

A photograph of Tom Nieporte, a professional golfer, standing in front of a clubhouse. He is wearing a dark blue V-neck sweater over a light blue and white striped polo shirt, and light-colored pleated trousers. He has his arms crossed and is smiling slightly. The clubhouse behind him has a stone and brick facade with a gabled roof. The text 'Up Close In A Class By Himself' is overlaid on the right side of the image.

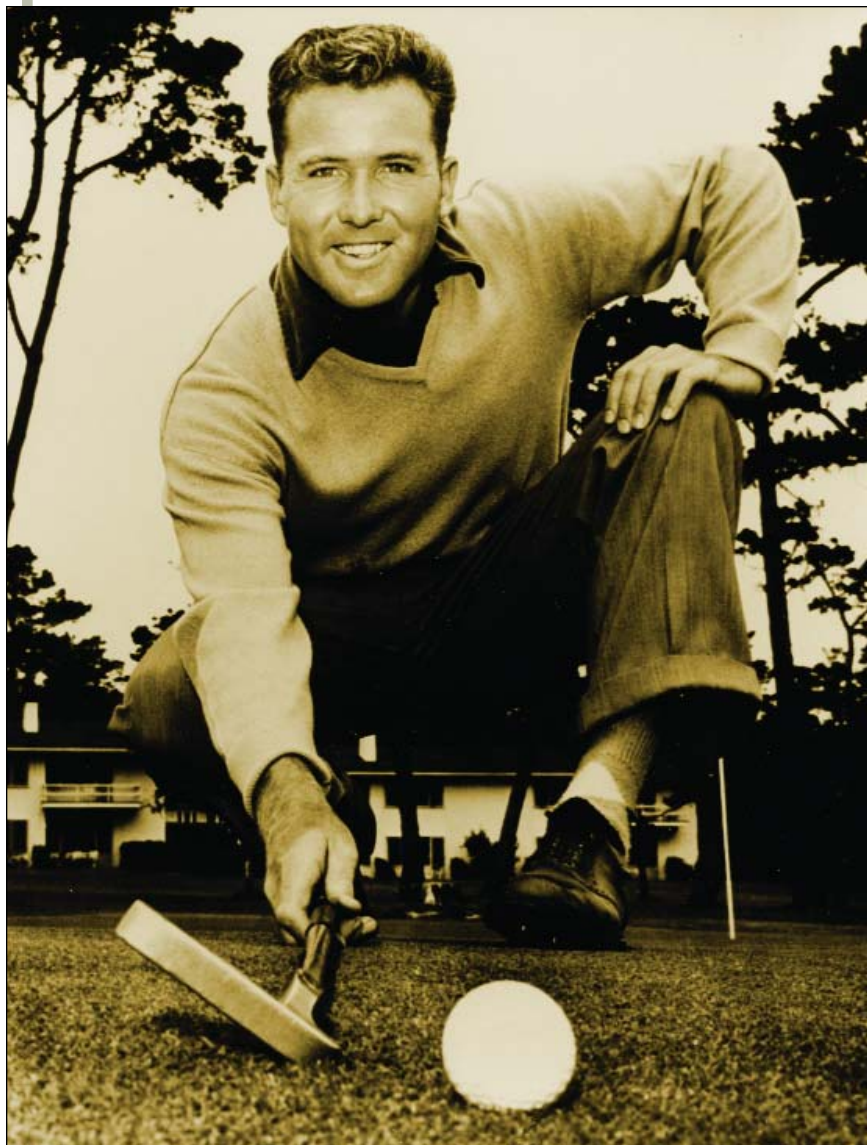
Up Close In A Class By Himself

*Winged Foot head professional
is the most elite job in golf,
and after 28 years
Tom Nieporte
has raised the bar*

BY REED RICHARDSON

Growing up and playing golf in the suburbs of Cincinnati during the early 1940s, Tom Nieporte might have appeared an unlikely candidate to one day end up as head professional of the storied Winged Foot Golf Club. But, long before most junior golfers have figured out there is a whole world beyond their local course, Nieporte says he was already idolizing the game's biggest stars and had his sights set on the game's grandest stages, especially Winged Foot.

Nieporte is as much a part of the Winged Foot fabric as its famed clubhouse.



At Pebble Beach in 1953, a 25-year-old Nieporte cuts a dashing figure at the All-Army Golf Championship.

“As a teenager, I got a job working at the MacGregor equipment factory in Cincinnati,” Nieporte recalls. “Back then, all the greats would come through there to get their clubs. I’d see guys like Ben Hogan and Byron Nelson, Craig Wood and Claude Harmon walking through the factory. Now, to most of the other workers there, these guys meant diddleysquat, but these names meant something to me, as a golfer. So, when I would personally ship golf clubs to Craig Wood, head pro at Winged Foot Golf Club or Claude Harmon, who succeeded him, I’d think to myself, ‘Gee, these guys have both won majors and work at one of the most prestigious golf clubs in the country. Someday, I want be like them.’”

