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Atlanta is the stage for  
biopic on golf legend / **E1**



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50 CENTS

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Bobby Jones**



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Monday

Tuesday

News

Metro

Sports

Business

Opinion

Living

Gwinnett

Front page

image

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

Saturday

Sunday

Full index

Nation / World

Metro

Business

Sports

Living

Opinion

Travel

Health

Your Money

Buyer's Edge

Jobs

Cars

Homes

Classifieds

AccessAtlanta

Entertainment

Events

Music

Movies

Theater & Arts

Restaurants

Recreation

Personals

ajc services

Archives

### A swing at a legend

## Moviemakers tee off at local courses to tell the story of famed Georgia golfer Bobby Jones

Bob Longino - Staff  
Tuesday, October 14, 2003

It's hard to imagine the real Bobby Jones ever having this problem.

Portraying Georgia's legendary golfer on the set of the indie movie "Stroke of Genius" at Chateau Elan in Braselton, actor Jim Caviezel finishes swinging a club. The camera fixates on a small gallery of local extras, all clad in 1920s costumes -- the tweeds and knickers reminiscent of "Chariots of Fire." But as sometimes happens in the movie business, it seems somebody forgot to tell the extras they're supposed to cheer. The extras, en masse, stand still. And stare.

Off camera, Caviezel --- who earlier starred in "The Thin Red Line" and "Frequency" and who plays Jesus Christ in Mel Gibson's upcoming "The Passion" --- starts jumping. He thrusts his arms into the air. He leaps in big hops across the fairway, all in an effort to get the crowd going.

Yes, they seem to understand now. The whoops, the hollering begin. The clapping erupts. The sheer elation rises.

Euphoria is what "Stroke of Genius" is all about. In the works for a dozen years, the movie, budgeted at a small but healthy \$18.6 million and with a script approved by Jones' surviving family members, is to be the life story of Bobby Jones, a celebratory and decidedly inspirational film planned for 2004 about one of the greatest champions of golf. Jones dominated the game in the 1920s before shocking the world by retiring at age 28.

In 1930, he became the only player ever to capture golf's grand slam, winning four majors in the same year. That started with the British Amateur Championship at St. Andrews in Scotland.

"If you mention the name Bobby Jones at St. Andrews, they get down on the floor and genuflect," actor Malcolm McDowell says. "They just love the man because he was an amateur and a gentleman in the truest sense of the word. He played for the love of the game."

McDowell, an avid golfer for the past three years and most widely known for starring in Stanley Kubrick's "A Clockwork Orange," co-stars in "Stroke" as O.B. Keeler, the real-life Atlanta Journal reporter who followed Jones during his career. Jeremy Northam ("Gosford Park") plays Walter Hagen, the pro golf champion who became Jones' greatest on-the-course rival.

Scotland and Atlanta

Filming began this fall at St. Andrews. No movie before has been shot on St. Andrews' historic Old Course. "Chariots of Fire" came close with its slo-mo running on the nearby beach.

"In an effort to be as true as possible to the story of Bobby Jones, we wanted to go



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"In an effort to be as true as possible to the story of Bobby Jones, we wanted to go to the actual locations," says "Stroke" producer John Shepherd. That meant not only Georgia, but Scotland.

"We went to St. Andrews and as soon as we mentioned the name Bobby Jones, Alan McGregor, the general manager of the links trust, hauled out a scrapbook," Shepherd says.

It was full of old photos of Jones visiting St. Andrews in 1936 and playing a round of golf in front of 4,000 people, who amassed at the course once rumors spread that Jones was there.

McGregor told Shepherd that his dad had shot the photos with a Kodak Brownie. "He got all misty-eyed and said, 'Whatever you guys need here.'"

Shepherd says his film crew got the same reaction in Atlanta and North Georgia.

"They've opened up everything," he says. Like East Lake Country Club. Chateau Elan and its finely manicured golf courses. "Atlanta is his birthplace. It's where he died. It's where he met his wife. And, besides, there is a wide film crew base here. It's very deep."

Filming, Shepherd says, has already been done at places like East Lake, the Atlanta Athletic Club and the Georgian Terrace. Soon, the crew will head to Griffin, which will get a makeover and be used to represent part of downtown Atlanta from 1919 to 1921. A trolley will be brought in.

Post-Masters opening?

"Stroke," written and directed by Rowdy Harrington (he directed "Striking Distance" with Bruce Willis and "Jack's Back" with James Spader), is a small production by big-studio standards. By comparison, Universal and DreamWorks' "Seabiscuit," this year's most high-profile sports movie, cost at least \$86 million and debuted on almost 2,000 screens nationwide.

The "Stroke" filmmakers have already signed a distribution deal with Franchise Films, says Rick Eldridge, the movie's executive producer. The film will debut, most likely in late April after next year's Masters at Augusta National, in at least 800 theaters nationwide and most likely through Warner Bros. There could be an early premiere in Atlanta on March 17, Jones' birthday.

The script has little violence (Jones, in anger, does throw a club that strikes a woman on the leg) and no sex. The biggest turmoil involves Jones' cursing and temper, which might have rivaled that of tennis star John McEnroe.

"For 12 years the script was not approved by the family," Shepherd says. "It took Rowdy Harrington coming along. He carefully researched Jones and said to the family, 'We know you don't want to portray Bobby warts and all, but he did have a salty tongue.'

"In the end, they understood. We can't tell the story of a good man getting good-er. We have to show the dramatics of a man who overcame, for instance, a very volatile temper," Shepherd says.

Beyond the links

For his part, Caviezel has dyed his hair blond to look more like Jones.

"Physically, they are a little far apart, but Jim has worked so hard and I think he's done a great job to become Bobby Jones," says Mary Black, the golfer's granddaughter. She's visiting the set at Chateau Elan, having traveled from her home in Greensboro, N.C. The previous day, the Pacific Northwest-born Caviezel had asked her to lunch to talk about her Southern grandfather.

"I told him we were a little afraid that he might not be able to perfect the accent," Black says. "And then he started talking to me in my grandfather's accent. It felt strange."

Chateau Elan's golf pro, Tom Ness, is coaching Caviezel, who rarely picked up a club before landing the role.

"To see how far Jim's come is remarkable," Ness says. "His swing has the look of a Bobby Jones and it's getting better as we go along."


Caviezel says his relationship with sports has helped.

"I played basketball for 18 years so there's a similarity between getting a jump shot down and getting your stroke down," he says. "Every good athlete knows there is a common link between all sports and that's usually balance."

Portraying Jones' rival, Northam admits he isn't much of a golfer, either. But he says the movie is about a whole lot more than strokes.

"It's a human spirit story, a story of single-mindedness and the determination of someone who embodied the better principles of the game to an extraordinary level," Northam says. "Nearly every golfer could easily look at what we're doing and probably say, 'Oh, that swing's not right.' But the appropriate thing for us is to go for the wider audience. This film's main story goes beyond golf. It's golf as a metaphor for the spirit of life."

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