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Miracle at Pebble Beach

A father's death inspires the round of a lifetime.

BY TURK PIPKIN

THE MERE MENTION of the name *Pebble Beach* conjures up images and emotions in golfers and nongolfers alike. For some, the dramatic ocean view from the seventh tee comes to mind. Others may envision Tom Watson, silhouetted against the Pacific, as he hits a nearly impossible shot from the deep grass to win the 1982 U.S. Open.

For me, the name elicits memories of my father, his beautiful smile, his leathered hands, the joy he found in the game of golf, and the way he passed that joy to me when I

was just a scrawny little pickle from West Texas.

When I hear *Pebble Beach*, I see the practice green near the first tee, where I was standing when my brother called to say, "Come fast." And I think of sitting with my dad the next day in the hospital room in Texas, the two of us watching Pebble's famous Pro-Am—the AT&T they call it now—on television, just as we had in my childhood when the tournament was known simply as the Crosby. And I think of what were very nearly my father's final words to me. "That's such a beautiful place," he said as

The author enduring a rough moment at the Pebble Beach Golf Links.



By the time I stepped once again onto Pebble's famous first tee, my moderate jitters of the year before had been replaced by absolute terror.



The Pebble Beach Co. empire stretches from the famous Golf Links (sixth hole shown at left) to the Lone Cypress on 17-Mile Drive (above).

he squeezed my hand. “We should have played there together.”

But we didn't. My father and I never played at the Pebble Beach Golf Links together. We never walked the course in each other's company, never enjoyed cold beers and a couple of those magnificent burgers in the Tap Room together. And yet the words *Pebble Beach* incite in me vivid recollections of my father, and of a place that healed a broken heart.

MY FATHER'S NAME WAS Raymond Pipkin, but everyone knew him as Pip. What Pip wanted in life was to hunt, fish, play golf, and be a good father to his five children. He was skilled at all of these and loved by just about everyone who met him.

When Pip first took me to the sunburned links of San Angelo, Texas, and taught me how to carry a bag and tend a pin, I was too young for

the work, and I think he knew it. But the bond of golf we forged that day would not be broken.

Why we never played Pebble Beach together—father and son at a place we both worshipped—was the result of both poor timing and a lack of foresight. Pip loved the fact that I had become a golf writer, but soon after I dedicated my novel *Fast Greens* to him, he suffered a stroke and never played the game again.

A few weeks after my father's funeral, unable to shake the loss or his near-final words, I called and booked a tee time to play the 18 holes that I should have played with him many years earlier. I intended to play one round of golf at Pebble Beach that would have made Pip proud.

A couple of months later, as I turned onto 17-Mile Drive and headed down the hill toward the ocean and clubhouse, I felt the first-hole jitters rising

inside me. They had not subsided by the time I stepped to the tee. Taking a deep breath, I smacked a 3-wood up the fairway, avoiding the bunker on the left and Pebble's upscale inn, Casa Palmero, on the right. Not bad, but my next shot landed in the bunker to the right of the green. I blasted out and over, chipped on, and two-putted for a double-bogey six. Welcome to Pebble Beach.

A long string of bogeys followed, but boring these bogeys were not. On the short par-4 fourth, I hit my tee shot over the bluff to the shores of Stillwater Cove. Seeing the ball on the beach, I climbed down the cliff with wedge in hand, and then knocked my ball back into the fairway. Several sunbathers applauded. This was Pebble at its finest.

I had never set a specific goal for my round at Pebble; the idea was simply to strike crisp shots and walk

proudly with my club at my side as Pip had taught me. Despite my early string of bogeys, on the 15th hole I calculated that soon I would be in the clubhouse with a score in the mid-eighties, not too shabby for Pebble Beach. In the Tap Room, I would raise a toast or two to Pip, and then I would go home to my family and my writing, and life would carry on.

But at Pebble's famous par-3 17th, I topped a shot that bobbed halfway to the green. I hit my next one just as poorly. Still fuming as I stepped to the 18th tee, I dunked my drive into the ocean, and for the first time in 40 years of golf, I asked myself a frightening question: “Why do I play this stupid game?”

I had practiced hard so I could play well for my father, but it hadn't been enough. I'd played one of the most beautiful golf courses in the world and had achieved nothing but a temper,

the last thing Pip would have wanted. The solution seemed so simple: Why not make this the final frustrating round of my life? Why not just hurl my bag and clubs off the bluff into the ocean and be done with golf forever?

But then I thought of Pip and how he had taught me to walk proudly down the fairway. And I remembered that every time I do so, my father walks with me. And I knew I was not going to give up golf—not then, not ever.

