

TITLE: Arnold Palmer – A Golfer of the People, for the People  
*...and one of golf's greatest marketing gurus*

By Jim Pasero

So who starts a cable television network at the age of 65? Ted Turner—no. Rupert Murdoch—maybe. Arnold Palmer—ah, yes.

This year, Arnold Palmer's creation, the Golf Channel, celebrates its tenth anniversary. Why did Palmer decide ten years ago to start a 24-hour channel devoted to golf? Because as Palmer told *BrainstormNW*, "There was a need to keep golf in the public eye, without outside interference, without a mediator." Bringing golf directly to the public has been Palmer's career.

Despite being an American legend for more than five decades, Palmer remains a uniquely modern thinker. And his and co-founder Joe Gibbs's creation, the Golf Channel, with its reach into almost 100 million homes on four continents, is a very modern invention. Palmer may have written large chapters in American sporting life in the '50s and '60s, but his stewardship of the game moves forward—the emphasis is now international. As Palmer thinks forward, he continues to underscore themes he first carved out 50 years ago in American culture—that golf is a game for all and not just a game for the socially elite or the wealthy nations.

"Golf is for everybody," says Palmer. "Grandparents can golf with their grandchildren; mothers with their daughters. There are not many sports where that can happen." Palmer has also been a strong proponent of the World Golf Foundation's First Tee program, a charity that breaks barriers by bringing the game to inner city young people.

Palmer is especially focused on the international growth of the Golf Channel, which happens, not by accident, to parallel the international growth of the game. "What you will see in golf in the next decade is that international golf will become more and more popular, and the international tournaments will become more and more popular, and we at the Golf Channel have the ability to bring those events to the golfing public."

He also sees another role for international golf—a diplomatic one—golf as a civilizing force. "It would be nice with all the problems and conflicts throughout the world to bring golf into those countries having these problems. Iraq, Arabia and Pakistan are now interested in golf. The more golf gets started in these places, the more influence golf will have on their political leaders. We can have our conflicts on the golf course."

Palmer is ready for the cynics. "Sure you can say introducing golf into conflict areas is just scratching the surface, but scratching the surface is where you have to start."

If Palmer takes big views, he is entitled. He knows something about changing a nation's culture. He did it in America in the 1950s. Legendary sportscaster Vin Scully once

summarized what Palmer did for golf in the 1950s and '60s. "In a sport that was high society, he made it 'High Noon.'"

And that tells half the story. In the 1950s, Palmer did for golf what Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley did for music, or what James Dean did for acting—he made it rock (scrambling out of the woods, charging from behind), and by doing so he enthralled a nation and invented television golf. He gave the sport to "everyman." No wonder a Google search shows Palmer's fame to be greater than Holly's and just short of Presley's.

The year was 1960—Arnold Palmer's stardom went nuclear. He won the Masters that spring with birdies on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> holes during Sunday's final round and defeated Ken Venturi by a shot. Two months later in a locker room at Cherry Hills Country Club in Denver, Colo., between the third and fourth rounds of the U.S. Open, Palmer would tell golf writers Bob Drum and Dan Jenkins that he would drive the first hole, shoot 65 and defeat Ben Hogan. Drum and Jenkins were pretty skeptical, especially since the first hole at Cherry Hill was 346-yard par 4, and Hogan already had four U.S. Open titles. No matter. Palmer drove the green with a mammoth tee shot, birdied six of the first seven holes, shot 65, and defeated "The Hawk" Hogan and a kid named Nicklaus. In American sporting lore, it may not be as famous a moment as Babe Ruth's called shot in the 1932 World Series in Chicago, but it's close.

In July 1960 Palmer reintroduced Americans to the British Open. The British Open Championship, the 1920s playground of American Bobby Jones and Walter Hagen, had fallen on hard times (mostly because of the length of World War II). Palmer's crossing the Atlantic changed that. He managed to finish second, a stroke behind Australia's Kel Nagle. In '61 and '62, Palmer won The British Open Championship, bringing prestige back to the tournament. Palmer and Scotland were a natural fit because, unlike America, golf was always a public game in Scotland, not a country club sport.

Still Palmer wasn't satisfied just being a sporting legend; he virtually invented sports marketing. In 1960 he shook hands with Mark McCormack and created the company International Management Group (IMG), now the world's premier sports and lifestyle management and marketing firm. Though McCormack, Palmer's business partner (and author of "What They Don't Teach You at Harvard Business School") passed away in 2003, IMG continues to bring in more than a billion dollars in yearly revenue.

