

# Thunder Bolt had soft side

**Tommy Bolt**

March 31, 1916 – August 30, 2008  
 1958 U.S. Open Champion, Southern Hills, Tulsa, Okla.

**Born:** Haworth, Okla.

Winner of 15 PGA Tour Events,  
 12 Seniors events

BY CLAY HENRY

Steve Thompson has been to a bunch of hall of fame ceremonies for Tommy Bolt. He's looking forward to another one and happy that it didn't take Oklahoma long to induct his friend.

Bolt is in the Oklahoma Golf Hall of Fame's second class. Oklahoma follows Ar-

kansas, Texas and Louisiana as state organizations to enshrine Bolt. He was also inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 2002 and by the PGA of America in 2015.

It's that last one that befuddled Thompson, who became close to Bolt in retirement in northeast Arkansas at Cherokee Village. Thompson was Bolt's financial advisor.

"I was outspoken about why the PGA of America waited so long," Thompson said. "That was surprising."

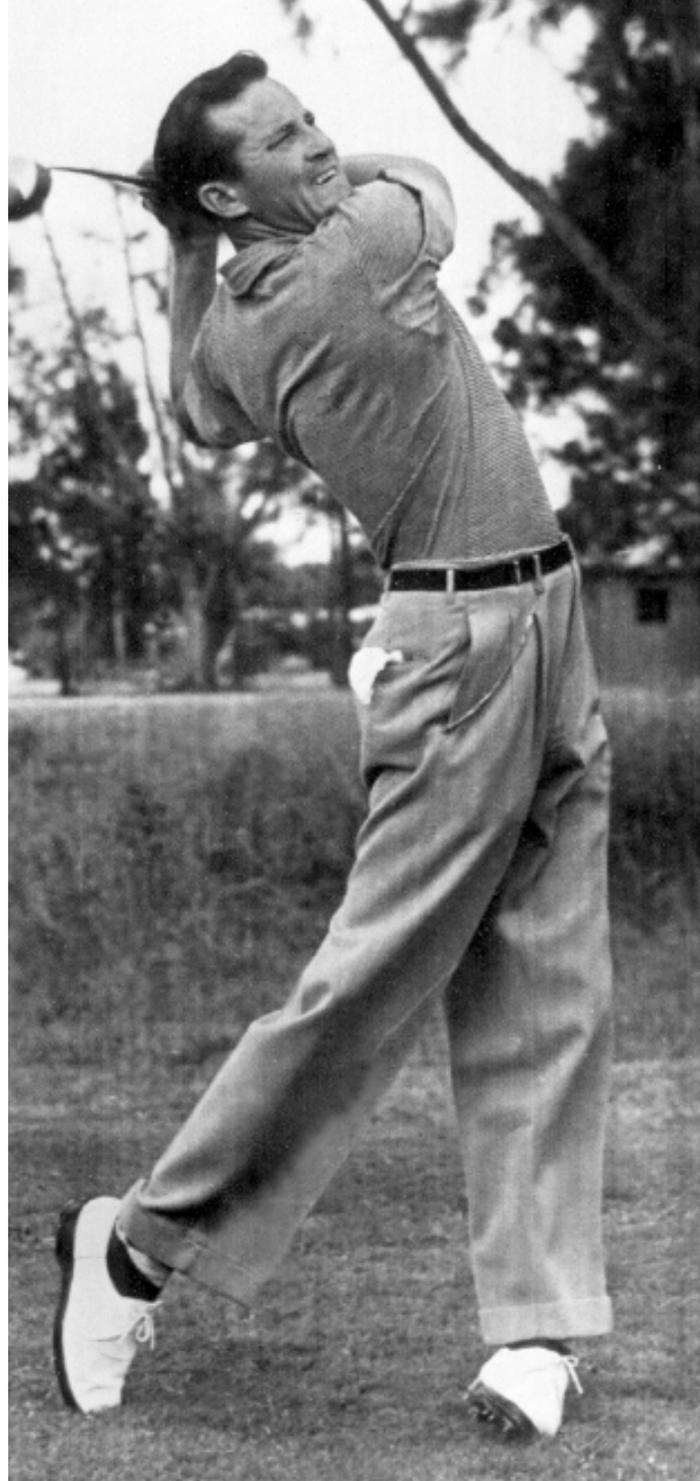
Bolt was born in Haworth in 1916 and moved from Oklahoma two years later, soon after his mother died of the flu. Bolt's father packed up a covered wagon and they moved first to Paris, Texas, then to Shreveport. That's where Bolt grew up, learning golf as a caddie.

Bolt perfected his game in World War II when he worked at the top course in Rome as part of his duty with the U.S. Army. Afterwards he was the most feared player on the amateur circuit around the Shreveport area, finally trying the PGA Tour at age 34.

There were conflicting stories of his age during his early pro career, partly because Bolt lied about it. He cut off two years because he thought 34 sounded old.

Bolt joked about his longevity late in life when he routinely beat his age. He also played late in the day, even in the heat. There was a famous Bolt line about that, too.

"Tommy didn't want to play until the afternoon," Thompson said. "Tommy would say, 'That's when the good players play.' What a gentleman, and he'd always be dressed to the nines."



*A sweet swing that resulted in 15 PGA Tour wins.*

Bolt teamed with Art Wall to win the 1980 Legends of Golf event, but it was probably that duo's second-place finish the year before that sparked the PGA Tour to begin the senior events. Tour Commissioner Deane Beman was among the six million watching on TV as Bolt and Wall traded birdies with Julius Boros and Roberto De Vincenzo in the epic six-hole playoff.

