

Scottsdale resident to receive Anser Award

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On Wednesday night, **Al Birmingham** of Scottsdale will probably ease his way to a podium and tell a story - or three - about his life in golf.

This time, it will be at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa on the Gila River Indian Community. The Southwest Section of the PGA of America will name Birmingham as its annual Anser Award recipient at the SWSPGA's annual meeting.

The prestigious award honors an individual or group whose positive efforts have influenced the history of Arizona golf.

During his 70-plus years, Birmingham has touched a lot of people in a positive way, whether it was slipping a sleeve of Titleist golf balls to a colleague or, later in life, serving as a mentor for dozens of young golf professionals.

Growing up in Pittsburgh, Birmingham developed into a great golfer, just not as adept as Arnold Palmer, another Pennsylvania prodigy who joined Birmingham at Wake Forest University on a golf scholarship.

They helped Wake Forest win the Atlantic Coast Conference men's golf championship in 1955. While Palmer went on to earn worldwide fame, Birmingham opted to pursue a highly-successful career in sales, 34 years with Titleist.

Birmingham joined Titleist in 1968. He eventually became one of the company's top executives and was named National Salesperson of the Year three times (1977, 1978 and 1989).

While Birmingham was an outstanding salesman with Titleist, his other contributions were arguably more important to golf in the Southwest.

Birmingham was one of the key architects of the Arizona Golf Association's initial handicap system when the AGA's membership totaled only 4,000 in the 1960s. He helped facilitate the union of Arizona's public and private golf clubs under one umbrella when many regional golf associations were doing the opposite.

"It allowed everyone to become a member, and many of the principles and ideals that we put into place are still there today and that gives me great satisfaction in knowing that," said Birmingham, who later served as AGA president in 1986 and 1987.

He was also the first president of the Papago Men's Golf Club in Phoenix, the first host course for Arizona State University's golf team.

Cave Creek resident **Ed Gowan**, executive director of the AGA for the past 20 years, has known Birmingham since the 1980s.

"From his time at Papago, to many years with the AGA Board, and finally as president (of the AGA), Al was constantly working for the good of amateur golf," Gowan said.

Bill Rodie of Phoenix is a good friend from their time at the AGA and now at Desert Forest Golf Club in Carefree (where Birmingham is a member, as well as White Mountain Country Club in Pinetop).

"Al's been very involved for over 40 years," Rodie said. "He's done a lot of good work for golf with the amateurs and professionals -and, perhaps more importantly, he's brought a lot of good will."

Birmingham and his wife of more than 50 years, Marion, have five children and spend many hours with their grandchildren, but the last few years have been both rewarding and trying for the couple.

After retiring from Titleist in 2002, Birmingham was asked to coordinate a national mentoring program whereby he would help aspiring or certified golf professionals and offer sage advice to those who were looking at various positions at golf courses.

Brandon Rogers, head golf professional at Desert Forest, has seen it firsthand.

"His ability to be a mentor for so many young guys is one of the best things about him," Rogers said. "He keeps in touch with all the golf professionals (he's met through the years). He likes seeing them get good jobs, and he takes it a step further than most people would."

"That was perhaps the most satisfying two years of my life," Birmingham said. "Giving back to the game of golf has always been important to me, and by matching up certain individuals with specific jobs and seeing it work out well for them and their families . . . well, that was extremely gratifying for me."

Birmingham also has been plagued by cataracts and recently lost his left eye to the disease. At one point, he couldn't drive, but it didn't slow his passion for golf. Rodie bought a chauffeur's cap, cut out a Titleist logo from a magazine, and pasted it on a button on the cap.

"I was the official driver for Al for a while to the course and out to dinner," Rodie said. "Marion just couldn't do it all the time. I kid him about his glass eye. I told him he should have some red lines put in to make it look realistic."

--**Russ Christ** is a correspondent for the *Scottsdale Republic*.

The Anser Award

Established in 1990 by the Southwest Section of the PGA of America, the Anser Award honors an individual or group whose positive efforts have influenced the history of Arizona golf. The award is given in honor of the late Karsten Solheim, the founder of PING and named after his famous PING Anser putter. Solheim received the inaugural award in 1991. Other winners include Bob Goldwater Sr., Arch Watkins, Bill Farkas Sr., Harry Cavanagh, Ed Updegraff, Lyle Anderson, JD Woodward, The Thunderbirds, Linda Vollstedt, Sister Lynn Winsor, John Riggie, Willie Low, and V.O. "Red" Allen.

More information: (480) 443-9002, or visit www.southwest.pga.com.

He said it "I knew Karsten Solheim, (the founder of PING) very well and despite the fact that we were competitors, we were great friends and having my name associated with his is a humbling experience and one that I will cherish for the rest of my life." - Al Birmingham

