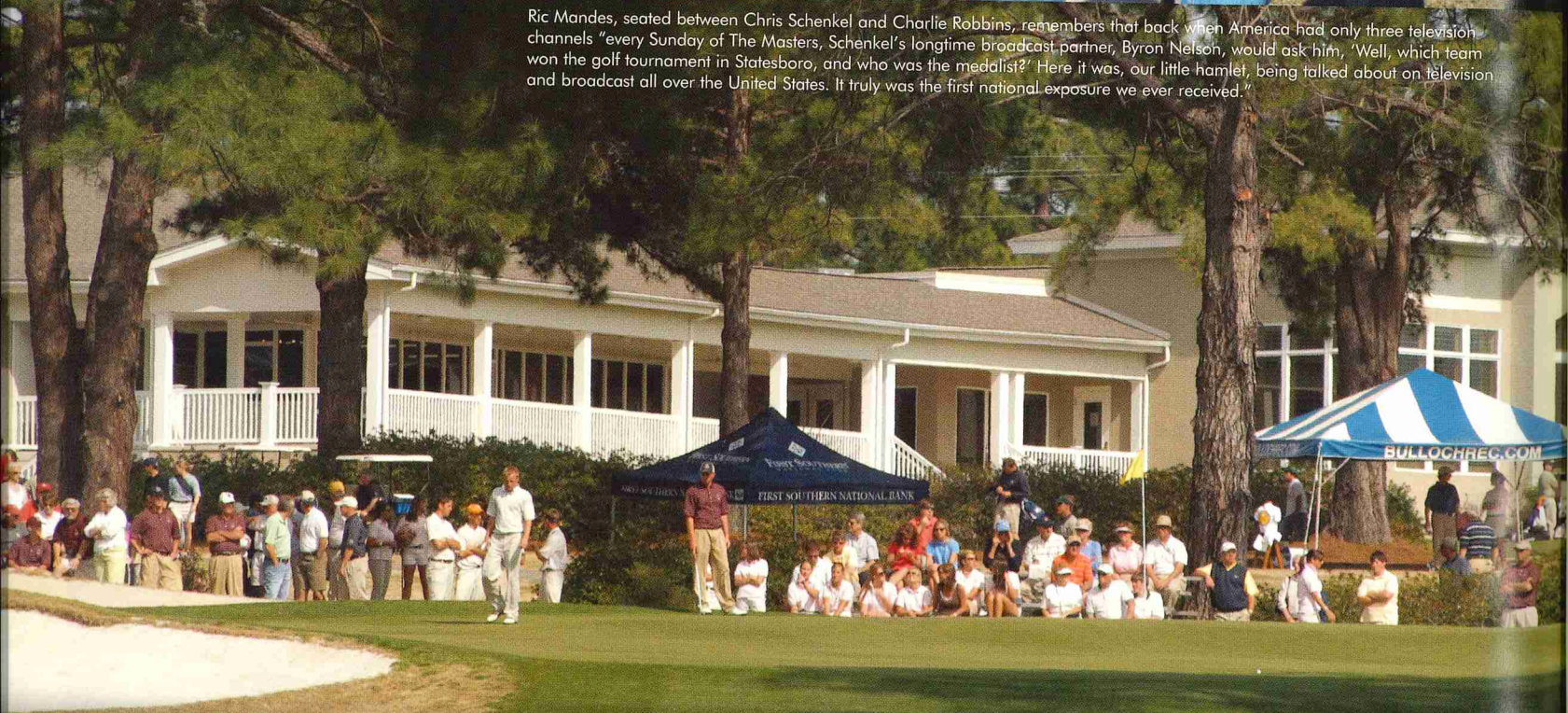


"The Schenkel Invitational, a much anticipated social event, as well as sporting event, was greatly missed by the community as well as the Georgia Southern Golf Program. Due to the hard work and dedication of many people, the feedback from the coaches and players indicate that indeed the tournament is back—one of the most prized invitations in collegiate golf," relates Billy Griffis, chairman of the Schenkel E-Z-GO Invitational from 1999-2005.

