

# Rub of the Green: Robinson Open once drew some of golf's big names

**By Bob Arnett**

The Tribune-Star

TERRE HAUTE — "Mighty oaks from little acorns grow."

That adage would appear to be right on the money when it comes to professional golf and Robinson, Ill., especially from the early 1960s through the early '70s.

It was back in 1962 when the Robinson Country Club sponsored a tournament which attracted 37 professionals and 57 amateurs who played for \$2,000 in prizes. The tourney continued to grow until it became a major stop on the PGA Tour in 1968 with prize money totaling \$25,000. Until that time, the question had been "Can a small southern Illinois town of less than 8,000 survive as a stop on the PGA Tour?" The facts speak for themselves.

To say that those in charge of the '68 Robinson Open knew what they were doing in no way gives justice to the outstanding work they accomplished. The one thousand and one details that accompany a PGA tournament can be mind boggling.

Dick Heath and Maxine Zwermann were co-chairpersons of the tournament that drew huge galleries. Nancy Lynn Thal was crowned Miss Robinson Open. K.B. Corvell was president of what was properly known as Crawford County Country Club. A cocktail party and dinner dance awaited many who had made large donations to the event.

Tents, press trailers, scoreboards, T.V. towers and other facilities were brought to the course. Notables on hand for the tournament included U.S. Senator Everett Dirksen and Governor Samuel Shapiro.

The Robinson Open was off to a fast start.

Dean Refram won that first tour event with a spectacular 18-under-par performance of 270, good for the \$5,000 first-place check. Although there was no Arnold Palmer or Jack Nicklaus in the field, it didn't lack for quality players. How about a pro who would go on to win many millions and multiple majors on the PGA Tour as well as the senior circuit? That would be Hale Irwin, whose tie for 21st earned him \$232.81.

Other well-known players on hand for the first Robinson Open were U.S. Open champion Orville "Sarge" Moody, Mike Hill and Dean Beman, who would go on to win on tour and later become commissioner of the PGA Tour.

Others were J.C. Snead, Dick Lotz, Larry Ziegler and popular local pro Earl Greenwell, who once held Robinson's course record, a 10-under-par 62.

And then there was John Schlee, a power hitter who instead of playing a dog-leg-right par five in the manner the hole was designed, chose to hit over the top of the clubhouse thereby cutting off a sizable chunk of yardage. Schlee always had a large gallery regardless of how well or poorly he was playing. This was because his wife followed him around the course and to call her a beautiful woman would have been a gross understatement. The photographers who were supposed to capture the action on the greens and fairways usually spent most of their time taking pictures of Mrs. Schlee.

Also on hand were Rocky Thompson, who later on the senior circuit used a driver with a 52-inch shaft, and J.C. Goosie, who organized countless mini tour events where a multitude of young pros could gain valuable tournament experience.

By 1969, the tournament became known as the Robinson Open Golf Classic and prize money jumped to \$75,000.

The field was strengthened with the addition of Bob Goalby, who won The Masters in May of the preceding season. He opened with a blistering 62. Rounds of 71, 73, and 67 for a 273 total put him in a tie with Jim Wiechers. The ensuing playoff was won by Goalby and a \$15,000 check was his as Wiechers settled for \$9,000 runner-up money.

Goalby never received the credit he deserved due to a scorecard error by Roberto DeVincenzo that cost DeVincenzo a tie for the Masters' title. Many blamed Goalby for the mistake made by Tommy Arron.

Other well-known players competing included Howie Johnson, who claimed third place, and Billy Maxwell, who tied for fourth. Maxwell, a former U.S. Amateur champion, teamed with Don January and Joe Conrad to make North Texas State one of the best teams in the nation during their collegiate days.

Jim Colbert won \$1,012 and would go on to dominate the PGA Senior Tour a number of years later.

By the time 1970 rolled around, prize money had climbed to \$100,000 and the Robinson Open Golf Classic was a hit with golfers anxious to gallery the professionals they had been watching on TV and reading about. They had not been disappointed as the tourney fathers prepared for a bigger and better Robinson Classic.

