

Billy Casper won 51 times on the PGA Tour, including three Majors. But for all that, he was golf's

# Quiet Champion

By John Fischer III

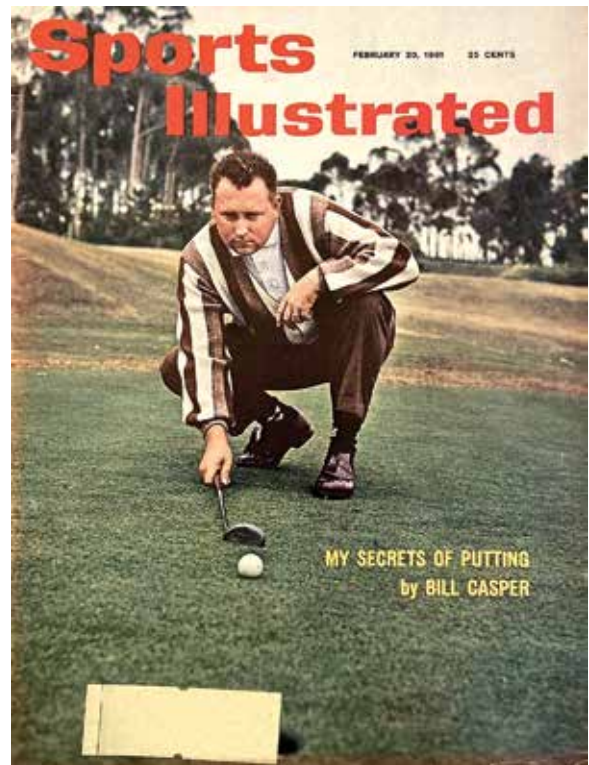
As Billy Casper and Arnold Palmer stood on the 10th tee of the Olympic Club outside San Francisco during the final round of the 1966 U.S. Open, Palmer held an insurmountable lead of seven strokes. Casper, who'd won the 1959 Open at Winged Foot (West), was two strokes ahead of Jack Nicklaus and Tony Lema, and said to Palmer, "I'd like to finish second," referring to his pursuers. Palmer responded, "I'll do everything I can to help you," not meaning advice, but that he wasn't going to let Casper slip by him.

Ben Hogan held the lowest winning Open score, 276, from the 1948 tournament at Riviera, and Palmer wanted to beat that score and set a new record. He could do that by finishing one over par on the back nine. Palmer was pretty sure he could pull it off; he felt Olympic's first nine was the harder of the two and he had gone out in 36, one over par.

So, in addition to the field, Palmer had an invisible opponent, Ben Hogan's record. Hogan had been given a special exemption to play at Olympic in recognition of his second-place finish in the 1955 Open at Olympic to Jack Fleck in a playoff. As a bonus, Palmer could break Hogan's record with Hogan in the field. With no one who could catch his seven-stroke lead, Palmer decided to chase the past and focus on breaking Hogan's record.

No tournament golfer changes his approach to the game, especially in the clinch. Arnold would attack the course even with a seven-stroke lead, always going for the jugular vein. Casper would play a cautious game, a strategic one where he kept the ball in play and placed his ball where he could play the next shot from the best position.

On the 10th hole, Casper made a par and Palmer bogeyed



after missing the green. Losing a shot when it leaves you with a six-shot lead with eight to go didn't seem to affect anything, especially when both Casper and Palmer would par 11 and birdie 12. If it were match play – and this was close to it – Palmer would be dormie six, that is, six up with six to play.

The next hole, No. 13, was a long 191-yard par-3, and Casper hit safely to the middle of the green, not at the pin which was tucked in the back of the green. Palmer turned up the juice and went right at the pin – and ended up in the thick U.S. Open rough. Palmer made a nice recovery, but two-putted for a bogey. Casper, in the meantime, two-putted for a par, gaining another stroke on Palmer.

Palmer and Casper both parred the 14th, no blood there, and headed to the short par-3 15th where Casper played safely to the back of the green, but had left himself a 30-foot downhill putt. Palmer went straight at the pin on the right front and ended up in the bunker. Palmer blasted out, leaving himself a 15-foot putt. Casper calmly knocked in his 30-footer for a birdie and Palmer two-putted for a bogey. Palmer was three up with three to play. It may not have been immediately noticeable, but the momentum of the game had changed.

At the 604-yard par-5 16th, Palmer decided to take advantage of his distance off the tee to overpower Casper and pick up a birdie to get a stroke back. Palmer hit a terrible duck hook off the tee, struck a tree, and his ball fell into the five-inch rough.

