

Top Ten Greatest Golfers in Northern California History

By Ron Kroichick

Let the 19th-hole debate begin. Northern California's rich golf tradition doesn't easily translate into a tidy, top-10 list of the region's greatest players. A parade of golfers emerged from our little corner of the world to scrawl their names into the game's competitive lore. So, for starters, some ground rules for this highly subjective exercise:

- We only considered players who grew up in Northern California, or at least played much of their junior golf here. This eliminates some big-name players who passed through the area in their college years including Tom Watson, Mickey Wright and, yes, Tiger Woods.
- We tried to look at a player's full body of work, including amateur achievements. Still, the PGA and LPGA tours are the game's highest levels-and success on those tours thus was the most compelling factor in putting together these rankings.
- We focused on a player's on-course achievements and the era in which he or she competed. That's why a candidate such as Jack Neville-who made an enduring impact on the NorthernCalifornia golf landscape by co-designing Pebble Beach, and also won five long-ago state amateur titles-ultimately was omitted.

Enough chatter. And off we go ...

MEN



1. Johnny Miller

Long before he won 25 times on the PGA Tour, including two major championships—and became television’s leading golf analyst—Miller was just a blonde-haired kid hanging out at Harding Park.

Miller started hitting balls (off a mat, into canvas) in the basement of his San Francisco home at age 5. By the time he was 12, he started spending his summer days at Harding; he often couldn’t afford the big course, but the starter let Miller and his friends tee off on the back nine. He played mostly with Roger Maltbie and Tommy O’Kane, and he also occasionally came across tour pros Ken Venturi, George Archer, Bob Rosburg or Bob Lunn.

The 1960s were a golden era of golf in the Bay Area, and that shaped Miller as much as the city’s narrow, demanding courses.

“I was totally aware of the tradition,” he said.

Young Johnny watched the City Championship every year with his dad, Larry. Later, he occasionally caddied for a group including Tony Lema and Harvie Ward at nearby San Francisco Golf Club. And the wave of players slightly older than Miller—including Lunn, O’Kane, Dick and John Lotz, Jim Wiechers and Ron Cerrudo—offered abundant motivation.

“I had to match what those guys were doing,” Miller said. “They were really setting a standard. Those guys were kicking butt nationally, and that really pushed me.”

Miller, now 67, eventually exceeded them all in forging a Hall-of-Fame career. He won the U.S. Junior Amateur in 1964 and the California State Amateur in ’68, preludes to his wild success as a pro. His biggest moments were those two majors: a transcendent final round 63 to win the U.S. Open at Oakmont in 1973, and a similarly sparkling final-round 66 to chase down young Seve Ballesteros in the 1976 British Open at Royal Birkdale. But maybe the most impressive element of Miller’s career was his dominance in 1974, when he won eight times and earned PGA Tour Player of the Year honors. That’s no easy feat in the thick of the Jack Nicklaus/Tom Watson era. Miller, in his prime, was just as good.

RESUME:

- 1998 World Golf Hall of Fame inductee
- 25 PGA Tour wins U.S. Open (1973)]
- British Open (1976)
- PGA Tour Player of the Year (1974)
- 1 California State Amateur (1968)
- 1 NCGA Stroke Play Championship (1969)
- 1 U.S. Junior Amateur (1964)

2. Ken Venturi

Like Miller after him, Venturi attended San Francisco's Lincoln High, won a memorable U.S. Open and enjoyed a long, distinguished career as a TV analyst.

Venturi's defining moment was the 1964 Open at Congressional, where he conquered suffocating heat and humidity to pump life into his sputtering career.

Venturi ultimately won 14 times on the PGA Tour and was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in May 2013, the week before he died at age 82.

He also was an acclaimed amateur, winning the San Francisco City Championship three times and the state amateur twice.

