

# THE Massachusetts Golfer

THE MEMBERS' MAGAZINE OF THE MASSACHUSETTS GOLF ASSOCIATION

SPRING 1999

\$2.95

# How The MGA Works For You





## The Golf Channel's popular host of *Golf Talk Live* and *Academy Live* switches chairs for an interview with *The Massachusetts Golfer*.

*Editor's note: Peter Kessler of The Golf Channel visited Boston in March to host a special session of his popular Golf Talk Live show, the feature attraction of the MGA's 1999 Spring Conference program, 'A Salute to the Ryder Cup'. Beforehand, he shared his thoughts on his job and golf.*

**The Massachusetts Golfer:** How did you get involved with The Golf Channel?

**Peter Kessler:** I was waiting my whole adult life to figure out what I was going to be when I grew up. I was reading *USA Today* in 1993 and it said that a golf channel was going to be formed. It didn't say who, when or how to get in touch with anyone. I was still at my job

on Wall Street and also working as the voice of HBO Sports. I called everyone I knew in the sports business.

Eventually, the fellow who got the job for hiring personnel at The Golf Channel, Michael Whelan, was someone I had played golf with about a dozen times. Not being able to keep my mouth shut about the history of the game, a little information about the game would seep out of me each time we played. So when Michael was hiring personnel for the network he talked to me first because he thought I knew a lot about golf. I just happened to be at exactly the right place at exactly the right time.

There's a great Charlton Heston

story about when he was a struggling actor and he waved at Cecil B. DeMille in a passing car. DeMille said to his secretary, "Who is that?", and the secretary told him it was Charlton Heston. DeMille said to his secretary, "I like the way he waves." The next thing Charlton Heston knew he was Ben Hur!

I believe it's a simple factor of luck for a lot of people getting into the right place where it makes them happy and where it calls on the few things that they do well. I am one of those people. This job calls on the three or four things I can do really well, and none of the 400 things that I am really bad at. Doing the show an hour is as long as I can probably fool you. Any longer and I'd be in trouble. That's when one of the 400 hundred things starts to come out.

When I was asked to join The Golf Channel, one guy had trouble with hiring me because I had not been on camera before. I had acted in college and

# Kessler Talk

L I V E

had done some community theatre and I was the voice of HBO Sports. And at the time I was working on Wall Street as a public speaker, so I was comfortable in front of an audience. But, nonetheless, I had never been on camera.

They used to call me all the time, sometimes in the middle of the night, testing me with golf history questions. I had been reading about golf three hours a day for 30 years so I hadn't missed much of the material — when you read for a long time it sticks in your head. They called at one in the morning one day and asked what Francis Ouimet shot in his final two practice rounds before the 1913 U.S. Open. I knew it was a pair of 88s. I got the job the next day.

**TMG:** So you've been at *The Golf Channel* from the beginning?

**Kessler:** I was here right from the start. They offered me the job in September, 1994. I stayed with the Wall Street firm until October 15 and was planning to give my two weeks notice and drive to The Golf Channel's studio in Orlando on November 1 and go on-air in January of 1995. I was sitting at my desk in my wool suit, hating to have to be where I was, and I got a phone call from the guy who I was going to be reporting to. He said, "I know you were going to give your notice today but I need you to leave right now. I need you to be in Latrobe, Pennsylvania tonight".

Latrobe had just gotten out of his mouth and I was down the hall giving my one-minute notice. I did apologize, but three hours later I was on my way to Arnold Palmer country. I spent the next day interviewing Palmer and the day

after that playing golf with him. I hit a ball through the windshield of his golf cart. It was my only good shot of the day. If he had been sitting in the cart, I'm sure he would be dead.

I was visiting Jack Nicklaus shortly after for an interview. He climbed up an avocado tree at midnight to get one for me to take home. I thought for certain he would wind up breaking his legs after jumping in the dark. I would then be known as the guy who killed Arnold and maimed Jack. But it all worked out fine and I got to keep my job.

**TMG:** Did you think *The Golf Channel* would be a success in the beginning?

**Kessler:** It never occurred to me that it wouldn't be successful because I was too naive to think otherwise. I knew I loved golf and I knew everyone I knew loved golf. They loved to play it, they loved to watch it, they loved the technology, they loved the history, the championships, the origins of the game, the development of the great players and the evolution of the game.

Unlike other sports — for example, football — when you're in your forties, you watch and that's all you're going to do. If you're in your forties playing golf you can do everything about golf — including reading a body of literature which is the greatest in sports. So, when we started, I thought this was fabulous and it never occurred to me that it wouldn't work.

