

Shorewood's Shooting Star
By Reed A. Passafaro

On a cold February day, I drive through the Lambert Avenue entrance of the Forest Hill Cemetery in Fredonia, NY, a small village fifty miles southwest of Buffalo. I get out and move between the rows and snow drifts, disrupting the morning quiet with the crunching of my footsteps until I find section DD. The cold bites at my bare hands as I feel for the outlines of a stone and gently push aside some snow. A name comes into view. Markey. My breath catches, the weight of my research hits. You must do this young man justice. But clarity, relief even, quickly follows. With his comportment and achievement, the deceased has already distinguished his life. What I can do is help keep his memory vivid.

Robert Markey Steele was born on September 12, 1954. I first heard Bobby's name as a participant in Shorewood Country Club's junior golf program. His eponymous tournament was, for us kids, our major. As a boy I knew little why my favorite tournament was named in Bobby's honor. I was like the group listening to Harold Hilton and Bernard Darwin reminiscence about Johnny Laidlay but couldn't see the picture being painted.

Bobby came from a family of some prominence. His father, Mr. Edward Steele, a WWII veteran and Georgetown graduate, was CEO of the Red Wing Company, a private label supplier of ketchup, peanut butter, and jams. His mother, Mrs. Joan Markey Steele, grew up in Staten Island and was college classmates with Ethel Kennedy. Her family ran R. Markey and Sons Inc in Manhattan, a certified weighmaster of commodities coming into port. Bobby was a happy kid with two brothers and two sisters. He was kind and friendly, unassuming and unaffected. His shyness manifested his humility, and that drew affection.

Bobby started playing golf at age five, participated in the Shorewood Junior Golf Program under club pro Jack Shubert, and later took lessons in Buffalo from PGA member George Smith. Growing up, Bobby was not a vast hitter, but he was unfailingly down the middle, his ball obeying with the fidelity of a military order the directive from his prepossessing swing. Bobby's accuracy was remorseless; his making of pars was relentless. I envision in my mind Bobby playing before the green keeper starts his day. The morning dew is streaked by a narrow path of footsteps following the ideal line of play, with a few more encircling the hole. There are no wayward turns to terrifying lies, the bunkers undisturbed, the rough untrodden. When on rare occasion Bobby's ball striking was off, like many skilled contemporaries who spent hours chipping and putting for quarters and Cokes, he got up and down from anywhere.

On the golf course Bobby carried himself with a quiet confidence commensurate with his thousands of hours of practice. He was gracious in victory and defeat but during a match he mostly kept to himself. A competitive fire to win burned within Bobby, but he had an outward tranquility. Bobby was small and slender so he was often underestimated. At fourteen he weighed around 125 pounds and stood 5 feet 6 inches tall. Men's clubs were too big for him, so he played with Izett women's clubs. He couldn't fit into a men's golf shoe, so he wore Adidas sneakers.

Bobby's play began to attract attention in the summer of 1969. He won a Buffalo District Championship, beating my uncle, David Passafaro, born thirteen days before Bobby and a close friend who lived five hundred yards down Central Avenue, 2 and 1 in the quarterfinals, despite David taking medalist honors. Later that summer, Bobby became the youngest player to win Shorewood's club championship, breaking a record held by my maternal grandfather, Malcolm Reed. The club's best players lost to a fourteen-year-old who carried his own bag and played with ladies' clubs. Tradition held that the club champion bought

a round of drinks. Bobby technically complied; he served lemonade. When the membership was greeted with the Buffalo Evening News headline “Golfer, 14, Wins Title Wearing Tennis Shoes”, it was predictable but still unseemly that the club would raise the entry age to eighteen. That summer Bobby also won the New York State Boys Championship, making him the winner of his club, district and state championships.