Six decades later, sitting at a card table in the lower locker room of that very same club, Tom Nieporte, now 77, shakes his head in

disbelief at how he has achieved the dreams of that lanky, wide-eyed, Midwestern teenager. “To think that as a young boy, I watched great players like Wood and Harmon and then, 30 years later, I end up following in their footsteps,” he says, chuckling. “How strange life is.”

Though he never won a major like his two predecessors (his best finish was fifth place at the 1964 PGA Championship), by the time Nieporte replaced Harmon at Winged Foot in 1978 – becoming only the fifth head pro in the club’s history – he had earned the utmost respect within golf’s professional ranks. And in this, his 29th and, most likely, final year as head professional at Winged Foot, that same sense of respect and endearment toward Nieporte is clearly evident amongst the club’s members, as well as his former assistants.

“He’s a natural,” says former Winged Foot assistant pro Rick Vershure, who is now head pro at nearby Quaker Ridge Golf Club. “During a sand-play clinic, I’ve seen Tom hit perfect wedge shots out of the sand one after another – left-handed – only to turn around and do the same thing from the right side with just one hand. And with every shot, he splashes maybe ten grains of sand.”

Paul Alexander of Brae Burn, another former assistant, simply calls Nieporte the nicest man he has ever met. “Many of the highlights of my time at Winged Foot were the 40 minutes I would spend having lunch with Tom,” Alexander recalls. “He treats everyone with the same level of courtesy and graciousness, no matter who they are.”

Having generated all this good will, Nieporte acknowledges, “there is a great camaraderie here at Winged Foot. I love it. It’s like I go from one family at home to another one at work.” This is significant for Nieporte because throughout his life, golf has always been associated with family, in one form or another.

“My dad was a golfer, so I first learned the game from him,” he explains. “But I didn’t really get the golf bug until I turned 12. That’s when, just like my older brother, Jack, I started as a caddie at our local country club.” Coupling his caddie duties with his other part-time job at MacGregor, Nieporte immersed himself in the game. By the time he graduated high school, he had already won the Cincinnati Men’s Championship and placed second in the National Caddie Tournament, good enough for a golf scholarship to Ohio State.

Despite his obvious aptitude for golf, how-

ever, the broad-shouldered, 6-foot-4 Nieporte briefly considered accepting a football scholarship to nearby Xavier University instead of pursuing golf. "It was my dad who changed my mind," Nieporte recalls, chuckling. It's a good thing, too, because by his senior year at Ohio State Nieporte had blossomed into one of the nation's best amateur golfers, and won the 1951 NCAA individual championship.

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After a two-year stint in the military in the early 1950s, during which he won the All-Army Golf Championship at Pebble Beach, Nieporte left the service and took an assistant pro position at Siwanoy Country Club in Bronxville, New York. But by 1956, the recently married Nieporte had moved on to the PGA Tour and was traveling in a station wagon from event to event with his wife, Joan. It was during those next six years on Tour that Nieporte forged lasting friendships with, among others, Arnold Palmer, Ken Venturi and Byron Nelson. To this day, Nieporte can still recruit big-name players to call in as "special guests" during Winged Foot's member-guest tournament and prestigious invitational, the Anderson Memorial.

"The Tour was like one big family during those days," Nieporte recalls. "We didn't have

these so-called teaching gurus, so everybody just helped each other. It wasn't uncommon to see someone like Sam Snead giving advice to another pro about his swing." Similarly, when it came time to find accommodations near a tournament, Tour players frequently lent a hand to their competition. In fact, when the U.S. Open returned to Winged Foot in 1959, Nieporte, who eventually missed the cut, may have unwittingly had a hand in securing Billy Casper's victory. "Billy and I were traveling together back then," he explains, "and I got him a room nearer to the course than most of the other guys. We both stayed at my sister-in-law's house in Scarsdale."

That Nieporte involved his extended family in his passion for golf should come as no surprise. After all, he first met his wife while working at Siwanoy and, today, many of Nieporte's nine children and 27 grandchildren enjoy the game. (Three of his children, sons John and Joe and daughter Penny, are golf professionals).

But by 1962, Nieporte realized that, despite a couple of Tour wins, his burgeoning family required that he leave the Tour to find a more stable, full-time club professional's job. "By then, we had four children and they started to fill up the station wagon to the point where there would hardly be any room left for my golf clubs," he says, laughing. "So, Shelly Mayfield, a former assistant pro at Winged Foot, told me about a head professional's opening at Piping Rock on Long Island, and that's where I spent my next 17 years."

During that time Nieporte won the 1968 Met Open and continued to sharpen his game by competing intermittently on the PGA

In His Own Words

We posed five questions on the course to Tom Nieporte to gain more insight into his thoughts on *the* game and *his* game. Here's what he had to say:

What, if any, swing thoughts do you have?

