



The LIFE and TIMES of LARRY Montes

By Adél Gabot
Photos by Carlo Ma. Guerrero
Materials courtesy of Wack Wack Golf and Country Club*

Every golfer's dream (or fear) is to have a time machine on hand to bring them back to that time when Larry Montes was in his golfing prime. To watch him? or to tee off with The Greatest Filipino Golfer Who Ever Lived? Either will be an honor.

Among the many apocryphal stories about the late and great Philippine golf legend Larry Montes, three of them involve Japan.

Emperor Hirohito was a golfer in a big way. The Emperor, hearing that Montes was in the country, insisted that Montes live at the Imperial Palace and teach him golf. He did, and taught his homegrown style to Japanese royalty. Normally this story, while interesting, would otherwise be unremarkable, if not for the fact that no foreigners are allowed to live in the Imperial Palace. Larry Montes was the first and only foreigner allowed to, with special dispensation from the Emperor himself. Larry Montes lived there for six years. (In his time at the Palace, Larry eventually learned fluent Japanese.)

The second apocryphal Japanese story is that one of Larry Montes's putters, the one he most used at the top of his game and the prime of his life, is on display at a museum in Japan. It is a Calamity Jane putter, the kind used by another great, Bobby Jones, and is inscribed on the back with the words "Larry Montes never misses."

The third is that he is the only Filipino included in the Japanese Golf Hall of Fame.

All three stories are true, and come from a wealth of anecdotes from a life lived in the full thrall of golf, and a life well lived at that. Larry Montes is the rarest of the rare: a true, genuine, bonafide legend. Today, his name is mentioned in hushed, awed and respectful tones when it comes up in golf conversation among

* Wack Wack Golf & Country Club Shaw Boulevard, Mandaluyong City, Metro Manila, telephone: (02) 723-0885 to 72, telefax: (02) 723-8562, (02) 723-8561

those in the know. In fact, Larry Montes is often called, without exaggeration, The Greatest Filipino Golfer Who Ever Lived, and with good reason.

It is interesting to note that Greatest Philippine Golfer started as a caddy. In the mid-twenties, when Larry was 16, he caddied at Muni Golf Course at the Luneta for US military and naval officers. And while he caddied, he learned and studied and practiced. Pretty soon he was good enough to teach the players he was caddying for, and by 1929 he was earning good money teaching his many friends.

Like many of the old greats, he learned his game by himself, without the benefit of coaches and teachers and golf theory and training. It's mind-boggling to consider that the greatest Filipino golfer who ever lived had no concrete idea about, or scientific reasoning behind the execution of his own golf swing. He just did what felt right.

"I have always gone by instinct and I have studied myself in order to evolve a good game. I put a premium on being straight and accurate so that I could hit the greens and end up near the pin," he was once quoted.

"I have invested so many hours in putting and this has rewarded me handsomely. I owe all of my championships to my accurate pitching and putting. I have never been a long driver."

His second son, Hector Montes, feels that Larry's greatest achievement is his track record of championships accumulated during his heyday. "[He's won] 13 Philippine Opens, the first when he was 18, the last when he was 42! This record will probably never be broken."

Larry's motivation was simple – he just wanted to improve his life. "Back then, Filipino golfers were more driven to succeed, mostly because the best came from poor backgrounds. Montes, Arda and Tugot were all caddies who worked hard to better their lot in life. We've had many really talented golfers from wealthy families (the Gaston brothers, Elon, Alan and Francis for example) who chose other careers rather than turn Pro," Hector says.

When Larry got that hang of his game, he began competing as well. His first championship was the very first Philippine Open of 1929, held at the Manila Golf Club in Caloocan, winning a trophy and the grand sum of P100. Through the years he would win a dozen more, winning his 13th during the wartime year of 1943, at the Philippine Open held at Wack Wack.

After winning his first Philippine Open, he started playing internationally, placing 12th in the British Open in 1931. Larry got around. In 1933 he won the Japanese Open Golf Championship, and he made the rounds of the Japanese courses, earning a comfortable living.

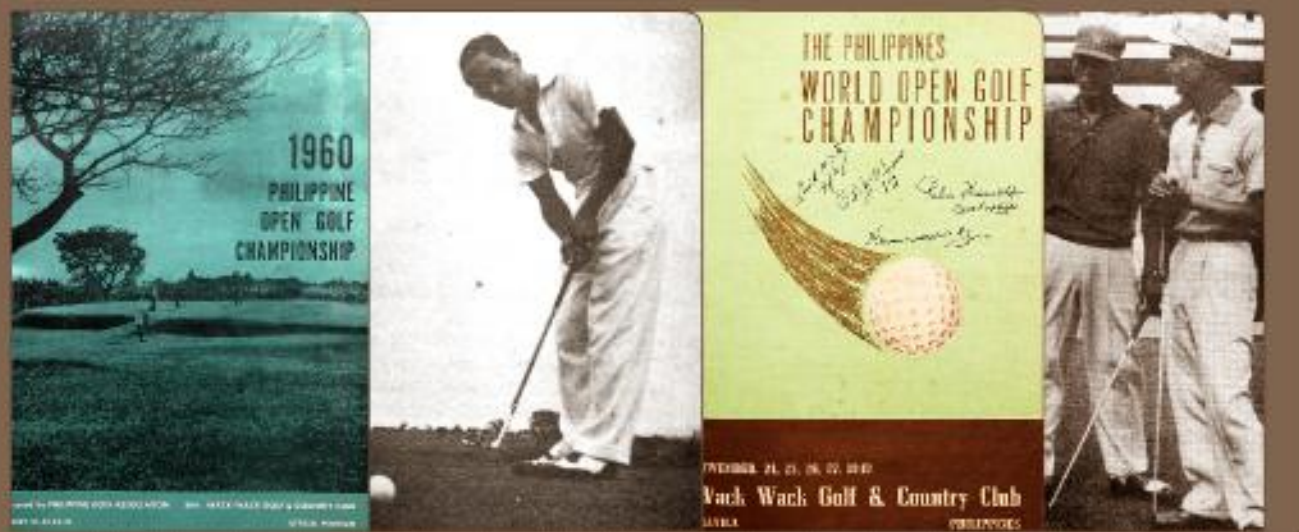
In the United States in the early sixties, he won the US Seniors