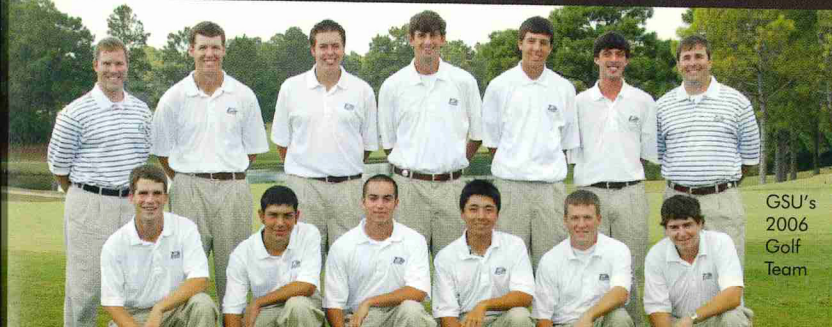
Ric Mandes, seated between Chris Schenkel and Charlie Robbins, remembers that back when America had only three television channels "every Sunday of The Masters, Schenkel's longtime broadcast partner, Byron Nelson, would ask him, 'Well, which team won the golf tournament in Statesboro, and who was the medalist?' Here it was, our little hamlet, being talked about on television and broadcast all over the United States. It truly was the first national exposure we ever received."



Remembering When It All Started...

Written by Pat Murphey

Photography by Frank Fortune and Geoff L Johnson



GSU's 2006 Golf Team



Schenkel with Mr. & Mrs. Clem Raith

What event first put Georgia Southern sports on a national stage? Think tall pines, azaleas, and springtime. Think fairways, bunkers, and greens. Think of an easy-going man with a smooth baritone voice who brought us our first vision of Arnold Palmer hiking his pants as he strode down the fairways at Augusta National. There's hardly a golfer in the Southeast who doesn't know what started it all. The *Chris Schenkel E-Z-GO Collegiate Invitational*, which held its inaugural competition at Forest Heights Country Club in 1971, proudly holds that distinction.

Today, however, few may realize that the Georgia Southern's pigskin revival of the 1980s was not the first time a "town and gown" alliance brought top flight intercollegiate competition to our city. For nearly 100 years, our civic and university leaders have understood how important they are to one another. Their mutual endeavors have produced a quality of life unique for a municipality this size, whose citizens reap the benefits of exposure to first class art, entertainment, scholarship, and athletics.

It all began with a couple of synchronous events. During World War II, the U.S. Army sent a young Indiana lad to a language institute at the Georgia Teachers College. During his nine-month sojourn, while he lived in Sanford Hall overlooking beautiful Sweetheart Circle, Chris Schenkel forged a bond with Statesboro that, although dormant for a few years, would last a lifetime.

After the war, Schenkel embarked on what would become perhaps the most distinguished career in the history of sports broadcasting, one that included a number of "firsts" and "bests." He was the first to cover The Masters on television (1956), the first to anchor a live telecast of the Olympics (Mexico 1968), and the first to call a nationally broadcast college football game. In fact, for over two decades, when Chris Schenkel and ABC Television broadcast a school's home game, it was the same kind of "happening" – at least for that era – as when ESPN's *Gameday* visits a campus today. Schenkel was truly "The Voice of College Football." By the time he'd finished his lifework, he had been inducted into sixteen halls of fame and had received an Emmy for Lifetime Achievement. But during all those years, he never forgot the hospitality that he'd enjoyed during his sojourn in Sanford Hall.

During the 1968 Masters, a chance encounter with one of Statesboro's leading citizens resulted in Schenkel becoming reacquainted with the community that he remembered so fondly. That year, the late Charles "Cholly" Robbins and his family made

their annual springtime trip to Augusta National. When his good friend, Savannahian Leo Beckman, who famously called the 18th green at The Masters, spotted Robbins after one of the rounds, he invited him for a drink and introduced him to the legendary broadcaster. When Schenkel learned that Robbins was from Statesboro, he surprised him with his knowledge of the city as "the home of Georgia Teacher's College and Sweetheart Circle."

