



Member Profile **Richard Grula** Winter Park, Fla.

Rich Grula was born 30 miles east of New York City at the tail end of the baby boom. “Life was typical suburban bliss on a 60-by-100 lot with a dozen kids in the neighborhood and wiffleball games against our garage door,” he says. While in high school, the Grula family moved to Florida and he picked up golf as a way to take walks with his suddenly-retired father. “We were both dangerously bad and only played at dusk, when the course where we lived was empty.”

Later, after majoring in film at New York University, Rich wandered through a variety of creative fields like advertising, music, and journalism. He relocated to Orlando in 1995, and “married a lovely woman named Natalie.” They had a son, Jake, and Rich joined the faculty of the University of Central Florida, where he teaches film and manages operations for the school’s motion capture and sound stages.

Rich says he stumbled onto hickory golf while on the 12th hole at Mid Pines. “I was caddying for my son at the U.S. Kids Golf World Championship (the boy is an excellent golfer and has been kicking my butt since he was nine). As he waited to tee off, I wondered ‘What kind of clubs did people use when they built this course?’ I craved authenticity and a shorter layout. The idea of going way back to the men’s tees to slice a modern 460 into the woods felt enormously unappealing. I wanted to play with the appropriate tools and keep it on the fairway (as my son could). After a week of Internet searching, I was on the phone speaking to Mike Just of Louisville Golf.

Natalie initially wondered if hickory golf was something akin to being a Civil War re-enactor as she watched her husband don funny clothes, play with antiques and pretend he lived in another decade. “There were long discussions about how she was not going to attend reenactments of famous golf matches or sleep in a tent,” Rich says. “I never saw it that way. To me, I was playing golf, only with different, more personal tools to which I related better. And sometimes I wore knickers, which turn out to be very comfortable.”

How often do you play hickories?

I play at least once a week, sometimes as many as five or six times. I try to avoid driving ranges (that’s where I break shafts), so many of my rounds are on a little nine hole course near my home. I gave up modern clubs about three years ago, so now 100 percent of my play is with hickories.

What’s in your play set?

My anchor clubs are Duralites by MacGregor and Louisville woods/putters. I’ve got a few George Nicoll Zenith irons, which I love, and I’d like to build a full set of those.

What ball do you play?

Wilson 50/50 – I bought a case of them before they were discontinued.

Favorite course for hickories?

A toss-up between Mid Pines and Southern Pines. I’m a huge Donald Ross fan and will play even his lesser layouts (like New Smyrna Beach, Fla.) with a big stupid grin on my face.

Favorite hickory tournament?

The Hickory Haggis Cup boasts an interesting match-play format on a perfect course (Southern Pines). The annual Mid Pines event is always great, as is the Southern Hickory Four-Ball (another fun format). I’m looking forward checking out French Lick at the U.S. Hickory Open. Really, I haven’t come across a bad tournament yet.

Any particular player or aspect of golf history you especially enjoy?

Bobby Jones. He’s the man. I own the DVD set of his short films from the 1930s and have learned a surprising amount in between the goofy comedy bits with stars of his day.

Best thing about hickory golf?

Hickory takes the macho out of golf, which is fine by me. It becomes a thinking game, requiring you to put the ball



Rich Grula, left, poses with pal Brian Schuman on the putting green at Mid Pines.

where it needs to go, rather than just wail away. Playing hickory re-establishes the conversation between course designer, nature and golfer. This dialog was lost as modern golfers exploited technology to dominate courses. Domination does not lead to conversation. There’s a humility to hickory golf that I find quasi-religious. The golfer is not the most important element. In fact, he/she is quite minor and temporary. Playing within the hickory tradition makes me realize that the course and game exist long after any single golfer walks the fairway. I find that weirdly comforting.

Also, I’m a collector of functional antiques. I love nothing more than to utilize something produced decades ago, proving that the design and workmanship were exceptional (in direct contrast to the modern ethos of sell it before it’s finished and throw it out before its broken). Vintage guitars, furniture, clocks and radios were what I collected and restored before hickory golf came my way. Now, most of my energy is put into finding and restoring hickory clubs.

Ideas to promote SoHG, hickory golf?

Empower every hickory golfer to be an evangelist and give them a tool to do it. Everyone who plays hickory golf in the real world runs into modern golfers who are fascinated with the concept of hickory, but they have no clue where to start. I suggest SoHG make attractive business cards featuring its web address. Give 100 of those cards to every SoHG member with instructions to hand them out whenever someone asks about the game. Then, on the SoHG website, create an area called “New To Hickory Golf?” and present all the basic information to get newbies over the hump of confusion and embarrassment.

Most recent book on golf that you read?

“Classic Instruction” (American Golfer, 2007) is an amazing pictorial study in which Ben Crenshaw deconstructs the swing of Bobby Jones and explains how it’s unique. Ben extrapolates Bobby’s swing for the modern player, but a hickory golfer can reverse-engineer the book to discover how swinging hickories should be different than swinging modern clubs.