

**Reluctant Legend Glenna Collett Vare**  
**by Kikue Higuchi for the LPGA**  
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Three men looked on as a 14-year-old girl, who weighed no more than 70 pounds, hit her very first golf ball at the Metacomet Country Club in Providence, Rhode Island during the summer of 1917. Not expecting much, the onlookers were shocked when the young girl whacked that ball over 100-yards straight down the fairway. Unable to contain his enthusiasm, one shouted: "The coming champion!"

And she was. That girl was Glenna Collett-Vare, who became famous worldwide for her astonishingly long and hard-hit drives. She was called the "the female Bobby Jones," and remains the only golfer to win six U.S. Women's Amateur Championships (1922, 1925, 1928-30, 1935), the most prestigious title in American women's golf at the time. She won her first five championships as Glenna Collett and her final title, which came over a 17-year-old named Patty Berg, as Glenna Collett-Vare, a mother of two.

With her hard-hitting style, Collett-Vare brought women's golf to the forefront of American sport. She not only proved that women could play golf but that they could do it just as well as the best of the men. By the time she won her fourth title in 1929, several journalists began to remark on the fast-closing gap between men's and women's competition in terms of scores and excitement. That's when the comparisons between Collett-Vare and Bobby Jones began in earnest, as they both laid claim to four amateur titles.

"It is a pleasure to note the advance in the standard of play in the Women's Championship," reads the November 1929 issue of *Golf Illustrated*. "The gap between the ladies and men is being steadily lessened and the low scores turned in recently have been so good that the difference between the very best players of either sex is no more than about five strokes."

The women on the courses with Collett-Vare felt the shift as well. Many began to stray away from the conservative style of women's golf that had dominated earlier decades and followed in the footsteps of a slim young girl from Rhode Island.

"She taught us a new game," said three-time US Women's Amateur champion Dorothy Campbell Hurd. "Before Glenna, we ladies used to aim just for the green. Glenna showed us that ladies can play for the flag."

And it all began with one lucky swing on a summer day in 1917 that dazzled the members of the Metacomet Country Club. The only spectator who wasn't surprised to see Collett-Vare nail her first tee shot was her father, George Collett. After all, he had spent the last 14 years watching his precocious daughter succeed at nearly every sport she tried. Before she picked up a club, Collett-Vare was already a proficient swimmer, diver and tennis player. And until her mother pleaded with her to adopt a more ladylike activity, Collett-Vare was the star of her brother's baseball team.

After that magical tee shot, Collett-Vare was hooked and slowly gave up her other pursuits in favor of golf. But her beginner's luck ended with that first swing. Her first 18-hole score was a disappointing 150 and by the end that first summer, Collett-Vare could only manage a 130 at best. Collett-Vare's preternatural prowess off-the-tee, though encouraging, wasn't enough just yet.

Luckily, Collett-Vare got her first professional instructor just a year later thanks to golf historian H.B. Martin. He wrote about the moment they met in 1930: "A slim young lady with a large red picture hat was playing at Apawamis in the Eastern Women's Championship. She drove astonishing balls from the tee with a graceful well-balanced swing. I happened to observe her tee shots and asked if she played the rest of her game as well. She admitted that she did not."

At that admission, Martin introduced Collett-Vare to Scottish golfer and two-time U.S. Open Champion (1906, 1910) Alex Smith. The Scotsman watched her hit tee shots and quickly decided to take the youngster under his wing. According to legend, Smith said, "If I can't make a champion out of her, I'll be a disgrace to the Smith family."

But luckily for Smith's reputation, she was indeed a champion. Smith's lessons were a turning point in Collett-Vare's career. She credits him with developing her raw talent. When she was at the height of her game in 1928, Collett-Vare wrote: "Smith taught me a sound philosophy as well as a better way of handling the mashie and the putter. He strengthened my driving to such a degree that when I was eighteen, standing five-feet six-inches tall and weighing 128 pounds, I drove a ball a measured distance of 307 yards, at that time, the longest drive ever hit by a woman."

No women had ever hit the ball as hard as Collett-Vare and her style captivated the nation as she rose through the ranks. After she won her first U.S. Women's Amateur title in 1922 at just 19-years-old – just the second teenager to do so after [Alexa Stirling](#) – journalist J. Lewis Brown wrote, “Undoubtedly, Miss Collett is the greatest driver of them all.”