Here we are in 1999 and we just had our first profitable quarter and we have no debt. I think we are going to get

there. We have established a foothold. Our viewership is almost 25 million combining the U.S., Canada and Japan. In one respect we are successful because we are still here.

**TMG:** Tell us about the first show you did for *The Golf Channel*.

**Kessler:** The first show we did was the first *Golf Talk Live* show on January 17, 1995 with Palmer. Nobody knew what I had prepared. Everyone was so busy trying to get on the air that no one checked with me to see if I had a clue about what I was doing. It was my first on-air appearance ever and here it was the opening of *The Golf Channel* with the most popular player in the history of the game. I sat around for a few weeks and thought about what I wanted to ask him and how to handle things.

I knew that this was the kind of work I should be doing. I was comfortable doing it and not worried about the camera at all. I figured out right away that one of the secrets to interviewing is to never say the word "I". Just never say I and you will probably not get in trouble. It's not about you, it's always about your guest. I have tried to follow this as recently as last night's show, probably the 260th *Golf Talk Live* that I hosted.



**TMG:** Who are some interesting personalities you've interviewed?

**Kessler:** As far as interviews, Gene Sarazen was a favorite. It was as though he let me be his grandson for an hour. He was brilliant, wonderful, warm. He

is one of the few men I stood next to and felt tall for once in my life. He is so tiny you think you can pick him up in your arms. That was a magical night for me and a great night for our audience.

We did that show in October, 1996 when Sarazen was 94 years old. What surprised me was the depth and clarity of his memory. We talked about that day in 1913 when Ouimet won the U.S. Open. Gene was 11 years old caddying at Apawamis in Rye, New York. The other caddy with him was Ed Sullivan who was also 11 years old. He remembered very clearly the cuff links on the sports writer he was caddying for that day; and the color of his shirt, the color of the sky and the mood of the day when Ouimet won. He said, "If Francis Ouimet can do that, then I can too".

Johnny Miller was also fascinating. He talked about the death of his brother, who died in a swimming accident when they were both very young. Most people don't know that. I had been aware of it, but never heard him talk about it. He wept freely. Two minutes later, when asked a question about transferring weight, he gave a brilliant answer — you try to keep the club as low as you can after you have made contact as though you were going to hit five balls in a row so the club stays low to the ground after the strike and the weight transfer becomes automatic. I'm sitting in the chair, kind of moving my hands, thinking yeah, I kind of feel that and everybody's going out the next day to try that.

be a great golfer, don't host *Academy Live*. I have no clue whatsoever on any part of the game other than putting. All of the teachers have been really nice, but the problem comes because each week there is a new teacher and each week a new methodology and sometimes if you take one piece of a methodology and put it together with another you have a conflict. You know I think good players play with rhythm and they play by feel and one of the risks of instruction is that we get information overload and become too critical and try to think our way through the golf swing.

So my game is like a manic-depressive; I can shoot 75 one day and 95 the next without any intervening event to suggest that I should shoot 20 strokes higher, so I'm thoroughly confused. Sometimes when we are playing good, we don't want to go to sleep at night because we are afraid when we wake up in the morning, the secret will be gone and we will have lost the feel.

*Lights, camera . . . cuff Nicklaus clips a restrained Kessler's necktie.*



**Kessler:** I'm a major championship guy. I love The Masters which heralds the beginning of spring, the snow and cold going away. We begin life anew, we begin golf anew. The thing about The Masters to me is that it is always played on the same golf course, and even if you have never been there, you know everything about it equal to or better than your own home course. You know exactly how the greens will break, you know exactly where not to hit the golf ball, you know if a guy hooks it on the 10th exactly what the problems are going to be. You know the golf course so intimately, and that's one of its charms.

And I love the U.S. Open. The USGA gave us this event that really put golf in America on the map in 1913, when Francis Ouimet won the Open against Harry Vardon and Ted Ray in a playoff. That signaled the transition of the game into American hands. That was the time that golf became dominated by players of this country, and that remained true right through until the very early 1980s when golf went from a domestic game back to an international one.

We have seen golf come full cycle, but there is no question that the watershed event in this country took place at The County Club in Brookline in 1913 when Francis Ouimet, with an incredible playoff round of 72, won the U.S. Open.

**TMG:** A question of personal taste — what are some of your favorite courses to play?

**"My game is like a manic-depressive; I can shoot 75 one day and 95 the next — so I'm thoroughly confused."**

Nicklaus and Gary Player have been fun. Palmer, who has done five interviews has been fun — he's warm, he's been great to me both as a friend and as a boss as chairman of The Golf Channel.

