The Legend of Charlie Coe

Sports aficionados know that this Sooner could have been one of the immortals who took professional golf into its golden age—if he had not put family before fame.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

In a few months, the northwest corner of Constitution Street and Par Drive in Norman will be home to a 6,200-square-foot, state-of-the-art practice and teaching facility that will house the University of Oklahoma men’s and women’s golf programs. Serving as a link between Sooners past, present and future, the Charlie Coe Golf Learning Center honors the greatest golfer in OU history.

While Charlie Coe himself might point to the accomplishments of players like Andrew Magee, Jim Vickers and Walter Emery, no other Sooner has done more to put Oklahoma on the golfing map than the gifted Ardmore native. For more than half a century, Coe quietly has been this state’s ambassador to the world of golf.

During that span, Coe established himself as the finest amateur golfer of his era and one of the greatest of all time. He won two U.S. Amateur titles.
and etched his name along side those of champions like Arnold Palmer, Ben Hogan, Jack Nicklaus and Sam Snead.

But with all of the accolades, with all of the shelves full of trophies and medals, and with all of the memorable moments, Coe’s biography is really a love story—not so much about golf as about family.

Coe, who celebrated his 74th birthday in October, long ago decided to be a family man first and golfer second. It was a decision that caused him to pass up a shot at a professional playing career in order to help raise his three sons. It was a decision based on the love that exists to this day between Coe and Elizabeth, his wife of 49 years.

“That is the one thing I’m most proud of—the fact I never turned professional,” says Coe, wearing a crinkled smile while reminiscing about his family and career. “Liz and I talked about that situation a lot, and I just decided my family was more important. Looking back on it, I don’t have a single regret about my decision.”

Instead of dragging his family across the country and living out of a suitcase in an endless string of hotel rooms, Coe concentrated on a handful of amateur events and an occasional invitation to play with the pros.

“In a sense, I wish Charlie had gone ahead and turned pro. But it was a different world back then,” Liz Coe explains. “You didn’t have the air travel, and the money wasn’t very good. It was a different situation. Having Charlie around more made a world of difference for our family. It would have been difficult for our boys to be without daddy for a long period of time.”

While Coe may have passed on a chance to join Palmer as a pioneer for golf’s modern professional era in the late ’50s and early ’60s, when the game’s popularity and purses began to soar beyond imagination, his contributions to the sport were still profound.

“Charlie served the game well. He was such a great talent and always a gentleman,” noted longtime friend Jim Vickers, who became the second Sooner to win the NCAA title in 1952. (“Emery won it in 1933.”) “There was an era in there from 1940 on into the ’50s when Charlie was the best player in the world. He beat everybody in amateur golf, many of whom went on to become quite well-known.”

Coe’s phenomenal success on the links began at an early age, but his career began to flourish upon his arrival at OU in late 1945. After spending a year at The Citadel, followed by 33 months as a World War II Air Force instructor pilot, a 22-year-old Coe enrolled at OU for the second semester.

Four months later, he was leading the Sooners to the first of three straight conference championships. Coe earned medalist honors at the 1946 Big Six Championship and again at the 1948 Big Seven Championship.

Oklahoma’s golf team did not capture its one and only NCAA team championship until 1989. But as the story goes, the Sooners could have and should have won the 1946 national title.

Instead, a shortage in traveling funds forced then-OU coach Bruce Drake to take only his top two players to the NCAA Tournament at Princeton, New Jersey. Coe and Andy Anderson proceeded to finish first and third in the qualifying rounds, meaning the Sooners would have won the team championship with a pair of 84s from absent teammates Richie Norville and Owen Panner, both of whom were capable of posting scores in the 70s.

“Boy, was my dad mad. He said he would have paid to get me and Owen up there if he’d only known,” says Norville, who still resides in Oklahoma City. “But that’s just the way it was—even with players like Charlie, golf didn’t get much attention back then. They didn’t have any scholarships, but they did give us three golf balls for every dual.”

Coe describes the OU program as “a bunch of guys who liked to play golf.” In 1948, Norman, the Sooners were relegated to a nine-hole course located on the land where Brandt Park now stands with the Duck Pond providing the water hazards. So Drake’s squad spent much of its time at the Oklahoma City Golf and Country Club.

“We didn’t get a whole lot of publicity—that’s just the way it was,” says Coe, who shot a course-record, 8-under 64 en route to winning the Big Seven crown at the Country Club of Lincoln, Nebraska, in ’48. “We traveled by car to all of the tournaments, and it was all fairly quiet.

“Coach Drake was an excellent golf coach. He wasn’t a good player, but he understood the game, and he always got the most from his players.”

Drake, who was better known for his work with the Sooner basketball program, gave Coe the only “D” he ever made in school—for, of all things, a golf class.

“I kidded him for a long time about that. I never went to his class because I was always on the golf course,” says Coe.

