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The Master's

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Do you get the feeling when you watch the Master's on CBS that you are involved in a religious experience?

The shots of nature in its full spring glory, the whispered tones of all the commentators, the endless references to tradition, the interviews conducted in a manner befitting a minor deity, all conspire to give this impression. The greens are manicured, the flowers are manipulated to bloom at just the right moment, the water hazards are tinted with artificial coloring, and the crowds are tightly controlled.

It is one of the few sporting events left in the world that demands television conform to its schedule and its protocols, rather than the other way around. That alone is charming, although not as charming as one might think.

Augusta National is the creation of golfing legend Bobby Jones, the only one to win the British Amateur and Open Championships and the U.S. Amateur and Open Championships in the same year. The year was 1930 when Jones was twenty-eight years old, and he followed his feat by announcing his retirement. At the time he was one of the best known and most admired sports figures in the world, challenging even the fame of Babe Ruth.

After retirement he let it be known that he was looking for land to build a course. His wife's family had connections in the Augusta area, and New York financier and acquaintance Clifford Roberts had gotten wind of 365 acres of rolling land west of Augusta. Jones and Roberts acquired the land, then brought in Dr. Alister Mackenzie, a Scot who designed golf courses rather than practice medicine, and together they constructed a course that has become a legend.

"Amen Corner" (the eleventh through the thirteenth holes) has been deconstructing the best golfers in the world for over a half-century. It is "Amen Corner" which has led to the saying that the Master's is always decided on the back nine late on Sunday afternoon.

Jones had intended the course be a private place for himself and friends where once each spring he would invite the select, for four rounds of golf. But in a short time the course was so famous that the best golfers in world were heading to Augusta

each April. Dubbed the Master's by a reporter, it soon was marked as the first of the four major tournaments of the year.

Along the way Clifford Roberts acquired a reputation as a local dictator controlling crowds, sending out armies of men to remove the litter before it hit the ground, and demanding that nature, with an occasional nudge from man, do its job by providing the natural beauty of middle Georgia in spring. Roberts also controlled the way in which the tournament was presented to the world. Reporters were approved and disapproved by Roberts who banned Jack Whitaker for calling the crowd a mob, and banned anyone who was bold enough to criticize anything or anyone associated with the Master's.

And of course it was Roberts who kept African American golfers off the course and off the membership rolls long after segregation had ended most everywhere else in America. Lee Elder was the first African American to play in the Master's in 1974, but the continuing paucity of African American members at Augusta was only underlined this year by the fuss made over Tiger Woods.

But in the end it is still the Master's and it is still one of the most dramatic sports events of the year. This past weekend it lived up to all the hype, when Ben Crenshaw won the tournament only a week after the death of his mentor, and golf guru, Harvey Penick who died at age ninety in Austin Texas. Only a week earlier Penick had given Crenshaw a putting lesson, even though Penick was bedridden and barely able to speak.

Just three years ago the name Harvey Penick was not much noticed outside of the insiders' world of golf. For sixty years Penick as the club pro in Austin, golf coach at the University of Texas, and guru to the pros had been keeping notes in his little red book. When it was finally published as "Harvey Penick's Little Red Book: Lessons and Teachings From a Lifetime in Golf" it sold 1.3 million copies, and two more books have since been published.

After serving as a pallbearer on Wednesday, Ben Crenshaw, a pupil of Penick's since he was six, flew back Augusta where he put together four days of golf worthy of his mentor and friend. It ended late Sunday afternoon when Crenshaw put the final putt in the hole on 18, and collapsed in tears into the arms of his caddy.

Clifford Roberts didn't have to arrange any of this. It was a moment worthy of the great golfing gentleman Bobby Jones, and a tribute to the great teacher Harvey Penick.

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