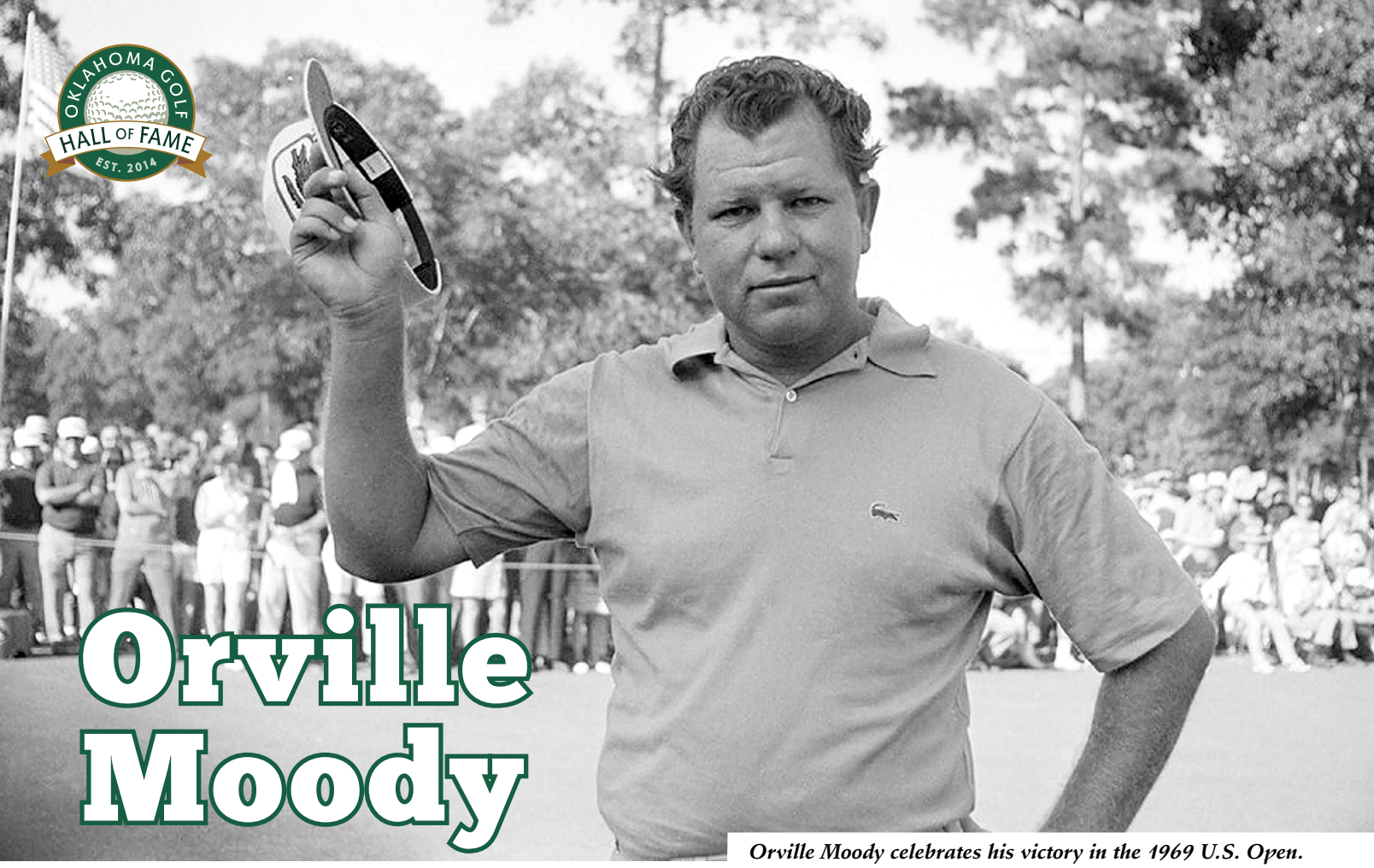

Orville Moody

Orville Moody celebrates his victory in the 1969 U.S. Open.

State's only U.S. Open champ in 2019 Hall of Fame class

BY JOHN ROHDE

Orville James Moody was walking to the No. 18 tee during the 1969 U.S. Open's final round at The Champions Course in Houston when he suddenly was stopped by a marshall, who had mistaken Moody for a spectator.

"Behind the ropes," the marshall ordered.

"He's a player. Let him go through," a nearby marshall re-ordered.

Moody actually was more than a player. He was the tournament leader.

Four strokes later, Moody nervously caressed in a 14-inch par putt to avoid a four-way playoff and capture the prestigious national championship.

That U.S. Open wound up being Moody's only PGA Tour victory, and it was a doozy. However, a slew of achievements before and after that magical moment left an unobstructed path to Moody's induction into the Oklahoma Golf Hall of Fame's 2019 class on Nov. 24 at Southern Hills Country Club.

A 1999 inductee into the Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame, Moody died on Aug. 8, 2008, in Allen, Texas. He was 74 and survived by his son (Jason) and three daughters (Kelley Moody, Sabreena Moody and Michelle Blackmon).

Blackmon, who resides in Sulphur Springs, Texas, was adopted, but that's not the way she saw it.

"I was 4 when we went before the judge," Blackmon said, "but he's the only dad I've ever known."

Blackmon served as her father's caddy on the senior tour during her high school days and beyond. She would calculate yardages and frequently read putts for Moody.

"If it got dark, he couldn't see," Blackmon said. "If it was overcast or bad weather was coming he'd say, 'I can't see anything.' I always looked at putts with him. He didn't always agree with me, but it was pretty close."

Far more important, Blackmon kept her father company.