The year 1948 was a particularly good one for Coe, not only because he was fast becoming one of the top collegiate golfers in the country, but also because of his October wedding to his childhood sweetheart, Elizabeth Merrick.

Despite being separated by college, the war and then separate schools, Charlie and Liz never had lost touch.

“We wrote letters back in those days, and there were a few phone calls. Plus, we saw each other whenever possible,” says Liz, who graduated from OU in 1945 after initially attending Pine Manor Junior College in Wellesley, Massachusetts.

“We grew up together in Ardmore and lived just one house apart. Charlie and I played together as little kids, and we were good friends a long time before we ever started dating.”

Nine months after tying the knot, Coe won his first U.S. Amateur title and began a torrid three-year run that saw him join the ranks of the world’s best amateur players. He won the Western Amateur and earned spots on both the Walker Cup and Americas Cup teams.

During that same period, Mrs. Coe gave birth to sons Chuck, Rick and Ward. The Coe clan was growing as fast as
Charles R. Coe

1933 Junior Champion (9 years old), Ardmore
1939-1940 Champion—Dornick Hills Club, Ardmore
1941 Champion—Oklahoma High Schools
1946 Champion—Big Six Conference
1948 Champion—Big Seven Conference
1947-1948 Champion—Broadmoor Invitational
1947 Champion—Trans-Mississippi
1948 Low Amateur—Colonial Invitational
1949 Champion—U.S.G.A. National Amateur
1949 Walker Cup Team
1950 Champion—Western Amateur
1950 Low Amateur—Colonial Invitational
1951 Walker Cup Team
1951 Runner Up—British Amateur Championship
1952 Captain—Americas Cup Team
1953 Walker Cup Team
1954 Americas Cup Team
1956 Champion—Trans-Mississippi
1957 Captain—Walker Cup Team
1958 Low Amateur—U.S.G.A. National Open
1958 Amateur Champion—U.S.G.A. National
1958 Captain—Americas Cup Team
1959 Captain—Walker Cup Team
1959 Runner Up—U.S.G.A. National Amateur
1959 New York Metropolitan Golf Writers Gold Tee Award
1960 Americas Cup Team
1961 Walker Cup Team
1961 Captain—Americas Cup Team
1961 Runner Up—U.S.G.A. Masters Championship
1963 Walker Cup Team
1963 Americas Cup Team
1964 U.S.G.A. Bobby Jones Sportsmanship Award
1977 Oklahoma Athletic Hall of Fame

dad's golfing reputation, so he decided to retain his amateur status and start his own oil company. Both proved successful.

Coe went on to captain both the Walker Cup and Americas Cup teams twice each, and his second U.S. Amateur title fortified his status as one of the all-time greats. That win also opened the doors to practically every prestigious golf club in the country, including Augusta National (in Georgia), where he became a lifetime member.

On the rolling green fairways of Augusta, the Coe legend took root.

There, he regularly played with President Dwight Eisenhower and other dignitaries. He battled Palmer and Gary Player for the Masters Championship in 1961, finishing tied for second with Palmer.

"Charlie had as much ability as any golfer I've known," Palmer recalls. "Over the years, he established himself as one of the great amateurs ever. Charlie had all of the tools and had he chosen to (turn pro), he would have been a formidable foe."

Coe played in 19 Masters Tournaments, more than any other amateur in history. Augusta became his home away from home.

"That is the one thing I'm most proud of—the fact I never turned professional . . . I just decided my family was more important," says Charlie Coe, here with wife Liz and their three sons, from left, Ward, Chuck and Rick.

"Golf has been such a wonderful way of life. It has given me so many opportunities," says Coe, who played his last competitive round at the Masters in 1971. "The dearest thing has been the people we've met and the friends we've made.

"Liz has been there every step of the way. She is such a lovely person, and we've enjoyed a very close relationship. I couldn't ask for more."

Yet, Charlie Coe will receive more in the form of the new golf learning center at OU bearing in his name.

"I appreciate all of that. I truly enjoyed my time at OU, and it means a lot to me," he adds.

Coe harkens back to his post-OU days and his close friendship with legendary Sooner football coach Bud Wilkinson. He recalls how one day on the golf course Wilkinson challenged him to concentrate more on every single shot.

"Bud did a lot for me. He got me to concentrate to the point where I was oblivious to my surroundings," Coe says.

"At that point, I felt I had the concentration level of a Hogan or a Nicklaus. My game really took off from there."

Indeed.

"Charlie Coe is the greatest player to ever come out of this state, and I believe the world of golf would acknowledge him as the greatest amateur player ever behind Bobby Jones," notes Stan Ball, OU director of golf.

"The new facility is going to be phenomenal, thanks to everything it will offer our players—and it is appropriately named," adds Carol Ludvigson, the OU women's golf coach.

"Charlie's golfing ability speaks for itself. In my book, he's the best we ever had at OU."