

Major Professional Golf in Rocklin

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Bing Crosby and Sunset Oaks Golf Pro Paul Harney (center) follow a caddy along the bank of the 9th hole pond during a rain-soaked celebrity pro-am at Sunset Oaks in January 1964, ten months prior to the ill-fated Sunset Camellia Open

The year was 1964. Lyndon Johnson promised a quick victory in Vietnam and was elected President over Barry Goldwater. Arnold Palmer won the Masters for what turned out to be the last time. Rocklin's population was about 1,600 (today it is over 50,000), and Sunset International Petroleum Corporation brought our city, for the first and only time, into the heady world of major professional golf.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s Sunset had purchased the southern 12,000 acres of Joel Parker Whitney's Spring Valley Ranch and in 1964 the corporation was

in the early years of a 25-year plan to develop an upscale residential and recreational community for the Sacramento region. In 1962 they had commissioned William F. Bell and Sons to design a championship golf course which together with a spacious clubhouse, Olympic-size swimming pool and modern tennis courts would make up the country club that would be the centerpiece for the project. Sunset's new showpiece was named **Sunset Oaks Country Club**. The golf course had opened for play on June 27, 1963.

Sunset had hired Paul Harney as head golf pro that same year. Harney was a big name among PGA touring pros, having won several PGA tour events. In January 1964, shortly after his stint at Sunset Oaks had begun, Harney won the prestigious Los Angeles Open.

Sunset scheduled two golf tournaments for Sunset Oaks in 1964, one a benefit event to include famous names from both the PGA Tour and the entertainment world, and the other a regularly scheduled PGA Tour event. Golf's fortunes were ascending in 1964, assisted by ever-improving TV coverage and golf fans' love for swashbuckling Arnold Palmer.

Prospects for a successful tournament in Rocklin, with large crowds, were very bright.

The first tournament, held on Tuesday, January 21, 1964, was a one-day benefit for the Porky Oliver Cancer Research Fund. The tournament was made up of golf pros and entertainment personalities who had just competed in the Bing Crosby Pro-Am on the Monterey Peninsula. Included in the Porky benefit field were U.S. Open champ Julius Boros, band leader Harry James; dancer Ray Bolger; and Der Bingle himself. Sacramento area amateurs paid \$350 each to play with the headliners. That was big money in 1964.

The news on that Tuesday turned out to be the weather – not golf. Monday in Rocklin had seen one of the strangest storms in history. Winds had gusted to 50 miles an hour and two inches of rain had fallen mixed with light snow! At sunup on tournament day the pristine fairways of Sunset Oaks were as white as a new golf ball. But the snow melted early and at 11:30 players teed it up for the shotgun start. At about 2:00 p.m. another major storm moved through the course disgorging torrents. Spectators ran for cover and foursome-by-foursome the shivering contestants trudged back to the clubhouse having completed little more than nine of the scheduled 18 holes.

Contestants' praise for the Sunset Oaks venue was profuse. Bing Crosby, who had played in a group with Harney, called the layout "extremely interesting" He especially liked the ninth hole, a picturesque but diabolical short par three which many consider the course's signature hole even today.

Despite the foul whether almost 5,000 spectators attended, netting \$10,000 for the Porky charity. The tournament had been a rousing success and Sunset's managers were now able to plan confidently for the PGA Tour event scheduled for the upcoming October.

1964 was the first full golf season for Sunset Oaks. During that spring and summer, play was sparse because home sales in the area were lagging, possibly made worse by expected employment cutbacks at the area's defense facilities. But preparations for the upcoming PGA tournament proceeded apace. Sunset Oak's rolling greens and the tilted fairways were maintained in immaculate condition, hand-watered when necessary. Sunset built a huge redwood scoreboard near the 18th green to match the western motif of the clubhouse. All was in readiness in early October when the touring pros headed here for Rocklin's \$25,000 First Annual Sunset Camellia Open at Sunset Oaks.

Tournament week began on October 5, 1964. Typical early-Fall Rocklin weather greeted the contestants. Except for high winds at times, especially on the first day, the weather cooperated during that entire week.

But the absence of golf's marquee names worried the Sunset's staff. They needed a four-day gate of about 30,000 fans to break even. Some tournaments in those days drew that number in a single day. But the colorful names of the PGA tour were missing; Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player, all taking the week off. Chi Chi Rodriguez was the biggest name on-site but he was threatening to withdraw as he coughed and convulsed with the flu. In the end Chi Chi played but did not make the 36 hole cut.

Another worrisome factor for Sunset was competition from baseball's World Series. To compensate, officials installed 2 television sets, one in a prominent position in the clubhouse and another on the course. Inning-by-inning scores were broadcast from clubhouse loudspeakers.

The first of four rounds of play started on Thursday and disappointment crept in as the gate was reported at an extremely low 2,341, about half the number that had braved intense rain, wind and cold in January to see the Porky event.

Second and third round gates disappointed again, bolstered only by the competitive play of local favorite and soon-to-be-PGA Champion Al Geiberger. Al eventually finished in fifth place but his fine Saturday effort helped Sunday's attendance jump to 5,143.

Bob McAllister of Corona California won the tournament and went on to participate on the PGA tour and Senior PGA tour until the mid 1980s.

Despite intense coverage by Sacramento's electronic and print media the tournament had been a flop. Speculation during the tournament's post-mortem pegged Sunset's financial loss at \$35,000. That meant that the gate had not covered the purse, nor had it covered a large chunk of preparation and promotion costs.

In retrospect this tournament served as a marker for the eventual demise of Sunset's real estate development project in Rocklin. Continuing slow real estate sales put the project into a financial reorganization in the late 1960's. Harney left Rocklin to rejoin the PGA tour in 1965. The PGA Professional Hall of Fame inducted him in 2005. The Sunset Oaks Country Club, after a series of new owners and court supervised financial restructurings in the 1960's and 1970's is now privately owned and operated as the **Sunset Whitney Country Club**.

A Second Annual Sunset Camellia never materialized.