RESUME:

- 2013 World Golf Hall of Fame inductee
- 14 PGA Tour wins
- U.S. Open (1964)
- 2 California State Amateurs (1951, 1956)
- 2 NCGA Stroke Play Championships (1951,'52)
- 1 NCGA Junior Amateur (1949)

3. Lawson Little

Talk about the match-play king. Little won 32 consecutive matches in taking both the British Amateur and U.S. Amateur (then considered majors) in 1934 and again in '35.

Little, born in Rhode Island but raised in Northern California, won eight times on tour, including one major—he beat Gene Sarazen in a playoff to win the 1940 U.S. Open.

Lawson was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1980.

RESUME:

- 1980 World Golf Hall of Fame inductee
- 8 PGA Tour wins U.S. Open (1940)
- 2 U.S. Amateurs (1934, '35)
- 2 British Amateurs (1934, '35)
- 2 NCGA Amateurs (1928, '31)

4. Tony Lema

History sometimes overlooks Lema, in part because of his tragic death in a 1966 plane crash at age 32.

Lema, who grew up in Oakland, already had collected 12 tour wins, including the '64 British Open at St. Andrews-where he coasted past Nicklaus by five shots. That victory punctuated a dominant stretch for Lema, who won the Bing Crosby National Pro-Am in January 1964 and four more times in six weeks in June and July.

"Champagne Tony" also was a terrific Ryder Cup player, posting an 8-1-2 record.

RESUME:

- 12 PGA Tour wins
- British Open (1964)

5. George Archer

Billy Casper once described Archer as "sort of a question mark bent over the ball."

This was Casper's creative way of conveying Archer's uncommon height (6-foot-6), but it didn't stop him from becoming one of the game's best putters.

Archer, a San Francisco native who attended San Mateo High and later lived on a ranch in Gilroy, won 13 times on the PGA Tour, including the 1969 Masters. He also won 19 events on the Champions Tour.

RESUME:

- 13 PGA Tour wins
- Masters (1969)
- 19 Champions Tour wins
- 1 NCGA Stroke Play Championship (1960)

6. Bryson DeChambeau

The powerful DeChambeau, a native of Clovis outside of Fresno, got going by winning the NCAA

Championship and U.S. Amateur the same year (2015). He later added eight PGA Tour titles, two European Tour wins and a pair of U.S. Open titles (2020, 2024).

RESUME:

- 8 PGA Tour wins
- U.S. Open (2020, 2024)
- 2015 U.S. Amateur
- Two European Tour wins
- One Korn Ferry Tour win
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7. Olin Dutra

His 10 PGA Tour wins include the 1932 PGA Championship and the '34 U.S. Open, in which he overcame a painful intestinal infection and an eight-shot deficit after 36 holes. Dutra, born and raised in the Monterey area, came back to edge Sarazen by one shot.

RESUME:

- 10 PGA Tour wins
- PGA Championship (1932)
- U.S. Open (1934)
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8. Bob Rosburg

Rosburg, another native San Franciscan, won the 1959 PGA Championship and twice finished second in the U.S. Open. He grew up playing Lincoln Park and later starred in baseball and golf at Stanford. Rosburg won six times in all on the PGATour.

RESUME:

- 6 PGA Tour wins
- PGA Championship (1959)
- 1 NCGA Amateur (1950)
- NCGA Junior Championship (1944)

9. Bob Lunn

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It's easy to forget about Lunn, who was Miller's teammate at Lincoln High (Lunn is two years older). But Lunn won the U.S. Amateur Public Links in '63, tied for third in the 1970 U.S. Open and nabbed six PGA Tour wins, including tournaments in which he outlasted Arnold Palmer, Gary Player and Lee Trevino.

RESUME:

- 6 PGA Tour wins
- 1 U.S. Amateur Public Links (1963)

10. Nick Watney

Watney joins DeChambeau in representing the modern era on this nostalgia-heavy list. His five official PGA Tour victories include triumphs over deep, elite fields in a World Golf Championships event and a playoff tournament. Watney grew up in Dixon, outside Davis.

