

## PEGGY KIRK BELL

October 28, 1921-November 23, 2016

*by Jaime Diaz\**



Those lucky enough to be around golf a lot also have the good fortune of knowing a lot of golf people. “Golf person” is a specific designation. Not all golfers are necessarily good people (though their overall batting average is high). And being a golfer doesn’t automatically make someone a golf person.

In my mental shorthand, golf people, besides loving the game (or perhaps in part because they do love the game) are some blend of interesting, generous, open-minded, wise, and fun. Many of them play the game well—which helps foster a poignant perspective that comes from finding value in losing—but it’s not a requirement. Mainly, their close connection to playing keeps the child within more vitally alive.

Peggy Kirk Bell, who died peacefully last week at age 95 in her home next to the 18th fairway at Pine Needles, was a quintessential golf person.

She came to the game relatively late, at 17, but with talent and verve. She won three Ohio Women’s Amateurs, the 1949 Women’s North and South Amateur, and made the 1950 Curtis Cup team. After turning professional as a charter member of the LPGA, she won the 1951 Augusta Titleholders. In 1953, she married Warren (Bullet) Bell, a former ball-handling guard for the Fort Wayne Pistons of the early NBA, and the couple purchased and ran Pine Needles until Bullet’s death in 1984. Pine Needles hosted three U. S. Women’s Opens during her tenure.

With the help of her three children and their spouses, Peggy continued as owner, and in 1994 purchased the adjoining Mid Pines Inn & Golf Club. The two Donald Ross originals and their warm, unaffected lodgings and gracious staffs have become as authentic a center of the best things in golf as there is in America.

Being a pilot and liking people were two things she shared with her friend, Arnold Palmer. The Palmers often stayed at Pine Needles, with Winnie Palmer channeling its rustic charm in shaping the atmosphere at Bay Hill. Mrs. Bell was also friends with Ben Hogan, who in 1947 helped her with her grip, and confided that he was in the process of



perfecting a fade, Byron Nelson, and Jack Nicklaus, who made her a member of his Captain's Club at Muirfield Village. Among women players, Mrs. Bell was tight with Babe Zaharias, Patty Berg, Nancy Lopez, Annika Sorenstam, and Cristie Kerr.

Mrs. Bell was the winner of the USGA's Bob Jones Award in 1990 and an inductee into seven halls of fame, but it was as a teacher that she made her greatest contribution. After starting one of the country's first golf schools at Pine Needles, she began running five-day group lessons she called "Golfaris" for women to learn the game. More than 20,000 women have gone through the programs, many more than once.

Having been a good player, Mrs. Bell was harder on herself and driven by the mystery of the golf swing. Her son-in-law, 1978 PGA Tour rookie-of-the-year Pat McGowan, on occasion would see Ma Bell make impromptu 300-yard trips in her 1964 Lincoln convertible from her home to Pine Needles' expansive practice range, as if, well, she owned the place.

We had seen Mrs. Bell from time to time on Golf Trips past, tooling around the grounds with her assistant or having lunch at the In the Rough Lounge. She even stopped by the Ross Lodge for an impromptu golf lesson one Saturday afternoon. She was of course the driving force behind all that Pine Needles and Mid Pines have to offer, and the reason why we will soon celebrate our twentieth year there. We are grateful for her contributions to the Game of Golf and The Golf Trip.



\*Editor's Note: Portions of this article by Jaime Diaz of Golf Digest first appeared in the Nov. 28, 2016 issue of Golf World, and were reprinted in Golf Digest. The link to Golf Digest article is here: <https://www.golfdigest.com/story/heres-why-peggy-kirk-bell-held-such-a-unique-place-in-golf>.