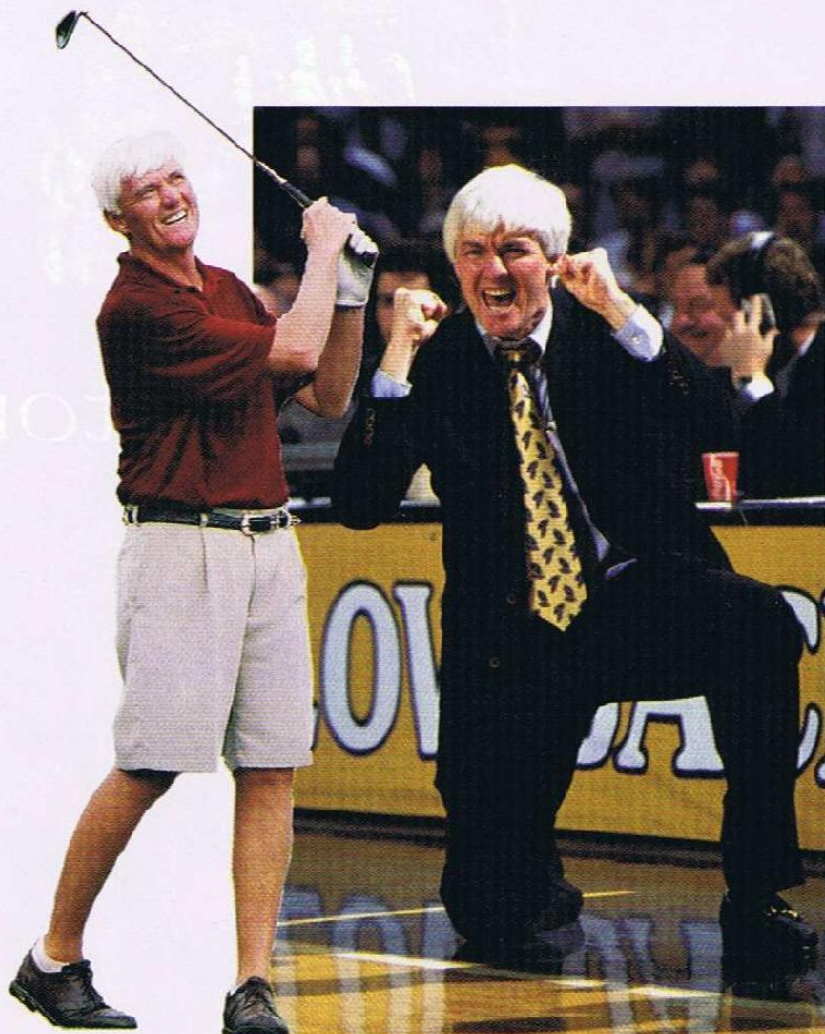


## Profile

BOBBY CREMINS



**BACK IN THE SADDLE:** CREMINS LEFT GEORGIA TECH FOR RETIREMENT GOLF THEN GAVE THAT UP TO COACH THE COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON

# Back in the Swing

BY PATRICK JONES

**H**e was a gangly Irish kid growing up in the 1960s, devoting much of his time shooting basketballs in solitude on the asphalt playgrounds in the Bronx, New York. Now his name is permanently stenciled onto the hardwood court of a premier collegiate institution in the Deep South.

He was the Naismith National Collegiate Coach of the Year in 1990. He led his team to an NCAA Final Four appearance. At the zenith of his powers, he was lured into accepting the head coaching job at his alma mater – for a few hours at least. He reconsidered, reneged and followed his heart.

He finally retired to a cozy life in Hilton Head, South Carolina, with forays into television color

commentary and celebrity golf fundraisers. He had nothing left to prove. Yet, as age 60 neared, he was pulled again by the call to lead young men in sneakers and shorts. They now follow him to gymnasiums in small-town college outposts like Cullowhee, North Carolina, and Statesboro, Georgia.

Bobby Cremins admits to reaching life's major decisions on gut instincts. There has been the occasional double-dribble, but his sixth sense has been as reliable as a consistent first man off the bench.

Legendary basketball coach Frank McGuire enticed Cremins to play point guard for him at the University of South Carolina. Cremins had no realizations that his venture south would define his

professional and personal life. He has never left the region.

"I get a kick out of it when people call me Yankee because I have been living here so long in the South," says Cremins, whose Bronx accent remains palpable even after 35 years of exposure to syrupy "y'all's."

Cremins accepted the head coaching job at Appalachian State at age 27, making him the youngest head coach in Division I history at that time. During his tenure as the Mountaineers head man, Cremins also experienced his first clumsy introductions to the game of golf.

He and a buddy showed up at a public course in Boone without enough clubs, and, as the self-deprecating Cremins admits, with "even less of a clue" about the sport.

"The pro came out and told me I had to have a golf bag," says Cremins. "We only had one set of clubs between us. I told him, 'I don't know how to play. I am only going to go out and hit a few balls, so don't worry about it.' The pro said, 'No, I am worried about it.' So he gave me a hard time and I gave him a hard time. Finally, he said I couldn't play without my own equipment so I rented some from him. He proceeded to give me left-handed golf clubs. And I went out and tried to play with them anyway."

The awkward initiation to golf continued for the youthful head coach at a member-guest tournament in Wilkesboro. Cremins chose not to play in the event because of his lack of skills but was cajoled to attend anyway and to ride along in the cart.

"The guy I was with hit a fairway shot," says Cremins. "He grabbed some clubs and said he's going to walk to the green, and for me to take the cart to the green. So I literally drove the cart right up on the green. When he got up there, he about had a heart attack. I didn't know a thing about golf."

That was about the same time the first hints of silver began appearing on Cremins' prematurely aged mop of hair.

