

## **Hall-of-Famer Johnny Bulla made most of chances**

*By JAY ALLRED*

The chance for an eleven-year-old to make 25 cents carrying a bag of golf clubs for nine holes doesn't sound like much today. But for Johnny Bulla in 1925, it was the first of many opportunities that he turned into a Hall-of-Fame career.

From those humble beginnings in Burlington, Bulla went on to set a standard of great golf that was finally recognized earlier this year with his induction into the Carolinas Golf Hall of Fame.

Bulla's father, a Quaker minister, moved the family from Asheboro to Burlington as young Johnny was starting grade school. After a few years kicking around "Bigger Better Burlington," Bulla found out you could make some good money as a caddie at Burlington Country Club. The old country club is no longer around but stood near what is now Williams High School. Bulla's father wasn't very fond of his son being a caddie. At the first sign of spring, Bulla would kick off his shoes and walk barefoot down the fairways looping for the members. He liked the money but he didn't have any interest in playing.

"I didn't start playing until I found out they had a caddie tournament and all the caddies had to play. I finished last and was embarrassed," laughed Bulla. "I worked my fanny off after until I got better." Bulla learned a lot about life from his parents and from those early years as a caddie. He was Burlington Industries founder Spencer Love's favorite caddie.

The best lesson he ever learned in life was when Staley Cook, owner of the newspaper in Burlington, offered him a dollar if Staley beat this doctor he always lost to.

"Staley was a good player but had a terrible slice off the tee," Bulla recounted. "I would race ahead and pick up the ball with my toes and place it on top of the bermudagrass." Cook won the match and Bulla collected the dollar.

Two weeks later the doctor invited Bulla to caddie for him in Pinehurst. It would be Bulla's first trip to Pinehurst, but Bulla never saw the course. When they arrived the doctor gave him 50 cents and told him to catch the bus back home. "He told me, 'I saw you cheating for Staley picking the ball up with your toes and teeing it up.' That stayed with me all of my life. I never cheated anyone again."

At age 18, Bulla hitchhiked to Pinehurst to play in his first professional event. His curiosity led him to hitchhike to Georgia to see the course Bobby Jones was building. Along the way he slept in the back seats of cars. In 1933 he hitchhiked to Chicago to watch the U.S. Open; he could not have imagined he would play in the same tournament three years later. That same curiosity led him to frequently visit Pinehurst and watch Donald Ross create his magic on the No. 2 course.

Bulla joined what is now the PGA Tour in 1935 and played into the 1960s. At the 1935 Louisville Open, Bulla became friends with Sam Snead; and, for the next few years, they traveled together. Snead noted, "Traveling with Johnny in those days probably helped me handle the successes and the failures. I always remember what he said about life. It's like a three-legged stool with equal parts spiritual, mental and physical. It can't stand up without solid foundation in each part of your life."

Bulla was a hard worker on tour; the number of practice balls he hit rivaled Ben Hogan's. Bulla was among the best long-game players of his day. "I was one of the top four or five longest drivers on tour and I was very accurate. Sam used to say I was the best one-iron player of our time." But, he admits, "I was probably the worst putter on tour. The shorter the shot, the worse I got."

Bulla was a naturally left-handed but was told to do everything right-handed growing up. Later in his forties he tried playing left-handed and finished second in the National Lefties Tournament.

His greatest moment might have been the 1939 British Open at St. Andrews. In miserable conditions, he drove flawlessly and never missed a fairway. The driver is on display in the Royal & Ancient Golf Club Museum, but his name is missing from the claret jug. He finished early that day and was the leader in the clubhouse. He held the lead until Dick Burton, playing in the final group, caught him and won with a birdie on the last hole.

All was not lost; Bulla's wife bore him a son that day named Robert "Bob" Jones Bulla named after his Georgian friend.

The British Open was suspended until after the war. When it resumed Bulla picked up where he left off and finished second to Sam Snead in 1946. He tied for second in the 1949 Masters Tournament. He came close to winning all four events now considered the Grand Slam. In 1939, he led the U.S. Open after 54 holes but finished sixth; and he gained the round of eight in the 1948 PGA Championship.

Another great accomplishment was his string of cuts made in the U.S. Open from 1936 to 1954. He played in 18 U.S. Opens, 15 Masters and 9 British Opens. Bulla played in 40 consecutive Los Angeles Opens, the site of his lone tour triumph in the 1941.

Bulla endorsed Walgreen's Drug Store's low-priced "Po-Do" golf ball. This cost him invitations to many tour events, and he was banned from the PGA Championship and the Ryder Cup from 1936 to 1946.

Walgreen's offered Bulla a plane to fly to the tournaments back in the 1930s. He was the first tour player to fly his own plane to tournaments. During World War II he moved to Greensboro and flew the Atlanta-to-Chicago route for Eastern Airlines. "I played a lot of golf with Bobby Jones during the war. We normally played several times a week at East Lake," commented Bulla.

After the war he purchased a C-47 and converted it to a DC-3; Hogan was his co-pilot. He would charge players a small fare to ferry them to the next tournament.

In 1946, Sears and Roebuck signed him to a 10-year contract to represent them and create a line of Johnny Bulla clubs and balls. During this time Sears became the leading golf retailer in the nation.

It was also at this same time he moved his family to Arizona and founded Arizona Airways with Bob Goldwater. Bulla reflected, "We were a little before our time in founding the airline. America West and Southwest Airlines are really doing well here now."

In Arizona, he helped design a half dozen courses. He won 42 sectional titles, including 10 PGA Chapter Opens and four Arizona Section Opens.

Today, at 86, he walks three miles a day and can be found most every day at Ocotillo Country Club in Chandler, Arizona.

In January of this year the Carolinas Golf Reporters Association inducted him into the Carolinas Golf Hall of Fame. A fitting tribute to a man that took every opportunity the American dream had to offer.

*[-http://www.triadgolf.com/mar-apr2001/majorplayers\\_bulla.htm](http://www.triadgolf.com/mar-apr2001/majorplayers_bulla.htm)*