**