Instead of pitching out and playing it safe, Palmer decided to hit the ball as hard as he could with a 3-iron. It was a disaster. Palmer's ball barely moved and left him in the rough. He then hit a 9-iron into the fairway and a three-wood which fell



(Clock) SAN FRANCISCO, June 20—CASPER CHASE BATTLE WITH PALMER—BILLY Casper takes back the lead for the first time today in an effort to win the U.S. Open golf championship in an 18-hole playoff with Arnold Palmer in San Francisco. Casper parred the first hole. (AP Wirephoto/174403024) 1966

DOUBLE DISASTER SOMETHING NEW  
**Arnie Still Wondering, 'What Happened?'**

SCORE ONE FOR FAITH  
**Billy Credits Win To New Church, Old Touch**

FOR ALMOST THAT IS  
**Casper Never Gave Up Hope**

**The Times Sports**

GIANTS LOSE FORESTERS WITH BAD SHOULDER



Three Little Florida Reasons Helped  
**BILLY CASPER REGAINS U. S. OPEN TITLE WHEN PALMER FLOUNDERS ON OLYMPIC COURSE BACK**

Arnold Palmer (right) congratulates Billy Casper yesterday after the Franco/Israeli playoff went awry on the back nine of the Olympic Golf Course at San Francisco and lost the U. S. Open title.

**HEADLINES AND WIREPHOTOS** told the story of Casper's 1966 U.S. Open victory over Arnold Palmer.

just short of the green into the front bunker. He played out to four feet and made a six, "the best six of my life," Palmer commented later.

Casper, in the meantime hit a drive to the right rough, but after four days of the gallery tramping in that area, had a good lie, and Casper hit a safe 2-iron, followed by a 5-iron to 13 feet from the cup. The cool Mr. Casper knocked the putt in for a birdie and a two-shot swing.

**All this was being picked up** on ABC television, which was broadcasting the final five holes of the tournament live. Not long before, many viewers had turned off their televisions since Palmer clearly had this one in the bag. What else could one expect from Arnie?

The stalwart members of Arnie's Army watching their televisions at home were biting their nails watching the unfathomable roll out before their eyes.

At the 17th, a 435-yard par-4, Palmer drove left again and dropped another stroke when he missed a 5-½ foot putt for par.

On the 18th, a short 337-yard par-4, Palmer hit his third hook in a row into thick rough and it wasn't clear he could hit it the 80 yards to the green. With a massive slash, he got the ball out, but he was outside Casper who was 12 feet above the hole.

Palmer two putted from 30 feet. Now it was up to Casper.

If Casper made his putt, he would win the Open. The cup was on a steep slope, and there was no guarantee that the ball wouldn't roll all the way down the slope to the front of the green if the putt were missed. Casper decided to lag his ball to the hole, leaving it just inches short. He tapped it in, knowing he faced Palmer in an 18-hole playoff the next day.

What does one do the night before a playoff for the U.S. Open? Have room service bring you a nice dinner and watch television? Hang out with a few of your buddies on tour? Go to a movie? Party all night like the great Walter Hagen and show up on the first tee the next morning in your tuxedo?

Not if you're Billy Casper. You keep your word, and Casper, a devout Mormon, had promised he would give a talk that evening to a group of Mormons in Petaluma, about an hour's drive north of the golf course. No one expected there'd be an Open playoff and no one would have chided or criticized Casper if he'd cancelled the talk. But that wasn't Billy Casper. He said he'd be there and so he was. His wife, Shirley, had a dinner ready for him when he returned.

The next day, as Yogi Berra once said, "It's like déjà vu all over again." Palmer was out in 33, Casper in 35. However, Palmer made some mistakes on the inward nine and shot 40 to Casper's 34. Casper's 69 easily trumped Palmer's 73. From the seventh hole through the 18th of the playoff, every time Palmer looked up, there was Casper's ball on the green. Palmer may have had some problems and a bad break or two, but there's no doubt that Palmer didn't throw away the title; Casper won it, and Palmer agreed.

Casper said, "(Olympic is) a course you cannot charge, you have to romance it a bit and play position. I tried to hit it higher than usual and let the ball float in with the wind."

Some commentators felt Casper's defeat of Palmer effectively ended Palmer's career. His whole approach to attacking the course had failed him. Palmer's final major win was the 1964 Masters Tournament. But the debacle at the 1966 Open didn't slow Palmer down. He had six top tens in the U.S. Open afterwards, including a second-place finish to Nicklaus the following year, and won 15 more times on the PGA Tour.