The next thing I knew, in spite of the ball lost to the Pacific Ocean, I was jamming a 40-foot putt in for a double-bogey. I had shot 89 at Pebble Beach, not what I had in mind to honor my father, but good enough to know that I could do better.

And that gave me an idea. What if I were to dedicate not a round, but a year to my father?

“You could be good,” golf instructor David Leadbetter had told me a few months earlier after watching me hit balls one day in Austin. “But you'd have to work at it.”

And so, staring out at the beautiful ocean and the gathering dusk from Pebble's 18th green, I vowed that I would indeed work at it. In one year, on my 50th birthday, I would return to Pebble Beach and take 10 strokes off my score. It was a crazy idea, and Pip would have loved it.

ONE YEAR AND ABOUT a million practice balls later, I once again turned onto 17-Mile Drive and headed down the hill toward the ocean and the Pebble Beach clubhouse. I carried a new set of custom-fit Callaway golf clubs in my trunk and a new swing—courtesy of several dozen lessons with David Leadbetter, Dave Pelz, Ben Crenshaw, and other top instructors—in my head.



Originally designed by two amateur golfers in 1919, the Golf Links (seventh hole shown above) has changed little in the ensuing decades.

So by the time I stepped once again onto Pebble's famous first tee, my moderate jitters of the year before had been replaced by . . . absolute terror. What if I failed after all that work? I was trying to break 80 at Pebble Beach on my 50th birthday, and truth be told, even after a year of nonstop instruction, I still wasn't a great golfer.

Gripping my 3-wood, I aimed at the bunker on the left side of the first fairway and fired away. I'm not exactly sure where the ball stopped, because that swing was the last thing I remembered about the hole until I stroked in a short putt at the green.

"Good bogey!" someone in my group said.

And so the holes passed by on a perfect, sunny day at Pebble Beach. Playing with purpose, and satisfied with nearly every shot I hit, I continued to make bogeys. But such is the nature of Pebble: Miss the green by 3 feet and land in the deep, wet grass, and you'll be hard-pressed to make par.

When I lipped out a 5-foot putt for par on 11, I checked my card and realized that I was already six over. To finish seven over after 18, I'd have to give up only one more stroke to par while playing against the wind all the way home.

I was toast. Shoot, I'd be lucky to bogey every hole.

While we waited for the group in front of us to clear the green on the next hole, I remembered that the

night before I had scribbled some essential golf advice to save for just such a moment. Pulling from my pocket a beer coaster from the Britannia Arms Pub in Monterey, 11 holes into the final round of my quest, I finally got down to the essence of what I had learned—and it had nothing to do with golf mechanics. If I couldn't be a good golfer, I'd have to be a wise one. That's why I titled my beer-coaster list "The Seven Pillars of Golf Wisdom."

1. *Every Shot Counts.*
2. *Pull the Right Club.*
3. *Call Your Shot.*
4. *Take Dead Aim.*
5. *Believe in Yourself.*
6. *Complete Your Swing.*
7. *Never Give Up.*

My guess is that any golfer could make a list that suits his or her game as well as this list suits mine. The one thing I am certain about is that the list worked for me, because one swing after reading through it on the 12th tee at Pebble, my ball was sitting 8 feet from the hole. And one putt later, I had made my first birdie of the day.

Never Give Up, I read again. Then I walked to the 13th tee.

Now I was having fun. Suddenly I felt like I had in those early years in West Texas. Like those first times I actually got the ball airborne. Like teeing off at dawn, then walking down the middle of the fairway, making the first footprints in the wet

grass. Like my father's hand on my shoulder as he said, "Good shot."

An hour later, I walked to the 18th tee at six over par, needing only a bogey to break 80. Having hit my tee shot in the ocean a year earlier, I aimed right—*way* right—and landed safely. For my second swing, I aimed down the right side again, and I realized my mistake as soon as I swung.

"No!" I yelled at the ball in flight.

But yes, my ball was heading out of bounds. Landing hard, it bounced past a white OB stake into someone's yard. But just as suddenly, the ball bounded left and rolled back into play. It reminded me of Ben Crenshaw's kick at the Masters, when my father and I were convinced that Harvey Penick, Crenshaw's former instructor, had given his ball a helping hand from heaven. "Thanks, Pip," I said out loud.

And so I came to the 18th green, with a 30-foot putt and two strokes to get in the hole. Walking the line of my shot, I thought, "This is it; this is everything!" But as soon as I thought it, I knew it was a lie. This putt wasn't everything. This putt was nothing. It simply didn't matter. What mattered was that my father took me out to the golf course, put a golf club in my hand, dropped a ball, and said, "Hit it in the hole." And that's what I've been doing ever since.

In my mind, I had made this putt well over a year ago. Shoot, I made this putt when I was 10 years old. Thirty

feet, right to left, slightly uphill. I could see it, and I could trust it.