RESUME:

- 5 PGA Tour wins

HONORABLE MENTION

- Roger Maltbie (5 PGA Tour wins, 1 NCGA Amateur (1972))
- Kevin Sutherland (1 PGA Tour win, 5 PGA Tour Champions wins, 1 NCGA Amateur (1986))
- Dick Lotz (3 PGA Tour wins, 1 California State Amateur)
- Casey Boyns (record 20 total men's NCGA championships, 4 NCGA Player of the Year titles, 2 California State Amateurs, NCGA Hall of Famer)
- Randy Haag (record 6 NCGA Player of the Year titles, 16 NCGA men's championships, NCGA Hall of Famer)
- Gary Vanier (1 California State Amateur, 1 NCGA Match Play Championship, 1 Master-Division Championship, record 6 San Francisco City Championships, NCGA Hall of Famer)
- Ron Cerrudo (2 PGA Tour wins, 2 NCGA Match Play Championships)
- Bobby Clampett (1 PGA Tour win, 2 California State Amateurs, 1 NCGA Junior Championship, 1 NCGA Player of the Year, NCGA Hall of Famer).
- Cameron Champ (3 PGA Tour wins, 1 Korn Ferry Tour win)

WOMEN



1. Juli Inkster

Inkster earned induction nearly 15 years ago, but she still shakes her head when she hears those magical words—"Hall of Famer"—preceding her name.

Golf wasn't Inkster's lifelong dream, even if she grew up in a house alongside the 14th fairway at Pasatiempo in Santa Cruz. She was a basketball player first, and only became serious about golf at age 15.

Even now, at 54 and firmly established as one of the most decorated players in the history of the women's game, Inkster refuses to define herself by what happens between tee and green.

"Golf is just what I do," she said in a March 2014 interview. "It's not who I am."

Inkster struggled at times, trying to balance her professional ambitions with her personal interests as a parent. Inkster went four full seasons without a victory (1993-96) as she learned to juggle her career and family life. She seriously considered quitting the LPGA Tour, only to ultimately decide she would try to balance both. That meant taking daughters Hayley and Cori on the road whenever possible—weekends, spring break, summer.

"Juli's fear was that we weren't doing the right thing by our kids," says her husband Brian. "That wasn't the case, but as a mom I'm sure you're thinking about it when you're at the Residence Inn in Rochester."

Don't let these maternal instincts mislead you, though—Inkster has always been a fierce competitor. That was part of her recipe in winning 31 LPGA events, including seven majors.

Inkster might belong on this list even without those 31 victories. She won three consecutive U.S. Women's Amateur titles (1980-82), one California Women's Amateur ('81) and two San Francisco City titles (1979 and '81), in addition to earning All-America honors at San Jose State. Good thing she got serious about golf.

RESUME:

- 2000 World Golf Hall of Fame inductee
- 31 LPGA Tour wins
- 7 majors including the 1999 and '02 U.S. Women's Opens
- 3 U.S. Women's Amateurs (1980, '81, '82)
- 1 California Women's Amateur (1981)

2. Patty Sheehan

Her geographical background gave us pause—Sheehan was born in Vermont, grew up in Reno and played most of her early golf in Northern California—but her credentials are unquestioned.

Sheehan has 35 LPGA wins, including six majors; twice won the California Women's Amateur; and was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1993.

RESUME:

- 1993 World Golf Hall of Fame inductee
- 35 LPGA Tour wins • 6 majors including 1983, '84 and '93 LPGA Championships
- 2 California Women's Amateurs (1977, '78)

3. Paula Creamer

She burst onto the LPGA scene in 2005, when she picked up her first tour victory at age 18.

Creamer, who lived in Pleasanton until she was 14, now has won 10 times, including the 2010 U.S. Women's Open at Oakmont. She also has been a Solheim Cup stalwart, with a 12-6-5 record.

RESUME:

- 10 LPGA Tour wins
- U.S. Women's Open (2010)
- 13 straight junior wins in Northern California

4. Pat Hurst

Much like Creamer, Hurst cut her golfing teeth in the junior program at Castlewood Country Club.

