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KARSTEN'S WAY



The Man Who Changed the Golf Club Industry

He's been called a visionary, a revolutionary, a genius. He has been credited in some circles with virtually inventing the modern game of golf—or at least with so indelibly stamping his mark on the golf equipment industry that scarcely a club made today doesn't in some way bear a resemblance to the clubs he designed. He's been seen as an outsider in the golf-club industry and a maverick in the way he ran his business—from how he treated his employees to how he built and marketed his products. He is known as a man who knew how to solve problems, no matter how simple or complicated they may be.

Whatever adjectives you apply to the man, whatever changes in the golf equipment industry you credit him with, and no matter how you describe him, there's no ques-

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tion that Karsten Solheim forever changed the face of golf and the golf equipment business. He left his imprint on the equipment golfers at all levels of competition use to play their sport. And he revolutionized the way golf manufacturers produce and market their products.

It's rare at the beginning of the twenty-first century to find a piece of golf equipment that doesn't owe at least part of its design to Karsten Solheim. Golf manufacturers have been using his ideas—at least variations of them—for a generation, and since many of the patents on Karsten's clubs have long run out, much of the new equipment are blatant copies or knockoffs of what Karsten Manufacturing has been doing from the beginning. Ideas such as heel-toe and perimeter weighting, investment casting, and custom fitting—all pivotal in the development of Karsten Solheim's clubs—are now in use in many quarters of the golf equipment industry. It has been estimated that there are literally hundreds of duplicates and clones of Ping's Anser putter alone on the market today.

It's an impressive story, especially when you consider that it is the story of a man who never played golf until he was in his early forties but who went on to become one of the most important figures in the game.

LOOKING FOR SOLUTIONS

As the inventor of Ping golf clubs and the founder and president of Karsten Manufacturing, which builds and markets Ping clubs, Karsten Solheim was nothing if not a problem solver. He was truly a visionary whose goal was to make things better for golfers at all levels of the game. From the beginning of his involvement in golf-club manufacturing in the late 1950s, Karsten Solheim set about solving a problem that all golfers know about: equipment that made the game more difficult than it needed to be, equipment that was so unforgiving that it required near perfection on

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the part of golfers in order to turn in a decent score. As far as Karsten was concerned, there were enough variables in the game of golf already—the weather, the course, the golfer himself or herself—without the golfer's having to battle his or her equipment. So he looked at the problem, then found a way to solve it.

Karsten Solheim's brilliant mind could examine a problem, figure out what caused the problem, then work to make the necessary corrections. From the time he began playing golf, he had the unique ability to look at his own shortcomings and those of other golfers at all levels and figure out how changes in equipment could help the golfer become the best he or she could be. In other words, Karsten wanted to design golf clubs that were an asset and not an actual hindrance to a golfer's game.

The results speak for themselves. The Ping golf clubs—the putters, the irons, and the woods—are among the most popular in the world, and certain models have maintained their place as the best-selling clubs in their classification. The Ping Anser putter, first produced in 1966, wasn't Karsten's first putter, but it was by far the most successful. Modeled after his original putters with some improvements, the Anser has played a part in more than 500 professional tournament victories worldwide and is considered the all-time best-selling putter. The Titleist Bulls Eye, the Wilson 8802, and the Ram Zebra are extremely popular putters and rightly so, but the consensus among industry experts is that the Anser is the best-selling ever.

With Ping's spot in the putter market firmly established, Karsten moved on in the early '60s to designing and manufacturing irons. The results were no less spectacular. Ping's Eye2, first introduced in 1982, is the single most popular iron ever created. More sets of the Eye2 were sold than any other iron, and they are still being made.

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A DIFFERENT MOTIVATION

Karsten Solheim's ideas made him a wealthy man, but he never had as his motivation the pursuit of worldly riches. Karsten was a complex man, who was in many ways a contradiction to most self-made millionaires. He was a man who never set out to make a fortune but only to earn a comfortable living for his family and to help golfers at all levels to improve their games. He did not spend his life in the pursuit of money. In his life and his business, Karsten never pursued profits and riches.

To Karsten Solheim, money was nothing more than a means to make other people's lives more comfortable. He was a man who was concerned first with people. He enjoyed using his know-how—and it was know-how that seemingly came naturally, as you will see later on—to help golfers hit the ball straighter and to allow the thousands of people who worked for him over the years to earn a good living so that they and their families could live comfortable lives.

