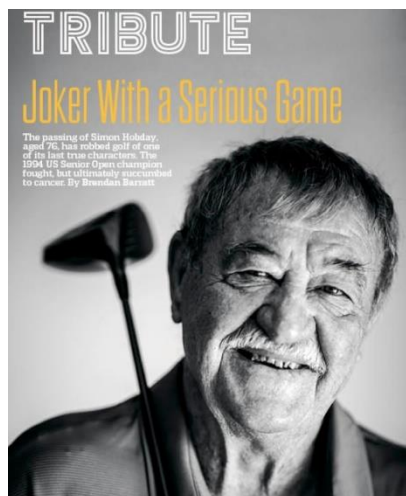


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The passing of Simon Hobday, aged 76, has robbed golf of one of its last true characters. The 1994 US Senior Open champion fought, but ultimately succumbed to cancer, writes **BRENDAN BARRATT**.

Mention the name Simon Hobday and you're likely to stir up some delightfully juicy stories about the often wild, generally scruffy and always charismatic South African golfer. While time may have exaggerated many of the anecdotes, at the heart of the stories lies one true assertion: that only the unforgettable Simon Hobday could have pulled off the stunts he did.

There was the time Hobday, a notoriously fickle putter, tried to con the golfing gods by donning a wide-brimmed hat with 'David Frost' written on top of it. After holing two 20-footers, he three-putted the 3rd hole.

'I knew it wouldn't take you long to find me,' he said, looking up to the sky, 'but at least I got a few in.'

Then there was the time he threatened extreme measures to quieten down a spectator. 'Excuse me,' he barked at the offending fan, 'the first prize in this tournament is £10 000. But for £300 I can put a hit out on your life. If you move again, you're a dead man.'

Hobday's antics, which often included remonstrating with the 'Old Pro above' about his bad luck, tended to be light-hearted and unique, but never malicious.

'I had to do those kinds of things to relieve the pressure,' he said. 'I was a bloody angry player and did more damage to myself than anything.'

Once, after a bad day on the greens, he red-carded his putter, tied it to the back of his car and drove to the nearest pub. There, he dumped the tattered remains into a beer glass. Another time he famously walked through a water hazard after his ball had miraculously bounced off the water and on to the green, leaving him a simple two-putt to win the tournament.

For all the humorous anecdotes, it is easy to overlook the fact Hobday was an exceptional golfer, albeit a largely underrated one. As one of the great ball strikers of his generation, he had a swing so simple and effective that famed golf instructor David Leadbetter claimed to use it as a model.

'I've played with Palmer, Nicklaus and Player and I've seen the best players in the world,' says renowned golf course architect Peter Matkovich. 'But there were two players who stood out as ball strikers – Hobday and Hogan. There was just a different sound when they hit the ball.'

Although he was a multiple winner on the European and Sunshine Tours, Hobday's greatest achievement was winning the 1994 US Senior Open at Pinehurst. Thrust into the spotlight by being in contention at a Major, he immediately endeared himself to American fans with his candour and self-deprecating sense of humour.

At one point, as he walked down the 18th, with the television cameras fixed on him, he grabbed his throat and stuck out his tongue.

'It wasn't like no one knew I was choking,' he said, 'there was no doubt about it.'

'I was under terrible pressure,' Hobday said in his post-round interview. 'My swing deserted me, and the worse I swung, the worse I putted. I must have gone through at least two packs of cigarettes. At one point, I know I had two going at the same time.'

The win got him into the following year's US Open at Shinnecock Hills, where he shot 77, 74 to finish at +11, one stroke ahead of Nicklaus. 'I missed the cut by five, but at least I beat Jack Nicklaus at the US Open. How many people can say that?' he joked.

Hobday was schooled at Bishops, in Cape Town, but grew up in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and represented the country at the 1966 Eisenhower Cup. He spent much of his career in South Africa, playing on the Sunshine Tour, and spent many years on the European Tour, where he won two tournaments. He quickly made a name for himself as a player and as a fun character – one who played hard on and off the golf course.

Playing in apartheid-era South Africa came at a cost, however, as he was deported from Zambia for breaking the government's moratorium on playing sport against South Africa. He was given 48 hours to exit the country and had to abandon his farm, escaping with only the possessions he could fit into his minibus. He drove to Zimbabwe and lived there for some time before relocating to South Africa.

Long after retiring from competitive golf, Hobday still loved to play the game and he continued to play it well. A few months before his death, on his 76th birthday, he knocked it round his home course of Umhlali in 65 strokes.

'Simon's contribution to the game was immense,' says close friend Dale Hayes. 'He showed us that as serious as professional golf is, it should always be fun. He was a champion on and off the course and the world of golf is a better place because of him.'

In 2014, when he was inducted into the Southern Africa Golf Hall of Fame at a glitzy awards banquet, he did so in pure Hobday style. Looking uncomfortable and typically unkempt in a suit, with his shirt hanging out on one side, 'Scruffy' stepped up to accept his award and announced, 'It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy!'

Although said in jest, it is hard to imagine there are too many people who would disagree.