



Up Close

A Legend in Focus

Photographer Jules Alexander has chronicled the greats of the game for more than 45 years, and none meant more to him than Ben Hogan

BY SAM WEINMAN

Throughout the most recent U.S. Open at Winged Foot, it was apparent Jules Alexander was not just any photographer. While other media members were shuttled in from miles away, Alexander was granted a parking spot close to the clubhouse. Though he had no formal assignment, he was issued a special credential by the United States Golf Association that allowed him the same access as USGA staff (it read “Jules Alexander, USGA”). When Alexander, still impeccably dressed and remarkably fit at age 80, would pass through the cavernous media center, he was stopped often by other photographers who were as much disciples as they were counterparts.

Compare the experience for Alexander this year to that of another Winged Foot Open nearly a half-century earlier. In 1959, Alexander had been making a good living in New York City as a fashion and commercial photographer, but he was a novice when it came to

shooting golf. He read about the Open coming to Winged Foot and, on a lark, decided to chronicle the action. Alexander calls it a “self-assignment,” which he still gives himself today. “It’s like practicing out there,” Alexander said, motioning to the driving range. “You play Thursday through Sunday but you practice on Tuesday and Wednesday.” The “practice” paid off, and then some.

To get to Winged Foot, Alexander took the train from Grand Central and then walked from the Mamaroneck station. Without any formal credential, he simply wandered onto the golf course with his camera around his neck. It was there that his perceptive eye settled on the striking figure of Ben Hogan, then 47 but

Alexander, at home in Rye, keeps an expansive collection of his work.

still a formidable presence. Impressed by Hogan's swing, captivated by his steely demeanor and stylish attire, Alexander soon began snapping photos: Hogan at address. Hogan past impact. Hogan on the green, putter at his side, gazing off into the distance. From that week alone, Alexander came away with dozens of photos of the nine-time major champion – furthering the legend of one of the game's most intriguing characters; and in the process, helping to create a legend of his own.

“The Hogan images from 1959 elevated Alexander into the highest tier of golf photographers, and many of the game's biggest names can be counted among his fans.”

Alexander grew up in the Bronx, and his father used to take thousands of pictures of him and his brother, as well as 16-millimeter home movies. Intrigued by photography, Alexander said he knew he wanted to do it for a living as early as age 12. He entered the service in 1944, and was charged with taking aerial photographs during World War II. Professionally, he got his start shooting actors and musicians, even shooting Frank Sinatra and Duke Ellington for *Down Beat* magazine when he was just a teenager. After the war, he came back to New York, rent-

ed a studio he couldn't afford, but because of it, was able to land advertising work for the likes of Eastern Airlines and Camel cigarettes. “From there,” he said, “I was on my way.”

Though a natural athlete – he still swims regularly – Alexander didn't start playing golf until after the war, when he used to go to Mosholu and Van Cortlandt Park and play for a quarter. To watch him swing today, it is apparent that Alexander is as much a natural with a golf club in his hands as he is with a camera. He's been as low as a 5-handicap and is now closer to a 9 or 10 at Westchester Country Club, where he has been a member since 1971. He plays a couple of times a week here, and is still capable of shooting his age. “We call him the best golfing photographer in the world,” son Paul said. “I think he plays so well because he's got such a good eye.”

Alexander's somewhat accidental entry into the golf world makes it even more remarkable to view the arc of his career. Even now, it is difficult to overstate the influence the late Hogan had on Alexander. Though the photos Alexander took at the '59 Open sat mostly untouched for more than two decades (it took the prompting of his two sons to share them with the world), they eventually made their way into advertisements for the Ben Hogan Company. They were the inspiration for a vastly popular coffee-table book, “The Hogan Mystique.” And they elevated him into the highest tier of golf photographers, and many of the game's biggest names can be counted among his fans.

“Every time I go to Winged Foot, I get the creepies because I could almost feel him there. He was such a strong influence, such a strong personality,” Alexander said from his Rye, New York home overlooking the Westchester Country Club driving range. “I would know where he was on certain shots, on certain holes, how he overcame the golf course. I would get all these funny feelings just because he meant so much to my career.”

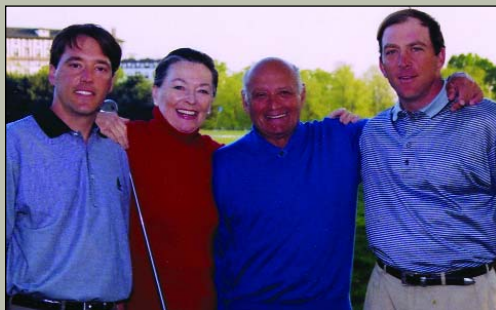
Though the Hogan photos are his trademark work, they were in many ways just the beginning for Alexander. He would go on to shoot countless covers for golf publications, including one for this magazine's April/May 1990 issue that featured Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, Gary Player and Lee Trevino – together, in one photo. He has done landscapes, portraits, not to mention thousands of photos of the game's greatest champions in action. His work is so respected, several top players have actually solicited him. He has been commissioned by Tour pros such as Brad Faxon, Ben Crenshaw, and Tom Lehman to photograph

Golf: An Alexander Family Affair

It would be rare for any father to claim two sons who are among the area's leading club professionals. And yet in the case of Paul and Carl Alexander, you might say it was inevitable.