Success opened doors to other tournaments. In 1971 Bobby was selected for the Buffalo team that participated in the Williamson Cup at Fox Chapel Golf Club against teams from the metro areas of New York City, Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia, in addition to Massachusetts, Ontario and Quebec. Bobby was hosted by the family of Dave Gookin. They met two months earlier because Gookin caddied for his teammate Dudley Merchant when he beat Bobby for the Eastern Interscholastic Golf Association Championship at the Bedens Brook Club. That same year Merchant defeated the legendary Jay Sigel for the Pennsylvania Amateur. “Bobby was very gentle and humble, and had a very rhythmic swing,” Gookin remembers. Buffalo didn’t win, but the next day Gookin took Bobby to Oakmont Country Club, whose future pro, Bob Ford, had competed on the Philadelphia team at Fox Chapel. At the course universally known for its ability to host a U.S. Open on a moment’s notice, Bobby shot 75 sight unseen.

As he was gaining more national exposure, Bobby continued to win events across Western New York. In one week during the summer of 1971, he earned medalist honors at both the New York State Championship qualifier and the local U.S. Junior Amateur qualifier while winning another Buffalo District Championship. At that event, Bobby beat his friend David Passafaro in the finals 2 and 1. Mrs. Steele drove the boys home to Fredonia with the tournament’s championship and runner-up trophies in the same car destined for the same street.

The U.S. Junior Amateur, like the U.S. Amateur and Amateur Championships, is a grueling test. With a combination of qualifying stroke play and win or go home match play, it’s golf at its most ruthless and most unpredictable, which makes it golf at its most fun, and a keen identifier of future success. Past winners include Johnny Miller, Jordan Spieth (2x) and Scottie Scheffler. The 24th edition was held at the William Flynn designed Manor Country Club in August 1971. The course was tight and wet, measured 6,400 yards, and played to a par 70. The medalist was future back-to-back U.S. Open winner Curtis Strange. Another future U.S. Open winner, Scott Simpson, was in the field, which also included nine-time PGA Tour winner Jay Haas and Dave Gookin.

Bobby was the only player from New York State to advance to match play. He won his first match 1 up and his second in nineteen holes after almost holing an eagle and tapping in for the winning birdie. In the quarterfinals Bobby was three down after five holes and remained two down after nine. He roared back to win five of the next seven holes to advance. Earlier that day, Bobby won his third-round match 3 and 2, his only victory up to that point in which he never trailed.

In the semifinals Bobby faced Mike Reid, who would win two PGA tour events and two senior majors in his career. Reid recalls falling in love with the course at Manor, perhaps an augury for his course setting round later in life at the Flynn-designed Cherry Hills. His strategy that week was to outlast people with steady pars, but in their match, Bobby made birdie putts of thirty and fifty feet on the first two holes. “He just drowned me in the first five holes,” Reid shared. “I had not played anybody who had that kind of firepower before.” Reid remembers the rhythm of Bobby’s swing, the easy and warm way he had about him, and how they talked about where they’d come from, and where they might be headed. Bobby won the match 4 and 3. “I thought this guy is going places.”

That afternoon Bobby faced Mike Brannan, Reid's future roommate at BYU, in the final. Bobby was down six after nine. He rallied but lost 4 and 3 when Brannan sunk a forty-five-foot birdie putt on the fifteenth, making him the youngest winner of the championship, a record that stood until Tiger Woods' first of three victories in 1991. Brannan became a four-time All-America, a member of the 1977 Walker Cup team, and played several years on the PGA tour while competing in three U.S. Opens and the 1978 Masters. Despite the loss, Bobby's play elevated his national standing. People took note of something else. Because he ignored his father's advice to earn some extra cash for a caddie, Bobby carried his own bag throughout the championship.

Bobby attended high school at Canterbury School in Connecticut where he met Mike McBride whose family is synonymous with golfing excellence. Mr. McBride won thirteen club championships between Westhampton and Arcola and the 1949 Metropolitan Amateur among other titles. Mrs. McBride was a five handicap at Apawamis and Winged Foot before having a family. Mike and his two brothers, Terry and Mark, played golf at Stanford. As Mike jokingly told me, "In our family, if you didn't break eighty by fourteen you were sent to the orphanage."

