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The Venerable Mr. Venturi

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When I was young—say about 8 or 9 years old—my parents used to tell me to take time to speak with our older neighbors and listen to what they had to say. And not just when they were yelling at me for cutting the corner through their daylilies on my bike after school. Take some time to sit down with them, ask them questions about how things were when they were young and listen to what they had to say. I was assured that I would be amazed not only at how much had changed in the world, but also at how much had *not* changed. These were the men who had fought our World Wars and the women with more grand and great-grandchildren than they could keep up with at times. Of course, getting that to sink in for a nine year-old with ball games to play and dogs to play fetch with was surely an unenviable task. Later in life, as these elderly neighbors and friends of my parents began to pass on and I grew more mature, I realized all of the potentially fascinating life stories about their lives that would go untold—at least to me. Procrastination is a nasty habit, especially when it costs you the time that cannot be relived. But to a child, there's always tomorrow to talk to the older folks.

The 2002 Kemper Insurance Open was the last time Ken Venturi would sit in the CBS tower behind the 18th green calling the shots for the viewers of CBS's PGA Tour coverage each year. Although Ken Venturi the man has not passed on, his television legacy has—leaving an indelible mark on more than a few of us. He was one of those announcers you found yourself inexplicably drawn to due to his true emotion and sense of “been there, done that.” Unfortunately for me, it took a few years for me to realize exactly who he was and that makes his exit more noteworthy to me than perhaps to others. When I first got hooked on golf at about age 10, I would sometimes spend entire afternoons on weekends watching CBS's golf coverage. Early on, I grew tired of Mr. Venturi's ramblings and seemingly obvious comments. “This putt is all speed and direction” was one of my favorites. As a pre-teen who knew everything there was to know about the game (except who this Venturi guy was), I knew that all putts were speed and direction. Right? Then again, it's always been difficult to bridge the generation gap—especially when it requires two bridges over three generations. As I grew older and began to play competitive golf in junior and senior high school, I still watched as much golf as possible when I wasn't actually playing golf. For me, the small screen provided an eye on the golfing world and an outlet for my desire to play more. The reason was simple: no one in my family played golf, there was no course in my hometown, and I wasn't yet old enough to drive. I didn't mind not getting to play as much as I would have liked and—in hindsight—it probably benefited my career today by spending more time watching golf on television. I got to see some of the best courses from all over the world instead of the same course every week.

So there we were: Ken Venturi and myself going over every shot on every hole week in and week out. Sure there were weeks when NBC or ABC would grab a share of the market to cover a major or a Skins Game; but the majority of the time was spent with Kenny in the tower on 18—there was no Golf Channel. Then at about age 14, I had an epiphany by “accidentally” learning who Ken Venturi really was. I couldn't believe what an idiot I had been! I read a story about him in a magazine that I can't remember the name of today. It began with the story of his childhood and how he turned to golf to escape the taunts he endured as a result of a speech impediment. Speech impediment? “How could someone with a speech impediment make a career of sports broadcasting?” I thought. It went on to tell of how he lost the 1956 Masters as an amateur with a final round 80—losing by one stroke! He then turned pro and won no less than 10 times in the next four years on Tour before hitting a dry four-year spell that nearly cost him his game. He said he had to borrow money to play in the 1964 U.S. Open—an Open that is now a part of golf history. The same 1964 Open he won by playing through dehydration and 100 degree heat for a 36-hole final that forever defined Venturi the player.

Now we've come to the end of a 35-year long career in the booth that has seen Ken Venturi win the hearts of millions of viewers. Forget the critics. So what if people thought he wasn't as critical as NBC's Johnny Miller. Venturi was a straight talker, but a consummate gentleman—a genre that has been slowly slipping away from your television in contemporary times because it's hard to sell to the younger generation. The viewers are what count and remembering Ken Venturi is what counts to him. Will the Masters really be the same to us without him in the booth? Only time will tell. The viewers and players alike will surely miss you Mr. Venturi. Enjoy your retirement and the much-deserved time off. Just remember: like putting, retirement is all speed and direction.

Nathan Crace is the Senior Design Associate at Maxwell Golf Group in Jackson, Mississippi. His freelance “Lipouts” column is based, in part, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know. Copyright 2002.