



# Not short of a few Bobs..!

## 'Hacker Bob' Jones on a tournament designed only for people with the same famous golfing name

When a friend mentioned to me about 25 years ago that there was an annual golf tournament in America for people called Bob Jones, my reaction was, I suppose, similar to most: a mixture of scepticism and amusement.

Amusement because of the pleasing irony of the Bobby Jones Open being 'open' only to people called Bob Jones. Scepticism that anyone could be daft enough to establish such an event.

But my pal was not pulling my leg. The Bobby Jones Open (in memory of the game's first international superstar and Grand Slam winner Robert Tyre Jones, or Bobby Jones

Jnr), does exist and entry is indeed restricted to those who share the great man's name.

Almost everyone I've ever told about it since has said the same thing - "You've got to play in that, Bob!" - so in 2023, finally, that's what I hope to do.

The Bobby Jones Open was first played over 40 years ago. The founder of the event was a Robert Arthur Jones, according to his son Chris. Robert Arthur, now sadly passed away, was a larger-than-life salesman used to having to put up with comparisons between his own less-than-outstanding game and that of his illustrious namesake (no relation). So one day he decided to do something about

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it by setting up a tournament in his home state of Michigan just for Bob Joneses. He proceeded to cold-call every Bob Jones he could find in the Detroit phone directory and in 1979 five of them teed it up in the very first Bobby Jones Open.

Word spread, Chris told me, and soon Robert Arthur's office was receiving calls from other Bob Joneses wanting to take part. One caller spoke to Chris's sister, Kelly, who was working on the front desk at the time: "Hi, this is James Robert Jones, but I go by Bob, can I play in the Bobby Jones Open?"

"Er, I'm not sure. Let me go ask my Dad and I'll call you right back," Kelly said.

Robert Arthur wasn't keen, but he also wanted more participants in his event, so he decided on a compromise: "If he goes by the name Bob Jones, he can play." Kelly rang back.

"Hi, this is Jim."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Mr Jones, you've just disqualified yourself from the Bobby Jones Open."

But compromise did follow. Today about half the contestants at the 36-hole event are genuine Bob Joneses. All have their own identifying nicknames: Robert Arthur was 'Computer'; it's been agreed mine should be 'Hacker' reflecting both my golf and my journalistic past; Bobby Jones IV (grandson of the grand slam winner) played in the fifth event and was nicknamed, sure enough, 'Grandson' for the duration. The Bob Joneses play for the competition's main prize. Chris (or rather 'Computer II'), whose middle name is Robert and who now chairs the Bobby Jones Open, was made an honorary Bob. One female Bobbie Jones has played and is expected to return in 2023. With guests now permitted - and a competition for both men and women - three prizes in all are up for grabs, the scores calculated on a modified 'Calloway' strokeplay system (don't ask me, you'll have to google it). Attendance has totalled around 60 golfers in recent years, but non-golfing friends and family come too and the prize-giving dinner can have more than 100. The 2023 event will be held on June 14-15 (with an optional practice day on June 13) at Lederach Golf Club near Philadelphia.

2023, as it happens, is the centenary of the first of Bobby Jones Jr's 13 majors. By winning the US Open in 1923 he ended a period later known as the 'seven lean years' in which he failed to win a single major and when many thought he wasn't capable of living up to his potential. But that win launched him on a golden stretch of eight years in which he won at least one major a year, culminating in the 'impregnable quadrilateral' in 1930 when he bagged all four majors of the time, the US and British Opens and the US and British Amateurs.

No one since has won so many majors in such a concentrated period. Nor has anyone

done so while simultaneously gaining two degrees (mechanical engineering and English literature) and passing their bar exams; or working full-time for a living; or starting a family. All of which meant that there were often months-long periods in wintertime when he barely lifted a club.

These astonishing achievements took their toll, however. The stress of 'tournament play', which Jones regarded as a wholly distinct form of golf from the relaxed kind he played at home

at East Lake in Atlanta with his father and friends, was so great that he gave up competing in majors after winning the grand slam. Besides, he had been a sickly child, suffering stomach problems that prevented him from digesting solid food until he was five years old. By then, the family had already moved out to the suburbs from downtown Atlanta so Bobby would benefit from the cleaner air.

Some think these early health problems were symptomatic of the terrible illness that

blighted Jones's last years, to which relatively little attention is, understandably, given. Jones suffered from syringomyelia, a rare disease that causes a cyst to grow in the spinal column, initially causing intense pain and eventually leading to paralysis of the arms, legs or respiratory system. After playing in his 12th Masters Tournament (before it became a major) at Augusta in 1948 at the age of only 46, Jones hung up his golf bag for good. His condition went undiagnosed for many years

and was in any case incurable. He ended his days in 1971 in a wheelchair weighing just a few stone; strong drink and cigarettes were among the few things that alleviated his suffering.

