

World Golf Hall of Famer BERNHARD LANGER



A New Legacy

THROUGH MY FIRST TEN YEARS of professional golf, I stayed close to home in Germany, playing the European Tour, building a young career. In the early 1980s I won in Germany, Italy, England, France, Spain, Ireland, The Netherlands, and even in Colombia. Get me to a golf course, anywhere in the world, and I'd do my best to figure out how to win.

But the eyes of nearly every golfer are eventually drawn to the United States. It is in America that three of our major championships are played, it is where the most money is offered week in and week out, and you generally find the best players making their way to compete here.

When I made my way to Augusta in 1985, it was my third trip to the fabled course. I had missed the cut in 1982, then finished tied for 31st in 1984. Likely, few were looking for me to make much of a run at the green jacket that spring, though by then I had twice been runner-up at the British Open Championship.

At 2-over par after 36 holes, I was certainly on no one's radar screen. Six shots off the lead, I was tied for 25th.

But on Saturday, I came back with a strong 68, and pulled within two of the leader, Raymond Floyd. Raymond had won the tournament in 1976, so he knew what it would take on Sunday to get the job done. So did my fellow European Seve Ballesteros, who already had two green jackets and was in contention again, tied with me. Curtis Strange, who had rebounded from an opening round 80 by firing 65 on Friday, was now at 213, alone in second, a shot ahead of me and Seve.

Sunday, however, was mine. I put together another 68, with birdies on four of the last seven holes—a charge often mounted on Augusta's back nine, which sets itself up for such feats, with holes that invite equally triumph or disaster. My putter was a friend that afternoon, and I sealed the lead with a 14-foot birdie at seventeen, allowing me to make bogey at the last without worry, for I was headed to the Butler Cabin.

If you have forgotten your Augusta National landmarks, the Butler Cabin is where the tournament winner meets the club chairman to thank the club and the patrons, put on the green jacket, and speak of his win. It was in that speaking that I gave myself away.

IN MY CHILDHOOD, before I would leave school at the age of 14 to pursue life as a professional golfer, I had been raised in a home committed to church life. For me, in Germany, that was the traditional Roman Catholic church, with its many rituals and practices.

I would go to church every day before school, learning the catechism and serving as an altar boy. I went to confession and prayed the rosary and all those things that Catholics are taught to do when they are young. More than that, I was taught that if I would simply do more good things and avoid bad things, then I had an excellent chance of mov-

The eyes of nearly every golfer are eventually drawn to the United States. It is in America that three of our major championships are played...and you generally find the best players making their way to compete here.

ing through purgatory and into heaven. But no one ever really encouraged me to explore the Bible for myself, and I had no concept of a relationship with the Lord who is revealed in the Bible, Jesus Christ.

So late that April Sunday afternoon in the Butler Cabin, I did not guard my words very closely and I used some loose vernacular in referring to Jesus. Recounting my thoughts during the round, I said something like this to the chairman and the television audience: "I said to myself, 'Jesus Christ, I can't believe I'm four shots behind Curtis Strange after nine holes.'" It was an irreverent way to use Jesus' name—something I would never do now—but that is what I said.

And people were listening.

Among those watching that interview were Tour regular Scott Simpson, who would win the U.S. Open two years later, and Tour chaplain Larry Moody. When they heard me use Jesus' name in a flippant manner, they recognized that I had no sense of who Jesus really was. Right then, they prayed for me, that I would come to know Jesus.

But I did have a sense of something very important. I had a sense that there was an emptiness inside of me. And although I had just won my first major, that emptiness lingered. *What is this? I wondered. It's weird. You've fulfilled all the dreams you've ever had. You've got a good looking young wife, you have houses, cars, money in the bank. You're successful, you're healthy—why this emptiness? Why is this feeling inside of me? I*

couldn't pinpoint it.

From Augusta, we moved to Hilton Head Island for the Heritage Classic. I played a practice round there with Bobby Clampett, and when we were finishing up, he issued an invitation. "Why don't you join us for Bible study tomorrow?"