Mike was a year older than Bobby and both played on the golf team. "He was a special kid, the full package," Mike remembered. "Bobby played golf at a different level." At Canterbury Bobby played four years of golf, two of which he was undefeated, and was the captain his senior year. He was described as a golf "phenom" and the "most feared player in the prep school league." Bobby was also an honors student, the sports editor of the school paper, a sacristan, and a counselor at Canterbury's summer camp, according to PALLIUM, the magazine of Canterbury School.

After high school, Bobby enrolled at Stanford, the college home of Little, Tatum and Woods and the winner of nine men's golf national championships. He arrived in Palo Alto lithe and handsome. Bobby was listed in the media guide at 6-0, 160 pounds, rail thin yet strong. Joining Bobby at Stanford was Mark McBride, Mike's brother, and with whom he would grow close over the next year. "Bobby kept his words back, but he was fabulous and fun. He was a class act, but he wanted to kick your ass on the course," Mark told me. "He loved competitive golf." After class, Bobby and Mark would ride bikes, a way of life on Stanford's campus, to the golf course that George Thomas and Billy Bell originally built to hit balls and play. Though Bobby quickly took to the temperate climate, he initially struggled as he acclimated himself to west coast golf.

During those years there was no doubt who drew the most admiration and awe. Tom Watson graduated the year before Bobby and Mark arrived on campus. Watson was a three time All America and had already played in the 1970 Masters. One afternoon, Bobby and Mark made their way to the Stanford course and found the icon from Kansas City on the first tee. They could hardly believe it when Watson welcomed them to join him for nine holes. "That was memorable!", Mark recounted. "Everyone at Stanford wanted to be the next Tom Watson, but nobody was."

At that time, the fall was devoted to qualifying and the top six players, based on scoring average, played the varsity matches in the spring, but there was fluidity in the makeup of Coach Bud Finger's team as exceptions and substitutions were made. Records of who played in what matches during those years are hard to find. However this much is clear. At the end of the season, Bobby had the lowest freshman scoring average on the team and was named an honorable mention All-America. "He was a rising star," teammate Wade Nonnenberg declared.

Before the school year ended, one of golf's ultimate invites arrived, a round at Cypress Point, thanks to Mark's family connection to Jimmy Murray, a cofounder of Pinseeker. The course, expectedly, was spellbinding. But it wasn't just the round that stayed. It was an instance Mark captured on camera — Bobby on the beach, a wide smile on his face, the wind tossing his long brown hair: vigorous, magnetic, and, though no one knew it then, forever young.

In the early hours of Tuesday June 5, Bobby was riding his ten-speed bike when he collided with another cyclist on Escondido Road near the intersection with Arguello Street. It was dark and, in those days, nobody wore helmets. Bobby sustained serious head injuries. When Mark McBride heard the news, he phoned the Steele residence in Fredonia. "I got bad news for you," he shared. Mr. Steele asked about the severity of the accident. "It's serious enough you're on the next plane out here," Mark replied. Bobby underwent several hours of surgery but his condition was beyond medical aid. He died on June 7, 1973 at the age of eighteen.

Bobby's wake took place at the family home in Fredonia. His passing soaked the village in sorrow. The line of mourners extended all the way down Central Avenue. They entered the front door and turned left to the large living room. Bobby was laid out in a casket in the adjacent parlor. The house has belonged to dear friends for years, but my Dad still can't enter that room. The family's anguish was deep. The loss of a child is a violation of our natural sequence. That it was a freak accident that caused Bobby's death made it harder to accept. During the funeral at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, David Passafaro was a pallbearer, helping to carry the body of his close friend, bisecting rows of pews when they should have been carrying clubs down the middle of a fairway. Bobby was buried in Forest Hill Cemetery, in a plot with direct line of sight from Red Wing, the company his father led.

