

# Magic Wands

**Bob Bettinardi, one of the game's top craftsmen, has created custom putters for some of the world's best players.**

By Adam Schupak

**F**or a clubmaker, nothing is sweeter—or better for business—than victory on the PGA Tour. So it goes without saying that winning a major championship is the ultimate product vindication.

In 2003, puttermaker Bob Bettinardi, a native of Chicago's South Side, hit paydirt in his own backyard when Jim Furyk won the U.S. Open at Olympia Fields Country Club wielding a Bettinardi-designed Baby Ben putter. Bettinardi walked all 72 holes that week, including the last 18 with his dad, following Furyk and rooting with the same fervor that he has supported his beloved Chicago White Sox.

"It was one of those weeks that was a gift of God," Bettinardi said with a dimpled smile.

In an age when "Made in America" is fast becoming obsolete, the putters that bear his name are crafted in Tinley Park, not far from where he grew up. Bettinardi, 46, is a throwback who has carved out a niche in an industry that doesn't like outsiders. And it all happened, as things so often do, largely by accident.

Bettinardi was born to be a craftsman. His father owned a machine shop, where young Bob worked every summer.

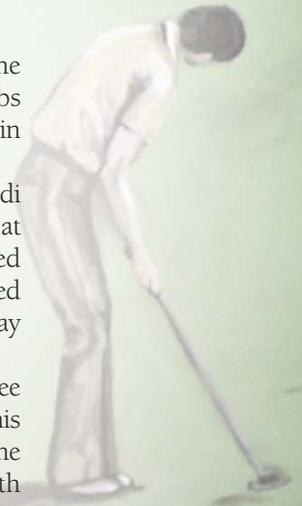
"Even at age 12, I could tell you what stainless steel feels like and looks like," he

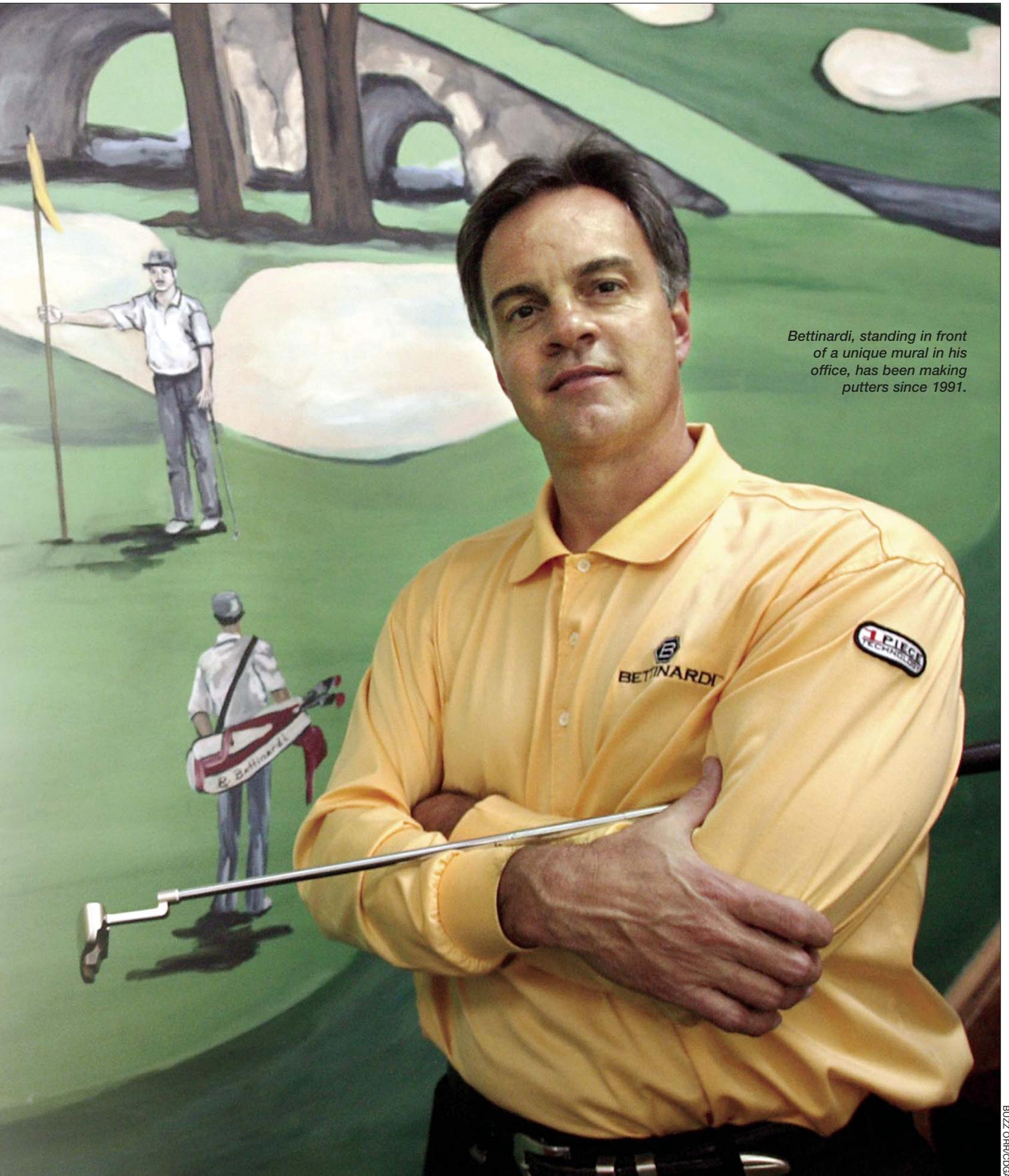
said. "Aluminum, carbon steel, all the different metals, because one of my jobs was to cut the metal for the guys to put in their machines."

