

HISTORY

Venturi and Sinatra resilient in the desert

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Both the temperature and the humidity hit the 100 mark in June 1964 at the final round of the U.S. Open golf championship held at the Congressional Country Club. The extreme conditions tested the mettle of a man.

Ken Venturi had worked his way up through the qualifying tournaments to even be allowed to play that day. Kathy Chenault writing in 2011 summarized, "Venturi had been a top American golfer in the 1950s, but he had lost his competitive edge by 1964. When he began those final 36 holes at Congressional, he was trailing Tommy Jacobs by six strokes and Arnold Palmer by five. But by late in the final round, he'd taken the lead. He knew he could blow it and become just another hard-luck guy who fell short of his defining moment at the U.S. Open. Or, he could overcome the elements and display the kind of courage that would immortalize him at a tournament known for high-pressure show-downs. Nearly a half-century later, spectators who were there that Saturday still talk about Venturi's ordeal."

Chenault continued, "Venturi was an amazing sight that day, too, at least in the beginning. Down by six strokes, he scorched the first nine, making the turn at 30—five under par. The temperature kept climbing. Venturi ignored it. He birdied 12 to go to six under for the round. It got warmer. Venturi focused only on playing, forgetting to drink anything.... Then it caught up to him on the 17th hole."

Some accounts say the temperature reached 108. He finished the first round two shots out of the lead, and collapsed. Prostrate from heat exhaustion he was carried to the clubhouse where a physician advised him that playing on could prove fatal. After iced tea and salt tablets, with sopping wet ice-cold towels draped around his neck, Venturi persisted in going out for the afternoon round. Years later he would recount that "I went back to concentrating on what I had to do."

Venturi had been the most promising of amateurs growing up in San Francisco, despite an extreme stutter that caused his family to worry if he would ever speak. He retreated into the game and endless practice, winning the California State Amateur Championship in 1951 and 1956. In the interim he served his country. Stationed in Germany, he was given permission by the commanding general to accept the invitation to play as an amateur at the Masters. After leading in each of the first three rounds, he lost by a single stroke. To this day no amateur has ever won.

Venturi turned pro at the end of 1956 and again came close to winning the Masters in 1958 and 1960 but was bested by Arnold Palmer. But by the early 1960s he was struggling.

Chenault summarized, "The onetime brash phenom from San Francisco had fallen into a maelstrom of marital discord, financial difficulties and a long slump that had him questioning whether he belonged on the



Seventh annual Thunderbird Invitational Tournament. Ken Venturi and wife accepting the Ford Thunderbird Award from Bill Ford of Ford Motors in 1958. COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

tour anymore. He'd once performed golf wizardry with ease, boldly taking on legends of the sport such as Byron Nelson and Ben Hogan and holding his own even as an amateur. After he turned professional, his popularity soared. He socialized with Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra and other golf-loving celebrities. By 1960, other pros described him as the man to beat...then his game inexplicably fell apart." Chenault writes "he wasn't just losing, he had lost his way."

Golf writers called him a has-been. On that June day in 1964 his character and resiliency would prove them wrong. He was visibly weak, plodding through the course. Jacobs and Palmer wilted in the heat. He caught them on the ninth hole and won by four strokes in the end, securing his place in history.

But Venturi still had troubles. His marriage was disintegrating, he suffered muscle damage in a car accident that plagued him, and on a February day in Palm Springs in 1962 he was playing in the pro-amateur tournament he leaned over to pick his ball up out of the cup when something snapped in his spine creating unrelenting pain. He had carpal tunnel syndrome and the barbaric operation he underwent left him unable to grip a club.

Venturi and his friend Frank Sinatra understood

struggle. Sinatra, had once been idolized then ignored by thousands of teenage fans, had reinvented himself as a movie star. Sinatra released an album in 1964 that included the tune, "Here's to the Losers." The lyrics of the tune make a plea, "Here's the last toast of the evening, here's to those who still believe/ All the losers will be winners, all the givers shall receive/ Here's to trouble-free tomorrows, may your sorrows all be small/ Here's to the losers, Bless them all!"

Both Sinatra and Venturi would triumph in the desert creating a blessed life for themselves here.

Venturi moved permanently to Palm Springs with his two boys in 1971. Their house in Deep Well wasn't yet finished so they moved in with Sinatra in Rancho Mirage. Sinatra was godfather to Venturi's son Tim, who recalls the most joyous time. Singing songs around the piano played by Jimmy Van Heusen, with Jilly Rizzo and Frankie Vale; playing cards with Bing Crosby; or a dinner party with Dean Martin, Henry Kissinger, Liza Minnelli, Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford; driving around town in some pretty fabulous cars, with license plates like FAS 1, for Francis Albert Sinatra, FAS 2,3,4, etc.

Venturi and Sinatra were the best of friends. Sinatra trusted him completely. Tim illustrates his father's character and sense of propriety with a story about how Sinatra wanted to give his godson an Italian Ghia (not to be confused with a Karmann Ghia), for his 16th birthday. The elder Venturi forbade it (the car is now worth millions).

Tim says Venturi and Sinatra would be out on the town at Ruby's Dunes, Don the Beachcomber, Sorrentino's, Pal Joey's and Lord Fletcher's. Tim Venturi recalls once when he was about 14 years old, Sinatra and Jilly Rizzo showed up at the Deep Well house and said they were taking Venturi out for a bit. Three days later Venturi returned home having been whisked away to New York for some fun, perhaps at Sinatra's hangout Toots Shor's.

Reinventing himself, Venturi became the golf pro at Mission Hills and in 1972 he was invited to become a commentator on CBS television by producer Frank Chirkinian. Overcoming his stutter, Venturi delighted fans all over the globe explaining the drama unfolding during tournaments, and in the process created a 35-year-long career for himself. Venturi would go on to raise millions of dollars for a variety of good causes and is one of the most respected figures in golf.

Writing for Sports Illustrated after Venturi's win at the Open Alfred Wright noted, "...it was as if everyone suddenly wanted to drive an Edsel instead of a Cadillac...It was as if they took all the guys down on Skid Row and put them in charge of the big banks. It was a day for losers everywhere, because, for the best part of three years now, Ken Venturi has been a loser's loser." Well, here's to the losers, bless them all!

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com