

BILL DWYRE

At 80, Palmer looks trim and tan and still flies his own plane. During a stop at Rolling Hills Country Club, he answers some questions, including how an ice tea-lemonade blend came to bear his name.

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If you play golf, watch it on TV, think you might take it up someday, or have hit a ball under a windmill and through a clown's mouth, there was no better place to be on a sparkling clear Saturday morning in Southern California.

The King was in town. The golfer who never had a gallery, always an Army, was in the house.

Arnold Palmer got out of a car, hitched up his pants and walked into the courtyard at the Rolling Hills Country Club like somebody about to shop for a new putter. The man who made the game the multi-billion-dollar sport it is today never acts like it. People surround him, keeping an arm's length as one would for royalty. And it is Palmer, always a little embarrassed by this sort of adulation, who engages them first.

"How y'all doing," he says. "You lucky people in Southern California, just another great day for golf. Hope you're all gonna play."

He was actually on a sales call, making the final push to get the contract for Rolling Hills' proposed course redesign. Everybody on hand, including Palmer, talked as if only a few I's needed dotting and T's needed crossing.

"We're going to need to move a lot of earth," he told the gathered officials and club members. "Time to get started."

Palmer is never really out of the news, but he has been more prominent lately.

First, there was the matter of his 80th birthday Sept. 10.

Yes, folks, the man who made his famous charges down the fairways of the Masters in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as we watched on our little black and white tubes -- and with those charges took golf out of the country clubs and into the mainstream -- is 80% of the way toward a triple-figure life.

The good news is, with Palmer, 80 is the new 55. He never slows down, looks trim and tan, and still flies his own airplane, a Citation X, from coast to coast on a moment's notice.

"Flying is one of my great passions," he says. "I've been doing it since 1955 and I have 19,000 hours in the cockpit."

It was shortly after 11 a.m. and Palmer had flown in that morning from his home in Latrobe, Pa., taking off from the Arnold Palmer Regional Airport.

The second piece of news was that, last week, Palmer was selected a recipient of the Congressional Gold Medal, which honors distinguished achievements and has been given out since the American Revolution. He went to the White House, met President Obama, and said, "I got choked up."

Given this access, the self-imposed mandate was to use it to ask Palmer a few offbeat questions.

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How did the combination of iced tea and lemonade become known as an Arnold Palmer?

That started probably 35 years ago, when I came in from a round of golf at my Latrobe Country Club. I drank a lot of iced tea and I asked my wife if she'd fix me one. Then I decided I wanted it a little sweeter and she said she'd pour some lemonade into it.

I liked it, and I started to order it in restaurants. I was in Palm Springs a while after that and asked the waitress for half iced tea and half lemonade. She brought it and then I heard a lady at the table next to us tell the waitress she wanted one of those Palmers. A little later, I was back in Palm Springs, at a different place, and ordered iced tea and lemonade. The bartender says: "Oh, you want an Arnold Palmer?"

I went back home, told my business people, and we licensed it.

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At age 80, how far do you hit your driver now?

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I'll answer with a Gary Player line. I hit it so far that I can hear it land.

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Would you be satisfied with consistent 240-yard drives?

Tickled.

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How many presidents have you known personally and how many have you played golf with?

All of them since Ike [Dwight Eisenhower], except Jimmy Carter and Lyndon Johnson. And now I've met President Obama, and we talked about how he wants to play more golf.

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Did you ever choke in a tournament?

If you are asking if I ever missed a four-foot putt that was important, yes. But I think choke is an unfair word.

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Have you ever had a close call, flying your airplane?

No, but there are times when things got your attention more than others. I was a lot more nervous about it when I first started flying.

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Were those the days when you used to fly low and buzz your buddies on the way in to a tournament?

Ah, yes. I did that.

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Who was your best friend on the tour, the one you talked to the most, confided in the most?

Dow Finsterwald. We traveled together. I still see him all the time and talk to him. He lives part of the year at the same place I do, Bay Hill in Florida.

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If you had a chance to go back for one week, be young again, and win any event, what would it be -- another Masters, a U.S. Open that slipped away, maybe one of your early national amateur events?

The American PGA. I never won that. That would give me all four, complete the sweep.

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What's the greatest shot you ever hit?

Hmmm. Don't think I have a greatest shot. There were lots of ones that gave me pleasure over the years. I've got 19 holes in one and I remember that first one. I was just a kid, Latrobe Country Club, second hole.

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What was your second-best sport?

Did you miss my performance the other day at PNC Park [in Pittsburgh]? They let me throw the first pitch. It was 80 miles an hour, a fastball, right down the middle. Then they took me out.

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Was the 12 you took at Rancho Park years ago the worst score you ever had on a single hole in a tournament? (Note: This was the hole that, legend has it, created the exchange between Palmer, who was hacking away in the woods, and Times sports columnist Jim Murray, who was standing nearby. Palmer saw Murray, whom he knew revered Ben Hogan, and asked, somewhat sarcastically, what Murray thought Hogan might do in this situation. Murray allegedly replied, "Hogan wouldn't be in this situation.").

I think that hole is the worst-ever recorded on the books for me. I remember the reporters asking me afterward about how I took the 12. I told them I missed a 20-footer for 11.

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Soon, it was time to go. The 80-year-old flyboy was skipping lunch and was off to more meetings, these in Pebble Beach, Calif., where he owns part of the world's most famous golf properties.

"I might have time to play a little," he said.

He flashed a smile and was gone.

In the clubhouse, a middle-aged woman gazed longingly at the visor with the scribbled name. It was just after 1 p.m. The King had come and gone, but would not soon be forgotten.

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