

Sarasota Biography

Trailblazers: Bert Montessor

Sarasota's Reigning King of Golf

Although J. Hamilton Gillespie introduced the game of golf to Sarasota in 1886, he succumbed in 1923, suffering a fatal heart attack on the very course he established at Ringling Boulevard and Links Avenue.

It took Bert Montessor — who by age 33 had mastered every aspect of the sport — to make the game popular in Sarasota, which was beginning to come into its own as a year-round resort. With a population of some 10,000 in 1935, the city had only just been handed its first Works Project Administration project: drainage of the city-owned Bobby Jones Golf Course, resulting in employment for 40 workers. Mayor E.A. Smith was delighted when nine other WPA projects followed, bringing 500 jobs and many improvements to the city's infrastructure.

It was at this time that Cincinnati Reds pitcher Paul Derringer, noting a golf-pro position open at the Bobby Jones club, contacted his pal Bert. When he moved here from St. Petersburg to become a teaching professional at Bobby Jones, the town had one golf course. He watched Sarasota grow into a city with more than two-dozen courses, during almost five decades spent in the area.

Born in Bela Horizonte, Brazil, Bert Montessor grew up in south Chicago with an assortment of the usual teenager's jobs along the way: diving for golf balls in the greens lake (earning the nickname "Snake"), then selling them back to golfers. He also worked for an undertaker — lots of work in Chicago even before Capone! But the enterprising youth found he had a talent for designing and carving golf-club heads from wood blocks used at the time, before shafts were made of metal. Combining this craft with his hours caddying at Flossmore Country Club, he soon became known for the special designs, which Marshall Field displayed at their downtown store.

As many young men did back then, he quit school after eighth grade in favor of gainful employment, helping his family in the process. During WWI and the man shortage that resulted, young Montessor was able to fill many positions at country clubs, especially after completing an apprenticeship to his older brother Louis, a golf pro in Kansas City, from 1917 to 1919. Following a stint teaching golf at a women's college in Rockford, Illinois and a year at Idlewild C.C. (Flossmore, Ill.), Bert became head pro at the Toney Oregon (Illinois) Country Club during the 1920's and joined the newly-formed Professional Golfer Association of America in 1927.

It was while Montessor was at the Oregon C.C. in 1929 that he met his future wife, Edith Ferradina, then only 19, and they were married the following February 26. Becoming golf-pro at the prestigious Southside Country Club in Decatur, Illinois in 1931 (until 1941), Montessor spent summers in his hometown environ "up north," then he and Edie headed to Florida during winter. First these trips were only short visits, usually to play in some tournament, but following a brief stay in St. Pete in 1935, Montessor became part of the Sarasota scene — at least for the winters.

By this time, he and Edie were parents of a son, Ron, born in 1931. It was the year Billy Burke won the U.S. Open (for you statistic fanatics!). Sarasota in those days resembled the "sleepy fishing village" of legend and myth — well, it was quiet, at any rate. Many noted baseball figures came here in the winter, and most of them played golf: Babe Ruth, the Deans, Durocher, the



Opening of the Par Three Golf Club on February 7, (left to right) Bert Montessor, Alice Bauer Hagge, Marlene Bauer, Babe Didrickson Zaharias, Betty Dodd @1954.

Ferrells, Cochran, Medwick, Manush.

After a year at Bobby Jones Golf Course, Montessor started his own driving range in 1936, on several acres that he purchased from Mrs. Charles Ringling, the site now occupied by Ringling Shopping Center. He operated it for almost 20 years, teaching young and old the game of golf on the same soil upon which Gillespie's second range had been situated decades before. Two of his "students" were Dizzy Dean and John D. MacDonald. In 1936, the Montessors welcomed baby Sondra to their family (that was the year Tony Manero took the U.S. Open championship, folks).

Montessor's years at Southside Country Club were among his most treasured, he once revealed to friends. Here he was surrounded by folks he knew all his life, their families and the next generation. Once, at the club, he phoned the great Walter Hagen, a close pal, who was in Detroit at the time, and asked him to play a charity exhibition. Hagen, who was always available when needed, simply replied, "When is it and how do I get there?"

But another chapter was to begin in 1941. Millionaire founder of the Steak 'n' Shake chain, Gus Belt, prevailed upon Montessor to join his club in Normal, Illinois, and finally he capitulated, staying on as teaching pro until 1949, during summers. Through the war years he put on golf exhibitions for the enlisted men, as did many other sports figures. And during the months in Florida, he and Edie involved themselves in community activities and the socio-cultural world of art exhibits, theatre openings, concerts, and charity functions. They, along with best friends Louise "Weezie" and Billy Sullivan (the ball player) were a foursome seen everywhere — and their combined presence lent pizzazz to any event. Long before the cliché "beautiful people" was born, they were its essence.