And then I knocked it in the cup.

AFTER A CEREMONIAL beer and burger in the Tap Room, I drove up the hill from the clubhouse and pondered what I had accomplished. I hadn't brought my father back to life, of course, and I hadn't seen a rainbow in the sky that told me he was watching. But the truth is, I never expected a miracle.

The night before, I had lain awake worrying that I was forgetting my father's face, but now I could see him clearly. I still see him as I write these words. I see him walking down the fairway just ahead of me at the San Angelo Country Club. I'm a little young for the task, and with his heavy bag over my shoulder, I'm falling farther and farther behind. And then he stops, looks back at me with a smile, and waits for me to catch up.

I see him years later on the only day my oldest daughter ever saw him play golf. Pip and I are coming up the 18th fairway at San Angelo. It's about 105 degrees and we're half-fried, but we haven't played with each other in a couple of years, and I can see how happy he is that we're together.

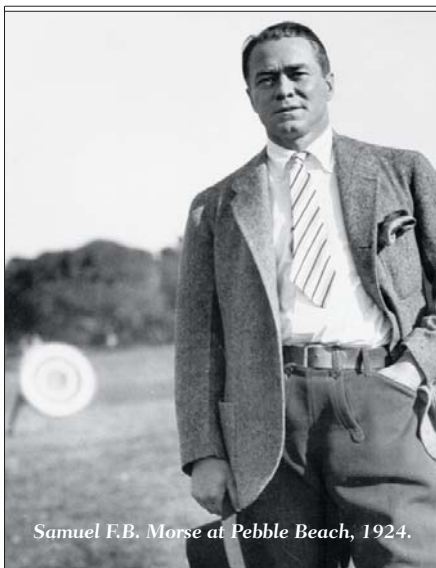
I see him in the nursing home, confusing everyone's names but sharp enough to push a checker to the back row, turn it into a king, and hop my pieces all over the board. What a triumphant grin he gives me.

I see him in the hospital on that last afternoon, the tournament broadcast showing Pebble's 18th fairway from the tee.

"That's such a beautiful place," he tells me.

And now we have played there together. *

Actor and writer Turk Pipkin is the author of the golf novel Fast Greens and a recent nonfiction book, The Old Man and the Tee, which tells the story of the year he dedicated to breaking 80 at Pebble Beach for his father.



Samuel F.B. Morse at Pebble Beach, 1924.

STROKES OF GENIUS

AFTER MOVING WEST from his native New England in 1908, Samuel F.B. Morse, a distant cousin of the inventor of the telegraph, went to work for the Pacific Improvement Co. Among the Northern California real estate firm's holdings at the time was a hotel on the Monterey Peninsula. Built in 1879, after Pacific Improvement's owner, the Southern Pacific Railroad Co., had completed a spur line into Monterey, the Hotel Del Monte was a popular destination for California's affluent ranks, even more so after the proprietors added a golf course to the grounds in 1890.

By 1915, however, when Morse became manager of Pacific Improvement's properties on the Monterey Peninsula, the Del Monte's Gilded Age glamour had faded, and lot sales at another of the company's projects, known as Pebble Beach, were not meeting expectations. Morse's charge was to spruce up the company's holdings on the peninsula and find a buyer willing to pay \$1.3 million for them.

Morse scrapped Pebble Beach's existing development plans, which

called for small, crowded lots along the seafront, and convinced his employer to buy back all of the parcels. (Pacific Improvement succeeded in reacquiring all of the lots but one, whose owner refused to sell.) Morse's vision for the property included larger homes set back from the beach and overlooking a golf course that would meander along the rocky bluffs above Stillwater Cove. But as he would recall years later, Morse believed that only two prominent golf course architects were qualified for the task: Charles Blair Macdonald, a wealthy Easterner who was not interested in the job, and Alister Mackenzie, who was serving in the British army in World War I.

Morse therefore enlisted two local men—neither of whom was a course designer—to build the Pebble Beach Golf Links. Jack Neville, a Pebble Beach real estate salesman for Pacific Improvement, had proven himself a fine golfer by winning the first California State Amateur tournament at the Del Monte course in 1916. Douglas Grant, the scion of a San Francisco family, had spent time in Great Britain playing amateur golf and studying the classic links courses. Together, under the guidance of Morse, the duo designed what remains one of the world's finest, and certainly one of its most famous, golf courses.

A year or two after Pebble Beach opened in 1919, Morse expanded the 18th hole into a par 5 that stretched along the curved line of Stillwater Cove. (Critics had complained about the course's conditioning and its poor closing hole, a short par 4.) In the late 1990s, the Pebble Beach Co. succeeded in purchasing the parcel of land from the family of the owner who had refused to sell to Pacific Improvement, and the resort enlisted Jack Nicklaus to build a new par-3 fifth hole on the cliff-top site. Aside from these changes, the layout Neville and Grant designed is virtually the same one played today.