Karsten Solheim's ability to solve problems made him wealthy indeed, but it also helped some of the greatest golfers of all time to etch their names into the history of the sport.

DOING IT HIS WAY

Karsten Solheim ran his business under the philosophy that if you don't constantly improve, you will stagnate and be overtaken by the competition. That showed itself in how Karsten Manufacturing expanded, first from putters to irons, then from irons to woods, then from woods to all sorts of golf equipment and accessories, including bags, clothing, and, for a time, golf balls.

Most businessmen who have enjoyed this kind of success have resorted to mass marketing, mass production, and price discounting to enjoy the kind of volume Karsten

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Manufacturing has enjoyed. But Karsten Solheim had other ideas, which made his Phoenix-based conglomerate a model in the business world. He never discounted or mass marketed. Rather, he manufactured products at the highest level possible and trusted the discriminating buyer to rise to the appropriate price. Every piece was custom-made, one at a time, to fill a standing order.

Karsten's way was simple: Build it better, sell it at a fair price (fair to the producer as well as the consumer), and let the quality of the product speak for itself. That way of doing business was a successful one too, and many of the game's top tour players had a hand in making Ping the success that it has become.

From the time Julius Boros became the first professional golfer to win a tour event, the 1967 Phoenix Open, using a Cushin model Ping putter, some of the biggest names in the world of professional golf—Tom Watson, Seve Ballesteros, Nick Faldo, and Paul Azinger on the men's tour, and Betsy Rawls, JoAnne Carner, Beth Daniel, and Judy Rankin on the women's tour, to name a few—have given Karsten's putters a great deal of credit for their success.

While Karsten owed much of his success to the professional golfers who used his products and were successful with them, he also enjoyed helping even the most rank amateur golfer improve by using his clubs. From the very beginning, his goal was to use his giftedness to make golf easier for people. With an improved club, golfers at all levels play better, enjoy the game more, and derive more satisfaction from it. Karsten loved the idea of making golf more fun for those who play the game, and he loved to hear from those who liked his clubs.

There was nothing Karsten Solheim enjoyed more than meeting people who used his equipment and improved their golf games as a result. He always had time for people. He loved being approached by people—on golf courses, in

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airports, in restaurants, wherever he would meet them—who wanted to thank him for his innovations in the game. He was approached often by people wanting his autograph, wanting to talk to him, or wanting to have their picture taken with him. And almost without fail, he accommodated their requests. He always took time to talk to the customers who liked his products. He was even known to miss flights in order to spend time with people who wanted to talk to him.

Karsten Solheim was, in many people's eyes, the ideal boss. He worked to make sure that the thousands who worked in the Karsten Manufacturing plant loved their jobs, knew him personally, were free to address him as "Karsten," and were paid well enough to provide a comfortable life for their families. He did that not just because he wanted his employees to work harder for him, but also because he knew it would make them happier people.

While many businessmen might balk at his ways of doing business, it's hard to argue with the results. Karsten Solheim was an incredible success, both in terms of finances and human relations. He was, in every objectively measurable way, a true self-made success story. Karsten would say only, "God blessed us."

AN UNLIKELY SUCCESS STORY

Anyone looking to grow and excel in his or her own business would do well to study the life of golf's genius, to take a long look at the man whose old-world values—hard work, unflinching honesty and integrity, and a deep-seated sense of loyalty—made him what he became in the modern business world. On every level of his business, this Norwegian-born engineer, designer, and salesman is an icon to any armchair thinker who ever dreamed of an idea that would make his fortune. The man who reached such heights in the second half of his life did not come to corpo-

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rate America through an MBA program. Rather, Karsten Solheim was an unlikely genius, an outsider in the world of golf who made his fortune through the kind of hard work and perseverance rarely seen in today's business world. Most everybody who knew Karsten Solheim knew him as a good man: a humanitarian, a philanthropist, an honest and loyal businessman, a tireless worker, and a man who loved his wife and his children. But he was not a perfect man. He dealt with all his associates honestly, but he had his enemies in the business world. He believed deeply in the importance of the family and loved his own, but he had his shortcomings as a husband and father. And for those who found him inspirational and a catalyst for creative thinking, there were others who saw him as rigid, stubborn, and impatient. Even those who respected and loved him the most say with a smile, "It always had to be Karsten's way." In short, as with so many, his strengths were also his weaknesses.

