

Everybody Loves Peg

The spirit behind Pine Needles Lodge & Golf Club is still going strong and enjoying the place she's long called home

Interviewed by Rhonda Glenn

MMARGARET ANNE KIRK BELL has seen everything in golf. And if she hasn't, she's probably heard about it.

"Peggy" – as she's known by her golf students, Jack Nicklaus, PGA Tour professionals, Annika Sorenstam, junior girl golfers, golf course superintendents, golf course designer Pete Dye and past USGA president Judy Bell – will celebrate her 90th birthday on Oct. 28.

She has won every golf award worth mentioning. In 1990, the USGA gave her its highest honor, the Bob Jones Award, for a lifetime of distinguished sportsmanship. In 1994, the Golf Writers Association of America honored her with the William Richardson Award for outstanding contributions to golf. She has been LPGA Teacher of the Year and *Golf Digest* once named her one of the five most influential women in the game.

Without a doubt, Peggy Kirk Bell is one of the folks in golf who is truly beloved. She has been a USA Curtis Cup player, pilot, resort owner, founder of the LPGA Tour (and yes, she'll set you straight on *that*), wife, mother, grandmother and one of the most respected teaching professionals in the game.

In 1953, Peggy married Warren "Bullet" Bell. They bought Pine Needles Country Club in Southern Pines, N.C., and with years of hard work, developed Pine Needles Lodge & Golf Club into one of the nation's most popular golf resorts. The Bells had three children, Bonnie, Peggy Ann and Kirk. After Bullet's death in 1984, the Bell children and their spouses stepped in to help run the resort. Today it remains a top golf destination, with families and avid golfers returning year after year.

Peggy was a fine player who captured the Titleholders and Women's North & South Amateur Championship in 1949. She won the Women's Eastern Amateur and played on the USA Curtis Cup team in 1950 and turned professional late that year.

Over the years, Bell has made thousands of friends. We caught up with her recently at her home at Pine Needles.

Rhonda Glenn: I understand that your friendship with the late Babe Didrikson Zaharias began at the 1945 Women's Western Open. How did you become friends?

Peggy Kirk Bell: I was playing and somebody said, 'Babe Didrikson is down on the practice tee.' Man, I ran down there so fast. I'd never seen anything like it. Women golfers at that time moved all over, but this swing was compact and short and she just whacked it.

Not long after, she asked me to play gin rummy. I said, 'I don't know how to play.' She said, 'I'll teach you.' We played and at the end she added it up and said, 'You owe me \$13.15.' I couldn't believe it! Later I told her, 'You're the biggest hustler I've ever known.' She said, 'I'll get the \$13.15, we'll play and I'll give you a chance to get it back.' I said, 'I'm not *that* dumb!'

When she kept asking me if I wanted to play golf, I was thrilled to death because she was the greatest athlete, although she hadn't won a lot of golf tournaments yet. So we played and became friends.

RG: Did Babe ever help you with your game?

Bell: She never taught me anything, but I said, 'How can you hit it so far?' She said, 'I just turn my left shoulder to the target and I just step into it.' She picked up her left heel, but she always got it back down. That's why, when I've taught, when people can't turn enough and they lift that left heel, I let them do it. You need that to get *behind* the ball, but you have to get the heel back down. It's turn away with the upper body and move in with the lower. You can't just stand there and slap at it.

RG: How did you become friends with the late Patty Berg?

Bell: Patty went to church every day. She was a very devout Catholic. So, I took her to church one day and there was an offering box next to the door, and she put some money in it. Then we walked into the church and there was another little offering box and she put some money in that. Then we took our seats and the service began. After a while, they came around passing a basket on the end of a stick, and she put some money in that. I told her, 'I can't go to church with you anymore. It costs too much money!'

We were friends for many, many years. She used to do a clinic in the early days of the tour. She'd line up all the players in chairs around the practice tee. Then she'd call them up, one by one, to hit a certain club and she'd do the narration. She was wonderful at it and it brought spectators out. A few years ago she started doing a clinic at the Women's Open. Kathy Whitworth and I would hit the shots and Patty would be the narrator.

