

# Jimmy Jackson: The Gentleman Golfer

By

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One of the most beloved golfers ever to roam the links of St. Louis was Jimmy Jackson from Greenbriar Hills & Algonquin. Born in Mulberry, Arkansas in 1922, Jimmy would begin winning matches early in his career. In 1939, while at Kirkwood High School, Jim won the individual title at the State Matches. Finally, five decades later, he would capture his last victory in the 1982 St. Louis Publinx. He was won of three area amateurs whose presence at an event meant everyone else was fighting for a runner-up spot!

But as golfers sit on benches, awaiting their turn on the tee, it isn't just about his records by which he is remembered. Above all, Jimmy was a gentleman; someone who played with a grace that we often find lacking today. If you were to find him in the locker room following his round, his first thought would not be of how he did (though it was probably somewhere in the 60's!), but more likely he inquired about your round. How did you play a certain shot, what club did you use, how did you find the greens! Never deprecating to others, he just took his skills for granted; the way one would the ability to play catch; but his ability would be better compared to the way Nolan Ryan plays catch...just a little bit better than everyone else!

Though ten years younger than the ageless Bob Cochran, and ten years older than the powerful Jim Tom Blair, his timing could not have been better. He captured several area titles in the late 40's, and he qualified for the 1948, '49 and '50 US Amateur. His victories in 1948 and 1949 in the St. Louis Open would be chronicled as he competed against the best around, professional and amateur alike. But beginning in 1951 he would run off a string of victories and attendance at National Events which would be unequaled at the time. He won the 1951, 1954 and 1959 Missouri Amateur, having finished second in 1950. He played in the US Amateur in 1951, '52, '53, '54 and 1955, then again in 1960, '61, '62, '63, '64, '66, '67 and 1976. In the 1951 Amateur he lost in the 4<sup>th</sup> round and in 1952 lost to Gene Littler 1-up in the 5<sup>th</sup> round.

In the 1952 US Open at the Northwood Club in Dallas, won by Julius Boros, Jimmy finished 19<sup>th</sup> and was the low amateur. He finished ahead of players such as Cary Middlecoff, Paul Runyan, Gene Sarazen, Dutch Harrison, Johnny Revolta, Jackie Burke and Gardner Dickinson. His 296 total was only 3 strokes short of finishing in the top 10! He also won back-to-back Trans-Miss titles in 1954 & 1955, the first person to do so. Only one other has ever accomplished this feat, some blonde guy out of Ohio State named Jack.

Due to his accomplishments, he was selected to the 1953 and 1955 Walker Cup teams. In the 1953 matches, he teamed with Gene Littler as they defeated their counterparts 3 & 2, despite almost losing the match on the third hole by having too many clubs in his bag! Other significant members of the '53 team included future US Open champ Ken Venturi, Harvie Ward, Charlie Coe, Bill Campbell and Don Cherry. In the 1955 matches, he and Bruce Cudd won their foursomes match 5 & 4, then he defeated R. Cecil Ewing 6 & 4 in singles. This team included Ward and Cherry along with Masters legend Billy Joe Patton and Dale Morey.

During this period he received invitations to the Masters in 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956 and 1957. He was on hand for the '53 Hogan victory as well as the '54 playoff where Snead edged Hogan, in the Masters that will forever be called the Billy Joe Patton year. [The amateur would shoot 32 on the front in the final round and be tied for the lead with Hogan. But when he came to the par 5, 13<sup>th</sup>, Rae's creek would do him in as he took a double-bogey 7 and ended up third] He saw Cary Middlecoff run away from the field (and Hogan) with his 7-shot win in '55, and he saw Jackie Burke edge Venturi in the 1956 event by one shot as Venturi shot 80 in the final round! And finally, he saw Doug Ford capture his green jacket in 1957 as he defeated Snead by three shots. The 50's had been very good to Jimmy and in his mid-30's his career was just beginning.

Jimmy would win even more events, most on the local level. He would capture the Tournament of Champions at Triple A twelve times, and win the Publinx five times along with three District titles. Along the way, he would add his fourth State Amateur in 1976 at age 53, the oldest player to do so! However, he was far from finished. In 1977, he became the only amateur to win the Missouri Open as he defeated a young Jim Mason in his pro debut. He then captured the 1980 and 1981 Missouri Senior Amateur and the 1982 Publinx as his final crown.

If you talk to players who competed against Jimmy, players like Cochran or Blair, they will comment on his short game and in particular his putting. "*Best long putter (30+ feet) I ever saw*" commented Bob Cochran. A comment echoed by Jim Tom later who said that in 1951, Jimmy was probably the best amateur in the country.

Top amateur David Lucks would spend several years working side by side with Jimmy. They would travel to sales calls and golf tournaments together as David picked his brain to try to find the key to Jimmy's greatness. Traveling throughout southern Illinois Jim would win countless local events at virtually every course in the area. Like the gunslinger of old, Jimmy would ride into town and like a whirlwind, scoop up the prizes and vanish, only to return the following year to repeat it all over again.

However, as is often the case, fate spins its tragic spell. Jim was diagnosed with a brain tumor, dying from its complications in 1983 at age 61. During his hospital stay, Bob Cochran would visit him every day, such was the love and admiration he had for him, and the depth of their friendship.

When the St. Louis District inaugurated the Jimmy Jackson Memorial in 1985, it was won by Jim Mason, the man Jimmy defeated in his pro debut in 1977. Most of the areas top amateurs covet this event, mostly to honor the man whose name it bears. Jim's son Beau, who resides in California, his daughter, Betsy who now calls Maryland home, and occasionally Jim's wife Helen, who is now remarried and living in Michigan, will attend. Only the man for whom it is named will be missing!