



Photo Greg Linhares

OAKLAND

Home to NBA Champions and Rich Chapter in Golf's History

By Paul Prendergast



Photo Greg Linhares

Oakland Uptown in the afternoon sun.

Stephen Curry and his Golden State Warriors team have pumped another enormous dose of adrenalin into the sporting pulse of Northern California, with an outstanding triumph over the Cleveland Cavaliers to claim National Basketball Association Championship success this year.

The Warriors join the San Francisco Giants, the reigning Major League Baseball champions, as the second San Francisco Bay Area franchise team to hold world championship titles and having spent some time in the city recently, the spring in the step of the community is both tangible and infectious.

The Warriors' win has also thrust attention on the City of Oakland, also the home of the NFL's Raiders and MLB's Athletics, but so often a city shrouded in the perennial shadow cast by the glittering city of San Francisco across the Bay.

Oakland has endured a chequered reputation over time to say the least but today, a renaissance is definitely afoot across the Bay Bridge. The cosmopolitan population mix in Oakland is a melting pot for a rich diversity that is rapidly emerging in food, nightlife, the arts, niche bars, restaurants and music, juxtaposed with the established hillside suburbs that feature grand properties from yesteryear.

Oakland's contribution to golf has been less documented; in fact it's scarcely on the radar in the modern era by comparison with other locales in Northern California. Any conversation about the game inevitably starts and finishes with reference to revered layouts such as The Olympic Club, TPC Harding Park and the ultra-private San Francisco Golf Club, all to the south of San Francisco.

The courses of the Monterey Peninsula down the road speak for



Photo Greg Linhares

Pedalfest at Jack London Square.

themselves and significant amateur and professional events have for years been hosted in the Napa Valley to the north and in southern and east bay layouts including Cordevalle, TPC Stonebrae, Blackhawk and Wente Vineyards at Livermore.

Golf in Oakland may be somewhat of a mystery to many outside the local area but that would be doing a huge disservice to a number of fine layouts within the city limits.

However if the names Ben Hogan, Sam Snead and Byron Nelson don't capture your attention, nothing will, and you may be surprised to learn that this triumvirate of greats were among many in bygone eras who graced the fairways of Oakland.

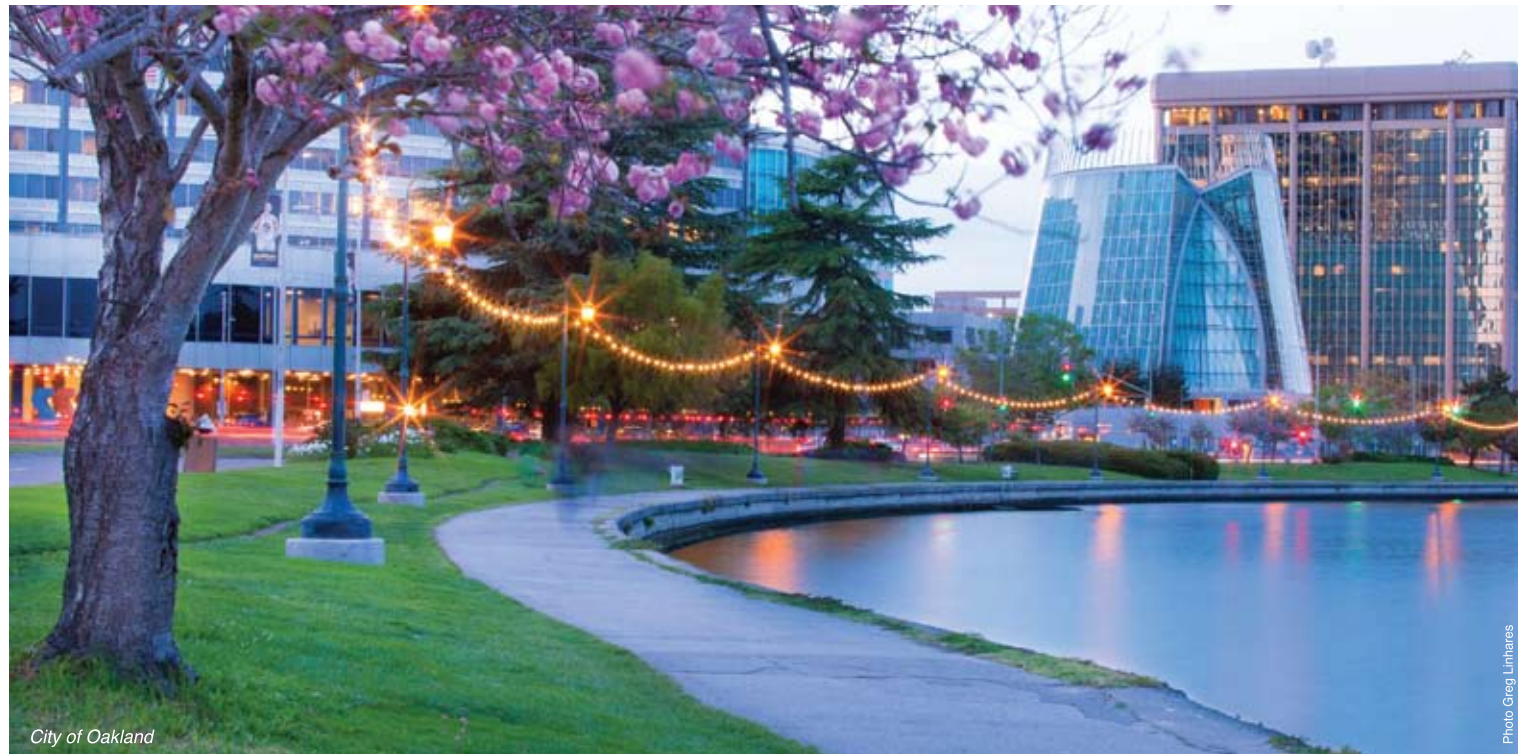
In return, Oakland has graced them all by providing the canvass for moments of poignancy in their storied careers.

