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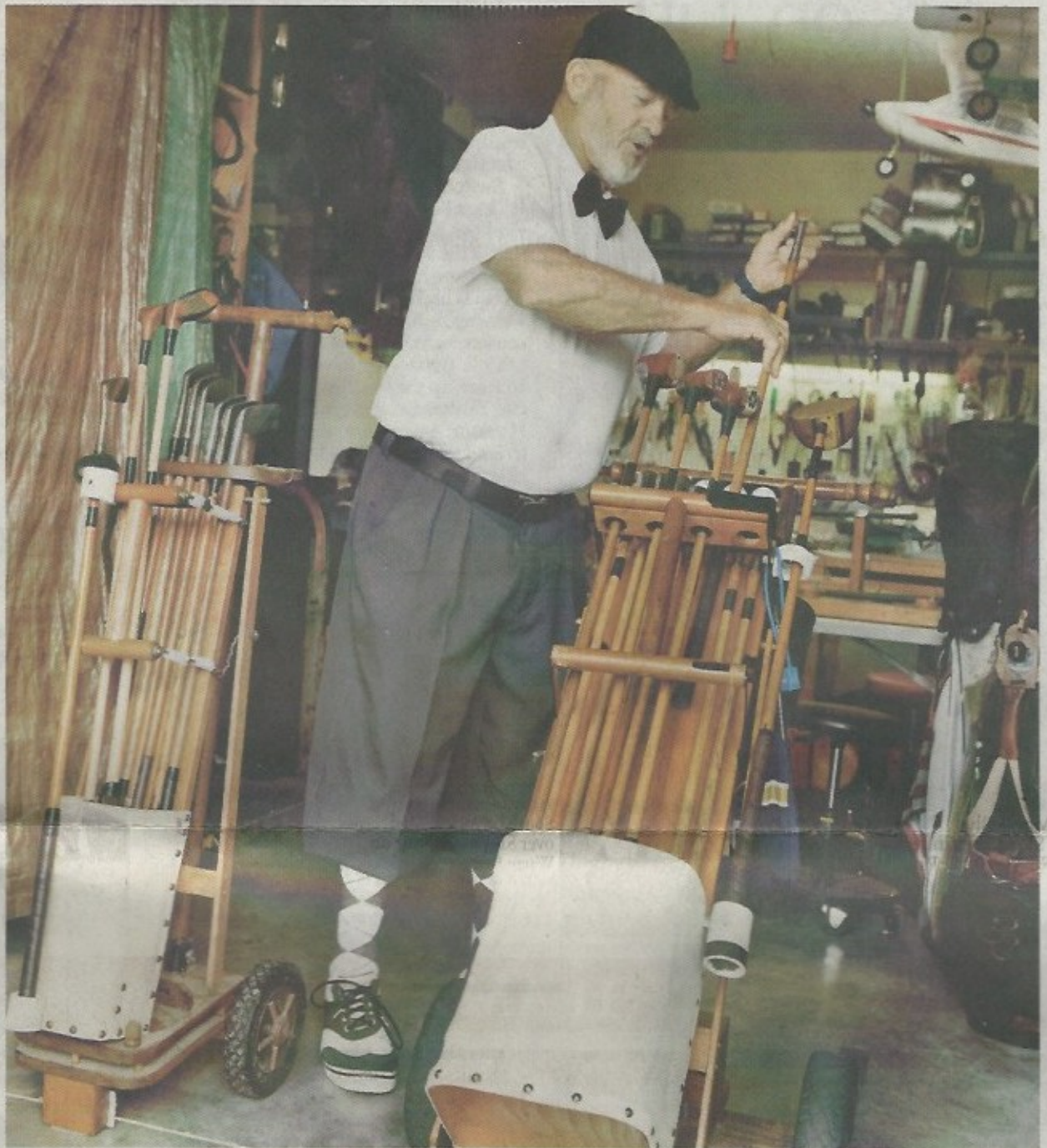


Keeping Score

THE GAMES, THE TEAMS AND THE ATHLETES

Resident Relishes In Old-School Game

VILLAGER HITS THE COURSE WITH HICKORY GOLF CLUBS



Cindy Skop | Daily Sun

Mike Hobson, of the Village of Hadley, shows some of the hickory-shafted clubs in his collection.

