

NORMAN CONQUEST

Let me state at the outset, this is not the story of the Norman conquest of England when, in 1066, Duke William II of Normandy defeated King Harold II at the battle of Hastings. While the subject of this paper is golf, it does not involve the action of James II of Scotland who, in an Act of Parliament on March 6, 1457, banned golf and football because both sports were interfering with archery practice.

Legend has it that the origin of golf emanates from bored shepherds tending their flocks near St. Andrews, Scotland. They became skillful at hitting rounded stones into rabbit holes with wooden crooks. Games resembling golf were played as early as the fourteen century by sportsmen in Holland, Belgium and France. But, it was not until 1603, that Scottish Baron, James VI took the game to England. Then, in 1744, the Honorable Company of Edinburgh Golfers was formed which competed on behalf of Great Britain against Ireland. Finally, in 1834, King William IV became the patron of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews.

It is fitting for this story, that in 1873, golf migrated to North America when The Royal Montreal Club was founded in Canada. With apologies for this brief history, let us move to the subject of this tale. I am referring to our protagonist, one who has been identified as both an unforgettable and eccentric person. According to Tiger Woods, he was one of the two owners of the greatest golf swing; the other being Ben Hogan.

If you were led to believe I was going to talk about the great Australian golfer, Greg Norman, who shot an amazing 63 during the first round of the 1996 Masters, you are still mistaken. Although nick-named the "Shark", he is still not my subject. The man I am referring to, is Moe Norman, who was nick-named "Pipeline," because of his incredible ability to hit a

golf ball dead straight time after time. He is probably unknown to most of you. (Here ask for a raise of hands if they have heard of Moe Norman.)

What then, prompted me to write this paper about Moe Norman? First, since the famous Masters Tournament begins this week in Augusta, Georgia, the timing seemed appropriate. Upon reading of his unbelievable anecdotes, I was fascinated by the extraordinary stories about him. Plus, the fact that he was universally regarded as the greatest ball striker of all times in spite of his extremely unorthodox swing. Listen to what some of the great players say about him:

Lee Trevino: "I don't know of any player, ever, who could strike a golf ball like Moe Norman, as far as hitting it solid, knowing where it is going and knowing what he wants to do with the ball. Moe Norman is a genius when it comes to playing the game of golf."

Tiger Woods: "Only two players have ever truly owned their swings, Moe Norman and Ben Hogan."

When VJ Sing was asked in a 2004 USA Today interview, "Who's the best golfer you have ever seen?", he answered: "Moe Norman. I've hit balls with him lots of times. He was incredible. Whatever he said he could do, he could do. If you talk to Lee Trevino and other greats of the game, they'll tell you how good he was. He could talk it, and he could do it. God gives people little gifts, and Moe had a gift for golf."

What made his swing so unconventional? His arms were rigid, he extended them from his body, took a very wide stance with minimal knee bend, had a shorter-than-usual back swing, an extended follow through and minimal hand action. It produced amazingly accurate ball placement.

Murray Irwin Norman was born in 1929 in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada with his twin sister Marie. He died in 2004 at age 75. Nicknamed "Pipeline Moe, or just Moe", he started as a caddy at a Canadian municipal course and, in 1955 and 1956 won back to back Canadian Amateur tournaments. After turning pro in 1957, Moe played briefly on the PGA tour earning less than \$2,900. He was, however, extremely shy and basically remained in Canada until, when he got older, he would go to Florida for the winter to teach clinics.

At age five, he had a serious accident when his toboggan ran into a car, injuring his head. Apparently, for financial reasons, his parents did not take him to a hospital. In fact, the first time he saw a doctor was at age 67, when he suffered a heart attack. Many attribute his later personality problems to the car accident. The theory is that he sustained frontal lobe brain damage resulting in autism. As an adult he spoke in an odd sing-song voice, repeating phrases over and over again like a machine gun. Others reject that theory, claiming he was merely extremely shy and suspicious.

And yet, he was a gifted athlete, and had astonishing hand coordination. He was brilliant in math, had an extraordinary talent with numbers and an unbelievable memory. With his photographic mind he could remember not only every hole he played, but also the yardage of each hole. He was also a master card player. But he was dumb in everything else such as science, history and language. As a result, he was extremely shy, self-conscious, timid and had a severe inferiority complex. The other kids constantly teased him and by the ninth grade he was repeatedly skipping school to play golf.

At age 16 he shot in the low 100s. By the time he was 17 and 18 he was shooting in the low 70s. Hitting balls became a compulsion for him. At age 19 he was 5 feet 5 inches tall and weighed 140 pounds.

While a teen he made money setting pins in a bowling alley during the winter before they had machines. In those days there were only five pins and Moe was able to work four lanes at a time because he was so fast.