(To Be Continued)

# Rub of the Green: Memories of Robinson Open are not forgotten

**By Bob Arnett**

Tribune-Star Correspondent

The Robinson Open Golf Classic took off like a rocket back in 1968. By 1969 even "Sports Illustrated" had taken notice when they featured an article entitled, "Here's to You Mr. Robinson-The Pros Love You".

Much credit for the continuing success of the tournament was due to the promotional expertise of Dick Heath along with the diligent efforts of Maxine Zwermann and Crawford County Country Club president, K. B. Correll.

With prize money growing to \$100,000 in 1970, another strong array of professionals gathered to pit their skills against Robinson's pristine layout that featured tight fairways and super slick greens, a venue that was always in mint condition.

Terre Haute native Ray Goddard entered Robinson's open competition as an amateur. To get into the tournament proper, Ray had to survive a Monday qualifying round by finishing among the 10 low scorers from a list of 100 that included hopefuls who were commonly called "rabbits". Subsequently, Ray fired a 71 which tied him with eight others for the last two places in the field.

After his birdie on the third extra hole, Goddard was officially in the field where he shot rounds of 77 and 70, missing the 36-hole cut by a couple of shots. Ray recalls, "After playing with the tour boys I decided I'd better become a club pro. They were so good it was scary." Ray Goddard now has 37 years experience as a PGA Professional and he still "holds his own" in regional and national senior competition.

As the curtain came up on the 1970 edition of the Robinson Open it was unheralded Richard Bassett who started fastest with a six-under-par 65. Bobby Nichols' 66 was good for second and a covey of players was tied for third with 67's. Among them were: George Knudson, George Archer, Grier Jones, Charles Sifford, Hale Irwin, Bob Payne and Larry Hinson.

Close competition was usually evident, and by the time the 72nd hole was completed it was a pair of Georges, Knudson and Archer, deadlocked for the championship. When Archer missed a straight-in two-and-one-half-foot putt in the playoff, Knudson was \$20,000 richer, whereas Archer had to be content with the second place check for \$11,400.

Prize money again totaled \$100,000 in 1971 for what proved to be another successful tournament. Eight players finished within three strokes of the winning total. It was Labron Harris and Bert Yancy in another tie, necessitating the third sudden death playoff in four years. Harris won the playoff and \$20,000 with a 274 total. Gay Brewer, Jim Colbert and Larry Hinson tied for third, two shots back and pocketed \$5,300 each.

As 1972 dawned, ties for the championship had become commonplace. With another strong field, it was little known Dave Marad who held a slight lead over Grier Jones heading into the final nine.

Marad still held a single shot advantage as he played the final hole, but he suffered a three putt green, and it was off to another playoff for the title. After Jones prevailed, Marad remarked, "I guess I got a little careless. I started thinking about the \$20,000 prize." Jim Colbert was two shots back in third place.

By 1973 the tournament was known as The Shrine-Robinson Open Golf Classic and the purse was increased to \$125,000 with \$25,000 going to the winner.

Many Shrine Temples were actively engaged in promoting this event by selling tickets, sponsorships and programs. At that time there were 900,000 Shriners in the U.S., Canada and Mexico which assured a sizable contribution to the success of the tournament with proceeds slated to go to Shriners' Hospitals for Children.

The dates of the 1973 Shrine-Robinson Golf Classic conflicted with those of the British Open but that wasn't much of a problem. "The Open" as the Brits called it, paid so poorly that it was shunned by most American pros. Ben Hogan went over and won "The Open" in 1953, but he never returned. In addition, most American pros were not enamored with links golf. Running shots to greens was not their strong suit.

In the pro-am preceding the main event, Bobby Nichols picked up \$500 for his 65.

When the tournament proper began it was '71 champ, Labron Harris, out in front along with David Graham and 23-year-old Tom Kite, all with 66's. As the halfway cut came at 143, five pros were in a logjam that included: Bobby Greenwood, Grier Jones, Dean Beman, Babe Hiskey and Charles Coody. By the end of the third round, co-leaders were Beman, Dick Rhyan and Charles Courtney with 204 totals. A young Andy North was two shots back.

