

The Faith of Payne Stewart

Payne Stewart was an American professional golfer who won 11 PGA Tour events, including three major championships – the last of which occurred just a few months before he died in an airplane accident at the age of 42.



On Oct. 25, 1999, a month after the American team rallied to win the Ryder Cup and four months after his final U.S. Open victory, Stewart was killed in the crash of a Learjet flying from his home in Orlando, Florida, to Texas for the year-ending tournament, The Tour Championship. Investigators concluded that the aircraft failed to pressurize and that all on board were incapacitated due to hypoxia as the aircraft passed to the west of Gainesville, Florida. It continued flying on autopilot until it ran out of fuel and crashed near Mina, South Dakota.

Had Stewart died five years earlier, he would have been remembered in an entirely different manner. But because of the rearrangement of his priorities just a few years before his death, he has been memorialized as a family man who loved God. His relationship with Jesus Christ was the most important aspect of his life. But it hadn't always been that way.



Throughout most of his career, this celebrity golfer was known more for his competitive spirit, flamboyant clothes and cocky attitude. When he reevaluated his life as a man approaching 40, he discovered the need to abandon his self-serving priorities and embrace Jesus as his Lord. Ironically, his golf game dramatically improved once he put his priorities in proper order.

When his jet went down, grief gripped those closest to him because of the wonderful man he had become. Some of those most deeply affected were his numerous friends on the PGA Tour. Many of them were making preparations for The Tour Championship in Houston when they learned of Stewart's death.

All of them wrestled with ways to appropriately remember him. One of the most unique memorials was provided by Bob Estes, a fellow golfer and Christian who was deeply affected by Stewart's faith.

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On the first hole of his first round, Estes took his putter to the tee box. He stood over the ball for a few moments, then putted it about 15 feet. He then quietly said, "That's for Payne."

In a game in which each stroke can be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, Estes voluntarily gave up a stroke to make an important point.

He later said, "It was symbolic of the last putt he (Stewart) made to win the U.S. Open. But maybe more importantly, it also had to do with the way Payne had changed. The way faith and family and friends were his top priorities. All of us need to remember what's most important."

That advice rings true for each of us. And the priorities begin with establishing a relationship with Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:8-10 ESV).

– Beecher Hunter