Playing golf as a child made him feel good. But his father disapproved and did not want to hear about golf and did not want his clubs in the house. So Moe dug a hole under the front porch where he hid his clubs. As Moe later explained, his father was too fat to get into the hole, and Moe would dig the clubs out to find them. He played very fast, two to three hours for an 18 hole round. He routinely drank 20 diet cokes a day, ate mainly candy bars and hot dogs and never took a practice swing. He rarely lined up puts and, until later, years was a poor putter. In short, he was a bundle of nerves. He spoke so quickly, he was hard to understand. While an amateur, from a poor family, he would frequently sell his prizes prior to the tournament, confident he would win, and yet needing money to have expenses to get to the next event.

Here was his record. He won 54 tournaments, two Canadian amateurs, held 33 course records and had 17 holes in one. He kept his possessions in the trunk of his car, didn't have a phone, and never drank, smoked or had a date. He was uncomfortable in the clubhouse and would put on his golf shoes in his car. As a young man he owned only two pair of pants and was seen frequently with mustard on his shirt. He and his brother used bobby pins to hold up their pants. His golf shoes were patched together with tape. He slept in bunkers, on park benches and later in his car. He barely had enough money to get to the next tournament. Because he looked and dressed like a ragamuffin, he became very sensitive and insecure. His reputation as a clown hurt him.

He received no family support. His friends laughed at him. Having never taken a lesson, he learned by feel and would hit 600 to 800 balls a day until his hands got bloody and eventually became calloused.

He won his first tournament in 1948. By the end of that year, he knew he had his swing down and no longer had to think about the mechanics. That year, at the Canadian amateur tournament, the car in which he was riding to the golf course broke down. He got a ride in a pick-up truck and arrived just in time to tee off. He won the tournament on the 12th hole, 7 and 6.

While waiting his turn to hit, Moe frequently would bounce a ball off the face of his club. A spectator once bet him he could not do it 100 times in a row. He agreed to pay him \$1 for every hit over 100 if Moe would pay him \$1 for every ball he dropped. After 184 hits, Moe intentionally missed because he was holding up the tournament. His record for walking and bouncing the ball off the face of his club is 194 yards. He had to stop because his arm was getting tired.

Between 1954 and 1961, he didn't hit a single ball out of bounds. Moe became so accurate, he could hit a ball off anything. Sometimes he used a specially made eight inch tee, hit off the ground or, in one case, off eight coke bottles. In exhibitions he hit off a woman's shoe. He never missed, never took a divot and hit with uncanny accuracy. Paul Azinger saw him hitting balls at a driving range in Florida. He was hitting balls off the ground 250 yards and not one was more than ten yards apart from the other on either side. According to Azinger, before Moe hit he would often state how many times the ball would bounce. Azinger said he was unbelievable.

In 1956, he set nine course records, shot 61 four times, won 17 of 26 tournaments and won six television sets, all of which he sold. At the Edmonton Golf Club, Moe shot a 64, four strokes better than the previous record held by Doug Sanders. The record still stands.

He won his next match 8 and 7, 13 under par for 29 holes. He next played Jerry Magee for the championship. Both golfers played very fast. The first nine took 58 minutes. The match was played in two hours and two minutes. Moe had three birdies and one eagle. He won his second consecutive Canadian Amateur championship 5 and 4.

Unfortunately, because of his demeanor, his trick shots, his rapid fire talking, his rumpled clothing and his discomfort in speaking with people, he became an outsider in a gentlemen's game of blue-bloods. He was a loner. Other than talking about golf and math, he could not carry on a conversation. Because he felt stupid and out of place he was both amazing and perplexing. Embarrassed before a crowd of people, he would sign his card at the end of a tournament and quickly leave. Others would accept his prize and later deliver it to him.

In 1955, after winning the Canadian Amateur tournament in Calgary, he disappeared and hid in the bulrushes on the banks of the Bow River rather than giving a speech at the awards ceremony. He was so shy he didn't know where to stand or what to say. As he became older he was able to speak normally, but usually it would be rote, reciting a speech he had memorized.

After winning the Canadian Amateur in Winnipeg, he hid in the clubhouse boiler-room rather than face the crowd at the trophy presentation.

Renowned golfer Ben Crenshaw said one had to see him to believe it. One time Moe hit three drives and they were all touching each other. At the CPGA championship, he was playing a 400 yard hole. Told by his caddy that it was a driver and a wedge, Moe hit the wedge off the

tee, and then from the fairway hit a driver to within three feet of the hole. “Drive and a wedge, wedge and a drive, makes no difference,” he would repeat.

