

"A Conversation With One of Golf's Greatest Dames"

By Jill Branson Hambergren



Fifty years after the LPGA officially formed, one of its greatest treasures, Peggy Kirk Bell, or Ma Bell as she's affectionately known by many of her fans, is still proudly passing on the finer points of golf to her eager students. I met up with Mrs. Bell while she was hosting

and teaching one of her famous 'Golfaris' at Pine Needles Lodge and Golf Club. Since 1960, Bell has been offering her trademarked event involving five days of total golf saturation. To the attendees, it gives them an expedition in fun and intensive instruction from world-renowned teaching professionals, including Bell, as they search for ways to improve their golf games. There are so many ways to describe the 78-year-old Bell who has Katharine Hepburn's classic beauty and some of her feistiness too. Those who know Bell find her to be very charming, warm, inviting, inspiring, and loving. But she's not afraid to tell it as she sees it, or even afraid to tell you to your face if she doesn't like you. She's easy going, but at the same time, very demanding. She expects the best out people, especially her staff, and in turn she gives you her best. And her best means more than 60 years of golfing experience. But it's not just playing golf. She knows the basic fundamentals and how to use precision and the best techniques so players achieve their best golf game. She imparts her wisdom to her students with infinite patience, hands-on assistance and even visual guidance. Every student at the Golfari goes home with a souvenir reminder of how the perfect grip should feel. Bell takes a permanent marker to their golf gloves, demonstrating the right areas where to place the club. She even draws an "X" where the club should never rest. She offers words of encouragement to her adoring students. "You're on the way to greatness," she tells one woman after helping her correct her grip and erratic swing. "You may pass golf school," Bell jokes with another better golfer wannabe. Watching Bell in her element, it's easy to see why she's been honored several times as

LPGA Teacher of the Year, LPGA Master Professional, ***Golf Digest's*** Best Women Teachers in the World and even ***Golf for Women's*** Top 50 Teachers. Bell holds many other top honors as well, but she's modest and reluctant to let those honors go to her head, "I just like to play golf."

Her best advice for anyone taking on this challenging game: "Number one, perfect your grip. Number two concentrate on your posture." Bell jumps up and demonstrates. "Number three, you must have rhythm and timing. It's a beautiful flowing motion, like a ballet. You've got to relax, search for the feel and swing through the ball, not hit at it." If it were as easy as all that, I'd be getting my pro card next week.

For those of us who struggle to improve our games, you'll be happy to know that golf didn't always come easy to Peggy Kirk Bell. "No, it was difficult. I wanted to do it, but I grabbed it like a baseball bat and had my hands way out in front. My grip was bad. But a professional, a man by the name of Leonard Schmutte took an interest in me and changed my grip," says Bell. She says she got started in 1939 when her father bought a membership to the Findlay, Ohio Country Club. "Dad sold sporting equipment, so I took some clubs and three balls from the warehouse and went to the first tee. I lost them all in the woods and never made it to the green." Bell promptly gathered the clubs and headed for the clubhouse in search of a lesson, which by the way, lessons were 50 cents at the time.

While an amateur in 1949, Bell won the Augusta Titleholders, which in those days was the women's equivalent of the Masters. The following year she turned pro when she joined the U.S. Curtis Cup team. Bell crisscrossed the nation in her own plane to play in tournaments until a blinding snowstorm in Virginia forced her to make an emergency landing. Her beloved, Warren, had to come get her. She says she sold the plane right after that. Bell played with the likes of LPGA Hall of Famers, the late Babe Didrikson Zaharias, Patty Berg, Betsy Rawls Louise Suggs, and Alice and Marlene Bauer. During that time, there was no money in the tournaments. Bell says her largest payday on the tour was just \$300 when she finished third at the LPGA Championship. Bell is pleased

with how the sport has changed, especially for women. "I think it's great that they can make a living at a sport. Before, a lot of the girls (women) had jobs, they taught school and then they'd play golf in the summer. We were playing for nothing; we just loved the game. But I mean sports are here to stay. It's only going to get bigger and better, and it's great. I love to go and see the money they're making and I'm in awe."

Bell believes the success women's golf is having has to do with the way golf is now accepted and encouraged at the college level. She also enjoys seeing an emphasis on youth golf.

In looking back over Bell's career she fondly recalls the times she played golf with her best friend and mentor, Babe Zaharias. When asked who the most interesting person she's ever met, she's quick to answer, "I would have to say Babe. You either loved her or hated her, because she was tough. She was a competitor. She always wanted us to play better to be better competition for her. But she was great."

Ma Bell also easily slips other famous names into conversation, "Jack (Nicklaus) and I were talking the other day about his hip and I was telling him I had it in the hip too." Bell says her right hip often hurts, but not bad enough to do anything about it. "It doesn't affect my game, and Jack says not to do anything about it until you have to." She talks of regularly seeing her other friends, Arnie (Palmer), Tiger (Woods) and even former President George Bush. She proudly showed me a recent picture of her with Tiger Woods. Bell also talked about chiding Michael Jordan while playing a round with him, "I told him that 'terrible athletes can learn the game, but that golf is not his game'. I know he loves it and he's getting better, but basketball was his game."

Bell is most happy when talking about hosting the U.S. Women's Open at Pine Needles Lodge and Golf Club in 1996 and then again in 2001. She credits the success of the Club to the vision of her late husband, Warren "Bullet" Bell. "I was fortunate to marry Warren, and he had a goal to make Pine Needles into a great golf club. He really built it to what it is now. I was, am still thrilled to see that goal come true."

Bell's family now runs the day-to-day operations of the club. But she is still the matriarch of Pine Needles and its sister course, Mid Pines Inn and Golf Club, also in Southern Pines, North Carolina. "I'm always critical, if I see something out of place, I let them know." Bell has two daughters, a son and six grandchildren, all of whom Bell happily announces, is in some way connected to the game of golf.

Bell thinks so highly of this revered sport that she often gets annoyed with some people playing golf today. "My advice to them is to learn the etiquette and history of the game. People don't have respect for the game. It's a game with gentlemen and ladies."

During my conversation with Peggy Bell, tears quickly formed in her eyes twice. The first time happened when I asked her what her life would have been without golf.

"You ask the tough questions," she said. "It's been a great life for me. I don't know what I would have done without golf. Been a bum, I guess, or maybe a school teacher. But I have met wonderful people because of golf. All my friends, Jack (Nicklaus), Arnold (Palmer), everyone, again, it's been a great life for me. I just love the game and it's been a great life for me. I love everything about it; love playing it; love watching it; and I love teaching it."

Bell also got choked up when I asked her what she wanted her legacy to be. "That she was someone who was grateful for the game of golf. I guess I would want people to say she loved the game." Then her self-deprecating sense of humor came back, "I don't really think I'm important enough for a legacy; I never won enough tournaments."

But what about the lives she's changed? "Oh, I don't know," she shrugs, "I get nice letters, thousands of letters all the time, but if I thought I was going to change lives, I would've been a preacher. But I've been blessed." And so have we.

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