By the conclusion of The Shrine-Robinson Open, it was Dean Beman who prevailed by virtue of a 67 for his final 18. His 271 total was good enough to nip Bob Dickson and Bunky Henry by a shot. Beman collected \$25,000 for his win. Larry Hinson, a favorite of Robinson galleries, finished three shots out of first. Notables at the tournament included Evel Knievel who was limping noticeably from his most recent "crack up". Knievel later stated that he thought he had the skills to play on the PGA Tour. Some believe that Evel would first need to learn how to break 110 for 18 holes before he tackled professional golf.

The 1973 Shrine-Robinson Open would be the last of six PGA tournaments hosted by Crawford County Country Club. Each event was superbly organized and administrated. The many volunteers did outstanding work, and the contestants played some phenomenal golf. Let's take a look at some of the accomplishments of those pros who participated in Robinson's tournaments.

Lee Trevino would make the trip to Robinson, but his 36-hole total would be too high to make the cut. He did a little fishing in one of Robinson's lakes and then advised that he didn't like the quality of sand used in bunkers. He also dropped by Lincoln Trail Junior College to accept an honorary degree.

Later Lee would go on a tear and win the U. S. Open, the British Open and the Canadian Open, all within 21 days.

Bill Doan Sr. recalls playing in a pair of pro-ams at Robinson when he was paired with Hale Irwin and Lou Graham respectively. Irwin would go on to win the U. S. Open in 1974 and Graham would capture the 1975 U. S. Open.

Lee Elder, who played in a Robinson tourney in the early 60's, would become the first Afro-American to play in The Masters. Billy Maxwell, a frequent Robinson competitor, won the '51 U. S. Amateur which had 1,416 entrants. Popular pro, Larry Hinson, would go on to win the New Orleans Open in 1969. Beman became PGA Commissioner in 1974.

Orville "Sarge" Moody would win just one official tourney on the regular tour, the U. S. Open, but he would later be a consistent winner on the senior tour with his long "broomstick" putter. Moody said, "If I would have had the long putter earlier, I would have won 25 tournaments."

Charlie Sifford won the 1969 New Orleans Open at the age of 46. Frank Beard won \$50,000 for the richest prize in golf at the Westchester Classic in 1969, and then Bobby Nichols one upped Beard by winning \$60,000 in the Dow Jones Open. Tom Shaw won the Bing Crosby National Pro-Am in 1971. Homero Blancas once shot 55 in an amateur tourney. The Colonial was one of his four wins on tour.

Mike Hill won the '70 Doral-Eastern Open before J. C. Snead won it in '71. Snead also added the Tucson Open to his list of accomplishments. Bob Lunn won the Glen Campbell L. A. Open in 1971. Larry Ziegler won the Michigan Golf Classic, but they had no funds to pay the \$100,000 purse. The PGA paid half of what was due.

Jerry Heard won the Colonial N. I. T. in 1972. Miller Barber won \$100,000 by winning the first 144-hole World Open in North Carolina in 1973. In 1968 a dispute between touring pros and the PGA was settled.

Several Terre Hauteans caddied for the pros at Robinson. Jack Myers carried for Martin Roesink, a native of Holland who during one round hit the green on each par-5 at Robinson with a drive and a 7-iron. He previously had won a driving contest in London with a 350-yard smash. Myers also carried clubs for Sam Adams who later would win the Quad Cities Open.

Bill Alumbaugh Jr. caddied for Steve Spray who handed Bill \$400 for his efforts. Teddy Schneider's pro was Rafe Botts and Claude McCalister recalled working for Dave Eichelberger. In 1977 Crawford County Country Club was renamed Quail Creek Country Club and Resort.

All in all, Robinson Open Golf Classics and the Shrine-Robinson Open were exciting times for those who had the opportunity to watch professional golf close to home on a course that most pros rated the best they played.

Memories of Robinson are not forgotten.