On another occasion, during an exhibition, he took aim at a hydro cable hanging over the fairway which, when rarely hit, was an accident. Moe took aim at it and hit it three out of ten times.

At the 1971 Quebec Open, the 18th hole was a 440 yard hole guarded on the left side by a lake. Moe hit a booming drive and then put a three wood on to the green, the first player in the tournament to make it in two. He then proceeded to four putt and lost the tournament.

A week later, at the next tournament, Moe was pestered by the press with sarcastic questions about his putting. Moe ignored the comments. He stepped to the tee on the next hole, a 233-yard par three, and while the ball was still in the air Moe turned around and said to the reporter, “I’m not putting today.” The ball hit the green and rolled into the cup for a hole in one. His playing partner shouted, “He called it in the air.”

As a young golfer, Moe was afraid of cars. Nevertheless, he would hitch-hike to the next tournament. Early in his career he won six television sets. To raise money he sold them. That got him in trouble with the Royal Canadian Golf Association which said he could not sell them or he would lose his amateur status. He replied, “What am I supposed to do with them, watch all six?” They said yes. He replied he didn’t have room for all of them in his house. The association threatened to revoke his amateur status.

At the 1956 Masters, Moe, now only 26, was paired with the U. S. Amateur champion. During the practice round, Moe took off without a caddie. Cliff Rogers, the Masters chairman, had a fit. He chased Moe down the fairway, yelling that he had to take a caddie. When Moe replied he couldn’t afford one, Roberts said they would furnish one for him.

His playing partners in the opening round were to be followed by Byron Nelson and Carry Middlecoff, the defending Master's champion. On the first day of the tournament, Moe was a nervous wreck about playing before 30,000 spectators and perhaps appearing on television. Before the announcer completed welcoming him to the tee, Moe had hit his ball perfectly straight and was walking down the fairway.

Moe shot a 75 the first day and a 78 the second. Moe's problem was his putting which was horrible because he refused to line up his putts. So, after completing his round, Moe headed for the range. Sam Snead, who had heard about Moe, approached him and asked if he could offer him a tip. Reluctant to refuse the legendary Snead, winner of three Masters, Moe, who had been hitting balls beautifully, accepted. He then spent the next four hours on the tee, hitting over 800 balls. His hands were so blistered and raw he had to put a splint on his thumb. The next day, after completing the ninth hole, his hands were so sore he could no longer hold a club and had to withdraw. Years later Moe regretted what happened in Augusta. He said it was like a young hockey player getting a tip from Wayne Gretzky. What do you do as a kid when you get a tip from the best golfer in the world? Like a dummy I went and hit a lot of balls.

Moe subsequently got his revenge on Snead. The two were paired together in a match. They came to a par four hole that had stream bisecting the fairway 250 yards from the tee. When Moe took out his driver, Snead warned him that he should lay up to avoid hitting his drive into the creek. Moe asked if there wasn't a bridge over the stream. Snead acknowledged there was. Moe started repeating to himself "ball bridge, ball bridge" over and over again. Moe then hit the ball toward the bridge. The ball hit the ground, rolled over the bridge and crossed the stream. Snead never again offered advice to Moe.

After returning to Canada from the Masters, the Ontario Golf Association scolded Moe for playing so fast. They told him to slow down by zigzagging down the fairway. Don't walk in a straight line and jaywalk the fairways, they said. Sometimes Moe would slow down by lying on the fairways pretending to be asleep.

During the 1950s, Ben Hogan was practicing on a range next to Moe. Hogan had repeatedly asserted that there was no such thing as an intentionally straight shot. A straight shot was an accident, he said. After watching Moe for some time, Hogan scratched his head and walked away. He turned to Moe and said, "Keep hitting those accidents".

Several years later, some high-tech experts hooked Moe up to a computer. After observing him hit, they assumed there was a glitch in their computer because there was no sidespin on any of his balls. They reloaded the software, but the result was the same. Moe kept repeating "ball straight, ball straight", There was no discernible sidespin on any of the balls Moe hit. The experts had never seen this before, not on their own hitting machines, and certainly not from any golfer.

One day on a driving range he hit 131 drives in a row, using the same tee without having to adjust it or straighten it. A friend asked him if he could try to hit a drive. He placed a ball on Moe's tee and hit a pretty good drive. But the tee came out of the ground and fell 20 feet ahead in long grass. Moe commented, "I loved that tee. I had it for seven years."

A young 12-year old acquaintance reported that he once shagged balls for Moe. He said, "He was so straight, I never once moved my feet left or right from 175 yards. He would hit five balls to my left arm and five to my right. I never saw anything like it."

1956 was a banner year for Moe. That year he set nine course records, shot 61 four times, won 17 of 26 amateur tournaments and six television sets, all of which he sold.