RG: You turned pro and joined the LPGA Tour in November 1950?

Bell: Yes, and I'm really a founding member of the LPGA Tour, but they won't admit it. When they were trying to figure out who the founding members were, they'd lost the records, so they went back to this one little tournament in Washington state, and whoever had played in that was named a founding member.

Well, I hadn't gone to that tournament. It was too far away, too long a drive, so I stayed home that week. But I have my original LPGA membership card and it says, 'Founder.' I told them, but they didn't pay any attention.

RG: When the LPGA Tour first started, the players had to handle the day-to-day operation of the tour. What jobs did you have?

Bell: I can't remember, but I know that we had to do a lot of things. Like, we always had to help with the pairings because there were only about eight pros and you had to play with two amateurs. The winning pro would win maybe \$500 and all the other pros got \$50. Today I get a kick out of these girls. None of them have a job as a club pro. None of them work for a company. They all get paid on the tour today. It's big money.

RG: What do you think of today's women touring professionals?

Bell: A few years ago, when Carolyn Bivens was running the tour as the commissioner, I went to her and said, 'You have to have a dress code. Those women are dressing terribly.' She said, 'I can't do that. The dress companies would sue us.' I said, 'You ought to be sued, the way

those girls dress with everything hanging out. They look terrible.' They say this new commissioner [Michael Whan] is pretty good and he's doing a good job.

RG: What do you think of the way the women professionals of today play the game?

Bell: They're great. They can hit it great. But the equipment is better. It's just like [Sam] Snead said, these guys make so much money today, and the women too.

RG: How do you like to spend your time these days?

Bell: I had my knees replaced in 2010. The doctor who did the surgery said it's going to take me a while. He blames my age. I can walk and do everything, but I lose my balance. I chip a little bit and pitch. I lean against the hood of a golf cart, put balls out in front of me and pitch them up there.

Now and then, I'll hit a 9-iron. It's work, but I'll work until I can walk. I have a golf cart in my garage and I drive over to the club for lunch every day and see everybody in the bar. I'm still teaching. I go out to the practice tee in my walker and I sit down. Then I get up and I can change a player's grip or get them to turn a little better. Make it simple. My golf schools have gone down badly because of the economy. I think women's golf is slipping a little bit because of the economy.

RG: You have a big birthday coming up in October, your 90th. What do you think of that?

Bell: I think that I'm old! I never thought of being old, but I'm old now and I feel it.

RG: You've accomplished so much in your life. It must give you pleasure to look back at it.

Bell: I'll tell you, golf has taken me around the world. I've coached the India team and I've brought kids over from India and other countries to Rollins College, my alma mater. You know, in India they pick your husband. I told this girl from India, 'Now, get a nice American boy.' She said, 'No, I can't do that. My parents pick my husband.' Isn't that amazing? When you learn about other countries and with what you know about this country, you understand how grateful we should be.

All my family plays the game. I love to just walk in the club and have the guests come over and introduce themselves. Today, a man from the University of Findlay (Ohio), was here to meet with me. I said, 'Now what did you want to see me about?' I always comp the people from the University of Findlay when they come here. They play in a tournament here. They gave me an honorary degree from Findlay but I got a degree from Rollins, so I say, 'I don't need any degrees. I have a bunch of degrees.'

Pete and Alice Dye were at Rollins right after I was there and we've been friends for years. I see them if I get to Florida but I haven't travelled down there much because I'm just here, limping around.

RG: How many grandchildren do you have?

Bell: I have eight wonderful grandkids. I'm so blessed. Bonnie's daughter, Scottie McGowan, can hit the ball almost to the green from the ladies tee. She can smack it a mile and her swing is perfect. She's 13.

RG: Any final thoughts?

Bell: Golf has really been a blessing to me. Every day, I go to the club and meet new people. I've been blessed. Everybody should play the game. Golf has been wonderful to me and my family. Without golf in my life, I wouldn't be anything.

Copyright Virginia Golfer, 2011. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission. Interviewer Rhonda Glenn is a manager of communications for the United States Golf Association.