By 1945, the once-fashionable Sarasota Bay Country Club, designed and built by famed architect Donald Ross in 1926, had fallen on hard times, run-down and in need of repair inside and out. Tree branches littered the grounds, all bridges were torn up, clubhouse windows blown out, and its

membership was nil. Once it had been the scene of a world-famous tourney between Hagan and Bobby Jones, now weeds grew over it. Montessor made it his pet project. Borrowing heavy equipment from the military base, he spent several months reviving the course and the club was able to get back on its feet, becoming again the gracious facility known today as exclusive Sara Bay C.C. Grateful board officers gave him a lifetime membership.

Settling year-round in Sarasota ultimately in 1951, the Montessors air-conditioned their Laurel Street house and enjoyed their Lido Beach cabana, part of the "Sun 'n' Surf" Club, which some 25 or 30 couples in their social set had bought into. A few years later, Montessor and a business acquaintance, Dare Davis, partnered an innovative 18-hole "Par-Three Golf & Country Club" at U.S. 301 and today's Northgate Boulevard. One of the first Par-3 courses in the nation, it also was the first lighted course anywhere. Its layout was so ideal it remains unaltered 50 years later in its present incarnation as Woodcrest Country Club. At that time, Montessor sold his driving range property to the president/founder of Publix, George Jenkins, who started the first of his Florida supermarket branches in Sarasota on the site in the 1955 Ringling Shopping Center.

Montessor continued to operate his Par-3 until 1964, buying out Davis in the late 1950's. Deeply involved in community activities, he was a member of the Elks and honorary Lions Club member, having staged many exhibition games for Sight Preservation. Retirement was not a word in his vocabulary; he was in demand to play in tournaments nationwide and on several continents, and his name has been forever intermingled with the other immortals: Demaret, Snead, Palmer, Hogan, Sarazen, Nicklaus, Trevino, and the group he was instrumental in bringing to Sarasota for an exhibition game at the Par-3 opening: Babe Didrickson (Zaharias), Marlene and Alice Bauer, Patty Berg, and Betty Dodd. Four thousand people watched the day-and-night tourneys under newly installed lighting, on Feb. 7, 1954.



Bert Montessor

Born: April 26, 1902 in Bela Horizonte, Brazil

Died: June 5, 1974 in Sarasota, Florida

Family Statistics: Married Edith Ferradina Feb. 26, 1930 in Decatur, Illinois. Two children: Ronald, born 1931, and Sondra (later Mrs. Donald Dicken), born 1936.

Extended Family: Ron and Diane Montessor have four children: Karen, David, Teresa and Angela; Sondra and Donald Dicken have two boys and a girl; seven grandchildren totaled.

Contributions: Sponsored many charity golf tournaments nationwide, getting together big-name players who devoted their time and resources for important causes, like Lions Club's Sight Preservation campaign. Was instrumental in renovating an abandoned Sara Bay Country Club in 1945.

Best Remembered for: Re-introducing the game of golf to post-Gillespie era in Sarasota. Owner of Montessor Driving Range on Ringling Boulevard and Three-Par Golf Course on US 301 and Northgate Boulevard more than five decades.

Most Unique Characteristic: Winner of numerous golf tournaments nationally and on several continents, Montessor was never an "old golfer" and in his last exhibition he teamed up with LPGA pro Alice Bauer to beat Leo O'Grady and Pat Wright in extra holes at Village Green Golf Club. A "trick" golfer, he could play one-handed and still win.

Top Honors: Was inducted posthumously in the Chicago District Sports Hall of Fame in 1976. In 1956 he was named Sarasota Sportsman of the Year.

The father of golf, Bert Montessor, died June 5, 1974 at age 72. The legacy lives on, in the street named for him in Toronto; in the benefit clinics he held at VA hospitals like Bay Pines; in the 1964 dedication of a plaque for the old Gillespie golf course, for the front of Robarts Funeral Home (the original home of Col. J. Hamilton Gillespie); it lives on in the pro-am 1975 Bert Montessor Memorial Open, with 50 pros and 150 amateurs competing at Bradenton's El Conquistador C.C.; and most of all, in the Chicago District Sports Hall of Fame, where he was inducted in 1976.

The legacy has been handed down to son Ron, who became a golf pro for El Conquistador, Toronto's Oakdale C.C., and now teaches girls' golf at Cardinal Mooney High School. Sondra Montessor became the wife of a golf pro, Donald Dicken of Warsaw, Indiana. Of her many grand- and great-grandchildren, Edie has no doubt a few will be talking birdie, bogey and eagle eventually! In the House of Montessor, you will never hear, "Tennis, anyone?"

Joan Griffith