

“WHERE IN THE WORLD IS CORI BRETT”

September/October 2012

“MOROCCO”

When Steve Stricker was named the 2012 Payne Stewart Award winner in September, it brought back some wonderful memories for me.

I recall sitting near Payne Stewart at a fancy outdoor feast in Marrakech, Morocco. Just off the golf course, tastefully attired in his trademark plus-fours, he spontaneously jumped up and joined a group of folk dancers weaving their way through the audience. They kicked up their heels to musical accompaniment, drumming and singing. A red Moroccan fez replaced Stewart’s usual peaked cap, and its tassel was swinging with every step. He was having a great time, and they loved him.



Payne Stewart and Cori Brett

We were a group of about 100 Americans attending the King Hassan II Trophy in the late 1990's. It was founded by King Hassan II and golf legend Billy Casper some 38 years ago to help spread the game of golf. The week-long golf event included practice rounds in Marrakech, with the professional tournament and a Pro-Am taking place in the capital city of Rabat.

In addition to golf, participants toured exotic marketplaces and historical sites, dined in former palaces and were treated royally. Payne Stewart was one of the U.S. pros who competed. Now the Hassan II is an officially scheduled event on the European Tour and is held in the coastal city of Agadir.

One morning before golf, Stewart gathered a group of aspiring young Moroccan golfers at the practice range and began an informal lesson. He talked to them about beginning golf (many spoke English), demonstrated the swing, hit some shots, and proceeded to give some basic lessons. Then he produced golf clubs for the youngsters, which he had brought from the U.S. They were so excited. Each day he made himself available at the range for them. I'll bet some of those kids are dedicated golfers today because of him.

All week long, Payne Stewart participated with great enthusiasm in everything our hosts presented. He represented everything good about Americans in a foreign country. I told him he was a great ambassador.

In the end, he won the tournament. The monetary prize was overshadowed by a magnificent jewel-encrusted dagger, presented by the Crown Prince himself. Stewart wondered aloud what would happen when he declared it to U.S. Customs.

The golf world lost a beloved champion when Stewart passed away in 1999 in a bizarre airplane accident. The Learjet he was flying in with five others lost oxygen and flew aimlessly for hours before finally crashing into farmland in South Dakota.

The Payne Stewart Award was established in 2000 and is given annually to the tour player who exemplifies Stewart's respect for the game's traditions, exceptional character and generosity. Every year when the Award is given out, I reflect on what fun it was to be an American golfer in Morocco with Payne Stewart.

"Escape with Cori" on assignment to exotic and fun golf destinations. First-hand impressions from an experienced golf travel writer and AWGA member. www.coribrett.com. Copyright Cori Brett 2012 – do not copy or cite in whole or in part without permission.