

Stephen R. Lowe
Olivet Nazarene University

The Myth of Bobby Jones

For many Americans the name Robert Tyre “Bobby” Jones is synonymous with golf. All golf fans know that Jones, along with Clifford Roberts and Dr. Alistair Mackenzie, was a founder of the Augusta National Golf Club. Because he compiled an outstanding competitive golf record as an amateur in the 1920s the ‘golden’ age of sports, Jones became one of the most recognized and admired athletes of the twentieth century; indeed, few athletes in American history have been as admirable or as admired as Jones. He won the Grand Slam in 1930 and then retired at the tender age of twenty-eight. The success of Augusta National and its annual event, The Masters, as well as Jones’ friendship with President Dwight D. Eisenhower, further elevated Jones’ reputation. Moreover, the fact that he lived the last twenty-three years of his life in constant pain, plagued by a rare spinal disorder, secured his position as American golf’s greatest paragon.

Naturally, there has been a “marbleization” of the man and his golf skill over the years. For example, Jones is usually portrayed as the “simon-pure” athlete, who never played for prize money and who seemingly had no material interests in connection with his sport. As for his golf abilities, they have also become the stuff of legend. For example, it is almost impossible to watch an ABC golf telecast without hearing commentator Jim McKay say that Jones never played the game more than six months out of any calendar year, and that he put his clubs away in November and did not touch them again until April. Jones was a lawyer first and foremost, commentators suggest, and golf was supposedly far down his list of priorities. Yet, ultimately Jones made hundreds of thousands of dollars from golf; was he really simon-pure? Moreover, could anyone play golf only six months out of the year and win thirteen major championships, including four U.S. Opens?

My presentation offers a biographical sketch of Jones, touching on certain, oft-overlooked facts of his life. It also does something to “demarbleize” the Atlantan, debunking

the two myths mentioned above, as well as touching on his other less admirable personal habits and racial views. My conclusion is that Jones is usually portrayed inaccurately; however, despite an overblown image and personal shortcomings, Jones was generally admirable. Indeed, the Atlantan is more valuable to scholars and laymen as a man than as a myth.

The presentation is based on extensive research conducted for a parallel biography of Jones and Walter Hagen. Sources include Jones' autobiographical works and personal papers (housed at the USGA Golf House Library), newspapers, golf journals, clippings from the Bobby Jones' File at Emery University, Jones/Eisenhower correspondence at the Eisenhower Presidential Library in Abilene, Kansas, and personal interviews conducted with Jones' family and friends.