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## Last Word by Jimmy Roberts of NBC Sports

# Fezler: The Forgotten Man

**A**side from fast greens, you never know exactly what you’re going to get at the U.S. Open. It is a championship, though, which routinely gives us memorable personalities and strange moments.

As the Open arrives this year, one of the most oft-told stories is about the connection between Winged Foot and Oakmont. The story goes – and it’s apocryphal the best I can tell – that after my colleague Johnny Miller strafed the legendary western Pennsylvania course for a final-round 63 to win the 1973 Open, the powers that be at the United States Golf Association decided something like that would not happen on their watch again. The result was what came to be known as the “Massacre at Winged Foot” the following year. Hale Irwin’s winning score was seven over par.

Finishing second that year was a 25-year old Californian named Forrest Fezler, a man whose solid play was completely overshadowed by the focus on the brutal course conditions. Oddly enough, the Oakmont-Winged Foot-Fezler U.S. Open connection has another point of triangulation, and it happened nine years later.

The Open returned to Oakmont in 1983 and Fezler was playing in what he decided, for personal reasons, would be his final year on Tour. A slow-play penalty he’d been assessed by the USGA (and successfully appealed) two years earlier at Merion still didn’t set well with him and he vowed that when the opportunity arose, he was going to do “something.” This was his opportunity.

It was unusually hot and humid at Oakmont, and all week long Fezler played practice rounds in shorts. Although not specifically barred by the rules, it was highly unusual and he knew the USGA didn’t approve. When the competition started, he reverted to long pants, but on Saturday night before the final

round he told a reporter from the Associated Press that if he was sure he wouldn’t have been fined, penalized or disqualified, he would have worn shorts in the championship proper.

“Let me look into it,” Fezler recalls the reporter said. “And bring your shorts tomorrow.”

An interview with Bill Campbell, the USGA’s then-president, confirmed there was in fact nothing in the rules concerning dress, and so Fezler hatched his plan. After putting out on the 17th hole, he bolted for a porta-john and emerged in shorts.

“It was like 200 degrees in there,” he said recently. “I came out and I was really nervous.”

He hit his tee shot on No. 18 wildly to the right. Figuring it might be lost, he hit a provisional ball, which he topped.

“It barely made the ladies’ tees,” he says. “About this time I’m thinking: this is the stupidest thing I’ve ever done in my life.”

In dramatic fashion, Fezler’s stunt continued as his gallery seemed to grow by the minute. Having found his original tee ball, Fezler proceeded to shank his second shot, which hit a tree and then bounced into the fairway. He eventually made a bogey five and finished in a tie for 50th. But because the leaders couldn’t complete play until Monday, Fezler’s performance was among the day’s biggest news.

“It gave me five minutes of people knowing who I was,” he says. “Twenty-three years later, people will still meet me and say: ‘aren’t you that guy who ...?’”

The irony is that while shorts weren’t prohibited then, they are now. Fezler’s escapade prompted the USGA to adopt a dress code for the Open.

The whole thing goes into the books as one of the oddest episodes in the history of the national championship. Another colorful character. Another strange moment. Oh, by the way ... Larry Nelson won that ’83 Open. ■