The Parking Lot Heist

At Chambers Bay in June, Barbara Nicklaus was awarded the highest honour the United States Golf Association can bestow – the 2015 Bob Jones Award. Presented at the U.S. Open, the award is given annually to 'an individual who demonstrates Jones' spirit, personal character and respect for the game'.

The former Barbara Bash has been wife to Jack Nicklaus for over 55 years, mother to five and grandmother to a brood in excess of twenty. The official dossier on Mrs. Nicklaus' award talks of a life devoted to volunteer work and numerous youth-related charities, including the Barbara and Jack Nicklaus Junior Golf Endowment Fund and chair of the Nicklaus Children's Health Care Foundation, which has raised more than US\$32 million since its inception in 2004.

Unofficially, she's regarded by all who know her as the rock behind the man who would become the greatest player who would ever live. Nicklaus concedes he would not be the man or the player he became without Barbara's influence and the same can be said of the roles played by Winnie Palmer to Arnold and Vivienne Player to Gary.



City of Oakland

Photo Greg Linhares

The Leamington ... and that infamous parking lot.

A generation before the emergence of Nicklaus, Palmer and Player was the era lead by Hogan, Snead and Nelson. Ben Hogan and his wife Valerie knew plenty of hardship in the early years of their marriage, well before the victories began to flow and well before the car accident in 1949 that nearly claimed their lives, where Hogan flung his body across Valerie to protect her from the impact with a Greyhound bus.

If Barbara was the pillar of strength for Jack, Valerie by all accounts played a similar role with Ben and indeed, a decisive role by all accounts in the making of the man who would go on to win nine Major championships and over 60 PGA Tour events.

No more pivotal a moment came in of all places, Oakland, back in 1938 when the Hogans were following 'The Tour' to the West Coast.

The Oakland Open was part of a West Coast swing of tournaments held during the winter months, when courses in the north and east were under the blanket of snow. According to historical reports, the Hogans were down to either their last US\$8 or US\$14 as they rolled in to town from Fort Worth, Texas for the US\$5,000 Oakland Open that year.

