

WHAT A SWELL PARTY IT WAS!

For more than 40 years,
the Crosby Clambake
swathed the Monterey
Peninsula in an aura of
glamour and created the
mystique of Pebble Beach.
When it left, a captivating
era of golf went with it
BY MICHAEL CALLAHAN





KEN VENTURI

was sitting near the back of the lecture hall—he hated being in front—hoping he’d stay awake for his entire social-studies seminar when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a kid coming up the steps. Venturi had won the 1951 California amateur a few



Previous pages: Bing Crosby and and Bob Hope in 1952. Above, from top: Hope plants a smooch on partner Jimmy Demaret in '52; Dean Martin and Phil Harris ham it up on Pebble's first tee in 1967. Right: Crosby scans the invitee list with Ted Durein of the Monterey Peninsula Herald.

months earlier, but the only thing on his mind at that moment was, *Why are they coming for me? This can't be good.*

"We have a telephone call for you in the office," the kid said.

"Who is it?" Venturi asked nervously.

"Bing Crosby."

It took a second to sink in. Then Venturi burst out laughing. A few students looked over. *Bing Crosby? Calling me? Here? Impossible.* "Well," he replied, "tell him I'm busy." He told the kid it was a joke, a prank.

"No, no," the youngman insisted. "We really think it's Bing Crosby."

Venturi sighed. *Sure it is.* He got up, followed the messenger to the main office and picked up the receiver. After a few moments of chitchat, Crosby got down to business. An amateur had dropped out of his pro-am up in Monterey. He was sorry to call last-minute, but did Ken, then a 20-year-old junior at San Jose State, think he could fill in?

Venturi was thunderstruck. An invitation to the Bing Crosby Pro-Am, the tournament Monterey Peninsula Herald sports editor Ted Durein once described as "the most sensational, colossal, stupendous, breathtaking spectacle in the history of golf!" Yes, the young golfer said. Unequivocally, categorically, absolutely yes.

* * *

For nearly five decades, the Bing Crosby Pro-Am was golf's annual cocktail party, a mélange of storied courses, (club-) swinging celebrities and blustery weather. Crosby coated the game in stardust, creating an

aura of slouchy glamour that, Durein's hyperbole aside, pushed the event to the brink of, but never over, spectacle and bathed the game in the glow of Hollywood searchlights.

The sport's greatest names would eventually come to play Bing's tournament: Snead, Nelson, Hogan, Palmer, Nicklaus. They were joined by a conga line of gossip column-worthy men who amused and entertained the galleries with joie de vivre and the occasional bunker shot. Bob Hope, who would start his pro-am in 1960, was a presence almost from the start; through the years, George C. Scott, Fred MacMurray, Fred Astaire, Desi Arnaz and Sean Connery teed it up, as well as baseball's Sandy Koufax, Dizzy Dean and Leo Durocher; Harper's editor Lewis Lapham; Peanuts cartoonist Charles Schulz; hotel magnate (and newlywed to Elizabeth Taylor) Nicky Hilton; and composer Hoagy Carmichael. Jack Lemmon's annual Sisyphean quest to make the cut became as much a Crosby legend as his psychedelic pants. Then there was singer and comedian Phil Harris, best known as both the husband of actress Alice Faye and as Jack Benny's bandleader, who became as much a face of the tournament as Bing did.

"It had a lot of panache," says Johnny Miller, who won the tournament and pro-am in 1974. "It was really cool to just be around Bing Crosby. It wasn't about money so much then. People didn't come because of the purses. They came because they wanted to be around Phil Harris and Jack Lemmon and Clint Eastwood and James Garner. For me, it was my fifth major."

After the first Crosby, played at Rancho Santa Fe in 1937 (after World War II it later moved



TKTKTKTK - TKTKTKTK



DEAN MARTIN

"I didn't get a par until the fifth hole. Then I brought out the vodka. I played great the rest of the way. Those Russians have all the answers."

interchangeable B-list celebrities, second-tier pros and boardroom amateurs. The Crosby's breezy air of matinee-idol verve has been stripped away by the cheap currency that passes for contemporary fame. Less than a decade after Bing died on a golf course in Spain in 1977, AT&T took over as sponsor and swallowed the name of his event, opening its checkbook for the beefy purses modern golf demands. The facile stagecraft of today's televised pro-ams, coupled with the fastidious polish celebrities now apply to their vulnerable public images, leaves no room for the raw, bawdy spontaneity of the Crosby's gilded age.

