

# The Amazin' Moe Norman

Inside the clown hides the best golfer in Canada

BY ROY MacGREGOR

"I was paired with Moe Norman in the Quebec Open about four years ago. We had a good crowd with us, and when we teed off I told Moe I thought I was going to play better than him. He said if I played better than him then I'd have more money than him, and then he pulls out that big wad of his, shows everybody and knocks me down, grabbing me by my ankles and shaking me upside down. 'Let's see what you got in *your* pockets!' he yells. 'Let's see what you got in *your* pockets....'"

— Gary Slatter,  
Canadian golf pro.

In W.C. Fields' very first sound film, *The Golf Specialist*, made around 1930, there is a routine in which the famous eccentric shows up with an oversized golf bag, a driver with a rubber shaft, a shovel for the sandtraps, a wind velocity indicator, a caddy with squeaky shoes, and a cocktail shaker. It is just the type of satire that is mildly sacrilegious to those who are close to the subject matter — something like telling a Watergate joke at the 1976 Republican Convention — but it is the type of satire that works best, for golf has never been a sport much given to laughter, and a gentle tickle can sometimes leave a scar.

Satire, though, only verges on what is real. Moe Norman is very real. Not only does he look much like the late comedian, but he has the same gift for making people laugh. For every Fields' rubber driver or shovel, Moe Norman has always had a foot-high tee, a trick bouncing a ball off his club, or some repetitive, nonsense chatter. But where Fields could count on audience appreciation for his talents, all Moe Norman ever learned to count on was the next slap of his wrists. Norman's problem has been that, unlike Fields, he wasn't dealing with fantasy.

But if Fields was the best comedian of his generation, Norman must also stand as one of the great golfers of his time. Trouble is, he is known, and will be

remembered, as the game's court jester, not as one of the masters. His talent — which was at one time staggering and which even today, when he's 44, is still immense — will be overshadowed by his great tragedy, the flaws in his character that seem to cast him forever in the role of buffoon and perennial loser of the Canadian Open.

There are really two Moe Normans, the golfer and the character, and the golfer deserved a better response than the character delivered. It was golfer Moe Norman who Arnold Palmer worried would play the American tour, saying openly he wondered how much money Norman might have won. It was golfer Moe Norman who Sam Snead nicknamed "Clothesline," later refined to "Pipeline," in honor of his deathly accurate drives. And it was Norman the golfer who American golf expert Irv Schloss pointed to when he was describing the one man who came close to hitting a golf ball as well as Ben Hogan in his prime.

Norman can still strike a ball with surveyor's accuracy. To date he owns more course records than Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus combined, some 22 in this country and nine in the United States. And while they still talk of Sam Snead's great 59 score (par usually being around 72), there is little heard of Moe Norman's two 59s, or his 12 holes in one, or his victories in every major Canadian tournament but one — the Canadian Open.

It is here that Moe Norman the character begins to surface. To many, he should have been the great Canadian golf hope, the man who would win the one that mattered. One Open, he finished eighth, his best, and that saddens some. That he might have won at all terrifies others, for it is a fear of what unexpected turmoil Moe Norman the character might create that worries this group.

Moe Norman is not the same as you and me. He has a common flaw, mind

you, insecurity, but his inferiority complex runs very deep indeed. He has never felt comfortable with his own emotions: sometimes they come boiling out with great bursts of love, sometimes of anger, but when they come he never knows. Nor do others, which makes any relationship with him a little like roulette. His attempts to anchor down these great wellheads of feeling give Moe Norman a vast amount of nervous energy, and it is an energy he has learned to release through his eccentricities — the talking, balancing, laughing, the strobe-light manner of moving. And it is these very outlets that make him what he is to most people — lovable — as well as what he is to the dour, staid bodies that regulate golf — dangerous.

Moe Norman, golfer and character, is at the mercy of his feelings. Nothing deep down inside of him has ever whispered "I am the best," even though a good many others have virtually shouted it at him. He once said of George Knudson, "I used to beat him all the time. Now I can't even tie his shoe laces." The mere mention of a Palmer or Nicklaus puts Norman's putter into spasms.

"Those people — the Hogans and Sneads, and now the others — they were Moe's gods," says Gary Cowan, one of Canada's finest amateur golfers. "And Moe couldn't put himself in their class even if he was. He couldn't accept it."

Cowan knows more than a little about Moe Norman, as both came from Kitchener, Ont. and both learned their golf basics very early in life from Lloyd Tucker at the Rockway golf club. But aside from golf ability, instructor and home town, there are no other similarities. Cowan is an outgoing, confident insurance executive, a man who is able to entertain thoughts other than golf.

Not so for Norman. He discovered around age 11 that a golf ball was something he could hit that wouldn't hit back,

something he could hang on to at last, and he hasn't let go since. Coming from a poverty-stricken farm family of eight where one full meal a week was considered a treat, Norman was a skinny, awkward and shy boy who could barely say hello to a man, couldn't even glance at a woman. He did poorly at school, finally being expelled in, he says, Grade 9, though those close to him deny that there is even that much formal education.

Not being good at school or people, he wasn't about to give up on something he showed promise at. Moe would hide his clubs under the front stoop, attend morning classes, then race home to sneak off with his clubs to the nearby course. After leaving school he worked nights in a tire factory, but he eventually got fired for taking off so much time for amateur golf tournaments. As he says, he hasn't worked since.

Having no close friends to while away the hours with, Norman took his spare time to the practice range where he would hit balls for hours at a time, 500, maybe 600 golf balls, until his hands bled. He'd also work on his tricks, and he perfected things no one else in golf can do, like bouncing a ball on the end of a club for as long as he wishes. Today he still practises, but he is no longer obsessed with it: "I don't keep fit like I used to. When I used to do fingertip pushups, then I was strong. But I'm 200 pounds now, and look like a goddam Porky Pig. If I tried it now, my fingers'd break off. My fingers'd break off."

All that practice brought him skills and the skills gave him what he really wanted — attention. As an amateur he dominated the country, winning back-to-back Canadian championships in 1955 and 1956, playing twice as Canada's representative in the Masters tournament in Augusta, Ga., and winning virtually every weekend tournament he cared to enter.

He had notice then, but no money. He'd lost his one job, hitchhiked to tour-