The Tour in those days had greater similarities to the pro-am circuits that are dotted across the world today that the conglomerate it is today. Players held club jobs and almost exclusively drove from town to town



AllsportUK/Allsport

July 1953 – Ben Hogan with the Claret Jug after victory in the British Open at Carnoustie, Scotland.

for tournaments, shared cars, gas and rooms to make ends meet. They ate where they could afford, cooked out and hoped the host club might throw them a bone with a meal or two, or a BBQ.

In 1938, the Hogans were staying at the-then Leamington Hotel in



Scott Halleran/Getty Images

Barbara and Jack Nicklaus at the 115th U.S. Open Championship at Chambers Bay where Barbara was awarded the 2015 Bob Jones Award, given annually to 'an individual who demonstrates Jones' spirit, personal character and respect for the game'.

downtown Oakland and had their Buick, which had seen better days, parked in a lot across the street. During the tournament, Hogan came out one morning to find his car up on blocks 'relieved' of its tyres, courtesy of friendly local folk.

Twenty-five-year Hogan was apparently so shattered and despairing of his lot in life that he tearfully pronounced that he was driving back to Texas and quitting the game. Encouraged to soldier on by wife Valerie and fellow professional Henry Picard, Hogan relented and the following day, found something deep within at Oakland's Sequoyah Country Club that would change his life.

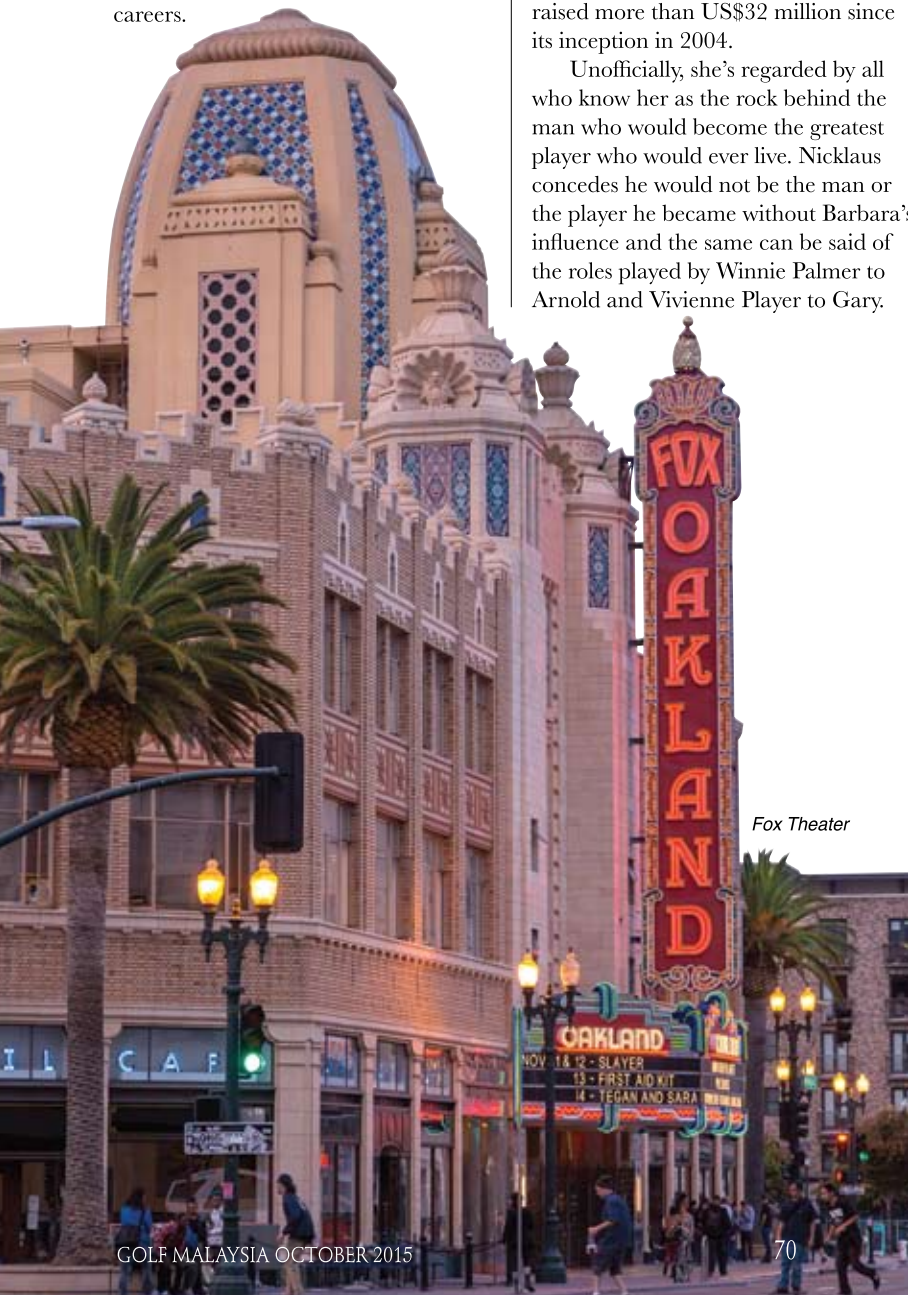
Hogan shot a 67 in what can only be imagined as the most excruciating pressure to perform, not just to create or save a career, but to eat and find a

