

TALKIN' GOLF

with Charlie Epps

My top 5 Masters champions

I really knew nothing about the Masters Tournament until 1968. That was the year when the agony and ecstasy of golf happened on one Sunday in April. After that day, I hated the Masters. But over the years, I've learned to love it.

How can you lose a golf tournament due to a clerical error? Especially when the mistake wasn't your own? It still doesn't make sense to me, but it's one of the rules of golf. You must verify and authenticate your score.

Of course, I'm referring to the tragedy that most people view as "the Lost Masters" of 1968. The great Robert De Vicenzo made a birdie 3 on No. 17, but his playing partner Tommy Aaron wrote down a 4. After 72 holes, De Vicenzo was tied with Bob Goalby. But there was no playoff. Unfortunately, De Vicenzo signed the incorrect scorecard and had to keep the incorrect score, which put him in second place.

Having grown up in De Vicenzo's homeland of Argentina, that turn of events ripped out my heart. (By the way, the election of the new Pope from Argentina warmed my heart.)

My favorite Masters was the one played in 2009. When you have a friend and student who wins the most celebrated tournament in the game, it only magnifies it. It's still hard for me to believe that I was in Butler Cabin watching Mike Weir put the green jacket on Angel Cabrera. It's a moment I'll never forget.

Cabrera, of course, is my all-time favorite Masters champion. Since he is a student and friend, I'll exempt him from the following list of my top five Masters champions.

5. Tom Watson. The two-time winner and three-time runner up was never afraid to go head-to-head with Jack Nicklaus. Tom beat Jack for the 1977 and '81 Masters titles, just as he did in the 1977 British Open at Turnberry and the 1982 U.S. Open at Pebble Beach. Tom was never afraid of Jack, and that's something I always admired.

4. Ben Crenshaw. One of the great nicknames in the game is "Gentle Ben," and he is truly a gentleman in every sense. Ben won his second Masters title in 1995 only a few days after his teacher and mentor Harvey Penick passed away. Ben broke down in tears on the 18th green Sunday and later said he felt as though Harvey was with him every step of the way that week.

3. Arnold Palmer. The King of Golf won the Masters four times. I never got to see him win there because I was growing up in Argentina at the time. His last Masters victory was in 1964, which was the time when I was just getting serious about golf. We all wanted to play fearless golf like Mr. Palmer did.

2. Gary Player. The great Black Knight has three green jackets. I had the pleasure of working with Mr. Player in Spain and got to know him personally in 1971-72. Since then, I've always respected and admired his dedication to his family and the game. He's been such a great friend to me over the years.

1. Jack Nicklaus. Without a doubt, the greatest golfer of all time is also my favorite Masters champion. He's the only six-time winner, having won his last one in 1986 at the ripe young age of 46. That one was a come-from-behind victory to break the hearts of Greg Norman and Seve Ballesteros. Something many people forget is that in addition to Jack's six titles, he finished second four times.

Now, you've probably noticed that I left one big name off my list. Tiger Woods actually finished sixth on my list of all-time Masters champions. He's an incredible athlete and a wonderful golfer. But for personal reasons, he came in sixth.

He hurt a good friend of mine, former Masters champion Fuzzy Zoeller. When Fuzzy made an off-the-cuff joke in 1997, he had no malice behind it and it wasn't intended the way it came out. Tiger and his father made the whole thing bigger than it should have been. Fuzzy shouldn't have told the joke, but you're entitled to make mistakes. And Tiger has made plenty of mistakes, too. **TL**

Known as "The Golf Doctor," Charlie Epps has been one of Houston's most respected PGA golf professionals for more than 25 years and is a member of the Texas Golf Hall of Fame. He is Director of Golf at Redstone Golf Club, home of the PGA Tour's Shell Houston Open. Listen to Charlie 9-10 a.m. Saturday mornings on the Sporting News Network Golf Show, 1560 AM in Houston, channel 127 Sirius and 242 XM. He can be reached at cepps@redstonegolfclub.com.



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