It is a Calamity Jane putter, the kind used by another great, Bobby Jones, and is inscribed on the back with the words "Larry Montes never misses."

Invitational in Las Vegas twice, once in 1962, and again in 1964. Larry made the rounds there, and won many tournaments across the United States. For example, Larry won the Northern California Professional Championship eight times.

"His best competitive round was a 64 at the Olympic Club in San Francisco at the Northern Cal PGA Championship in 1964. This was the course record until Adam Scott broke it in 2002. His best round ever was a 58 at Harding Park in San Francisco, site of the San Francisco Open in a non-competitive round," Hector relates.

Larry had natural talent, and he worked at improving his homebrew game. Larry Montes's game was honed from hard-won



experience and common sense. He once advised young golfers: "Let's remember that golf is very much a mental game. Therefore, when a player gets upset, he cannot muster his usual mental powers because they are befuddled with anger. Now this momentary and insignificant loss of control will, no doubt, affect his next shots. Thus may mean the end of a good game and the start of a bad one."

His limitations didn't affect his game, because he played up on his strengths and found avenues in which he could excel in. "Because I am not a long hitter, I make up for this deficiency with accurate shots, always hitting within my strength and not trying to kill the ball."

Hector reveals Larry's swing secret: "He didn't take deep divots, preferring to sweep the ball off the turf. Because they played mostly on carabao grass in those days, but he was successful in the US with this technique winning over 20 tournaments on the west coast. His contemporaries were Sam Snead, Gene Sarazen, Bobby Jones and Ben Hogan."

One of the signature mannerisms of the Montes game was that, like Lee Trevino, Larry never wasted time and dilly-dallied in taking his shot. He just went straight to the ball and hit it. "I have never taken my sweet time in addressing and hitting the ball. I do all my delays while walking. I never take too much time after I address the ball. Basta tira nang tira without delay."

Despite his homegrown wisdom and self-taught skills, Larry was a stickler for the rules. "I also have been lucky to be a golf rule nut, because without the knowledge of the rules of golf, one is always at a disadvantage. And since I was playing in so many tournaments, I had to gain all the advantages possible within the rules of golf. Because of this necessity, I read the rules of golf at least once a week, and it became a sort of bible to me."

While a great teacher to strangers, Larry Montes had a very laid

-back style when it came to teaching the game to his own kids. "All four boys played golf. Only Loy (the third) did not excel, the youngest, Jay, is a PGA professional, still teaching in California," Hector relates.

"He never gave his kids formal golf lessons. Instruction was mostly over the dinner table with the whole family in attendance. For example, when Hector started slicing the ball, he told his father over dinner. His dad then told him to check his grip, stance and swing plane then asked Hector to tell him how it went the following evening over dinner."

"Hector ranks his father in the top twenty golfers in the world all-time. He used to beat the American and Australian players like Jackie Burke, Lloyd Mangrum, Billy Casper, Peter Thomson, Norman Von Nida when they came to play in the Philippine open."

"Hector Montes now has a golf shop in Cebu called Pure Golf Academy which specializes in custom fitting and building golf clubs and training promising juniors."

Hector's dad Larry also loved teaching juniors.

"He taught all the great Filipino golfers, Celestino Tugot, 'Bantam' Ben Arda, Golem Silverio, the Gaston brothers and many others. When Golem Silverio was invited to the Masters, He called Larry Montes to accompany him to the tournament. When Golem found out Larry Montes passed away, he cried."

Though things were different then, people believe that Larry Montes could've still beat the pants off Tiger Woods if he was alive and at the top of his game today. "In his prime, he was unbeatable. He would've killed them. He had no weaknesses: he was a good driver of the golf ball, a good iron player and possessed a wicked short game. But, what set him apart was his putting," Hector shares.

Today, Larry lives on in those he taught, in the Philippines and over the world. The man, his game, and his legacy are a big part of local golf history. Forget Kevin Costner and Tin Cup. Here's the real thing, and Larry Montes's life is a movie waiting to be made. But movie or not, his mark on the game looms large, and serves as an inspiration to many. ▮



The first Godeff Golf Mission on board the Mayon (l-r): Montes, Libro, Chito Gonzalez, and Eddie Vargas.



Larry Montes (left), with Celestino Tugot (right), winner of the First Far East Open Golf Championship 1949 and runner-up in the Second Far East Open.