"What's that?" I asked him, never having heard of such a thing, even at 28 years old, and even with

When we were finishing up, Bobby issued an invitation. "Why don't you join us for Bible study tomorrow?" "What's that?" I asked him, never having heard of such a thing, even with my religious background.

all my religious background.

"We just read a part of the Bible and discuss it and see how it applies to our lives nowadays," Bobby explained.

It was a new idea, but not a threatening one. *Why not?* I thought. *I've heard lots of stories out of the Bible, I've heard lots of sermons.*

So I went home and talked with Vikki, my wife, about it and we decided to go.

The next night, I walked into the Bible study. And among the many there were Scott Simpson and Larry Moody, the two men who had prayed for me just a few days before. They must have been very surprised to see me—or perhaps not surprised at all!

Larry spoke that night, and he used the text from the third chapter of John in the New Testament. The account there is of Jesus speaking with a Jewish leader named Nicodemus. Jesus told Nicodemus that what he needed in his life was to be born again.

"*Born again*"? I thought. *Nobody has ever taught me about being "born again."* This was not something I had ever heard in the Catholic church where I had grown up. So I instantly concluded that either Larry was using a different Bible than the one I had read in the Catholic church, or something weird was going on.

After he was done, I walked up to him and asked, "What does this mean exactly, 'born again'?" Actu-

ally, Nicodemus had asked a very similar question.

Larry and some others explained that Jesus was speaking of a spiritual birth. And then they went on to tell me something very different from what I had been taught. They showed me that the Bible taught that we are not saved because we are able to do a bunch of good things and avoid doing a bunch of bad things. Nobody is good enough to do that! Instead, we are saved through Jesus, by His grace, because of His death and resurrection. There really is no such thing as saving ourselves.

I told them, "Wow, this is revealing, this is new."

So Larry showed it to me again in his Bible, as I didn't bring one of my own.

He said, "Here, in black and white." And he pointed to those first few verses in John 3. "This is the Bible, God's word."

I had no trouble with that. I believed the Bible to be God's word. So I asked Larry why this wasn't taught in the church I had grown up in.

He said, "Well, there are slight differences or big differences between churches. But you don't have to believe me just because I said so. Check it out for yourself."

That was important, because not too many people say that.

So I followed his instruction. I got my own Bible and I started reading. And within a matter of months, I was basically convinced that what was missing in my life was a one-on-one relationship with Jesus. For a long time I had been carrying around a burden of not being good enough. I felt I was a pretty good person, but there was no guarantee. But in the Bible I found that those who truly believed in their heart that Jesus was their Lord could say so with their lips, and they would be saved.

I know that may sound like a crazy religious idea, but for me it meant the end of religion. It meant that instead of rules and rituals, my rela-

tionship with God was paramount. And that relationship is to be built on believing and following Jesus. When Vikki and I understood that, we gave our lives to Christ.

HOW DIFFERENT IT WAS, then, in 1993, when I won again at Augusta. This time the victory was by four shots, but it was really no easier. Heading into the back nine on Sunday, I was just a shot ahead of Dan Forsman and two ahead of Chip Beck, a Ryder Cup player for the American side.

But I knew that I wanted to be aggressive throughout the round, and when I faced a 3-iron second across Rae's Creek to the par-5 thirteenth, I knew what to do: go for it. That shot flew just as I envisioned, coming to rest 20 feet from the hole. I made the putt for eagle, birdied fifteen a few minutes later, and finished the round on top.

This time, I would speak again of Jesus Christ in Butler Cabin. It was Easter Sunday, and I wanted people to know that more than any Masters champion, Jesus was to be honored that day. In the years between my two biggest wins, Jesus Christ had become the most important thing in my life, reshaping all my priorities and making me an entirely different man.

A NEW LEGACY is excerpted from an article appearing in the 2010 Links Players Magazine, printed each year and including profiles of golf's tour professionals, as well as business and political leaders who enjoy the game. For the complete article, including the work that God has done in Bernhard Langer's life in the ensuing years, please visit our web site. You will find player profiles, devotions and Bible studies for golfers, and further insight into how to live for Christ.

 www.linksplayers.com
LINKS PLAYERS
INTERNATIONAL