Robbins came home inspired with a brainchild that eventually would bring his hometown and Georgia Southern national recognition. A savvy businessman who recognized opportunity's serendipitous knock, Cholly called his friend Ric Mandes to discuss ways they could get Schenkel back to Statesboro. Their first idea was to name the medalist's trophy from a high school golf tournament held at Forest Heights Country Club after the broadcaster, and, in the spring of 1969, Schenkel flew to Statesboro to present the Chris Schenkel Trophy to its inaugural winner, Screven County's Pat Lane. He returned the following season to crown the competition's second champion, Statesboro's Jody Stubbs.

Then, Georgia Southern president John O. Eidson, Athletics Director J.I. Clements, Mandes, Robbins, and community leaders such as Bo Hook, Hal Averitt, Clem Raith, and Bill Cook, along with many others, saw the potential for bigger things, something that might put the school and the city on the national map.

They were right. Once again, Statesboro's and Georgia Southern's visionary leaders hit one right on the "sweet spot." From its inception in 1971 until a ten year hiatus that began in 1989, the Schenkel grew to become one of the most prestigious intercollegiate golf events in the country.

Having their competition named for a world-class celebrity gave it instant credibility, but it was the unique way the organizers ran the event that made it special. Beginning a tradition that continues to this day, they made hospitality as much a part of the tournament as chip shots and birdie putts. In fact, it was as much social affair as athletic contest – not that the competition wasn't fierce – with an agenda that provided the golfers with a welcome break from the "strictly business" atmosphere of big time college athletics.

From the beginning, a local family hosted each team, a tradition that lives. Some clans have entertained the same school for years and have established relationships that extend far beyond the 18th green; for example, Billy and Hilda Rushing with Ohio State; Wayne and Kristen

Akins with Georgia; Walter and Dottie Garvin with South Carolina; and Alan and Debbie Tyson with Florida. A typical weekend begins with the host family providing a welcome basket or goodies for their team as they check-in to the hotel. Then formal festivities open with a BBQ on Thursday night for patrons and coaches, and a banquet on Friday night that every team attends.

But, what is Southern hospitality without Southern belles? Among the players favorite Schenkel amenities are the Phi Mu sisters who help host the event. The sorority assigns a hostess to each team. They add an extra sweet touch to the golfers' weekend by baking cookies or cakes for them and then cheering them on during play. Like all athletes, golfers enjoy performing in front of appreciative spectators, especially those who enhance an already beautiful environment.

Often these relationships don't end when the last putt drops into the cup. Like the family hosts, many a Phi Mu has formed a lasting friendship with the players they've hosted, keeping up with one another through birthday and Christmas cards, wedding announcements, and tidings of new births.

But the ingredient most vital to the Schenkel's success is the level of competition. With Chris Schenkel's name and endorsement, the tournament began drawing championship caliber teams to Statesboro from the outset. A call to then Florida coach Buster Bishop secured a commitment from the Gators and another to his friend Arnold Palmer helped convince Coach Jessie Haddock to bring traditional collegiate golfing power Wake Forest into the fold. Then, Clements, Robbins, and Don McDougald flew to the NCAA golf championships and hand delivered invitations to the 1971 competition. Over the years, the very best teams in the Southeast, along with a sprinkling of such national powers as Oklahoma State, Ohio State, The University of Southern California, and Northwestern, made the Schenkel an annual stop. Head coaches from these schools consistently ranked the Schenkel among the top three NCAA events.

In addition to drawing great programs, the Schenkel has been a proving ground for some of the game's best players. Jay Haas, Andy Bean, Jerry Pate, Andy North, Bob Tway, Scott Verplank, Curtis Strange, Mark Calcavecchia and Georgia Southern greats Jody Mudd, Gene Sauers, Mike Donald, Buddy Alexander, and Aron Price are just a few who went on to star on the PGA tour.

It's no mystery why the tournament grew in popularity over the years. Lured by the