"When I am playing my best, I have a fairly natural, smooth rhythm. For me, it's about feeling, not thinking, the swing."

Which golf club do you feel the most confident using?

"Back when I was younger, my 2-, 3- and 4-irons were probably the strongest part of my golf game. That's because I played at Ohio State where, just like

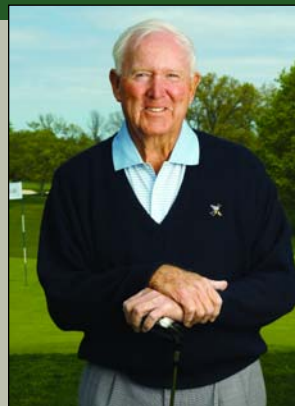
Winged Foot, there are a lot of long par fours."

How do you prepare for a pressure putt?

"It depends on the length. Definitely, I concentrate harder on a 10-footer than a 15- or 20-footer, because the shorter the putt, the more you're expected to make it."

What is your biggest challenge on the course?

"Pitching onto the green from about 40, 50 yards out, I just never got consistent



enough with that shot. Also, I tend to play too fast sometimes. I am a lot like Lee Trevino, once I have the club in my hand, I'm ready to hit the ball."

What have you seen change most in the game over the years?

"The biggest change is the greens are better. The balls and shafts have improved, too. And the players are physically

stronger as well. Some things, though, are still the same – the golf swing hasn't changed since 1850."

JEFF WEINER



Sharing the stage with Bob Hope and former President Dwight Eisenhower, Nieporte (center) is all smiles after the 1967 Desert Classic in Palm Springs.

Tour. In fact, the apex of his tournament career occurred at the 1967 Bob Hope Desert Classic, where his one-shot victory over Doug Sanders still stands as the last time a club professional has won on the PGA Tour.

Perhaps one of the most telling anecdotes about Nieporte's notoriously good-natured equanimity also revolves around his Bob Hope victory. While rushing to leave for the tournament, Nieporte accidentally packed a mismatched pair of white shoes. After making his par putt on 18 to win, with Bob Hope and former President Dwight D. Eisenhower gathered around him for the trophy presentation, Hope's wife, Dolores, looking down, noticed the odd pair. "Tom, you're wearing two different white shoes," she observed, to which Nieporte promptly replied, "It's okay, I've got another pair just like them at home." Bobby Heins, a former assistant of Nieporte's who is now the head pro at Old Oaks Country Club, still laughs at the story. "That's Tom in a nutshell, just totally unflappable."

Upon being named as Winged Foot's head pro in 1978, though, Nieporte says he made a conscious decision to curtail his PGA and Senior Tour aspirations in order to put his focus squarely on the club. "So many of the members here are wonderful players – we have about 80 who have single-digit handicaps and many of them serve on various MGA Committees – it makes teaching and running tournaments that much easier," he explains. "So, I didn't want to put anything else before this job."

In addition to his renowned dedication to Winged Foot (he still plays frequently with club members), Nieporte has also built a lasting reputation as a great mentor to up-and-coming golf professionals. Indeed, a list of Nieporte's former protégés reads like a Who's Who in Met Area golf, and includes Vershure, Heins and Alexander as well as Deepdale's Darrell Kestner, Bruce Zabriski and 1998 PGA Teacher of the Year David Glenz. Combined, these six former Nieporte assistants have won an incredible nine out of the past 28 Met Opens.

This statistic isn't surprising since a hallmark of any assistant's tenure under Nieporte was that their game improved substantially. "He really pushed all of his assistants to get out on the course as much as possible," says Alexander, who worked at Winged Foot from 2001–03. "For that, I kind of looked up to Tom like a father."

Clearly, the feeling is mutual. When asked to name one of his most memorable moments at Winged Foot, Nieporte, with the same enthusiasm found in any proud father, immediately recalls the 1978 Met Open, when his young assistant Glenz beat him by one stroke to win the tournament. In almost the same breath, he quickly goes on to extol current assistants Billy Van Orman's "amazing" driving ability and Alicia Dibos' "unbelievable" swing.

Though Nieporte admits that his own game isn't quite as sharp as it once was, he still offers this year's U.S. Open field some fatherly advice on how to win at his home course. "On the West Course, you finish with five straight par fours," he notes. "If a player can walk off the course on Sunday and say that they shot 80 on those five holes for the tournament, they will be the winner."

Long after the final cheers of this year's U.S. Open fade from Winged Foot, however, Nieporte will still have a job to do this summer, one that he looks forward to everyday. "I like to think I could do this job one more year," he says wistfully. "But I know that I'd rather get to spend more time with my wife and enjoy our children and grandchildren." Nieporte won't disappear from Winged Foot altogether, though. In 1998 he was honored with a full club membership, and he will continue to give lessons even after ceding the head pro title. And no matter how often he returns to play, one thing is certain: Thanks to his tremendous skills and generous spirit on and off of the golf course, he will never suffer from a lack of eager and appreciative playing partners. ■