During the event's prime—before the days of *Us Weekly*, and before its tee boxes were cluttered with CEOs and Kenny G—the party spilled onto the fairways, turning golf bags into minibars and giving new meaning to the term "clubs in the bag." It was all a reflection of those indolent Rat Pack-y days. "There are stories of some caddies carrying the booze, and drinking the golfers' booze while they were playing," says Neal Hotelling, the historian at Pebble Beach. "The caddies would be drunk by the end of the tournament."

Not that the players were bereft of liquid courage. "I didn't get a par until the fifth hole," Dean Martin once remarked. "Then I brought out the vodka. I played great the rest of the way. Those Russians have all the answers."

Palmer knew a woman in his hometown of Latrobe, Pa., who made "bourbon balls," small, round cakes with bourbon in the middle. Each year he presented a big bag of them to Phil Harris. "He didn't really need them, though," Palmer says today. "He found other ways to get his bourbon." Indeed, Harris often and proudly declared that he was playing "out of the Jack Daniels Country Club."

There were hijinks—at the first tournament, Walter Hagen and actor Richard Arlen pushed over an outhouse with 1928 and '29 PGA champion Leo Diegel still inside—and plenty of skirt-chasing, most of it done by men wearing wedding rings. Of course, this woozy, boozy approach to tournament play didn't suit everyone—in particular the young pros

who viewed the Crosby not as a party but as a paycheck, and who failed to fall under its spell. Paired one year with such a player stewing about all the carousing, Hawaiian millionaire Francis Brown finally asked him why he appeared so aggrieved. "Well, while you're out here having a good time, I see wolves swarming around my door. I just have to finish in the money." Asked how much he thought he could earn that week, the pro responded, "A thousand dollars." Brown reached into his trousers pocket, pulled out a wad of cash, peeled off ten \$100 bills, and thrust them into his partner's palm. "Now," he said, "let's go out and have some fun."

Brown had a place on the top of a hill in Monterey, and every year he threw a bash that became one of the tournament's signature punch-bowl-and-pearls galas. In his foreword to Dwayne Netland's 1975 book, *The Crosby: Greatest Show in Golf*, Crosby relayed going one year with his 13-year-old son Lindsay, who kept company with the gardener while the bash raged on. Bing's attempts to leave at a decent hour were easily thwarted, resulting in a 4 a.m. departure with Bing behind the wheel, Lindsay next to him, and a few raucous hangers-on in the back seat. Together, they took the drive down the hill back to Pebble.

The next day, a concerned Bob Hope pulled Lindsay aside. "How did you get home last night?" he asked.

The boy told him, and assured him all had turned out all right. Hope was unmollified. "Well," he said, "you didn't let your father drive in the condition he was in."

Lindsay pondered it a minute, then said flatly, "He was the best we had."

It's a typical Crosby anecdote, and is the type retold with a whiff of mirth, its accompaniments a shaking of the head, a sly grin. That's because it happened in 1951. Put that story out last week and you'd see Bing, looking stricken and somber, heading into a custody hearing live on TV, its outcome later dissected in the pages of *People* magazine. (Imagine the headline: "BING BONGED! A teary Dixie fears for her



From top: Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, promoting their new film, "The Caddy," clowning around at the 1952 Crosby; crowd favorite Jack Lemmon tried valiantly to make the pro-am cut—but never succeeded. This photo is from the 1969 tournament.



Top: Comedian Phil Harris (right) seized any opportunity to crack up the crowd. Above: baseball great Joe DiMaggio with Pebble Beach Resorts founder Samuel F.B. Morse.

to Monterey in 1947), Bing hosted a massive barbecue under some pepper trees at his ranch with what he called "suitable potables, edibles and impromptu entertainment." It rolled on well into the night. This fete—and, in the end, the tournament—became colloquially known as the Clambake. "Why it was called the Clambake I'll never know," Bing wryly commented later, "because there wasn't a clam in evidence."

Not that it mattered. The Clambake, a stag sit-down affair the Wednesday night before the tournament, featured entertainment from the likes of Rosemary Clooney, Kay Starr, Joey Bishop and Jimmy Durante, along with a peppery brew of ribald trash talk and vaudevillian snap from the guests. "They were wild," recalls Arnold Palmer. "It was a lot of fun, actually, because everybody entertained. And Crosby sang, and all the people who were participating in the tournament were there. You could say there was a little drinking." He chuckles. "It was a loose and major party."