But a look into the past of Karsten Solheim reveals much about what made him the man that he became. It reveals much about his professional and personal ways, about what shaped his personality, his business, and his family. An overview of his surprising past sheds light on the crucible of endurance necessary to produce such results. His principles of business, management, marketing, manufacturing, and even personal growth were forged and refined in the fire of real life.

The man who owned the manufacturing plant now run by his sons in Phoenix, Arizona, and who became a giant in the world of golf didn't have the kind of early life you would expect for someone of his stature. He didn't grow up in a life of privilege. He was, in fact, a motherless child.

AGAINST ALL ODDS



The Unlikely Shaping of a Genius

Considering Karsten Solheim's personal history, particularly his upbringing, it's amazing that he made anything of his life, let alone that he became a legendary success in the world of business. He didn't come from an advantaged background. In fact, he grew up without his mother and, for a crucial time in his early childhood, without his father, facing untold sadness and disadvantage as a young child.

Today, the kind of upbringing Karsten endured is routinely used as an excuse for all sorts of antisocial behavior and dysfunction. It might seem understandable in our modern culture to expect a man such as Karsten never to amount to much by the world's standards. But Karsten Solheim came along in an era when childhood trauma was no excuse for adult dysfunction. He grew up in an era when

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that sort of disadvantage was a source of personal strength and fortitude.

Those who knew Karsten Solheim well understood that he was a good man with flaws, and that, despite his love for people, he struggled with interpersonal relationships. But to accurately perceive this complex man—his strengths, his weaknesses, his flaws—you must look into his past. In order to understand his successes and failures in business, as an employer and as a husband and father, you have to look at the man through the window of a very difficult background. With that factor in mind, it is possible to understand how Karsten Solheim became what he became, professionally and personally, as an inventor, businessman, employer, and husband and father.

Understanding Karsten Solheim's background gives understanding of his personality, which many have seen as hardheaded, stubborn, aloof, and noncommunicative. But it also makes it all the easier to admire the man who rose from nothing to become one of the most important figures in late-twentieth-century golf. It helps us to understand a man who, despite his shortcomings, was also a humanitarian who had a deep love for people. It helps us to admire more the genius of Karsten Solheim.

A MOTHERLESS CHILD

Karsten Solheim's birth certificate says he was born in Bergen, Norway, on September 14, 1911, a firstborn. But for some reason, the family always celebrated his birthday as September 15. His father, Helleman Andreas Solheim, was a shoemaker like his own father. When Karsten was a year old, his father migrated alone to Seattle and Americanized his name to Herman Andrew. One year after that, Herman sent for his wife, Ragna Koppen Solheim, and Karsten. Mother and child set sail for America, Karsten too young to remember the trip.

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Karsten's early memory is of his mother in her coffin. She died June 27, 1914, after prematurely giving birth to his brother Ragnor, Americanized to Raymond. Karsten was not yet three years old. She had gotten pregnant right after arriving in Seattle but had also, perhaps aboard ship, contracted tuberculosis, a lung disease common at that time and a disease that was often fatal.

Ragna Solheim's death began an odyssey for Karsten, who was shuffled from family to family for the next several years of his life.

After the death of his mother, Karsten's father left for Alaska to seek work, leaving baby Ray to be cared for by a Norwegian family named Eriksen, who had been renting a room to the Solheims. Being prematurely born, Ray was tiny, weighing about two pounds at birth. The Eriksens fed him with an eyedropper and kept him warm by wrapping him in cotton wool and placing him in a shoe box on the warming oven above the stove. Amazingly, Ray would one day grow to be a very big man, much bigger than Karsten.

The Eriksens had four daughters of their own, the eldest a year older than Karsten's father. They knew they couldn't care for two boys, one of whom was an infant who needed constant care. So when Karsten's father moved to Alaska, he sent his older son to live with a German family named Himmelspech. About a year later, Karsten was sent to a Swedish family named Anderson.

Karsten barely spoke during the first several years of his life, and it's not hard to understand why. There he was, not quite three years old, having lost his mother and seeing his father leave him. He was in a strange country, where he began life in a Norwegian-speaking home, then moved to a home where German was spoken, then to a Swedish-speaking household. All the while, he was surrounded by Americans who spoke English. How confusing it must have been for him to move literally from one culture to an-

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other so many times during early childhood. He must have felt he had been abandoned.

Around the time Karsten turned six, he finally got some stability in his life when his father returned from Alaska and married the oldest of the Eriksen girls. They had no honeymoon. She simply moved into a new home with her husband and his two small boys. It was another change for Karsten, but it created a lasting, stable home life for him and his brother. In 1922, Karsten and Ray welcomed a baby sister, Elaine. Then, three years later, another baby was born to the Solheim family, a girl they named Marjorie.