"I think having someone who was family out there really helped, because it's a grind being out there," Blackmon said. "He might play for six weeks at a time. We went to dinner. We went to movies. We stayed in the same hotel room. It gave him someone to talk to. We'd go to malls, all the pro-am din-

Moody at the 1995 Vantage Championship.

ners together. He just didn't have to do stuff by himself."

Born in Chickasha and the youngest of 10 children, Moody became Oklahoma's high school medalist in 1952 while at Capitol Hill. Moody was living with his sister at the time while his parents remained in Chickasha, where his father was superintendent at the local golf course.

Moody initially attended the University of Oklahoma on a football scholarship because golf didn't offer scholarships in those days.

"They didn't have a lot of money," Blackmon said. "But he had a job while he was on scholarship at OU. His job was to make sure the tennis courts were there every day. Just make sure they were still there. That was it. Six weeks in, his girlfriend broke up with him and he joined the Army."

Moody was assigned to Special Services and reached the rank of staff sergeant, which led to his apropos moniker "Sarge." Moody oversaw Army golf courses, taught the game to Army personnel and played in tournaments around the world. He collected eight titles worldwide, winning the Korean Open three straight years (1958-60) and the KPGA Championship twice (1959 and 1966) while serving 14 years.

Moody joined the PGA Tour full-time in 1968 and 18 months later, he was a 35-year-old U.S. Open champion after posting a one-stroke victory over future PGA commissioner Deane Beman, future TV analyst Bob Rosburg and future "Mr. 59" Al Geiberger.

Perhaps more impressively, defending U.S. Open champ Lee Trevino had picked Moody to win beforehand. "He's one helluva player," Trevino said of Moody.

Afterward, Moody said, "I won it for Lee. It took a lot of guts for him to believe I could win."

Moody became the last U.S. Open champion of the 20th century to win through local and sectional qualifying.

Moody was a five-time runner-up on the PGA Tour, which included losing two playoffs facing the likes of Jack Nicklaus and Raymond Floyd in the 1973 Bing Crosby Pro-Am (won by Nicklaus), and facing Tom Weiskopf, Gene Littler and Julius Boros in the 1969 Greater Greensboro Open (won by Littler).

Putting was Moody's perpetual downfall on the PGA Tour. He tried every type of putter and putting grip imaginable to find more success.

"I remember going to watch him and if he had a 5-footer or a 3-footer, I kind of almost didn't want to watch," Blackmon said. "You just kind of turned around. It was bad."

Moody once explained: "I had the yips. Right at the point of impact I had a terrible jerk with my hands and wrists. I couldn't make a putt from a foot-and-a-half at times."

When Moody joined the senior tour (50-and-older), he spotted fellow touring pro Charles Owens on the practice green using a long-shafted putter. Owens created a 52-inch putter not only to conquer his own case of the yips but also to help combat his limited range of motion from a fused left knee suffered after a failed jump during his paratrooper days in the Army. He also had a bad right knee and aching back.

"Dad saw the long putter and said, 'Let me take a look at this thing,' " said Blackmon, who was in high school at the time. "He started messing with it and that's when he built one for himself. He started putting really well."

In her closet at home, Blackmon still has the original 50-inch putter her father built, and also the last self-made putter.

Blackmon's ability to calm her fa-

Orville Moody with daughter and caddie Michelle Blackmon.

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ther helped catapult Moody for years to come.

"Michelle has helped me in every area," Moody once said. "Reading the greens is her main job, and she's learned a lot. Keeping me calm is another part of the game she's helped."

Armed with a long-shafted putter and a pendulum stroke, Moody quickly prospered on the senior circuit, which included an 11-stroke victory at the Vintage Chrysler Invitational in 1988.

Moody joined the senior circuit in 1984 and won three of the first six events he entered, including the unofficial Viceroy Panama Open.

From 1987-1994, Moody won nine more individual titles. All told on the senior tour, he won 11 times, placed second 19 times and third seven times. In addition, from 1987-2006, Moody paired to win the Liberty Mutual Legends of Golf tournament on seven occasions (twice with Bruce Crampton and five times with Jimmy Powell).

Two decades after capturing the 1969 U.S. Open, Moody would win two more major championships on the senior tour, claiming the Senior Tournament Players Championship and the U.S. Senior Open, both in 1989, becoming just the fourth man to win both the U.S. Open and the U.S. Senior Open.

Moody wore his emotions on his sleeve, as often is the case with almost all struggling putters. Moody had a reputation for being, well, moody.

"He wasn't mean," Blackmon said. "Everybody thought he was. When something goes wrong, it's the caddy's fault. That's just the way it is. He broke the head off his putter one time and we still had three holes left to play. He starts (cursing at me). I said, 'OK, this is going to be a long three holes.' "

Blackmon was on the bag in August 1987 when Moody won the Rancho Murieta Senior Gold Rush just outside Sacramento, Calif. The next week, Blackmon returned for her senior year at Sulphur Springs (Texas) High School and upon graduation rejoined her father on tour full-time for 2 1/2 years.

"It was my choice," Blackmon said. "I knew I was going to go to college eventually, but not right away."

Long revered as one of the best ball-strikers on tour, Moody finally found his full potential thanks to a long-shafted putter and a career mulligan on the senior tour.

"He looked at tour stats every week," Blackmon said. "One of the things he was most proud of was being the No. 1 putter on tour. Putting meant so much more to him because he struggled so long with that. That was the stat that was most important to him. It wasn't the money. It was him becoming a good putter."

Photo by Jeff McBride/PGA TOUR Archive

Moody celebrates winning the 1989 Senior Players Championship.