Bolt became a legend in 1958 when he won the U.S. Open at Southern Hills Country Club in Tulsa. He was the hottest player on tour coming into the event and led all the way. He won by four shots over Gary Player



*Bolt signs autographs for youngsters.*

with 71-71-69-72 for 3-over 283.

There was little doubt in Bolt's mind that he was going to win after opening the tournament with a birdie at the first hole. Bolt said he walked off the first green thinking, "I wonder who is going to be second."

It was his play on the famed 12th at Southern Hills – called the All-American hole – that probably won the tournament. Bolt birdied the beautiful 458-yard dogleg left par-4 the first three rounds.

Bolt always played well at the classic courses. His first PGA Tour victory came at Pinehurst No. 2 in the 1951 North and South Open. He won 15 times on the PGA Tour, 12 senior events, including the 1969 PGA. Among other classic courses, Bolt won twice at the Colonial in Fort Worth and the Los Angeles Open at Riviera.

Interviewed by this reporter at Southern Hills in 1982 when Bolt was a guest at the PGA Championship, he said the '58 U.S. Open was one of the rare times that his temper was never an issue. Bolt said he was "at peace with his game" for all 72 holes.

Of course, Bolt was always worth a quote. There are countless great lines by the man fans and reporters dubbed Terrible Tommy,



**Bolt, right, with his idol Ben Hogan.**

Thunder Bolt or Tempestuous Tommy. He earned all of that with his temper and club throwing. The PGA Tour instituted fines for club throwing, nicknamed the Bolt rule.

"I threw clubs and I broke them," he said. "But it got to where I did it just for show. People came to see me throw a club, so I threw them."

"Photographers followed me for 18 holes hoping I'd throw one. I remember one time

the photographer seemed disappointed that I hadn't thrown one. I grabbed him and took him back out on the course so he could get a picture of me throwing a club."

Bolt said his temper was often in check when others thought it was not.

"I have a ruddy complexion," he said. "My nose and even my face might be red. It's just me. I wasn't mad, but people saw that and thought that."

Bolt told Jim Murray, the famed LA Times columnist, "write that I'm a nice guy, so people will like me. I don't think they do." Bolt was likeable and accommodating to the media. He produced some great one-liners.

"Never break your putter and your driver in the same round," he said. "Or, you're dead."

Bolt once asked his caddie, "What club?" The caddie responded, "The 2-iron, it's the only one you have left."

Bolt often traveled with Ben Hogan, the man who helped fix his grip in 1955 that all but eliminated the hook that caused many of the temper fits. Hogan turned Bolt's left hand to the point where only the last three fingers of that hand controlled the club.

The beauty of Bolt's swing was a slow tempo and most were in awe of his ability to

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hit all of the shots. He could move the ball either direction and had a wonderful ability with long irons. It was a dead stiff 2-iron shot on a par-3 in a playoff with Gene Littler and Hogan that won the 1960 Memphis Open.

Bolt thought Hogan was the game's greatest all-time player, ahead of Jack Nicklaus.

"I saw Nicklaus watching Hogan practice," Bolt said. "I never saw Hogan watching Nicklaus practice. When Hogan played a practice round, about half of the gallery was Tour pros."

There was also clear respect for Bolt from Nicklaus. Bolt's son went to Southern Hills for the 2001 U.S. Open. He had his son with him when they were introduced to Nicklaus and his son.

"Jack shook my son's hand and said, 'Your grandfather is the only player who ever intimidated me on the golf course,'" said Tommy Bolt Jr. "That was a great moment."

There continue to be great moments where Bolt's name is concerned at Cherokee Village. The 13th Tommy Bolt Memorial, a charity event, has raised more than \$80,000 through the years.

"Tommy worked to put it together and gave his name to it," Thompson said. "His family continues to support the tournament.

"Tommy did a lot for the community," Thompson said. "He was a big advocate for junior golf in our area. He gave his time and financially. Our area owes a great deal to Tommy."

David Webb, long-time pro at Cherokee Village, became good friends with Bolt. He said the number one thing to remember was the way he treated the junior golfers.

"He loved the kids," Webb said. "And we had a lot of good kids. They so respected Tommy. He always had a tidbit of knowledge for them. And, he just loved to see them out here on our South course."

One of those fine junior players was Aaron Circle, who would play at Arkansas State. Circle met Bolt as a seventh grader. Soon they were best friends as Bolt mentored both Aaron and his younger brother Nathan.

"I guess I was a good listener," Aaron said. "I tried to soak everything up. It started out as just me hanging around and then he did become my mentor. He turned into my hero.

"I'd go to his house for Christmas. It was amazing to look through his things. You'd see Christmas cards from the game's greats – Nicklaus, Trevino, and all of them."

As far as instruction, it was always simple.



**Bolt ready to drown a club.**

"He was big on the grip," Circle said. "Tommy said the game starts with the grip and he was never mechanical. Keep the grip neutral and you could play. Learn to hit the driver and to putt."

There were times great times watching 16mm film of Bolt and Hogan practicing side by side. Mary Lou, Tommy's wife, did the filming.

"We'd sit in the living room and Tommy would set up the projector and watch those," Circle said. "And, he'd talk about it. I don't know where those reel to reel tapes are now.

"We'd sit and talk about the swing, but he wanted to explain the mental side to the game more than anything else. And there were just such great stories."

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