Golf would come much later. Bettinardi grew up playing football, a fullback at Evergreen Park High School. He started playing golf at age 22, when his dad joined Ridge Country Club in Chicago, and today carries a handicap around 7.

After graduating from the Milwaukee School of Engineering, he worked for his dad as a production manager. In 1988, he opened X-Cel Technologies, starting with one machine and two employees—one on day and one on night shift. He made parts for medical and defense companies as well as the food, hydraulics and light trucking industries. His business grew little by little, adding another machine a year later, then another. His staff reached 10 in 1991. It was the type of small, entrepreneurial success story that America has been built upon.

Then one cold December day that same year, he walked into Palos Golf shop





*Bettinardi, standing in front of a unique mural in his office, has been making putters since 1991.*

in Palos Heights, Ill., and saw a poster advertising the Callaway Bobby Jones line of putters. It showed an antiquated Bridgeport milling machine. That got him to ask himself: “I wonder if I could make a putter on my machines.”

The thought lingered like a cold that wouldn’t go away. The shopkeeper gave him a brochure for another milled putter the store had in stock, a Cleveland model designed by Ken Gianini. So Bettinardi called him. One week later, Bettinardi flew to California to visit Gianini’s studio. Bettinardi learned everything he could in a day and a half. Still, it took him three months to make his first putter. He named it Cujo 101, after his dog.

Gianini outsourced an order to Bettinardi for 100 putters, which soon became 500. He was in business, using the same machinery to make putters as military parts. But it was more of a hobby until he met a young designer, milling putters at the time for Mizuno, named Scotty Cameron.

Cameron discovered Bettinardi’s handiwork at K&M Finishing, a Carlsbad, Calif., shop that both Cameron and Gianini used. Before long, Cameron hired Bettinardi to help produce the Reason by Scotty Cameron. Together they made some of the most popular putters of the ’90s for the likes of Davis Love III, Bernhard Langer and Tiger Woods.

Bettinardi chose to go off on his own in 1998. He was ready. After all, this is a guy who left his father to be his own boss and chase his dreams. He wanted his signature to grace the putters he created.

Among the many lessons Bettinardi learned during his tenure with Cameron, the most significant may have been the importance of Tour recognition. The first time Bettinardi visited a Tour



stop to show his product to players, he gave a BB-10 model to Jesper Parnevik on Wednesday of the 1999 Greater Greensboro Open. Parnevik put the putter in his bag, shot 23 under par (a tournament-record 265) and lit up a victory cigar walking up the 18th fairway. Bettinardi was on his way as a solo act.

He’s best known for the honeycomb face and the one-piece putter, a process that he championed and was thought to be too expensive. Bettinardi’s two separate businesses have grown to 55 employees in a 24,000-square-foot design studio and shop. He was on his own for four years. Then in 2002 he signed with the Ben Hogan Co., which hadn’t produced a putter in 12 years. It was a chance to attach his name to one of the most storied names in golf as well as its marketing muscle—which takes us back to where this story started and that fairy tale week.

Olympia Fields is a mere 10 miles from Bettinardi’s shop. At Jim Furyk’s three previous starts before the Open, he used a prototype Hog putter manufactured by Dogleg Right. But two weeks prior, the United States Golf Association ruled it was nonconforming because an alignment appendage on the clubhead violated the “plain in shape” rule.

Looking for a replacement, Furyk, a Hogan staffer at the time, got fitted for a Baby Ben putter in Bettinardi’s Tinley Park studio just two days before the start of the Open. After a few adjustments to the line and loft, Furyk liked its alignment and the positioning of the shaft near the heel of the putter face.

“I asked him, ‘Are you going to use it?’” Bettinardi recalls.

“He said, ‘Yeah I’m going to use it. I love this putter.’”

“One day and you love it? I didn’t say it like that,

*Bettinardi grew up in Chicago, and today his putters are created and manufactured in Tinley Park.*



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# MADE IN CHICAGO



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*Bettinardi's stock rose immeasurably when Jim Furyk won the 2003 U.S. Open.*

but that's what I was thinking. Wow, that's great," Bettinardi said.

Dogleg Right filed an appeal with the USGA, which on Wednesday of Open week issued a "duration of competition" extension, which meant Furyk could have used the Hog putter. Too late. Furyk was smitten. He took 118 putts at Olympia Fields and Bettinardi's phones started ringing with orders.

The most enjoyable moments in life are often shadowed by pain, the saddest by

an aura of absurdity. Two weeks later Bettinardi received a very different phone call. It was a reporter asking what he knew about Top-Flite, the parent company of Ben Hogan Co.,

filing for bankruptcy protection. A few days later, rumor became reality. The company asked Bettinardi to keep producing the red-hot Baby Ben putter, but when Callaway purchased Top-Flite and Hogan, Bettinardi soon realized he wasn't part of its future.

"Callaway already had Odyssey," he explained. "It was kind of like two horses to fit in a one-horse stall. It didn't work."

They parted ways in November 2005. Last January, Bettinardi partnered with Mizuno, which last produced putters in 2002.

"I see a huge push in the USA for Mizuno," he said, "and how they want to position Bettinardi putters here."

Six models were introduced last year. Both Luke Donald and Billy Andrade switched to the Mizuno C series putter Bettinardi designed. And so it was that last summer that another major visited Bettinardi's backyard: the PGA Championship at Medinah Country Club. He followed both staff players. Andrade held the 36-hole lead. Donald shared the 54-hole lead with Woods with Andrade still in contention.

It was shaping up like 2003 all over again. This time, however, the fairy tale was too good to be true.

"We had one problem," Bettinardi said, "a guy with the initials TW." 🍷

*Adam Schupak writes about the business side of golf for Golfweek.*

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