Phil Harris zinged off-color jokes around the room; serious, bespectacled young men in

tweed stood before a blackboard taking bets for the calcutta. "Then at some point Phil would come out and sing, 'Old Dogs, Children and Watermelon Wine,' and everyone would get teary-eyed," says John Durein, whose father, Ted, in addition to working at the Herald, served as the tournament press agent.

Fitting, because the Crosby was like a song: snappy, infectious and beloved, which in the end would be both its majesty and its tragedy. Because no song, no matter how pretty or melodic, goes on forever.

* * *

Although there is much in modern golf to be thankful for—hybrid clubs, ShotLink, David Feherty's quips, a guy with a penchant for red shirts and a grin made from Chiclets who has transformed the game—there has also been something lost in the vanishing of the Crosby and all its Jazz Age swagger.

Pro-ams endure, but now they seem like pale, less tangy copies, vanilla imitations peopled with



ARNOLD PALMER

“Crosby sang, and all the people who were participating in the tournament were there. You could say there was a little drinking. It was a loose and major party.”



Top to bottom: Bing Crosby at the Monterey Peninsula Country Club in 1951, joined by "The Firehouse Five"; Arnold Palmer is swarmed by his "Army" in 1970; singer Andy Williams and hotelier Ed Crowley on the first tee.

kids.”) Although no one would endorse drunk driving—then or now—there is something both reassuring and melancholy about the episode, and about the fact that it didn't result in the tournament-ending scandal that it surely would today. “There was a mystery about them,” Art Spander, the former Oakland Tribune columnist who began covering the tournament in the '60s, says of the Crosby Old Guard. “Now we know everything about everybody. I think that has taken the romance away.”

* * *

Romance is a good word to use when describing the Crosby, but it's hardly the only one. The tournament was groundbreaking in several ways, not the least of which was that it was the first to be played simultaneously on three courses: Pebble, Cypress Point and Monterey Peninsula. The pro-am was unusual in another way: Pro-ams that came in under a cutline played through the weekend.

In 1948, Bing built a white, Spanish-style house made of redwood and framed by Monterey pines off the 13th at Pebble, and from there supervised the entire operation, from the pairings to who entertained at the Clambake. But it was with the caprice of the invites—who got in, who didn't—that Bing Crosby established himself as golf's most powerful puppeteer.

As the tournament grew in stature through the '50s and '60s, players and celebrities alike anxiously sifted through the mail each September to see if they would be chosen to compete. Playing one year or even several years meant nothing—you could easily be in one year and out the next—for no apparent reason. Paul Spengler, now an executive vice president at Pebble Beach Co., played as an amateur (he'd won the Hawaiian state title) with Ted Makalena starting in 1964; in 1967, the duo finished second in the pro-am. In 1968, Spengler wasn't invited. To this day he has no idea why. “I went and had a hernia operation that week,” he says, “because I could.” Bing invited him to every pro-am afterward.

Once he decided who made it in, Bing skipped off to Mexico or planned hunting trips to escape the resulting pleas for exceptions. “September to January,” remembers his son Nathaniel, “was pretty brutal.”

“Bing did all the pairings,” says Carol Rissel, who ran the operations for more than a decade starting in 1956. “Someone would want this partner or that one, and Bing would just come in and say, ‘I don't want him playing there’ or ‘I don't want him playing with him.’”

That tight control helped the tournament run smoothly for decades in spite of its many moving parts and constantly atrocious weather. It also kept everyone in line—even the celebrities. Frank Sinatra came to the 1964 Crosby as Dean Martin's guest and to enjoy the clubby beau monde the tournament had become. The story goes (Pebble officials neither confirm nor deny it) that Sinatra, staying at the Lodge, wanted room service late one night. The kitchen had closed hours earlier, a revelation that sent Sinatra storming into the lobby, demanding to see the night manager. The manager apologized but reiterated that the kitchen wasn't open. Furious, Sinatra allegedly took a swing at him. Afterward, he was asked to leave. “Bing was really outraged,” says John Durein. “He never invited Frank back.”

Such unpleasantness was rare: Once the party got started, Bing made an art of making you feel welcome. One of Jack Nicklaus' favorite stories is about an impromptu get-together in his hotel room after one of the Saturday rounds in the early 1970s. It was his birthday, and his spontaneous little gathering had morphed into a noisy, freewheeling affair—in effect, a mini-Clambake. Amid the din the phone rang, and on the other end was John Swanson, a friend of Nicklaus' from San Francisco who each year partnered with Tom Weiskopf for the pro-am.