At the press conference after the tournament, Casper was asked whether he'd "tithe" (10%) of his \$25,000 purse to the Mormon Church which Casper had joined at the beginning of the year. Without hesitation, Casper said, "yes, right off the top." Palmer laughingly said his 10% would go to his manager, Mark McCormack, and leaned over to Casper and whispered in his ear, "I think you got the best deal."

**Nothing in Casper's early years** would have led one to believe he'd be a championship golfer. He was born in San Diego, but his family moved around. At one point, young Billy missed an entire year of grade school. His parents divorced, and he took solace as a caddie at the San Diego Country Club where he played at golf using a baseball grip. In fact, his desire was to play baseball, a second baseman,

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

**CASPER'S WRIST-ACTION** putting stroke changed little over the years. The wider stance in the above two photos were for longer lag putts. Below, a page from one of many articles Casper wrote about his putting technique.



CONTINUED FROM 23

and he was quite good at it. He had tremendous hand-eye coordination.

He and his mom moved to Chula Vista, Calif. School officials didn't know what to do with him, so they put him in the ninth grade. He was a mediocre student, but did well in math and geography, subjects Casper felt were helpful to a golfer. He made pretty good money as a caddie during the poor economic times, supplemented by putting contests with other caddies, frequently after it was dark. His father taught him to be a good card player at a game called "Tonk," a variation of gin rummy, and Billy picked up a lot of loose change from other caddies.

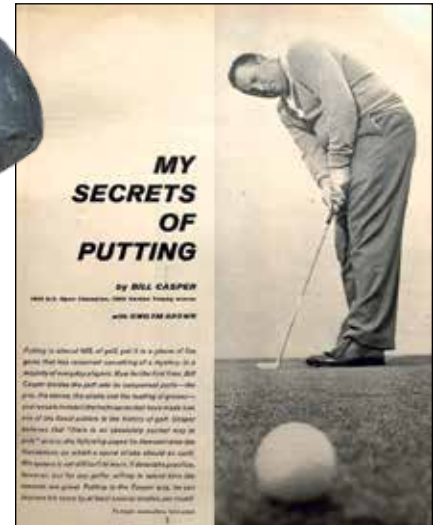
As fate would have it, the son of one of the members at San Diego liked Billy and convinced his father to get Billy five lessons with the club pro, Charlie Heaney. Heaney changed Billy's grip from the full fingered baseball style to the Vardon grip. Heaney gave him a total of five one-hour lessons and had him practice the balance of the day on what they'd worked on. Heaney also told him to practice for two weeks before playing.

At the end of the Heaney lessons, and the two weeks of practice, Billy went out to play and returned a score of 69.

Casper had another lesson, an unofficial one from Ben Hogan. Hogan was preparing to play an exhibition against Welshman Dai Rees, but Hogan was not on the practice range hitting balls in preparation for the next day's exhibition. Casper watched Hogan hitting three drives off the tee, all to different locations, then playing each one to the green. Casper realized that Hogan was setting his strategy for the next day. Where should the tee shot be? What's the best line of approach to the green? Casper realized this was something different. Hogan was planning to control golf. At a young age and just getting into serious golf, Casper couldn't quite figure it out, but over the years he did. Don't let the game control you, you control the game with a knowledge of the course and a preplanned strategy.



**THE PUTTER**  
Casper used for some time was a Wilson Biltmore. A Sports Illustrated article from 1959 noted that he switched to an Axaline putter for a time then to a Bull's Eye head on a five-iron shaft.



**Casper became an excellent player** in high school and one day decided to cut class to play in the County Amateur. The newspaper headline the next day was, "Casper Shoots 72, Leads Qualifying." The vice principal congratulated Billy on his fine play and gave him five detentions.

There were other good junior players in San Diego at the time. One was Gene Littler. Gene seemed to have Casper's number, defeating him twice in the finals of the county junior championship. Casper couldn't beat him in junior golf, although throughout their professional careers, it was Casper who became the star.

Casper was offered a golf scholarship to Notre Dame. He disliked the cold weather in South Bend and only attended classes intermittently. He spent most of his time hitting wedge shots against the dorm wall and finally made the decision to return to San Diego.

The Korean War was building up. Billy was perfect for the draft: no wife, no children, not in school and in good physical shape. So, when Billy returned to California he went to Chula Vista and enlisted in the Navy for a four-year hitch. When the Navy found he was a golfer, he was put in "Special Services," meaning he helped run the golf operations in San Diego and played on the base team.