How are we to judge Bobby's impact? The Stanford men's golf team annually recognizes the freshman with the lowest stroke average in honor of Bobby. Winners of the Steele Award include Notah Begay, Casey Martin, Tiger Woods, and Maverick McNealy who shared this reflection: "Growing up playing and practicing at the Stanford Golf Course, I idolized the guys on the golf team, so it was pretty surreal to win the Steele award my freshman year and make it on the wall with some of Stanford Men's Golf's best."

Another winner of the Steele Award is current Stanford men's golf coach Conrad Ray. "Winning the Steele Award as a freshman on the Stanford Golf Team is a big deal and something I will be always proud of," Coach Ray wrote to me. "There have been so many talented freshmen over the years and to have my name next to all of those people is a huge honor. The award's namesake, Bobby Steele, left his legacy on the Stanford program even though his time with us was way too short. The pride in the team, the role that freshmen have played within a successful program, and the excellence found at Stanford are all celebrated with this historical and important award."

At Canterbury the summer camp was named in Bobby's honor in 1974. Robert Markey Steele '72 Hall opened in January 1984 and has since been expanded and renovated with another dedication occurring in the fall of 2009. Of course, fundraising is needed for such endeavors, but places like Stanford and Canterbury don't establish awards and name buildings for insignificant people.

Dan Colvin is the longtime director of golf at Fishers Island Club. He played at Kentucky, worked at the Country Club of Darien, and served as the head pro at Somerset Hills and Hay Harbor during a long, successful career. But "it might not have happened if Bobby Steele didn't give me a call." Colvin grew up in Fredonia, five years Bobby's junior. Shortly after the U.S. Junior Amateur — his runner-up finish making him larger than life in the area — Bobby called the Colvin house, which wasn't unusual, since he was

friends with Dan's older brother, Chris. What was surprising was that Bobby wanted to talk to Dan, who was getting into golf and showing some promise.

"Bobby invited me to play nine holes at Shorewood the next day, and that thrilled me to no end," Colvin said. "He encouraged me so much and told me I was better than I knew." Bobby and Dan would go on to hit balls and play together from time to time. "He inspired me to get going in golf and live out my dream." Colvin would also take lessons from George Smith at the urging of Mrs. Steele. "After Bobby died," his voice beginning to break, "I felt like we had to pick up the ball from him. The Steele family has been part of my life as long as golf has been a part of my life."

David Passafaro and Dave Gookin, Mike and Mark McBride, Mike Reid and Dan Colvin, along with others, were quick to help me bring Bobby Steele to life. This reflects their own generosity and graciousness, and reminds me there are no strangers in golf. But for those who knew Bobby best, this was more than reminiscence. Being part of something with him at the center of it, to be near Bobby again, if only in memory, elicited joy, and I dare say, pride.

It is tempting to ask what Bobby would have become if he lived to comb grey hair. This is largely a futile endeavor, but certain truths can be established. Bobby's best golf was ahead of him and more time at Stanford would have been nurturing. With his performance at the U.S. Junior Amateur, Bobby demonstrated that he was among the best of his peers. Perhaps most importantly, he possessed an unswerving temperament to weather golf's inevitable ups and downs. It is reasonable to conclude that competing in U.S. Amateurs and Walker Cups was within reach. In the eyes of Mark McBride, Bobby's accomplishments and rise from a small town are instructive. "It's not like he was in Florida training every day, all day, all year round. Bobby grew up in the freaking epicenter of lake effect snow" where the golf season can be depressingly short, so in that way he had already beat the odds.

But it's the wrong question to ask. It's far better to inquire how we can emulate what Bobby was. With his exceptional play and ability to bounce back, with his modesty in the face of accomplishments, with his strong character, Bobby was the ideal champion golfer. To me, Bobby is our patron saint, Shorewood's shooting star, a bolt so bright and brief. As Paul Gallico wrote about another amateur named Bobby, "Well, what more can I say for my hero? He was a gentleman and there was laughter in his heart and on his lips, and he loved his friends."

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