**TMG:** What is one of the best tips you picked up doing *Academy Live*?

**Kessler:** Oh my god. *Academy Live* is the worst thing for my game. If you want to

If you watch the show, be selective about the information that you try and be ruthless about editing out that which seems to be inconsistent for your golf swing. The rhythm and the feel stuff applies to everybody, but it's the mechanics that can get you in trouble.

**TMG:** What events have you found most interesting to cover in the last four years?

**Kessler:** Let's start right here in Massachusetts with the Open Course at The Country Club, which I was ill-equipped to play. It is extremely difficult, yet I was struck by how fair it was.

Another club in your area that I played a number of times is Salem Country Club, which is also my favorite logo on a golf shirt — the witch.

One of the great things about the

Northeast, in addition to having the best golf in the whole world, is the diversity of golf and diversity of great architects who built the courses that you guys get to play. That's where all the great architects made their mark. It's where the game in this country really began.

Within 500 miles of where you are

regularly played by Tour players in competition. A lot of them were not on Tour when the U.S. Open was held there in 1988. I'm hoping that the American players really do take time to play the golf course not only for the obvious reason of getting to know it, but because it is such a great golf course.

that is. The Belfry — we don't know what that is. But here on home soil at one of our cathedrals of golf, the competition should be outstanding.

Europe has the class of '57 babies that are 42 years old this year. For 20 years it's been essentially the same team of Faldo, Ballesteros, Langer, and Woos-

**"Each year Northeast golf gets unwrapped like a Christmas gift; it just lasts six or eight months instead of a few hours."**

now is everything in golf that would satisfy and you never have to leave that area. Look at all the great courses in your part of the country from Pine Valley, to Shinnecock Hills, to Winged Foot and to The Country Club.

One of the great things is having the changing of seasons and whetting the appetite which we don't get in the south. You can play 12 months a year in Orlando, and it's fabulous, but there is something about the newness of the year. You find your game and you flex your muscles. So each year Northeast golf really gets unwrapped like a Christmas gift; it just lasts six or eight months instead of a few hours. There is something magical about the changing of the seasons which I think makes people in the Northeast appreciate the cyclical nature of the game and the cyclical nature of life much more.

**TMG:** Give us your thoughts on the upcoming Ryder Cup Matches.

**Kessler:** It continues to grow exponentially in excitement. You get such a unique meld of developments this time around. First of all it's here and not on some golf course no one heard of in Spain and not at some course it shouldn't be on in England. This is being held at one of the greatest golf courses in the history of the game and the golf course should favor the best players regardless of where they come from.

The United States doesn't have an advantage going in and it's not a course



Kessler 'golf talks' the Ryder Cup with (from his left): John Cornish of The Country Club; Will Mann of The PGA of America; golf architect Rees Jones; and The Country Club's course superintendent Bill Spence.

We sometimes forget that the reason great players are great players is because they fell in love with the game as kids, and one of the things you do is fall in love with great golf courses and this is one of the best in the world. The players should play The Country Club for the sheer joy of knowing it is so great, and to get their game ready and get a little knowledge as they go into the Ryder Cup.

Because it is being held in this country at this historic site, because the game of golf came into this country here so many years ago, because you've got a beloved captain who is a lot tougher than people give him credit for — a great golf historian who, by the way, can also tell you the two rounds Ouimet shot before the Open began in 1913. I think the excitement is going to be absolutely fever-pitched.

Valderrama? We don't know what

nam — all of these guys were born in 1957 and now Seve is almost as bad as I am, and that's bad. Other than a couple of guys on the European team we are going to see that same nucleus. Those players that are being replaced will be replaced by terrific young players. The

American team has the chance to be as strong as we have ever had.

**TMG:** Finally, what things do you most appreciate about the game of golf?

**Kessler:** One of the things we have not touched on is, I love to go to the golf course apart from playing the game as much as I like to go to play the game. By that I mean the golf course is a beautiful place to be whether you are playing golf or not. I remember when I fell in love with golf. I was a little boy living in New Jersey and my parents belonged to a local club where we would go for these barbecue dinners on holidays like Labor Day, Memorial Day and the Fourth of July. That kind of stuff is big in the Northeast in importance, more so than in the South. I would sneak away from the dinner table and grab a wedge, a 5-wood and putter and play the first hole to the green and then back to the tee until it was too dark to see or my parents came to get me. If you play badly it can be aggravating. But if you stop for a second and remember where you are and how lucky you are to be there, even shooting a zillion you can still have a great time. ■