



25 YEARS AGO...

Irwin Finally Stakes his Own Claim to

MEMORIAL TOURNAMENT GLORY

Dispiriting loss of '76 exorcised seven years later

BY DAVID SHEDLOSKI

THE GAME'S INHERENT DIFFICULTY and the poor percentages competitive golf affords compel practitioners to accept—and expect—frequent setbacks. Still, some losses sting more than others. Hale Irwin can verify that. A particularly shocking loss can feel like, well ... a stake through the heart.

Irwin has never suffered from a weak constitution during a career that has produced 20 PGA TOUR victories, including three U.S. Open titles and another 45 wins on the Champions Tour, a record that could prove as durable as the man who established it. But he'll readily tell you that his runner-up finish to Roger Maltbie in the inaugural Memorial Tournament was a particularly painful blow.

"Everyone has a story [about a tough loss]. Everyone has their chances, and they can't always work out, and you have to deal with that," Irwin says philosophically. "You take it and move on and hope you get another opportunity. But I wondered if I'd get another opportunity at the Memorial, because that loss ... that was kind of destiny, and it wasn't destiny working in my favor."

Irwin still remembers watching the ball in the air on the third playoff hole and thinking the first Memorial Tournament was just about in the bag. It was Maltbie's ball, and it was hooking left and over the green at the par-4 17th hole at Muirfield Village Golf Club. It was heading for oblivion. And then the ball hit a gallery rope stake and caromed onto the green. Maltbie tied Irwin with a par and then birdied the next hole while Irwin burned up four shots reaching the green. The victory validated Maltbie's Rookie of the Year credentials from the previous year.



Above: Ben Crenshaw needed to birdie 18 to catch Hale Irwin, but failed to do so.

Above right: A bogey on 17 caused 1980 Memorial winner David Graham to fall a shot back on Sunday.



LEFT AND RIGHT: MEMORIAL TOURNAMENT ARCHIVE/APPLIED COMMUNICATIONS

Irwin, meanwhile, was apoplectic over the result. "It took a long time for me to get over the hump of surprise," he admits.

That's why all these years later, even after his three Open titles and his six Champions Tour majors and 86 trophies (in official and unofficial events) dating all the way back to his 1967 NCAA Championship triumph and more than \$30 million in combined earnings, few victories mean more to him than his come-from-behind win 25 years ago in the eighth Memorial Tournament.

Redemption? Poetic justice? Karma?

No, just skill and determination finally winning out.

"Roger got the break and made the most of it. That's golf for you, plain and simple," Irwin says. "If you want the results to be different, then maybe that's something you should take on and do yourself."

Irwin's one-stroke victory over Ben Crenshaw in the 1983 Memorial definitely was the result of his own efforts. With rounds of 71-71-70-69 and a 7-under-par 281 aggregate score, Irwin overcame a four-stroke deficit to 1980 Memorial winner David Graham for the first of his two victories at Jack Nicklaus' prized invitational tournament.

In the immediate aftermath, the former college defensive back admitted that he was eager to make up for the dispiriting loss of '76. He did it in style, becoming the first player to post four

sub-par rounds at Muirfield Village Golf Club. He did it despite two long Sunday weather delays. He did it on a course he truly enjoyed but wasn't necessarily a good fit for his game.

"The way Muirfield played wasn't my cup of tea, really," Irwin, who turns 63 two days after this year's Memorial, says. "It's a great golf course, one of the better ones we play all year. [But] I've always preferred narrow fairways, and as the week went on it got softer when I like it hard and fast. But you do have to hit precise irons into the greens, and my iron game always has been a strength in my game."

On Sunday, Irwin suffered one bogey against four birdies, the last a chip-in at the par-3 16th that became the deciding stroke. But he still needed a little help and Crenshaw and Graham, who made double-bogey and bogey, respectively, on the 17th hole—the same one that had cursed Irwin in '76—to drop a stroke behind. When neither birdied the 18th, Irwin had his 15th TOUR title.

That he is still collecting hardware is a testament to his talents and tenacity. Heading into 2008, Irwin had won at least once in 11 of 12 Champions Tour seasons. He's not sure when he'll recede from competitive golf, but he is spending more time these days with his growing family and on a golf course design business that keeps him busy without stretching him thin.

Still, the feeling of satisfaction for what he



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accomplished in 1983, and again in '85 with the same 281 total, hasn't dimmed.

“It is definitely one of the high points in my career, given that the game's best player hosts it and designed the golf course,” Irwin says. “The Memorial from day one has always been on a level just below the major championships, and it remains there. It remains there because of all the things Jack brings to it and the quality of the Tournament and the golf course. That win, it was as meaningful as they come.” MT

With a score of 71-71-70-69, Hale Irwin became the first man in tournament history to post four rounds under par.

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