She prospered as an amateur while growing up in San Leandro, winning the U.S. Girls Junior in 1986 and U.S. Women's Amateur four years later.

Hurst has six LPGA wins, including one major ('98 Dinah Shore).

RESUME:

- 6 LPGA Tour wins
- 1 Nabisco Dinah Shore (1998)
- 1 U.S. Women's Amateur (1990)
- 1 U.S. Girls Junior Championship (1986)

5. Dorothy Delasin

Even if her LPGA career fizzled after a fast start—Rookie of the Year honors at age 19 and four wins by 23—Delasin practically played her way onto this list before turning pro.

She won the state women's amateur and U.S. Girls Junior in 1996, the Junior Worlds in '98 and the U.S. Women's Amateur in '99. Delasin grew up in South San Francisco.

RESUME:

- 4 LPGA wins
- 1 U.S. Women's Amateur (1999)
- 1 U.S. Girls Junior (1996)
- 1 California Women's Amateur (1996)
- 2 California Junior Girls Amateurs (1996, '98)
- 1 NCGA Junior Girls (1998)
- 1 Junior World Golf Championship (1998)

6. Christina Kim

She's one of the LPGA's most charismatic players, to put it mildly.

Kim has won three times on tour, most recently at the Lorena Ochoa Invitational in Mexico City in November, her first LPGA victory since 2005 (she also won a Ladies European Tour event in 2011).

Kim was born and raised in San Jose.

RESUME:

- 3 LPGA wins
- California Junior Girls Amateur (2000)

7. Kay Cockerill

Now known more for her work as a Golf Channel reporter, Cockerill once made a splash by winning the U.S. Women's Amateur in consecutive years (1986-87). She also was a two-time All-American at UCLA after growing up in Los Gatos.

RESUME:

- 2 U.S. Women's Amateurs (1986, '87)

8. Natalie Gulbis

She has one LPGA win, the Evian Masters in 2007, and three Solheim Cup appearances. Gulbis, from Sacramento, also enjoyed success before turning pro, winning the women's state amateur at age 14, earning medalist honors in the 1999 U.S. Women's Amateur and becoming an All-American at Arizona.

RESUME:

- 1 LPGA Tour win
- 1 California Women's Amateur (1997)

9. Mina Harigae

The one-time prodigy from Monterey boasts national credentials, as winner of the 2007 U.S. Women's Amateur Public Links and a member of the '08 U.S. Curtis Cup team.

Harigae also won four consecutive California Women's Amateur titles, starting at age 12.

RESUME:

- 1 U.S. Women's Amateur Public Links (2007)
- 4 California Women's Amateurs (2001-'04)
- 1 Northern California High School Girls Championship (2007)

10. Lynne Cowan

Her name is prominent in the NCGA women's record book, highlighted by four state women's amateur victories (matching Harigae and Shelley Hamlin for most ever).

Cowan, who lives in Rocklin, also won the 2014 California Senior Women's Amateur.

RESUME:

- 4 California Women's Amateurs (1999, 2000, '05, '07)
- 2 NCGA Women's Amateurs (2006, '07)

- 3 California Senior Women's Amateur (2015)
- 4 NCGA Senior Women's Amateur (2014, '15, '17 and '19)

HONORABLE MENTION

- Sally (Voss) Krueger (1 California Women's Amateur, a record 10 San Francisco Women's City Championships); NCGA Hall of Famer
- Shelley Hamlin (3 LPGA Tour wins, 4 California Women's Amateurs)
- Patricia Cornett (2 California Women's Amateurs, 3 NCGA Senior Amateurs, Curtis Cup captain)
- Jan Ferraris (2 LPGA Tour wins, 1 LPGA Rookie of the Year, 1 U.S. Girls Junior}
- Marianne Towersey (1 California Women's Amateur, 7 California Senior Women's Amateurs 2 NCGA Senior Amateurs, a record 10 NCGA championships); NCGA Hall of Famer