After the Navy, Billy married his childhood sweetheart, Shirley, and one evening they went to see the movie about

Ben Hogan, *Follow the Sun*. They decided to do the same thing and bought a small trailer and a Buick Roadmaster with enough power to take them cross country. They stayed in parks and cooked on a grill. It wasn't the most comfortable of lives, but they were having fun with other touring pros in the same position.

After Casper started making enough money, they stayed in motels, but only single story ones that opened to a parking lot or back door so they could still grill their dinners.

The first tournament Billy played in was the Western Open in Portland, Ore. It was an ominous opening. Casper's 12-year-old caddie fell in a lake, clubs and all, but Casper made the cut and was off and running. Casper finished tied for 13th and split \$100 with Tommy Bolt and Lawson Little. At least Casper had shown he could play with the big names.

That was 1955, and Casper's first win would come at the Labatt Open the following year. He would win twice in 1957, three times in 1958 and then a big win in 1959, the U.S. Open at Winged Foot. The earlier lessons he had learned by watching Hogan hit from different places on the course came to full fruition for Casper at Winged Foot.

The third hole at Winged Foot was a real challenge. It was 217 yards uphill with a huge bunker in front of the green and a large grass bunker on the right. The green was also surrounded by several large trees.

Casper decided he'd take no chances of dropping a shot or two there. Each time he played the third, Casper laid up, chipped on, and one-putted for his par. It turned out to be a smart move, because Casper won the Open by a single stroke.

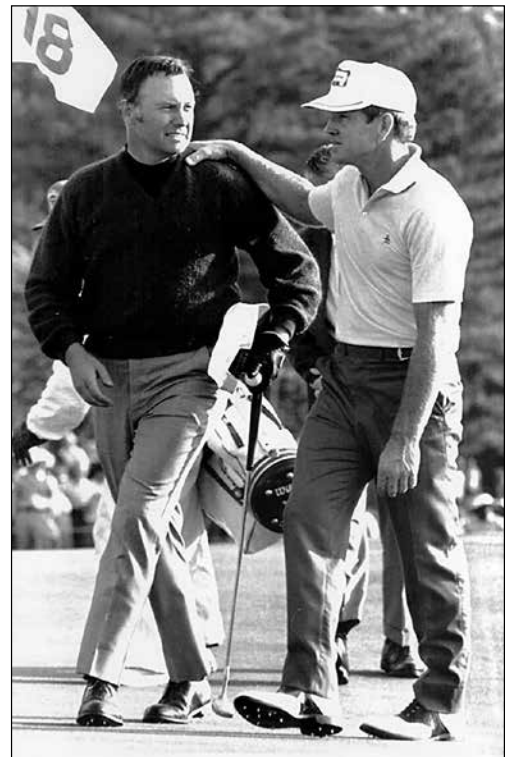
**Casper had weight problems all his life.** As a boy, he was chubby and admitted to knowing every shop in Chula Vista that sold candy and ice cream. Because of his weight, he didn't find playing 18 holes and carrying his own bag as enjoyable as time on the putting green. He'd stay and putt through twilight and the dark.

He was so good at putting that he frequently turned a poor round into a good round. Playing with Casper, Fred Hawkins and Dow Finsterwald, Ben Hogan looked at his three playing partners and said, "If you guys couldn't putt, I'd be buying hot dogs from you at the 10th tee."

The next day Hogan called Casper over and asked, "How do you putt?" Casper was stunned and said, "What?" Hogan



BILLY CASPER, golf's quiet champion, is shown above in a promotional photograph c. 1960, and at right with good friend and competitor Gene Littler.



repeated the request, "Billy, show me how you putt."

During his horrific automobile accident in 1949, Hogan had damaged his left eye, and some felt he may have injured some nerves in his hands, either of which may have led to his poor putting later in life.

So, Casper showed him his stroke. He played the ball off his left foot with his right foot dropped back a bit, a slightly closed stance. He kept the back of his left hand parallel with the face of his mallet putter (a Wilson Biltmore). He rested his left elbow on his left leg and putted almost entirely with his wrists. This is very uncommon today, but at the time wrist putting was popular, especially since greens weren't as fast. Casper then gave the ball a "slap" with his right hand with hardly any follow through. The face of the putter stayed parallel with the line because the left wrist was cupped as the wrists took the club head back, and the ball rolled down that line.

Old timer Ted Kroll gave Casper some advice after he joined the tour. When you had a difficult tee shot or a long fairway shot where the landing area was guarded by bunkers and a water hazard (what today's golfing apparatchiks call "penalty areas"), Kroll told Casper to use his straight club. When Casper asked what that club was, Kroll told him it was the one you could always hit straight. For Casper, it was a 2-iron.

