

Bringing **Golf's "Characters"** to Life



Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, Tom Watson. St. Andrew's, Augusta National, Pebble Beach. All staples of golf history. All associated with the work of Des Plaines sculptor Michael Roche.

Roche, 70, was raised in Park Ridge and began sculpting during the 1970s while a student at Elmira College in New York. Following graduation, he mainly sculpted commercial work for the likes of Warner Brothers and MGM before transitioning to crafting pieces he had a passion for. These were mainly historical figures Roche had researched deeply, such as Mark Twain and Rocky Marciano.

His first foray into golf came when he had the inspiration to sculpt one of the game's most venerable figures – Old Tom Morris.

“I did not know golf all that well, but when I was researching the different historical figures in golf ... I learned that almost all roads in golf lead to Tom Morris,” Roche explained. “He was a character.”

Roche's take on Morris, entitled “Keeper of the Greens,” features Morris traversing a stone bridge, holding five clubs and dressed in the ornate golf attire of the era. The piece immediately resonated with the golf community, including the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA), which utilizes it as the crux of the trophy they bestow every year as a lifetime achievement award (pictured with Roche, left). Nicklaus, Palmer and Watson all are past winners, as well as dozens of other golf luminaries.

Roche's other golf pieces feature the likes of Palmer, Harry Vardon, Young Tom Morris, Willie Park, Ben Hogan and Bobby Jones. The pieces, each one custom-made with varying materials and at dif-

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ferent sizes, are frequently purchased by golf clubs and events to give out. Local clients include Park Ridge Country Club, which awards the Old Tom Morris Trophy at the annual Champion of Champions event, Bob O'Link and Rich Harvest Farms. Nationally, Pebble Beach and Pinehurst purchase his work.

“I find that golfers, they love history,” Roche explained regarding the popularity of his pieces among golfers.

Roche's work is paramount in other sports as well, mainly hockey and basketball. He crafted pieces for USA Hockey that were awarded during the 2002 Winter Olympics and his Naismith Legacy Award sculpture is bestowed every year as a lifetime achievement award for basketball; the first winner was Michael Jordan.

Roche also served as a Highland Park firefighter for 40 years, citing the profession's 24-hour-on, 48-off schedule as the ideal complement to his sculpting career. He has created several fire service pieces, including “Brotherhood of Honor,” which depicts the famous photo of three firemen raising an American flag amidst World Trade Center rubble after 9/11.

Golf, however, remains one of Roche's favorite genres to sculpt, with his passion for visually depicting the game's rich history playing an integral role in the community's enjoyment of it. ●

—Casey Richards



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