He continued to excel on the hardwood, however. Three Southern Conference titles and a pair of 20-plus wins at App State leapfrogged Cremins to Atlanta and the head coaching job at Georgia Tech.

Utilizing his big-city street savvy, Cremins developed into the ultimate recruiter. He built a prolific pipeline

Cremins, who, nevertheless, felt the scorn of jilted Gamecocks faithful until after the wounds eventually healed.

Atlanta is also where Cremins finally discovered his golf groove. He spent 19 years roaming the same campus that Bobby Jones attended. David Duval, Stewart Cink and Matt Kuchar also matriculated at Tech. Cremins did not need to enroll in a Ramblin' Wreck chemistry class to trigger his osmosis into a golf

### HE'S GOT GAME – BOBBY CREMINS

**Born:** July 4, 1947 in Bronx, N.Y.

**Coaching record:** 452-302 (going into 2006)

**Awards:** Naismith National Coach of the Year, 1990; ACC Coach of the Year – 1983, 1985, 1996

**Family:** Wife: Carolyn; Children: Liz, Suzie, Bobby III

**Memberships:** Harbour Town Golf Links and Sea Pines Country Club, Hilton Head, S.C.

**Handicap:** 12, as low as 9 **Best score:** 72 at East Lake Country Club, Atlanta

**Holes in one:** Zero with nearest miss on No. 16 at Augusta National

**Clubs:** Nike SasQuatch driver, Nike Slingshot irons

**Best advice:** Credits Jim Ferree for "saving my golf game" by introducing him to the long putter

**Best golfers he has coached against:** UNC's Roy Williams and Syracuse's Jim Boeheim

into the boroughs of his native New York City and siphoned out the cream of its teen-aged talent. He brought in fellow home boys like John Salley, Stephon Marbury and Kenny Anderson. Cremins transformed the once moribund Georgia Tech basketball program into a national powerhouse. The previously sedate Alexander Memorial Coliseum started rocking and was dubbed the "Thrillerdome."

Cremins was a hot commodity. When the University of South Carolina wooed him with its head coaching job opportunity in 1993, Cremins felt the sentimental pull of his alma mater and accepted the position. But before the ink on the sports headlines could dry, Cremins backed out, deciding, after all, that Georgia Tech had become his true family.

"That is long forgotten about," says

aficionado.

"I love the history of golf," says Cremins. "My parents are from Ireland. I have played golf there three different times. I have read a lot about Bobby Jones because of his connection with Georgia Tech and because he is from Atlanta."

Not surprisingly, East Lake Country Club, the home course of Bobby Jones, is Cremins' favorite place to play. He cherishes that his all-time low score, 72, came at East Lake.

Cremins was the toast of Atlanta and had three Atlantic Coast Conference championships to his credit when his run as a collegiate head coach ended – or so he thought – at the end of the 1999-2000 season.

"Once I retired from Georgia Tech and moved to Hilton Head, golf became a major part of my life," says Cremins. "For the six years after I

retired, golf became my new love. Basketball has always been my first love. But without basketball, golf really filled a void.

"Golf is a lot like basketball. I used to like to love practicing basketball for hours by myself as a kid," says Cremins. "I'd imagine hitting the big shot to beat a great team. You can do the same thing in golf on the driving range. 'Here I am with a chance to win the tournament with a great shot on 18.' You dream and visualize."

During his six years of semi-retirement, Cremins whittled his handicap to a 9 with his self-described "unorthodox" swing. He donated a significant amount of his time to charitable fundraising events. Cremins volunteered as the honorary chairman of the Jimmy V Atlanta Celebrity Golf Classic for the past three years. He remains heavily involved with

Coaches Vs. Cancer, a collaboration between the American Cancer Society and the National Association of Basketball Coaches.

Jim Satalin, national director for Coaches Vs. Cancer, says Cremins has been "a fixture" in the organization's national golf tournament since its inception. "Bobby has been a great, great supporter of ours and he has done everything we have ever asked him to do. He is terrific. He is one of kind."

Ironically, tragically, one of Cremins' best golfing buddies died of cancer and it shook him to the core. It spurred him to re-examine his priorities.

"With everything going on in the world today, I wanted to get back in the mix," says Cremins. "I wanted to get back in the rat race. I thought I had something left to give."

Then, last July, Cremins was offered

the head coaching job at the College of Charleston. "It came out of left field," he says.

Winthrop coach Gregg Marshall, a former assistant at Charleston, had accepted the vacant position but then backed out of the deal the next day.

"He pulled a Bobby Cremins," says Cremins, who jumped at the opportunity to lead the program at the Southern Conference school.

"I had to make a quick decision and I decided to jump right back into the fire. I wanted a new challenge, and I certainly got that. It's been hard. But it has been very rewarding."

Cremins first-year schedule has featured some heavyweights like Kentucky, but primarily the games are against conference foes like Western Carolina, Georgia Southern and Appalachian State. He also proved you can go home when he coached against South Carolina in Columbia early in the season.

The College of Charleston does not have Georgia Tech on any future schedules, and that is fine with Cremins. He said he is not sure how he would hold up coaching against the school where he became a national name. Georgia Tech named the Alexander Memorial Coliseum hardwood Cremins Court in 2003.

"I would have a tough time playing a game on the court named after me," says Cremins. "But (Georgia Tech head coach) Paul Hewitt is a close friend. He has been great to me. I am a huge Georgia Tech fan."

Cremins says his golf game has been "non-existent" since grasping the College of Charleston reins.

"Golf has been a big part of my life, and I hope to God I get to play some more once the season is over," says Cremins. "And, next time I retire, I am sure it will be for good, and I hope that I am healthy enough to play golf for the rest of my life." ♦

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