



BY DAVE SHEDLOSKI

# Pride of Philly

AN OPEN WEEK VISIT WITH MERION MEMBER JACK WHITAKER IS A REMINDER THAT THE LEGENDARY BROADCASTER STILL HAS GAME

In the hallway of a YMCA in Allentown, Pa., the hungry young broadcaster with a knack for knitting together cogent observations stumbled upon his future. Having just completed his shift at the local radio station, Jack Whitaker stood enthralled by the fortuitous confluence of mesmerizing elements laid before him: the magic of television, the allure of golf, the majesty of the U.S. Open and the mystique of Merion GC.

It was 1950.

“I watched Bobby Cruickshank putting out on the 18th green on this tiny black-and-white television screen, and I said to myself right then, ‘That’s what I should be doing.’” Whitaker, one of the last torchbearers from the nascent era of sports television, recalled. “By that fall I had moved back home and began my television career.”

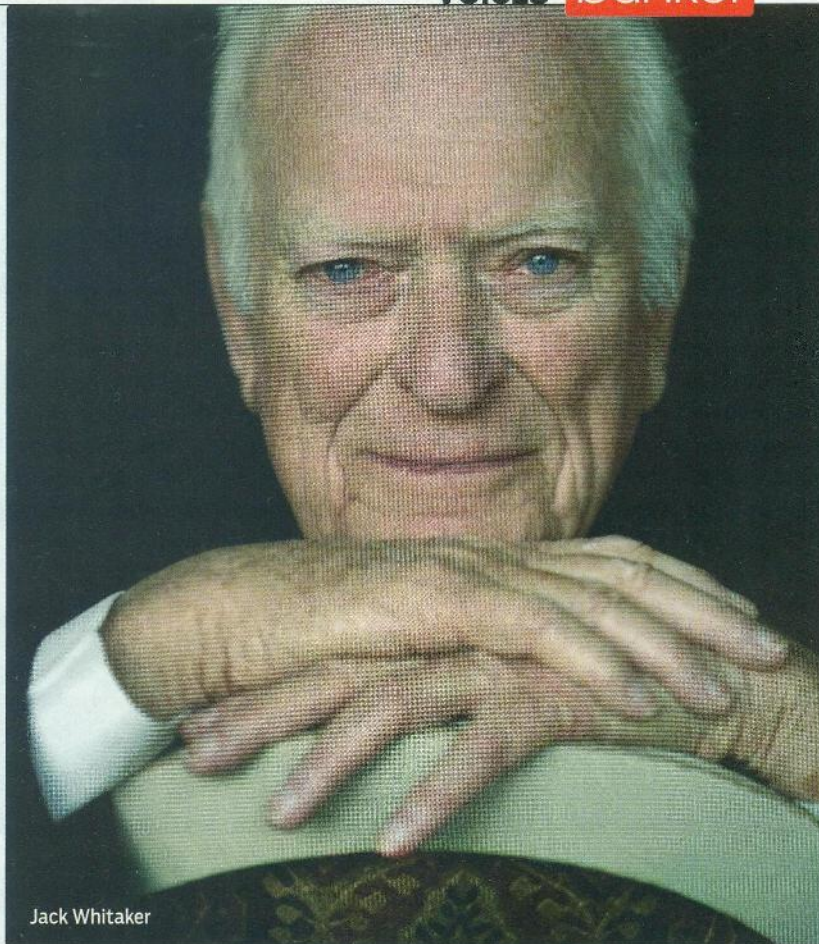
Home, then and now, is Philadelphia, and last week Whitaker reveled in the improbable reunion of the U.S. Open and Merion. Now a member of the venerable club, Whitaker lingered for a few days along the fringes of the historic East Course, and patrons attending the 113th Open beat a steady path to him, even though he is more than a decade removed from his final call for ABC Sports.

“It’s a nice thing to be remembered,” said Whitaker, dressed in tan slacks, a cranberry sweater vest and peach golf shirt emblazoned on the right sleeve with the logo of CBS Sports, with whom he began his career. “And I guess it’s still nice to be around to be remembered.”

Sadness pierced through that last remark. Whitaker turned 89 on May 18. Former CBS colleagues Pat Summerall and Ken Venturi died a month apart, on April 16 and May 17, respectively, and Whitaker admitted that he was shaken by those sudden losses so close together. He already had said goodbye to most of his contemporaries: Cary Middlecoff, Dave Marr, Bob Rosburg, Jim McKay and Frank Chirkinian, another Philly native with whom Whitaker broke into network sports broadcasting.

“That was the most fortunate thing that happened to me in my career [teaming with Chirkinian]. We grew up together right at the time golf was taking off,” he said. “And our timing was good. You had Hogan with that heroic win here in 1950, then his three majors in 1953, Eisenhower in the White House, and then here comes Arnold Palmer. We were right on the crest of it.”

Whitaker is perhaps most famous for being suspended from Masters telecasts for four years supposedly for referring to the bustling galleries as a mob during Jack



Jack Whitaker

Nicklaus’ 1966 playoff victory. But Whitaker isn’t so sure that was the reason he was benched.

“It didn’t make sense,” he said. “That’s just what they told me. But years later they found an old kinescope recording of Jim McKay using the same phrasing to describe unruly patrons during a broadcast sometime, I believe, in the late 1950s.”

The irony of Whitaker’s Emmy-winning career is that he traveled far and wide, working at a variety of sporting events from horse racing to the Olympics, but never called a U.S. Open at Merion—where he still plays a few rounds each summer, mostly on the West Course. His broadcasting home was CBS until 1982, missing by a year David Graham’s impeccable precision in the ’81 Open at Merion.

“But I didn’t start too badly,” he noted. “[Tom] Watson and Nicklaus and Pebble Beach. The drama of it was magnificent.”

Whitaker has a way with splendid summations. In later years his specialty was essays. He was eloquent and efficient, always delivering his remarks off the cuff, eschewing a teleprompter.

If given the chance, what might he say today about Merion? He chuckles. Hesitates. Then this:

“To this day there are things I learn about Merion, and I come to appreciate it even more, if that’s possible. It’s such a lovely little place, a real golfer’s place. It’s like the beginnings of the game settled here and stayed.”

Off the cuff. No teleprompter. Just right. **GW**