Collett-Vare also carded extremely low scores with remarkable consistency. Between 1928 and 1931 she won 19 events straight, including three consecutive U.S. Women's Amateur titles. And if she didn't win the event, she at least came away with the medal for lowest qualifying score. Though she lost in the final round of the 1924 championship – her only loss of the 60 matches she played that year – she became the first woman to break 80 in the qualifying round of the U.S. Women's Amateur.

Collett-Vare was sure to make history, even though her talent fueled a fame that she never got used to. The Providence-native wasn't shy, but she was always wary of maintaining the fine balance between confidence and conceit. She was so unwilling to acknowledge her own legacy, when she presented the very first Vare Trophy to Patty Berg in 1953, she presented the trophy as the “Betty Jameson Award,” since Jameson had come up with the idea of the Vare trophy.

Whenever she was asked about her record of six amateur titles, Collett-Vare would always mention JoAnne Gunderson Carner, who won five championships before turning professional. In 1987, Collett-Vare made a ceremonial appearance at the U.S. Women's Amateur and told her friend, Kay Jackson: “I wish JoAnne had won that last Championship so that I wouldn't have to come to these damn things.”

Though she was a reluctant legend, Collett-Vare was far from cold. In fact, she blames more than one of her losses on an overabundance of kindness for her opponent.

“People say I was intimidating, but I was not,” Vare said in 1989. “I lost matches because I tried to be too nice. I'd start out on the first tee with a girl saying how scared she was of me. So, I'd get kind of sentimental and want to put her at ease. Before I knew it, I'd be five down and licked – just for being nice!”

And, though she may have shunned her stardom, Collett-Vare was not afraid to use her influence. She was always a staunch advocate for women's golf and constantly tried to get more women to join the sport. She wrote frequent beginner's guides to golf that were published in women's magazines like the Ladies' Home Journal. She wrote two books, *Golf for Young Players* (1926) and *Ladies in the Rough* (1928), both of which aimed to persuade youngsters – especially young women – to pick up the sport.

She also wrote op-eds to promote golf among women. Trying to combat the idea that golf makes women “too masculine and thus not attractive to men,” Collett-Vare wrote a perfect sales

pitch arguing that golf enhances beauty, and that all women should take a trip to the course instead of going to the beauty parlor.

After Collett-Vare's career on the course had ended, she continued to advocate for the sport. She readily criticized broadcasts of the LPGA in interviews she gave throughout the 1970s and 80s. She wasn't afraid to say the women deserved better.

"I watch all the golf matches on TV and don't think TV gives the girls enough credit," Collett-Vare said in 1979. "The announcers patronize them. They should go into more detail and tell how far they drive and what clubs they use for their other shots. I think the reporting, on the whole, is a little casual. I think some of the men look down their noses at the women. I don't like that at all."

Collett-Vare was 85 when she passed away on February 2, 1989, after a bout with lymphoma. Inducted into the inaugural class of the World Golf Hall of Fame over a decade earlier in 1975, Collett-Vare was immortalized for her undeniable impact on the advancement of women's golf and her uncanny ability to win. Though she was lauded for being a good winner, Collett-Vare would perhaps prefer to be remembered as a gracious loser.

In the twilight of her life, Collett-Vare became particularly unwilling to speak about her impact and her own game. She waved off questions from reporters and told them to go look it up because it had all been written before. Only in one instance was the intractable icon forthcoming: when asked about her match with Joyce Wethered in the finals of the 1929 British Amateur Championship. Collett-Vare lost that match, but always said it was the best and most exciting golf she had ever played.

Just a few months before she faced Wethered she wrote the following: "There is an ideal toward which I have always struggled – something beyond physical prowess, beyond coordinated nerves and muscles, beyond the dominant will to win. Rather it is a mental quality that is part grace of spirit, part philosophy and part good manners reduced to the essence of sportsmanship – trying to be a good loser."

Though Collett-Vare undoubtedly wanted to win every match she played, she also understood that life was much more than just golf and preferred to be well-respected and loved by those she met. On that windy day at St. Andrews in 1929, though Collett-Vare played the best golf of her life, she still couldn't overcome Joyce Wethered. But she was not bitter, sad, or angry. She was thrilled to have played the match and remembered it as the greatest of her career. In short, she was a good loser.

Whether she likes it or not, Collett-Vare will always be a legend. But hopefully she'd be happy to hear she was remembered for more than just her swing or her scores, but her sportsmanship, her advocacy and her kindness.