Growing up as members of Westchester Country Club, the two sons of Jules Alexander had the club's practice range literally outside their kitchen window. Because of their father's status as a leading golf photographer, they had a steady stream of Tour players stopping by the house. Throw in the singular influence of Jim McLean, now one of the game's premier teachers but then an ambitious young Westchester assistant, and the two Alexander boys were able to immerse themselves in the game from an early age.

Decades later, both have grown into impressive players and teachers at clubs less than two miles apart. Paul,



Jules and his wife Danna, with sons Paul and Carl.

41, is in his third season as the head pro at Brae Burn Country Club in Purchase, while Carl, 40, is in his second season as the director of golf at the Golf Club of Purchase. “For me and Carl, obviously growing up at the end of the driving range was a huge influence,” Paul said. “So was having Jim McLean as a teaching pro. And so was having a dad who was really supportive and loved golf.”



He just turned 80, but Alexander still spends most days working in his studio (above). A 1990 cover shot (right) united four of the game's greats.

their children. Phil Mickelson invited himself over to the Alexander home to study the photographer's work. During a recent outing at the Golf Club of Purchase, the two-time U.S. Open champion Curtis Strange recalled the time when Jules came to his Virginia home to photograph him for *GOLF Magazine*.

"You know you've made it when Jules Alexander calls you and says he's coming down to photograph you," Strange said that day.

Said his son Carl: "That's where those Hogan photos changed things. When my Dad said he'd want to shoot you, it commanded a lot more respect... It was a defining moment for him, like a golfer who won a major."

If his photographs of Hogan were his most renowned works, it was his lone face-to-face meeting with the great man that remains among the photographer's most cherished memories. Bear in mind that Alexander had been in Hogan's presence on several occasions, photographing him not only at Winged Foot, but the next year in the U.S. Open at Cherry Hills, and even more than a decade later when Hogan played Westchester. But the two men never spoke until an afternoon in 1992, when Alexander was in Hogan's hometown of Fort Worth, Texas for a photo shoot, and he finally worked up the nerve to meet his idol.

Fourteen years later, the details of that visit are etched in Alexander's memory. Hogan was in the grill room at Shady Oaks Country Club, eating lunch with his back to Alexander. When he saw the photographer, he summoned him

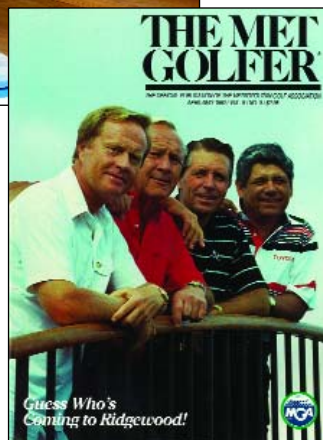
forward, then tapped the table to tell him to sit down.

"He looked at me for like 10 seconds, and then he waved at me," Alexander said. "And I said to myself, 'Oh please, don't say anything stupid to this guy.'"

Apparently they hit it off. The meeting was no more than 10 minutes long, and went well enough for the two to have a picture taken together. But it wasn't until after the golfer's death that Alexander learned of the impression he left.

"Jules was one of my husband's favorite people," Hogan's widow Valerie would say later. "He really admired Jules as a photographer, but even more as a gentleman."

Perhaps it's because Hogan saw a bit of himself, both men meticulous in their appearance, and in their devotion to their craft. Even now, Alexander will spend hours following a single golfer, studying their tendencies so as to know where he can capture them up close. Walk around the office in his home, and the walls are literally covered with indelible images of golf's



major figures: Woods, Palmer, and Nicklaus. And, of course, Hogan.

One of Alexander's favorite photos hangs on the wall opposite his desk. It is from a practice round at Winged Foot in '59, a half-smile across Hogan's face, a ball near his feet. (Valerie Hogan would say it was her favorite photo of her husband as well, and the author James Dodson chose it for the cover of his 2004 Hogan biography). Even now, Alexander thinks about the genesis of that photo, how Hogan never said a word to him, but still reached out to the photographer in his own subtle way.

"I sit at my desk and I can see the picture every day, and just recently I began to think, 'Why did he stand there just long enough for me to take all these frames with three different cameras?'" Alexander asked. "You can't do that in two minutes. But he's looking across the green at Claude Harmon. And I'm going to have the temerity to think that he posed for me by saying to himself, 'I'm going to give this guy a shot.'"

Sam Weinman is a golf writer for *The Journal News* in Westchester County and contributes frequent articles to *The Met Golfer*.