Casper had another "secret" club, his 7-iron. Casper's hand-eye coordination was so good, he could put 10 golf balls on the ground 40 feet from a telephone pole, and, using the 7-iron, hit the telephone pole each time. During practice rounds, Casper would make note on where 150 yards to the green was located on each hole. The 7-iron was his 150-yard

see **CASPER**, 29

# CASPER

CONTINUED FROM 25



BILLY CASPER

club. In fact, Casper would try to play to 150 yards from the green, although he could have hit closer, because he knew exactly what to do from 150 yards out. The grooves in his 7-iron were more worn than any other iron in his bag.

**The “Big Three,”** Palmer, Nicklaus and Player signed on with Mark McCormack who arranged endorsements, exhibitions and made-for-television events. It could have been the “Big Four”

because Casper had also signed with McCormack, but he left to go with one of McCormack’s proteges, an arrangement that fell apart.

The lack of a successful manager kept Casper from further riches and notoriety. Casper didn’t focus on the majors, he just played a lot of tournaments. His point was he had a wife and 11 children (six adopted) to feed, and he didn’t have the luxury of “saving” himself for the majors. Plus, he had little interest in the Open Championship; too much travel time, too little prize money. He later regretted his decision on not going to the Open in Great Britain, finding that his course strategy was perfect for links golf.

Casper hadn’t played much prior to the 1970 Masters Tournament. He and Shirley had a new baby and Billy had a new set of Wilson clubs with a lighter-weight shaft. He played in one event before the Masters.

But, without much of a build up in competition, on the final day of the 1970 Masters, Casper finished tied for the lead with Gene Littler, his friendly rival from their high school days, at 279. There’d be an 18-hole playoff the following day.

During the playoff, Casper’s putter was on fire, one birdie after another. After the 11th hole, Casper had a seven-stroke lead with seven to go.


It had an eerie feel to it, just the same lead Palmer had over Casper in the 1966 Open. Then Casper dropped four shots in four holes to Littler. On the 16th hole, Casper hit to seven feet from the cup, with a side hill lie. Casper asked his longtime Augusta caddie, Matthew (“Shorty”) Palmer, how the putt would break. Shorty told him it wouldn’t break, it was straight downhill. Casper listened, and in the ball went. Casper recovered his confidence and won with a 69 to Littler’s 74.

It was the first time Billy had defeated Gene in a head-to-head match. Shorty announced he might change his last name from Palmer to Casper.

Today when people think of Casper, it’s usually in terms of questions, wasn’t he the guy who could putt? Or wasn’t he

the guy who had a weight problem and ate funny food like buffalo or elk? Yes, to both.

He was one of the greatest players of his era but was quiet and didn’t interact with the galleries like Palmer, Trevino or Chi Chi, but he could go head-to-head with Nicklaus in his own unobtrusive way.

But his record speaks volumes about his talent and abilities: 51 tournament wins, including two U.S. Opens and the Masters; eight Ryder Cups; twice PGA Player of the Year; twice leading money leader; five times winner of the Vardon Trophy for lowest scoring average; and World Golf Hall of Fame inductee (1978). 

## The Casper Record

(Source: Wikipedia)

Casper had 51 PGA Tour wins in his career, with his first coming in 1956. This total places him seventh on the all-time list. His victories helped him finish third in McCormack’s World Golf Rankings in 1968, 1969 and 1970, the first three years they were published. He won three major championships: the 1959 and 1966 U.S. Opens, and the 1970 Masters Tournament.

He was the PGA Tour Money Winner in 1966 and 1968. He was PGA Player of the Year in 1966 and 1970. Casper won the Vardon Trophy for lowest scoring average five times: 1960, 1963, 1965, 1966, and 1968.

Casper was a member of the United States team in the Ryder Cup eight times: 1961, 1963, 1965, 1967, 1969, 1971, 1973, 1975, and a non-playing captain in 1979. Casper has scored the most points in the Ryder Cup by an American player.

Casper won at least one PGA Tour event for 16 straight seasons, from 1956 to 1971, the third-longest streak, trailing only Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus, who each won on Tour in 17 straight years.

On the senior circuit, Casper earned nine Senior PGA Tour (now the Champions Tour) wins from 1982 to 1989, including two senior majors.

He died at age 83 in 2015 of a heart attack at his home in Springville, Utah. He and his wife of more than 60 years, Shirley Franklin Casper, had 11 children, six of whom are adopted, 71 grandchildren and numerous great-grandchildren.

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