A STABLE FAMILY—FINALLY

Although Karsten was finally in a stable home with his own father, he was barely communicative. By then, he had almost completely forgotten his native tongue, Norwegian. His stepmother once told Louise Solheim, Karsten's wife of more than sixty years, that he rarely said more than *smør og brød*—"bread and butter"—in Norwegian. What made things even more difficult for Karsten was that he was also small for his age, too small to start school. Although he probably would have learned English faster if he had been in school, his father and stepmother kept him out until he was seven years old. By then he had learned enough English to get by, yet he had to repeat first grade.

Karsten remained small for his age all the way through his high school years, not attaining his adult growth until after he was eighteen. Being smaller than most of his classmates, despite being two or three years older than most, Karsten became a battler. He may not have been as big as his classmates, but he wasn't going to allow himself to be pushed around. He stood up for himself, and he got into scraps with some of his classmates because of it. Ray, who would not get involved in Karsten's fights, often raced home to get his mother to come to break them up.

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Karsten soon grew accustomed to his surroundings with his birth father and his wife, but the scars of his early family-to-family moves remained. He still feared that one day he would have to leave his family again—or that they would leave him. Ray had become sort of an adopted son of Herman Solheim's in-laws, so he was often invited back to the Eriksen home to spend the night. Karsten's father felt it only right to give Karsten the same privilege, so he delivered him to the Eriksens' one night. Family legend has it that Karsten, apparently believing he was being given away yet again, became hysterical. He cried so hard that his two teenage step-aunts had to walk him the twelve or thirteen blocks home in the middle of the night.

In addition to gaining some stability in his life, Karsten first learned of the Christian faith as a small boy. The newly formed Solheim family lived in the Ballard area of Seattle, a Scandinavian section of the city. Karsten's father, a Christian man himself, took his family to Bethel Temple, a Pentecostal mission in downtown Seattle, where, at the age of seven or eight, Karsten committed himself to the Christian faith. Many years later, he still vividly remembered being with his stepmother after hearing the sermon and "walking the aisle" to accept Christ. He remembered feeling at peace and good about what he'd done.

That night was the beginning of a long life of faith in God for Karsten Solheim, who operated his business and his personal life the best he knew how, using the Bible as a guide for all he did.

DEMONSTRATING EARLY GENIUS

Although Karsten didn't get his start in the golf equipment business till he was in his forties, long before that there were indications that this man would be something special in whatever field he entered. Those inklings of genius were evident from the time he started school. Looking

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back on that time in Karsten's life, it should be obvious to anyone who knew him that if it hadn't been golf equipment, it would have been something else.

By almost any standard, Karsten Solheim's start in school was a slow one. But once he got started, it seemed there was nothing he couldn't do, no idea he couldn't grasp, and no skill he couldn't master. The term "talented and gifted" as it is applied to schoolchildren was a gross understatement for a student such as Karsten. Math came easily to him, as did industrial arts. And in the subjects he didn't seem a "natural" at, he worked hard, achieving success through effort alone. He was always the kind of person who was driven to be the best he possibly could be in any area, and that included schoolwork.

He worked hard in school at first, but when he got into high school he became discouraged. He worked hard to get an A in a subject he didn't care for, and when he aced the test, the teacher couldn't believe it. He was accused of cheating. Dismayed, he decided to quit taking books home to study.

Karsten excelled most in math and woodworking. His woodwork was amazingly intricate, creative, and functional, particularly for a high school boy. In fact, he was so skilled with his hands that the two wood shop teachers at Ballard High School argued over who would have him in class. At one point they were hopelessly deadlocked and told him to just not take woodworking. Yet, when the principal needed a bookcase built, both teachers recommended Karsten for the job.

As he did with all his woodworking projects, he did a masterful job on the bookcase, which was still being used in the school fifty years later, with Karsten's signature on the back. More than sixty years after they were made, several of his projects still grace Louise's Phoenix home, as functional, sturdy, and visually appealing as they were when they were

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built. Visitors nearly always express astonishment that they were done by a high school boy more than a half century ago.