The same year he opened the Golf Links and the adjacent Lodge at Pebble Beach, Morse acquired from his

employer the 18,000 acres that included Pebble Beach, the Hotel Del Monte, and the Del Monte Forest. Although he paid slightly more than the original \$1.3 million asking price, Morse likely knew that he had mined a diamond from the rough.

A LIVING LEGACY

UNTIL HIS DEATH in 1969, Samuel F.B. Morse remained the owner of the Del Monte Properties Co., the firm he formed to operate Pebble Beach. The resort, the golf course, and their surroundings eventually changed hands in 1978, when 20th Century Fox purchased Del Monte Properties for \$72 million. Oil billionaire Marvin Davis then acquired the movie studio, including its Pebble Beach properties, in 1981. “I never fall in love with an asset,” said Davis years later, “but with Pebble Beach I came pretty close.”

In 1990, however, Minoru Isutani, who headed a Japanese conglomerate and owned golf courses in his country, offered Davis \$841 million for Pebble Beach. Davis sold to Isutani, who planned to sell million-dollar memberships and make the course semiprivate. This provoked an outcry from Monterey Peninsula residents, and the state-sponsored California Coastal Commission rejected Isutani’s proposal.

Eighteen months after he bought Pebble Beach, Isutani sold it for only \$500 million to a partnership of Sumitomo Bank and the Taiheiyō Club, which also owned golf courses in Japan. The group invested more than \$100 million to renovate the lodge, upgrade the property’s beach club, add a spa, and open a boutique hotel, but by 1999, Pebble Beach was on the market again. Among the companies that tendered bids—the benchmark price was \$800 million—were Starwood Hotels & Resorts, private golf course owner ClubCorp USA, former owner Marvin Davis, the Marriott Corp., and the Contrarian Group, the



Sands of time: a foursome at Pebble Beach, 1935.

latter of which was headed by Olympic impresario and former baseball commissioner Peter Ueberroth.

Ueberroth assembled a team of investors that included former United Airlines CEO Dick Ferris, golfer Arnold Palmer, and actor/director/local politician Clint Eastwood. Pebble Beach’s Japanese owners accepted the team’s bid of \$820 million, a large portion of which the partners raised by selling ownership units, priced from \$2 million to \$10 million, to 132 friends and associates. The names of those friends and associates have never been disclosed.

FOREST FOR THE TEES

THE PEBBLE BEACH CO., the entity owned by Ueberroth and his partners, manages an empire of resorts, restaurants, golf courses, and more on its now-5,300-acre property on the Monterey Peninsula. The company’s facilities include the Lodge at Pebble Beach, the Casa Palmero hotel, the Inn at Spanish Bay, the Spa at Pebble Beach, a beach and tennis club, an equestrian center with 34 miles of trails, and 17-Mile Drive, the scenic road that wends through the peninsula and passes the area’s landmark Lone

Cypress tree. Still, golf is the primary draw at Pebble Beach, and visitors soon may have another venue on which to play.

Pebble Beach’s existing golf courses consist of the Pebble Beach Golf Links, Spyglass Hill (a coastal layout that would be the main attraction at nearly any other resort), the Links at Spanish Bay, the old Del Monte Golf Course, and a nine-hole executive track. This year, a plan for a new golf course—its provisional name is the Forest Course—may finally come to fruition.

First designed in 1992 by architect Tom Fazio, the Forest Course originally was slated for an uplands area on the peninsula.

The California Coastal Commission and local environmentalists protested the plan, claiming that it would result in the loss of too many Monterey pines, which grow only in three areas, including the Monterey Peninsula, and which were already threatened by a pitch canker disease.

The Pebble Beach Co. thus moved the proposed site, and Fazio’s new routing, unveiled in 1999, plays through the land bordered by the Peter Hay executive course, the Equestrian Center, and Spyglass Hill. “Tom’s original site was laid out over very hilly and rough terrain,” says R.J. Harper, Pebble Beach’s director of golf. “The new site is a lot like Spyglass Hill, with rolling hills and views out to the ocean.”

As part of its new proposal, Pebble Beach agreed to set aside several hundred acres of Monterey-pine forest. Thus far, environmental groups have been amenable to the plan, and earlier this year it was approved by the Monterey County Board of Supervisors. The Coastal Commission must approve the plans before construction can begin; at press time, the board had scheduled public hearings for late 2005 or early 2006. —JAMES Y. BARTLETT □

Pebble Beach Resorts, www.pebblebeach.com