

12:01AM BST 31 Mar 2007

Maurice Flitcroft, who died on March 24 aged 77, was a chain-smoking shipyard crane-operator from Barrow-in-Furness whose persistent attempts to gatecrash the British Open golf championship produced a sense of humour failure among members of the golfing establishment.

In 1976 the 46-year-old Flitcroft bought a half-set of mail order clubs and set his sights on finding "fame and fortune" by applying to play in the Birkdale Open "with Jack Nicklaus and all that lot". He prepared by studying a Peter Allis instruction manual borrowed from the local library and instructional articles by the 1966 PGA Championship winner Al Geiberger, honing his skills by hitting a ball about on a nearby beach.

He obtained an entry form from an unsuspecting Royal and Ancient, which organises the championship, and, having no handicap to declare as an amateur, he picked the other option on the form: professional.

Invited to play in the qualifier at Formby, he put in a performance which one witness described as a "blizzard of triple and quadruple bogeys ruined by a solitary par", achieving a total of 121 - 49 over par, the worst score recorded in the tournament's 141-year history. In fact, this was only a rough estimate, his marker having lost count on a couple of holes.

His playing partner, Jim Howard, recalled his suspicions being aroused almost from the word go: "After gripping the club like he was intent on murdering someone, Flitcroft hoisted it straight up, came down vertically and the ball travelled precisely four feet," he said. "We put that one down to nerves, but after he shanked a second one we called the R&A officials." Under the rules of the tournament, however, nothing could be done. "It wasn't funny at the time," Howard recalled.

Others demurred, and Flitcroft's performance dominated the next day's sports pages, while stars such as Jack Nicklaus found themselves relegated to the small print. Flitcroft was interviewed endlessly. The score, he maintained, "weren't a fair reflection" of his play. He had been suffering from "lumbago and fibrositis, but I don't want to make excuses", and he blamed the fact that he had left his four-wood in the car: "I was an expert with the four-wood, deadly accurate."

When an enterprising journalist visited Flitcroft's mother and told her about her son's record-breaking performance, she asked: "Does that mean he's won?" When informed of the true state of affairs, she replied: "Well, he's got to start somewhere, hasn't he?"

Furious that their game had been held up to ridicule, the R&A tightened the entry rules. The following year, when Flitcroft applied to play in the qualifying tournament, he received a letter from the R&A's secretary, Keith Mackenzie, informing him that he had been turned down on the ground that he had provided no proof of an improvement in his game.

The letter sparked a prolonged correspondence, in the course of which Flitcroft challenged Mackenzie to a match at the Old Course to settle the debate about his golfing talents. Subsequently Flitcroft was banned from R&A tournaments for life.

Refusing to be beaten, in 1978 he posed as an American professional named Gene Pacecki ("as in pay cheque", he explained helpfully) and blagged his way into the qualifier at South Herts, where he was detected after a few holes and bundled unceremoniously off the course. At a qualifier at Pleasington in 1983, he tried disguise, dyeing his hair, donning a false moustache and masquerading as Gerald Hoppy, a professional golfer from Switzerland. He fared rather better this time, playing nine holes and 63 strokes before officials realised that they had "another Maurice Flitcroft" on their hands. "Imagine their surprise when they discovered they had the actual Maurice Flitcroft," he said.

In 1990 he entered the qualifier at Ormskirk as James Beau Jolley (as in Beaujolais), an American golf professional. He hit a double bogey at the first hole and a bogey at the second; he claimed to be "looking at a par" at the third before he was rudely interrupted by an R&A golf buggy which screeched to a halt in front of him. He remonstrated with the driver, asking to be allowed to finish the hole, but officials were not in the mood to show mercy. Nor did they return his £60 entry fee.

Flitcroft never understood why the R&A was so upset. "I never set out to belittle them. Golf's just a game and I tried my best. What did they need to get so uptight about?"

Maurice Gerald Flitcroft was born in Manchester on November 23 1929 and claimed to have been a talented schoolboy athlete. After leaving school he joined the Merchant Navy, then made a living as a high-diving comedy stunt man with a travelling theatre group. After his marriage he moved to Barrow-in-Furness, where he became a crane operator at the Vickers Armstrong shipyard. He retired in the 1970s.

Flitcroft's entryist assaults on the Open made him a cult figure in some golfing circles. He received mail from around the world addressed simply to Maurice Flitcroft, Golfer, England.

A club in New York State named a trophy after him, and another in Michigan named a member-guest tournament in his honour, the event featuring a green with two holes to give the truly hopeless a sporting chance. In 1988, when Flitcroft was flown in as an honorary competitor at the event, he explained that it was the first time he and his wife had been out of the house together "since our gas oven exploded". His game seemed to have improved somewhat and he completed the course with a score in the low 90s. "I hit a lot of good shots," he claimed proudly.

Though he was banned from playing on almost every course in Britain, in 1993 Flitcroft was permitted to play a round at a course at Windermere with The Daily Telegraph's golf correspondent Lewine Mair. Later he invoiced the newspaper for 12 lost balls. He enjoyed hitting a golf ball about on the beach until he broke his hip in 2001.

Maurice Flitcroft's wife Jean died in 2002, and he is survived by their two sons and by two stepsons. The R&A refused to comment on his death, explaining that Flitcroft had "only played in qualifiers".

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2014