

Goodwin: Mickey Mantle was a long hitter on the links, too

- Clair Goodwin
The Joplin Globe Dec 15, 2012

A group of guys were sitting around last summer talking about long hitters that we had seen. The names that came up most often were Boyd Downey, Anthony Fink, Kevin Roller and Carthage's Greg Kyte, a multi-time national senior long-drive champion.

I had to agree that those guys were among the longest hitters that I have ever seen around here.

But I felt compelled to offer Mickey Mantle in that category. Actually, all things being equal, I would have to give the edge to Mantle.

On several occasions over the years, I saw No. 7 drive the first green at Loma Linda Country Club (now Eagle Creek). I am certain that Anthony and Boyd have done it, too.

What made Mickey's feat so special, at least for me, was that those big drives were accomplished back in the days of wooden-headed drivers and heavy steel shafts. Furthermore Mick's knees were so damaged by disease and injury that he had to tape both his legs tightly from his ankles to his thighs just to play golf.

Mantle was about 5-foot-10 and weighed less than 200 pounds. His stance was very, very wide. His lower body was so stiff that he looked as if he couldn't hit the ball 150 yards. But his natural athleticism, his powerful shoulders and muscled arms made up what he lacked in lower body strength.

His drives generally soared high and far, seemingly never coming down. At other times, the ball would start rising about 100 yards out and continue flying long past the point that most mortal drivers fell to the earth.

If Mickey made solid contact and the ball went straight, he would have to fix a ball mark on the green. Depending on the wind and placement of the pin, that might be on front of the green, on the slope in the middle or on the flat area at the back.

I admit that I was in awe of Mantle's power. But he also was a very good player, carrying a single-digit handicap during his last decade or so. He could shoot in the 60s if his putter was working well or, if he started spraying the ball, he could shoot 100. Most of the time, he was a good partner on any team bet.

Mantle was a complex man. He could laugh and joke around with spectators or with golfers. He also could become sullen or let loose a stream of epithets that would cause a drunken sailor to blush. Or he might spot a nearby youngster, walk over to pat his head and give him an autographed golf ball or golf glove.

Such unpredictability made Mickey an easy target for criticism. And quite a bit of it was deserved. Mantle didn't always pay attention to the make-up of his galleries or, for that matter, filter his remarks

for appropriateness. I don't think that he meant to offend anyone, but he got caught up in having a good time.

Whether you liked Mickey or not, it was clear to those playing in his group as well as those watching, Mantle loved golf.

In a 1983 interview on the eve of the second Mickey Mantle Celebrity Classic at Loma Linda Country Club (now Eagle Creek Golf Club), The Mick noted that golf provided him the opportunity to keep his competitive juices flowing after he retired from the New York Yankees and Major League Baseball.

"I had been in competition most of my life and I missed it," he told me, sitting at a lunchroom table surrounded by chattering and laughing buddies who were trying to figure out who won and lost money in the many and varied games. A few fans interrupted to ask Mantle for an autograph, which, as I recall, he graciously gave them with one of those kid-next-door, "aw shucks" smiles.

"I couldn't play tennis or racquetball," he said. "I can't run. My knees wouldn't take it. Golf was the only sport I could still excel in ... the only way I could exercise."

Marshall Smith, golf guru from Miami, Okla., was Mickey's first and only tutor and actually got him his first set of clubs from the Wilson Golf Co. Smith considers Mantle the longest hitter that he ever saw and once said that if Mickey had concentrated on golf he would have been recognized as the biggest hitter the game ever had.

I used the comment in a column.

On the first tee the next weekend, Mantle jumped me. I thought he was angry when he loudly asked me, "Where in the &@#+% &%\$#@ did you get that 'longest driver ever' stuff?"

"From Marshall," I replied, preparing to duck a right hook or left jab.

"Oh, well, then it must be true," he said, laughing and walking away.

Over the years, Mantle and Smith teamed up in money games all over the country. Their biggest payday on the course involved Paul Richards, then manager of the Baltimore Orioles, and his low-handicap buddy. Richards was solid, but he wasn't as good as Mickey, especially on par fives that Mantle easily reached in two shots.

Here is one of my favorite Mantle stories, which he confirmed. When Mickey first joined the Yankees, Yogi Berra, Allie Reynolds, Eddie Lopat and some other veterans had a regular golf group. They refused to let Mickey play because he was so inconsistent and bad. So Mantle went to his pal Smith and together they built a game that allowed him to compete against his more advanced teammates.

What really got The Mick's attention, though, was losing so much money every weekend to his pals at Preston Trails Golf Club in Dallas, Texas. So he returned to Smith and they took his game up a couple of notches.

"I learned to keep the ball in play and worked on my short game," he said. "I got my handicap down to a four." He was still playing to about an eight or nine the summer before his death in 1995.

It is surprising the most productive switch-hitter in baseball history couldn't hit a golf ball from the left side.

"You see those guys punching the ball from behind a tree left-handed," he said. "Well, I can't even do that. People think I'm ambidextrous. I could hit a baseball from the left side only because my dad began teaching me at age 4. I can't do anything else left-handed."

I miss The Mick. He used to call me when he came to town and we'd visit, talking about golf, baseball and just about anything that piqued Mickey's interest. He could be rude and crude at times as well as gracious and generous on other occasions. But the Mickey Mantle I remember was an honest, funny guy who would talk and laugh about golfing into the wee hours of the morning.