way to put tyres on the car to get to ... wherever.

Hogan's 67 helped him land the princely sum of US\$285 for finishing sixth in the tournament, which must have felt like a million to him at the time. The windfall ensured he and Valerie got to eat and make their way to the next week, and the one after, and the rest is history.

Hogan also won a Bobby Jones Award later in his career and whether the turning point that occurred in his life at Oakland entered his mind as he accepted this award, one can only wonder. It would be hard to believe it didn't.

Incidentally, the Leamington Hotel still stands in Oakland although the refurbished building is now home to luxurious office space. Out of curiosity and a sense of nostalgia, I visited the



Fox Theater

building in June and the fittings and classic architectural exteriors from Hogan's day remain in their full glory.

So too the infamous parking lot across the street, the historic site of arguably one of the 'make or break' moments that changed the course of the game's history.

'Slammin' Sam Arrives

A year earlier in the inaugural Oakland Open of 1937, a similar legend had been born when Samuel Jackson Snead came west from Virginia to claim the title at the Claremont Country Club in the hills of Oakland.

Although the previous year's West Virginia Closed Championship is regarded as Snead first official PGA Tour victory, the Oakland Open was his first outside his home state in his first full year on Tour.

Snead won five times in 1937 and went on to set the all-time PGA Tour mark for tournament wins at 82 – a record that still stands today, although Tiger Woods (79) will be hoping to

seize the mantle for himself before his time is through.

The Oakland Open's tenure at the Alistair MacKenzie re-designed Claremont would be short lived. At the 1936 event, officials were frustrated that they could not collect entry fees from spectators who could walk freely onto the golf course from any point.

The following year, the tournament was moved to the fenced-in Sequoyah Country Club where the tournament remained for another six years with champions of the calibre of Byron Nelson, Jimmy Demaret and Jim Ferrier going on to grace its honour roll.

Oakland's MacKenzie Influence

Acclaimed course designer Dr. Alistair MacKenzie's stamp on the world of golf extends across continents but Oakland too has its own claim to the Doctor's work through his redesign of Claremont.

MacKenzie is most widely

acclaimed for creating Cypress Point, Augusta National and Royal Melbourne West and played regularly around the Bay Area and Monterey Peninsula, living for the final four years of his life in a house at the side of the 6th fairway at another of his fabulous creations, the Pasatiempo Golf Club in Santa Cruz.

Claremont opened in 1903 and boasts a grand Tudor-styled clubhouse in Rockridge, in the hills above Oakland. MacKenzie's work on the design occurred in 1926, around the time he designed the spectacular Cypress Point Club in Monterey and some years before his collaboration with Bobby Jones in the creation of the Augusta National Golf Club.

At Claremont, the Mackenzie influence is still clearly apparent in course images of the layout today, particularly in the style of high profile bunkering that is a feature of his work and an inspiration to many designers who have followed in his footsteps. ●



Royal Melbourne's West Course, designed by the good doctor.



Sam Snead in action on 1st September 1962 at The Walton Heath Golf Club, United Kingdom.



Augusta National Golf Club, created by MacKenzie.



Cypress Point, another MacKenzie creation.

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Metropolitan Golf Links

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