Additionally, he won 13 wrist watches. One day he walked into a pool room in Kitchener with the watches strapped on his arm. Some kid, thinking they were stolen, called the police. Moe knew most of the cops, so when they came into the pool room and saw it was Moe, they just laughed and walked out.

In 1957, Moe turned pro. On July 16, he shot a 59. At the celebration in the bar after the round, Moe drank his customary coke and left. The record still stands.

Turning pro presented a problem for Moe. The Canadian PGA did not like Moe because of the manner in which he dressed, the fact that he would not wear a coat and tie and was not associated with a golf club. He was a ragamuffin. He would dress in a black turtleneck and long dark pants, even in 120 degree heat. He was terrified and humiliated by the country club set, and no matter how many tournaments he won, remained an outsider. When Moe entered a tournament and won \$1,800, the Association declared he was ineligible and would not pay him. Poor Moe complained that he was not an amateur or a pro. Moe bitterly argued he had done nothing wrong and did not know what to do next.

Finally, in 1959, he got his card as a touring pro. He played in six PGA events that year and finished in the top 25 three times. But he never played in a United States event again.

Moe began to change in 1967. He dressed better. At age 41, Moe played in the Manitoba Open. On the second extra hole of a six hole playoff he lagged a 40 foot shot to inches from the hole. One of his opponents said, "Pick it up". When he did, he was initially disqualified because it was a stroke-play event. When the gallery angrily protested, he was allowed to continue provided he replaced the ball. He did, tapped it in and played on.

Eventually, Moe would drive to Florida to spend the winter. On one occasion he was playing golf at the Ocean Palm Course in Flagler Beach. A friend wanted to take a picture of

Moe hitting balls. Since he was hitting into the sun, his friend asked him to turn the other way. Moe then faced the ninth fairway where two women were walking down the middle ten yards apart 200 yards away. Moe took out a four wood and his friend said, "You better wait until the women are out of the way." Moe replied, "Watch, they'll never know." Moe hit the ball right between them, and in fact, they did not know.

One year Moe was leading the Saskatchewan Open by three strokes. Moe was putting for a birdie on the last hole, but because he was bored he intentionally hit his ball into the trap. Looking to the side of the green he saw two spectators with the blood drained from their faces. Moe then got up and down out of the trap for a bogie and won the tournament by two strokes. He walked over to the two and asked them what was the matter. "We had a huge bet on you to win," they said. "Sorry," Moe replied, "I needed the variety."

Moe met Dave Pelz, who had authored a book on putting and was a recognized expert on the subject. Moe told him he could drive the ball straighter than Pelz could put. Moe challenged Pelz offering to put a stake in the fairway 250 yards out; Pelz could chose a hole 80 feet away. "We'll take turns and I'll bet I'll hit the stake before you hole the put." Pelz turned down the bet.

In 1986, Moe hit bottom. He was penniless and \$20,000 in debt. He was fearful of not being able to go to Florida for the winter. His friends came to his rescue and arranged a fund-raising dinner and tournament. The response was overwhelming. The affair raised \$26,000. Moe was so touched, he got up and made a thoughtful and heartfelt speech. His bills were paid and he was able to go to Florida.

The event seem to energize Moe. When he returned to Canada in the spring of 1987 he won the CPGA Senior Championship by eight shots, winning \$9,000.

As the years passed, life improved for Moe. In 1995, he was finally elected to the Canadian Hall of fame. That same month, Wally Uihlein, president of Titleist and FootJoy, told Moe the company would pay him \$5,000 a month for the rest of his life. When told this, Moe fell backwards. He responded, "I've played your balls all my life; I wear your shoes." He then repeated for a second time, "I've played your balls all my life; I wear your shoes. What do I have to do for that?" Uihlein replied, "You have already done your part Moe. Titleist is just saying thank you for what you have already done simply for being yourself."

Moe also had a contract with Titleist which provided him with 500 dozen golf balls a year. But, Moe would spend many days looking for lost golf balls in the out of bounds area. Then he would use the balls he found to play with and sell the ones Titleist gave him.

When he died in September, 2004, he had used the same tee since 1989. It had been 11 years since he hit a ball out of bounds. His Cadillac contained over \$20,000 in cash, ten pairs of golf shoes and more than 1,000 golf balls. He was buried in a wooden coffin, with each corner decorated with a golf scene. His Titleist driver and some golf balls were placed by his side in the coffin.

Near the end of his life, Moe was asked about his love of hitting a golf ball. He replied, "The thrill of feeling it. Only two things money can't buy – knowledge and talent. And I have more of these things than anybody in the world. I'm the richest person in the world by far. I'm doing things everyone would love to do, and I know why. What a great feeling."

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