“He says, ‘Hey, Jack, happy birthday! I've got somebody here who wants to say hello to you,’” Nicklaus recalls today. “I couldn't hear on my end, because there was a lot of noise behind me. Well, here this guy gets on the phone and sings ‘Happy Birthday’ to me. And I'm listening to the whole



Left: Ben Hogan (left) and Bing Crosby were partners in 1956, the last competitive appearance for each. Above: Frank Sinatra (left) came to the 1964 Crosby with his friend Dean Martin. Here they share a laugh with actress Jessica Walter.

thing, I'm sitting there not thinking properly, and when he's done, all of a sudden I give it a real businesslike, ‘To whom am I speaking, please?’ And the voice said, ‘Oh, this is Bing Crosby, Jack. Happy birthday. . . . I was a little hoarse.’” Nicklaus' heart plunged into his shoes. “I wanted to crawl under the nearest table,” he says.

The only thing Bing couldn't control was the weather. Although petulant skies are a threat at every tournament, it seemed like the Crosby rolled out annually under some Byzantine meteorological curse, with a round or two (or four) masquerading as a British Open, packed with shrieking winds and bone-chilling rain. Wrote Los Angeles Times columnist Jim Murray in 1965: “If Bob Hope and Bing Crosby ever want to get together to do a picture on the Crosby golf tournament, I got the title for them: ‘The Road to Pneumonia.’”

The Saturday of the 1962 Crosby had been a splendid day on the course, with a high temperature of 64 and bright, sunny skies. Ken Venturi was feeling good: Paired with Dean Martin, they were only three shots out of the lead heading into the final round Sunday. If only there had been a final round Sunday.

Early Sunday morning Venturi telephoned Martin's room. A still-groggy Dean picked up. “Merry Christmas,” Venturi said. “Wh-What?” Martin replied, slightly disoriented. “What are you talking about?” “Look out your window.”

Dean Martin did and saw what the rest of Monterey saw: a thick coating of snow over the course. The rest of the day would see more snow,

hail, wind, sleet and just about any other form of teeth-chattering precipitation imaginable. Surveying the carnage, Jimmy Demaret famously remarked, “I know I got loaded last night. But how did I end up in Squaw Valley?” Later, actor Dennis O'Keefe putted snowballs; Palmer and his wife started a snowball fight in the parking lot.

Venturi couldn't convince Martin to stay for the postponed final round of play on Monday in 1962; Martin had a commitment to start a movie, forcing them to drop out of the tournament. When Martin got to the location the next day, he discovered filming had been delayed—for three days. “He always regretted not staying,” Venturi says.

* * *

You can still find glints of the Crosby shimmer in professional golf, but they're now reflected almost exclusively in the polished antiquities of tradition at the Masters: the feathery old birds of Augusta welcoming you “to the Masters Toonamint,” the mysterious, elegant aura of the Champions Dinner, the ginger placing of the green coat on the new champion by the outgoing one. But what is missing in golf today is the Crosby's raconteur spirit, its cocktail-shaker style.

“It's a much different environment now,” says Bobby Clampett, the CBS golf analyst who as a kid growing up in Carmel scrambled through the Crosby throngs for autographs and played his first one in 1981. “Much more corporate, much more high-dollar. The era of professionalism.”

Although Clampett says AT&T has been a terrific sponsor, he knows the passing of the Crosby was in many ways something to be mourned. Once AT&T took over in 1986, Clampett says, “It was not going to be ‘the Bing Crosby AT&T.’ It was either the Crosby Clambake or it wasn't.” (Bing's widow, Kathryn, took the Crosby name to North Carolina and hosted her own tournament, which ran for 15 years but was never able to replicate the magic of the Crosby's heyday in Monterey.)

Although his tournament is gone, at least Bing's philanthropic spirit endures through the Monterey Peninsula Foundation, which still runs the AT&T and serves as its charitable arm, dispersing grants throughout the community—more than \$72 million to date. Its headquarters is in an office park tucked in the dusty sand-colored hills above Monterey.

Hanging on a wall in the foundation's conference room is a series of bulletin boards highlighting all of this giving, the result of the vision of a charismatic crooner who brought what in 1950 Game & Gossip writer Charles Kilian labeled “a gigantic house party” to northern California. On the first bulletin board is a big quote from Bing that reads, “If I were asked what single thing has given me the most gratification in my long and sometimes pedestrian career, I think I would have to say it is this tournament.” The accompanying black-and-white photo shows Bing walking by a gallery in a sweater, baggy knickers and a tam-o'-shanter, a pipe jutting from lips turned slightly upward in a bemused smile. Fittingly, he is holding an umbrella. It was, of course, raining. ■