

Bob Wallace

One of the charming stories told about Bob Wallace is of Wallace meeting a then very young Gary Player at the Tostal Tournament in Ireland in the 'fifties. The story, according to Christy O'Connor Junior, is that he gave Gary Player ten shillings! If he did, it would have been typical of the giant of a man who was professional at Galway Golf Club from 1946 to 1973, but was a figure in the Club right up the time of his death in 1984.

Certainly, Bob Wallace was known to Gary Player. Christy Junior remembers meeting Gary Player at The Open some years ago when Player was asking how was his uncle (Christy Senior) and was he still using the left hand so superbly in the swing as taught to him by "that great old teacher in Galway?" (Bob Wallace).

In fact Bob Wallace was any number of things - teacher, wit, raconteur, bon voyeur, and even advisor and social worker! From his regular chair in the Professional's Shop at Galway Golf Club he watched the passing parade of life - and everything that passed by was commented upon, including the assortment of swings on the tenth tee!

Wallace, a native of that famous golfing country around Newcastle in County Down, was one of four brothers, three of whom played golf. The others were: Leo (Irish Champion in 1928 and a man who got a very good run in the News of The World Matchplay), and Pat, who was professional in Adare for seventeen years from 1946 and then Dungannon until he died in 1965. Leo was Don Wallace's father. The fourth brother in the family was Willie who was an antique dealer.

Bob Wallace came to Galway from Adare in 1946. He was to hold that "chair" until 1973 when he "retired" as his nephew Don Wallace took over. But, like many of the best people, reports of his retirement were greatly exaggerated he continued on in the pro's shop in Galway Golf Club until just before his death in 1984 when he had reached the age of 77.

His career as a club pro and in the game had spanned the era from hickory shafts, to steel, to graphite - his knowledge of the game was encyclopedic, and he never lost the enthusiasm for a game that he did not play for many years towards the end but which was always *alive* for him through teaching, the enthusiasms of others, the success of his star pupils Christy O'Connor Senior and Christy O'Connor Junior, and the memories of greats of another era.

He was one of those who knew golf from the era of hickory and who appreciated that it went back further than just Arnold Palmer and Gary Player and the great burst of worldwide popularity in the game, which began with them. He was in his element recounting stories of names like Sandy Herd (much feared for his wielding of an aluminum-headed mallet putter), Abe Mitchell, James Braid, Harry Vardon, Cyril Tolley. The names trotted off his tongue - you could talk about Nicklaus but he would counter with a line like "mon dear, Abe Mitchell could cut in a mashie and make the ball land like a feather on the hard greens." Then he would roundly curse the pupil who had got a loan of his Abe Mitchell book and never returned it. Or he would say "you should have seen Cyril Tolley move the ball." (Tolley was a man who won the Amateur Championship and played Walker Cup in the U.S. and, interestingly for an amateur, wrote an instructional book on golf published in the late 'twenties).

Once started, there was no stopping Bob Wallace. He would recount the times when the balls came in different sizes. "Mon dear the Spalding Green Dot was like a little marble. I used to use it into the wind and it would cut through it like a little stone. But it was the very devil to find if it went in the rough." Or he would recall during World War Two when balls were so scarce that if you put one into gorse, then you HAD to find it. Even if it took two hours, as he had done once.

Wallace had learned his golf in County Down but had also served his time as a clubmaker - as had his brother Leo - in Gradige's in London. It was there he learned the joy of turning out a finished head with its deep, polished luster from a solid block of Persimmon. It would have an 'open' or 'shut' face to your requirements (he personally preferred 'shut at the toe'). And he loved to re-tell stories of players in the hickory days paring a tiny amount off the thickness of their shafts with fine sandpaper to add a little more 'kick' to the shafts.

The result of so many years was a keen eye for a swing, a traditional approach to the game, a willingness to sell clubs 'on tick' which was gloriously abused betimes, and a devastatingly commonsense approach to the difficulties of a notoriously difficult game.

His belief was in golf being a left-handed game and his repeated remark on the practice ground while giving a lesson would be "no left hand," or "not enough left hand." He was also a teacher of "feel" - if a shot worked out right, he would say "did you feel that? now I want you to stop and try to remember how it felt at impact." A bad one often elicited the remark "I know how it felt boy like the ball was stuck to the face of the club and you had to shake it out of it" He was also not too proud to admit it when the problem was one of the teacher - on one occasion I remember him telling me to go home that it was his fault, he could not "see" the swing that day!

Tell him you were hooking it and he tell you to "get up and slice it" Then he'd show you how to intentionally cut the ball. He could also teach knock-down shots, quick-stopping pitches, and intentional moving of the ball. On telling him that you put a ball out of bounds over the wall at the first (the old first along the roadside) and he's say "how many hundred yards would you say there are between that wall and the third tee?" The answer was "about 200" and then he'd say" and you're telling me you can't put into a space 200 yards wide?" It was his way of showing you how to play safer and keep the ball in play.

A golfer on one occasion came into the shop to equip his wife (this was in the days before liberation) and bought a secondhand bag, secondhand clubs, a second half trolley, and even a supply of secondhand balls. Having paid for them in cash, he went out the door of the shop to the accompanying remark (intended to be heard!), "I swear to God if I had secondhand socks people would buy 'em."

Your approach to Bob Wallace had to be that if he proffered a good-humored minor insult, you threw one back - it would trigger that great deep, chortling, belly-laugh from the man on the chair. Like the time a rather diminutive golfer came into the shop and picked up a driver and waggled it, opining that it was "very big, wasn't it" His devastating reply "Aye.....it was made for a mon, but I could shorten if for you.

But his great glory was in giving a break to the country's two finest players, the two O'Connors. Both began with him - Christy Senior in the late 'forties - and both still have a great fondness for the hours spent developing their swings, a love for the game and its lore, and a variety of shots taught and learned. For his part, Wallace loved to recall coming to the club in the dark of the early morning and finding Christy Senior sitting by a primus stove making a pot of tea and waiting for the light to come up sufficiently to practice before doing his day in the shop. And in Bob's latter years they loved to while away hours over a few drinks (Bob's was almost always Jameson!) in O'Flaherty's, a father-and-son relationship that never dimmed. Says Christy Junior: "He was so bright, so intelligent, and such a connoisseur of the game. Gary Player at one of The Opens was talking to me about my uncle and then he asked if that great old teacher was still alive - the man who placed such an emphasis on the left hand. He asked if Senior was still using the left hand as he had been taught all those years ago.

"Bob was a great teacher "" and he knew so much about the game. He would be teaching and would suddenly say something outlandishly funny that would put the complete beginner at their ease. He was such a connoisseur you had to learn to *work* the ball. He knew so many shots my uncle loved him and lived with him when he came to Galway. He was such good company and knew the game *inside-out*.

Very few people know that as well that he was so caring about the youngsters about the area when we were growing up ...if there was a youngster in trouble, Bob would be the one who would go to the guards to explain that 'he wasn't that bad'... he was the one who would speak to the local District Justice if there was someone in trouble he was a caring generous man."



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