



Bobby Jones retired from competitive golf in 1930 after winning four major tournaments.

## Departing with Grace

Bobby Jones continued to make his mark on the sport of golf even after becoming a legend on the links

BY MARIA BLACKBURN

In 1930 at the age of 28, an amateur golfer from Atlanta named Robert Tyre “Bobby” Jones Jr. did something that no player had ever done before: he won the U.S. Open, the British Open, the U.S. Amateur Open and the British Amateur Open, the four major tournaments in golf, all in a single year.

Called “the all-time achievement in sports history” by The Associated Press, winning the Grand Slam of golf made Jones an international celebrity, and he was celebrated in newspaper headlines and with ticker-tape parades as

the greatest golfer of all time. It is a feat that has never been repeated.

Just one month after winning the Grand Slam, however, Jones did the unthinkable. He walked away from competitive golf forever.

Retiring at the pinnacle of an athletic career is an act that’s hard to understand, even 80 years after Jones did just that. Many top athletes retire, but only a few ever stay that way, it seems. For athletes ranging from Muhammad Ali to Michael Jordan, the thrill of competition is too hard to leave behind, and so they mount

comebacks that allow them to remain in the public eye just a little longer.

For Jones, retiring from competitive golf wasn’t a publicity stunt, or the staging for a dramatic comeback. After spending half of his life playing competitive golf, the Harvard-educated attorney wanted to focus on his wife and three children and on his law career. A true gentleman, he took his winning as an opportunity to bow out gracefully.

“I’ll never give up the game of golf,” Jones said to his friend, sportswriter O.B. “Pop” Keeler, when he told him of his plans to retire. “I love it too well and it has meant too much in my life. But I

think I'd like to play the sidelines for a while. It'll be an easier and more gracious trail from now on."

The son of a prominent Atlanta lawyer, Jones was born with a natural talent for golf. He shot his first 80 at the age of 11 and his fluid swing was legendary. "One might as well attempt to describe the smoothness of the wind as to paint a clear picture of his complete swing," sportswriter Grantland Rice once said.

But Jones, who played in his first national tournament at 14, struggled with the formidable psychological aspects of the game. A perfectionist, he placed tremendous pressure on himself and often lost 15 pounds during a tournament as the result of stress. Gentlemanly and charming off the course, the young man was given to fits of rage when he failed to play up to his own impossibly high expectations. He broke clubs or threw tantrums, and in 1921 during the final day of the British Open, Jones was so dismayed by his performance that he quit in the middle of a

round at St. Andrews and was disqualified. From 1916 to 1923 (from the age of 14 to 21), he lost 10 straight major championships.

By focusing on the scorecard instead of his human opponents during competitive play, Jones was able to triumph over his demons and he started winning—and winning big. Between 1923 and 1930, he won at least one national championship every year and 13 of the 21 major championships he entered. "Competitive golf is played mainly on a 5½-inch course, the space between your ears," he said.

With retirement came many opportunities for Jones to contribute to the game he loved without having it consume his life. As well known as he was for his achievements in competitive golf, he was just as famous for his successes that came with his retirement.

In 1931, using his own clubs as a model, he designed the first set of matched irons ever produced in the United States for the Spalding Sporting

Goods Co. Later that year, he made a series of 18 short films with Warner Brothers in which he taught the principles of golf. By the 1950s, those shorts had been seen by more than 40 million people; they are still popular today. And in 1933, Jones designed and founded Augusta National Golf Course and was a founder of the Masters.

In 1955, after years of extreme pain, Jones was diagnosed with syringomyelia, a rare, debilitating nerve disease that destroyed the center of his spinal cord. He suffered for more than 20 years before dying in 1971 at the age of 69. Jones never complained or sought pity. Instead, he lived out his life the same way he retired from competitive golf, with grace and honor and dignity. "In golf," Jones said, "we play the ball as it lies."

He was a gentleman to the end, and that, more than any record, is what distinguishes Jones and always has, said writer Herbert Warren Wind. "Of all the great athletes, Jones came the closest to being what we call a great man." ■

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