Karsten was also an excellent mechanic, and it seemed to come naturally to him. He had a seemingly innate ability to understand how things worked, a skill that would play a large part in his taking his place in the world of golf manufacturing. He had an uncanny knack for figuring out what was wrong with a machine, then fixing it on the spot. He could look at a machine, take it apart, analyze the problem, repair it, and reassemble it. He loved cars and engines and quickly became proficient at working on them, a skill that came in quite handy throughout his life.

As talented and intelligent as Karsten Solheim was as a youth, that would have meant little had he not also possessed that certain something within that made him the kind of man who persevered, who continued to work his hardest, even when things didn't go his way at first. He had that quality, and he had it in large quantities from the time he was a little boy.

LEARNING TO WORK

Nobody who knew Karsten Solheim, not even his wife and children, ever heard him complain about how hard he worked, even as a little boy in grade school. Karsten learned early the value of hard work, starting when he worked in his father's shoe-repair shop as a second grader. It seems cruel by today's standards to make a child that age work after school, but that was the way it was done in the Old Country, and that's how Karsten's father operated his shop.

Karsten started working in the shoe shop at a time when he was barely big enough to hold a broom in his hands. His father had him come right after school, which was only a few blocks from the shop, and work with him for the rest of the day. He swept the floor, washed the win-

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dows—whatever a boy that age was physically able to do. He even helped out at the counter, standing on a box to wait on customers because he was too short to see over the counter. As he got more and more accustomed to working, his father gradually taught him the shoe-repair trade. He always loved working with his hands and learning technical skills, so he took to shoe repair quickly at a very early age.

Karsten wasn't the kind of high school kid who let his time slip idly by. He was a busy high schooler who worked hard and had goals for his life. He wanted to become an engineer, and his goal was to graduate from the University of Washington. In addition to working to get good grades at Ballard High School, he rose early every morning to do a large paper route, saving the money he earned for college. After school, except during baseball season—he once lettered in high school baseball—it was straight to the shoe shop, where he worked until closing.

Karsten graduated from high school in 1931 and then enrolled at the University of Washington in Seattle, where he studied engineering. After just a year at college, however, the Great Depression made it impossible for him to continue school because he had run out of money. He dropped out of college, then moved to Port Townsend, Washington, where he took a job in the shoe-repair department at the back of Olberg's Department Store. His guaranteed wages were two dollars a day or half of what he took in.

Karsten had attended church his whole life, and he continued to attend in Port Townsend. He found he enjoyed services in the local Methodist church. There he met a farm family named Neville, which included four sons and parents, who made it a habit to invite people over for Sunday dinner. Karsten was one of those people, and he grew close to the family. He visited them often, even living with them for a time.

During that period, he continued to work with his

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hands. One of the Neville boys, William, later remembered that Karsten made them a leather slingshot, the kind David might have used in Bible times. Karsten went with the boys to the bank overlooking Discovery Bay, and they enjoyed seeing who could sling a rock the farthest out into the Pacific. Forty-five years later, William Neville visited Karsten and gave him that same slingshot.

MEETING DESTINY—BACK HOME

Herman Solheim's shoe-repair business expanded until he was running two shops in Seattle. But a year after Karsten left for Port Townsend, his father suffered an illness that forced him to cut back on his hours of work and forced Karsten to return home to help him run the two shops. There was no question about it: Herman needed Karsten's help if the business was to survive. The shops stood six blocks apart on 24th Avenue NW. After his return to Seattle, Karsten ran one of them, and his father ran the other.

Karsten and his father operated the business with the utmost integrity, insisting—quietly—that those who came into the shop not disrespect their Christian beliefs. One of the Neville boys visited Karsten one day and recalls two women swearing as they conversed in the shop. Karsten said nothing. He merely found a small placard and quietly placed it on the counter in front of them. It read, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." The women quickly fell silent.

Karsten Solheim was never one to be overly outspoken about anything, and that included his faith. Rather, he preferred to let his actions do the talking. His relationship with God soon took a prominent place in his life while he was still a young man. He was a behind-the-scenes servant at his church, Bethel Temple. He filled his big car with children he had invited to Sunday school. After the evening services, when he would drive his fellow youth group members

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somewhere, he sometimes had to deliver a pair of shoes along the way. Often he drove groups to various other area churches where special services were held.

For eight years, Karsten would run the shoe-repair shop and center his leisure time on church. When he landed a huge army contract job, he worked mornings and most of the night filling the avalanche of orders on time.

It was an incredibly busy time in his life, and in the middle of that period Karsten met someone who, like himself, was a motherless child. As it turned out, that person would be the woman with whom he would share the rest of his life.