Back in Michigan, Robert Arthur knew about Jones's illness and early on decided to introduce a fund-raising element to the Bobby Jones Open. "Every participant tends to donate some money on top of the entrance-fee," said Chris. "So far we've raised

## A charity Classic at East Lake

Fund-raising is the purpose of another annual golfing event, the Bobby Jones Classic, which was held for the first time in 2012 (and is open to non-Bobby Joneses). This event was established, with the support of Bobby Jones Jr's heirs, by Dorothy Poppe, whose son also had syringomyelia. Dorothy had set up the Bobby Jones CSF (Chiari & Syringomyelia Foundation) a few years earlier; the charity has raised more than \$6m to date.

"My son George had the same condition as Bobby Jones," Dorothy, whose background was in the voluntary sector, told me. "This was 1992. By then, MRI had just become available, so George was diagnosed quickly and early, unlike Bobby. Thanks to his MRI diagnosis, George was able to have a couple of miracle operations and he survived, though he did suffer from dysgraphia - he kept failing math tests because he couldn't write properly. But today he's six foot five and has a PhD in physics!

"I wanted to give back, so I started raising money for research projects in this area. I was organising a fund-raiser in New York City and I had the idea of inviting Bobby Jones IV [Bobby Jones Jr's grandson] to speak at the event. So I just cold-called him. He initially said no."

This reluctance to support so worthwhile a cause, overturned later by Dorothy's persuasiveness, sprang from the family's desire to adhere to Bobby Jones's own wishes. He didn't want to be remembered for the tragedy of his later life. He owned a chalet by the tenth hole at Augusta National, the golf club he built with Clifford Roberts, and he continued to attend the Masters after he stopped playing. But he was seen in public less and less. Towards the end he tended to watch the tournament on a TV in the chalet behind closed curtains with two packs of cigarettes and a bottle of something smooth on the table by his chair. In those days disability remained hidden.

Next year (2023) the Bobby Jones Classic will be held on March 26-27, with Bobby Jones Jr's home course, East Lake Golf Club in Atlanta agreeing to host it. East Lake is the only golf club in the world to have housed the trophies of all four Majors of the time (the Open, the US Open, the US Amateur and the British Amateur) plus the Walker Cup (after Jones captained the American team to victory in 1930 on top of his other achievements that year). Since 2004 East Lake has found modern-day fame as the home of the season-ending US PGA Tour Championship.



Dorothy Poppe at East Lake, Atlanta

I'm hoping to play in the Bobby Jones Classic as well the Bobby Jones Open, especially after Dorothy told me that East Lake is about to undergo some major changes, and that 2023 will therefore be the last chance to play the course in its current design.

"Bobby Jones would recognise the course as it plays today as the routing is very similar," explains Dave Purdie, East Lake's Director of Operations & COO, "[though] most of the greens and bunkers are different now. The coming changes will actually bring it back even closer [to how it was in Bobby Jones's day]. Our architect Andrew Green is basing his renovation on aerial images from 1947 and is drawing inspiration from the double greens (summer and winter) we had back then."

The work will start in September, so there will be a one-year gap before the Tour Championship returns to East Lake as its permanent home in 2024.



From left to right: Rick Johnson (only guest on the BJO committee), "Bugs" (works on infectious diseases), "Bodyshop" (owns a bodyshop in Des Moines, Iowa), and Doc Shires (guest of Bodyshop).

more than \$400,000." All the money goes to support people suffering from syringomyelia and related conditions. "Last year we gave 12 scholarships worth \$1,000 each to students with syringomyelia."

What of my own ambitions? While Bobby Jones Jnr has always been one of my sporting heroes, I can very confidently assert that there is precious little similarity between us, other than sharing the same name, and I doubt I will be challenging for silver if I make the starting line-up at Philadelphia next year. That said, there is one other characteristic we do share.

In Jones's case it was illustrated by an incident at Merion Cricket Club in 1916, where Jones played in his first major at the age of just 14, as recounted in O.B. 'Pop' Keeler's biography, *The Bobby Jones Story*.

In the first round of the knock-out stage of that year's National Championship (as the US Amateur was then known), Jones, the youngest contestant, was drawn against a former champion, 36-year-old Eben Byers. Both players had high expectations of their own play and vented their volcanic tempers

by hurling clubs as far as they could after wayward shots. At one hole Byers threw an uncooperative iron over a hedge out of bounds and refused to let his caddy retrieve it. The group behind said the two of them at times resembled a juggling act. Afterwards Jones is alleged to have quipped that the only reason he won was because Byers ran out of clubs first.

That rather reminded me of my own teenage golfing years (and the odd occasion since though, like Bobby Jones Jnr, I hope I have learnt as an adult to keep things under control). The comparison doesn't flatter either of us, but it has made me feel closer to the great man all the same.

*For more information go to [www.bobbyjonesopen.com](http://www.bobbyjonesopen.com) or [www.bobbyjonesclassic.com](http://www.bobbyjonesclassic.com) Both organisers would be pleased to hear from anyone who might like to participate. For the Open contact Chris at [computer2bjo@gmail.com](mailto:computer2bjo@gmail.com) and for the Classic contact Dorothy at [MPoppe@BobbyJonesCSF.org](mailto:MPoppe@BobbyJonesCSF.org)*

**Bob Jones ('Hacker Bob') is a member of Hadley Wood Golf Club**