

Caddying for Slammin' Sammy

Caddy Reflects on 1949 Western Open at Keller Golf Course

By Tim Cotroneo



Sam Snead and his caddy Lou Cotroneo at the 1949 Western Open.

Slammin' Sammy Snead was on top of his game when he arrived at St. Paul's Keller Golf Course to play in the Western Open. Snead had already won three tour victories that year including the Masters. The 37-year old Snead was a fan favorite, known for his smooth swing, booming drives, and straw hat.

That same summer, Lou Cotroneo was a 19-year old college student and caddy. In the week leading up to the Open, Cotroneo received a phone call from the caddy master at Keller. Ray Vennewitz, who would go on to become the head golf professional at North Oaks Golf Club, had some exciting news for Cotroneo.

Back then; the PGA's top golfers didn't have personal caddies as they do today. Local caddies would sell tickets to the tournaments in their hometown. The caddies who sold the most tickets would earn the right to handpick the golfer whose bag he would tote. "Ray had sold the most tickets, and he chose Jimmy Demaret. He graciously handed over some of his extra tickets to me and I came in second. I picked Sam Snead," Cotroneo said.

Snead would play like a man on fire that week. The Ashwood, VA, native turned the corner on the final round with a three stroke lead and nine holes to play. On the 12th hole, a Par 5, Snead's drive rested just below a fairway trap with about 220- yards left to the green. That's when Snead and Cotroneo had a difference of opinion.

"Sam asked me what I thought he should hit. I told him he'd been hitting his one iron great all day and that's what made sense to me. He felt he should hit his three wood. At the last minute, Sam went back to the one iron," Cotroneo recalled.

In the early days of the PGA, there was no crowd control. A huge gallery had gathered around Snead. Cotroneo was perched above the sidehill sand trap and had a good vantage point for Snead's shot. As soon as Snead hit his one iron, he was convinced his shot fell short. That's when the difference of opinion reached a boiling point.

"Sam threw his one iron at me and yelled something about me making the wrong choice. I had a bit of a temper back then. I picked up Sam's bag and tossed it at him. I told him, "Here is 13 more." Cotroneo said.

A couple of Cotroneo's boyhood pals began scurrying around and putting Snead's clubs back in the golf bag. "One of them told me to cool down because Sam was going to win the tournament," Cotroneo said.

When Snead and Cotroneo arrived at the 12th green, Slammin' Sammy's ball was just 30-feet from the pin for a potential eagle. Snead walked over to where Cotroneo was sitting on top of his golf bag and apologized. Snead's eagle putt just missed and he made a tap-in for a birdie.

Snead didn't miss many putts that week in 1949. The man who would go on to win 82 tour victories shot a tournament record 20-under par 268. That Western Open record would stand until 2001.

Snead's Western Open first-place winner's check was \$2,600. Cotroneo would take home \$150 as his caddy. Snead would win six tournaments that year and lead the tour in earnings with \$35,000. By comparison, in 2010, Matt Kuchar won one PGA tournament and led all golfers in earnings with over \$4.9 million.

On the 18th hole of the final round, Snead's drive landed in the middle of the fairway. In an era that was long before GPS devices or yardage markers, Snead again asked Cotroneo what he thought the yardage was to the pin. Cotroneo replied "about 160 yards to the pin." Snead raised an eyebrow and said, "I wouldn't want to buy real estate from you." The gallery following Snead all

laughed at the remark. This time Snead's caddy just smiled and hauled his clubs all the way to the winner's circle.

Tim Cotroneo is a freelance writer specializing in travel, business and golf.