Dave Manougian, president of the Golf Channel, remembers another Palmer invention—the Champions Tour, which this year is celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. "Arnold got the Champions Tour off the ground," says Manougian. "When it started, it needed credibility. People would ask, is this real? But as soon as Arnold started playing in the events, everybody else did too. The launching and the building of the Champions Tour are due to Arnold."

But it is at the Golf Channel where Arnold's signature is most pronounced. And while the Golf Channel may be on in every bar in every country club in America, the tone of the channel is for everyman. Palmer, who grew up the son of a greenskeeper at Latrobe

County Club in Pennsylvania (a club he would later purchase in the 1970s), spent considerable time helping create the welcoming atmosphere of the cable channel.

I am very pleased with what has happened at the Golf Channel, says Palmer. It is wonderful that people notice the station's embracing approach.

Manougian, who grew up on Eastmoreland Golf Course, Portland's municipal course, shares Palmer's attitude about golf as the everyman sport and underscores his sentiments on the station's philosophy. "When we positioned the Golf Channel brand we wanted to make the viewers feel that when they are watching Craig Kann or Kelly Tilghman on "The 19<sup>th</sup> Hole" that they would love to sit down and talk golf with them. We want the show to be an extension of their own view on golf. What they would do with their buddies—talking about where Tiger's shot at Augusta on 16 ranks in the history books. We want our product to reflect that."

Manougian sees Palmer weekly, sometimes daily. They are neighbors in Orlando, and they talk regularly about programming. Manougian says Palmer's input usually breaks down along these lines:

"If it is programming that involves Arnold himself, he pays attention to the different levels of details. If it is about other shows, I will say to Arnold, 'What do you think of doing x, y, z?' He says, 'Here is what you might want to think about...' He sees things that a lot of people might miss. He stays up at 30,000 feet."

And if it's about growing the station, Manougian says, "He stays on the big picture, such as the Golf Channel going after tournament rights, asking 'Is that good for the channel?' He understands the world of golf, he understands the viewers, and he understands the viewer perspective."

In Palmer's role as custodian of the game, one issue concerns him: "Technology is one area of concern. We need to work on slowing down the golf ball. If we slow down the golf ball adequately, the great courses will be great for another 100 years. This is important to me, and to Nicklaus. We are interested in doing all we can on this issue."

A "hot" ball is threatening to undermine the courses, forcing the game to eventually choose between the ball and the "great" courses, like Pebble Beach, St. Andrews, Augusta, Pinehurst, Oakmont or Troon, where the game's great memories were made. Portland Golf Club, which hosted the 1947 Ryder Cup and the 1946 PGA Championship, is an example of a course that is now obsolete for championship play. Palmer doesn't want to see that happen to other famous courses.

"I hope we don't have a special ball. I don't want that," says Palmer. His fear is that manufacturers may not agree to slow down the ball and that governing bodies of tournament golf will have to adopt a slower ball during tournament play to protect historic courses. "The Royal and Ancient, the USGA, the PGA, and the PGA TOUR, all

the international organizations that are in control of the game, are involved. We are having those talks now.”

Palmer explains why he thinks the governing bodies need to be involved. “It would be nice to think that the golf manufacturers would say, ‘Okay, we will reduce the ball voluntarily and slow it down.’ That would be a major step, but I don’t think they will. We will have to get enough influence to them.”

Caring about golf’s historic courses is typical Palmer. He’s been a steward of the game for five decades, and his ongoing vision for the sport may in the long run be remembered as much as his legendary play and eight major championship titles.

Manougian remembers introducing Palmer to his parents who were visiting from Oregon. “I introduced him to my mother and father, and I wondered what my dad would say to Arnold. Dad turned to him and said, ‘Hey, I played your course (Bay Hill) and it’s a pretty tough course for us old guys.’ And Arnold, without hesitating, said to him, ‘It’s a good thing that I’m not old.’ He doesn’t think of himself in those terms. It just isn’t his mental make up.

“Arnold made golf popular on TV. He is the ultimate spokesperson in the world of golf, the ultimate spokesperson in all of sports,” says Manougian. “He is a world-renowned golfer, but he is also the greatest guy to live next door to. He’s full of optimism, he’s charismatic, he cares about people. Put all those things together and you have a rare person.”

And that’s why Palmer’s contribution to golf—five decades strong—continues to be so huge.