



Straight from the heart of hickory

Old clubs, period clothes just a small part of the wooden-shafted mindset

By Jason Lusk WINTER PARK, FLA.

PICTURED: A set of hickory clubs at the Winter Park Hickory Classic

RIGHT: Richard Boggs of Sanford, Florida

BELOW: A square-dimpled ball



As the distance debate rages, modern golf equipment and hitting distances have come under increased scrutiny. The U.S. Golf Association and the R&A's recent release of their Distance Insights Report certainly put a spotlight on that discussion.

But there is another way. Bill Geisler, a past president of the Society of Hickory Golfers, sat down for a discussion about his passion for old golf clubs at Winter Park Golf Course, a short nine-holer that has drawn critical acclaim since its renovation in 2016 and proved an ideal setting for the hickory players. Geisler was there to run the Winter Park Hickory Classic, in which most of the two dozen competitors dressed in period clothes.

As Geisler explains, the hickory mindset is not just about which clubs to play. It's more of a lifestyle choice as an estimated 3,000 hickory aficionados in the U.S. embrace the gear and methodologies enjoyed by players before the introduction of steel shafts in the early 1900s. »







LEFT: Natalie Wells of Winter Park, Florida, tees off in her hometown hickory tournament.

BELOW: Bill Geisler was the creator of the event at the Winter Park Golf Course's nine holes.

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Golfweek: Why hickory? How did this all come about?

Geisler: A lot of guys who had been collecting hickory started to say, "Hey, I'd like to play this stuff." It's just fun. A second reason for a lot of people, they say, "I'm not going to chase technology any longer. Let's play golf in the pure sense."

And frankly, the clothing thing, why not? Why not dress period if you're going to play period golf clubs? It just makes it a little more interesting. ...

It's just a lot of fun. You can come out and play hickory golf, and nobody ridicules you. If you go out and shoot 110, fine. But

there's also good competition. If you're a scratch player and get a nicely matched set of replicas or original clubs, there's a lot of great competition, a lot of really good players and even pros. Hickory is for anybody that wants to get involved.

You don't have to dress up – a lot of us just do this for the fun.

How does somebody get into hickory golf? What are the first steps?

Most guys and gals will probably go online and find Louisville Golf out of Louisville, Kentucky, or find Tad Moore Hickory Classics out of Selma, Alabama.

They are the two primary makers in the United States of replicas. And that is the quickest, easiest and, frankly, best way to get started.

You're going to get good equipment that's playable and is not going to break on you. That's how you want to get started, and that's how I got started. You will get clubheads that have been accepted by the Society of Hickory Golfers as a replica of an original piece.

With Tad and with Louisville Golf, they have replicated some of the best pieces. It would be like somebody trying to replicate the best Titleist irons of today, only 300 years from now.

For a majority of us, you then start looking at the club swaps for original clubs. You start collecting, buying original pieces, maybe a driver, a mashie, a niblick, a putter. What happens, you start building up a collection of original equipment. After a while, you start taking that original equipment out there and playing it. Then you say, "You know what, I'm going to go pure," all original equipment.

How difficult is it to find original equipment? There has to be a limited supply.

If you go on eBay, you'd be shocked by what's out there. There's a lot of original equipment on eBay. A lot of it is not so good, call it junk maybe. And there's some good stuff, and that's the tough part. It takes years to figure it out, what's the good stuff and the not so good stuff.

Or you can come to one of our events, where typically there is a swap with guys bringing original equipment, guys like me who refurbish clubs. We can take an original piece, break it all down, refurbish it and put it back together again for playability.

I prefer playing original shafts. Even Tad will tell you, and if you think about it then it makes sense, but the hickory they harvested in the 1800s and early



LEFT: Jim Davis of Grand Rapids, Michigan, plays a bunker shot at Winter Park.

BELOW: Club builder Tad Moore lines up a putt.

1900s, those were mature, first-generation trees. The hickory now is third and fourth generation, and it's just not the same. In my opinion, the old stuff is superior.

If somebody started from scratch to buy a decent set of replicas, what would the cost be to get into this?

You can go with what we call a short set, which would be like seven clubs. You'd be looking at maybe less than \$1,000. You could go with a full set of 14 clubs, and maybe you'd be looking at \$1,500, close to \$2,000. No more really than you'd pay for a modern set of clubs.

And you can go out and find original pieces for \$30, \$40 apiece sometimes. Take your time, and also go into antique shops and flea markets, and sometimes you can find a gem in the rough. But you have to learn and understand what you're looking for.

People always ask, does the hickory stuff break? The answer is no, not if it's a good set. Even if it's a 100-year-old golf shaft, if it's in good condition and has been refurbished, it will last another 100 years as long as you don't leave it in the trunk of your car or in your garage.

How different is the swing, learning to play hickory versus modern clubs?

My feeling is that you really don't go after a hickory club. You don't get up there and try to step on one. You really have to learn to swing a little smoother. I think it

really helps your timing.

My general feeling is that if I went back and forth from hickory to modern clubs, I would be even better with the modern stuff because the hickory has really helped my swing, smoothed it out with a focus on contact. It's not as forgiving, so it forces you to improve.

Do you ever go back and try modern clubs?

The only thing I've ever done, at my golf club, Tuscawilla Country Club (near Orlando), they have a demo day, I always go out there and everyone comes over to look at my stuff.

I'll go over where they have Trackman and hit one of my hickory drivers, and it goes out there about 220 or something like that. I get curious and grab one of the latest drivers, and it takes me about two swings because it's just different. But after about two swings, I'll knock one out there 260 or something like that.

People ask me what's the percentage difference in the hickory and the new stuff, and I say it's about 15 percent, maybe 20 percent with a driver. With irons, it's maybe 10 percent.

How long should a golf course be for hickory?

For the U.S. Hickory Open, in the open division for pros and low amateurs, we try to keep the course around 6,000 yards, 6,100 yards. That may vary based on the

speed of the fairways. Here in Florida, we'll typically play about 5,800 yards.

Do you follow the distance debates in modern golf?

You'll find that most of us involved in hickory are adamant that it's gotten out of hand. It's one of the reasons we're drawn to hickory, because we think distance has just gotten out of hand and some of the great courses, even U.S. Open courses, are obsolete.

The nice thing about this game with a wooden shaft, you can't do anything with it. And the nice thing about a replica golf ball, it flies about 5 percent shorter than a modern golf ball hit by a hickory driver. **Gwk**



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