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By JEFF SHAIN | Daily Sun Senior Writer

Mike Hobson chuckles at the reaction he often gets when fellow golfers see him arrive at the first tee with his set of assorted mashies, niblicks and cleeks. “Normally it’s like, ‘Oh god, we’ve got to play with this guy?’” the Village of Hadley resident said good-naturedly. That typically lasts just a few holes, until they get a look at how Hobson works his ball around with those ancient, wooden sticks. “I tell folks I don’t mind waiting on them,” he quipped. Hobson is among a circle of golfers with a passion for teeing it up with hickory-shafted clubs — the type utilized by Bobby Jones, Gene Sarazen and their predecessors, stretching back to Old Tom Morris and generations even earlier.

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HICKORY

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It's a game short on technology, long on course management. And nostalgia.

"You break 80 with a modern set of clubs with the titanium and the graphite, it's fine," he said. "But you break 80 with these, it's a really good feel."

Hobson does break 80 with his handcrafted hickories, all but one dating from the 1930s or earlier. He has a couple other wooden sets, though some of those clubs are contemporary reproductions of old-school technology. He also has a modern set that sees a fair amount of play.

"The group I play with, we always play for money," he said. "If I don't play good with (the hickories), it's like, 'What did you bring those things for?'"

But there's little question which clubs he enjoys more.

"It's a different game," Hobson said. "You have to think about going around the golf course a little bit differently. But I play within three or four strokes of my modern clubs with them."

The only drawback, he added, is that he has yet to find other golfers in The Villages that share his passion. "They're interested," he said, "but they just don't bite."

In a community of golfers as large as The Villages, that's a bit of a surprise. The Society of Hickory Golfers has more than

It was there that he recorded a hole-in-one with hickory, using a 26-degree cleek he calls "Miss Pretty."

"It's a beautiful club," he said, turning the glossy wooden head over in his hands. "It was a 165-yard hole-in-one."

The nomenclature of hickory golf clubs certainly is more colorful than today's assortment of numbered sticks. A driver is still a driver, but the 2- or 3-wood is called a brassie. A spoon is today's 4-wood. A cleek is equivalent to the modern hybrid.

Mashies are long and medium irons — Hobson carries four in his bag — while niblicks are the short clubs. A "mashie-niblick" is somewhere in between — perhaps a 6- or 7-iron. Hobson also plays golf balls with an outer pattern similar to those used in the 1930s.

Some enthusiasts go as far as to use the pre-1900 "feathery" ball — literally feathers stuffed inside a leather pouch. "I'm not getting into that," Hobson said. "More money to spend."

Hickory golfers also tend to dress the part — teeing it up in plus-fours and button-down shirts, either with a bow tie or a standard tie tucked into the shirt. Hobson has a half-dozen such outfits in his wardrobe, mostly for when he plays tournaments.

"If I play my hickories, I can say that's why I dress like this," he said. "If I've got my modern clubs, they ask, 'What the

In a community of golfers as large as The Villages, that's a bit of a surprise. The Society of Hickory Golfers has more than 500 members spread across the nation, with 18 state and regional chapters at last count.

The Florida Hickory Golfers typically draw more than two dozen entrants to its monthly tournaments. Last month, the Florida State Golf Association announced a series of five hickory events this fall, stretching from Sarasota to Tampa to Winter Haven.

"We've played at Lake Nona; we've played at some really nice courses," said Hobson, who has teed it up at national events at Pinehurst Resort in North Carolina. In 2016, the International Hickory Cup came to Lake County at Mission Inn Resort & Club.

"Hopefully I can find someone else to enjoy the game at a different level," he said.

Hobson's interest in hickories took root eight years ago, after seeing the film "The Greatest Game Ever Played." The movie, drawn from Mark Frost's award-winning book, chronicles the 1913 U.S. Open in which 20-year-old local Francis Ouimet took down two of Britain's heavyweights — Harry Vardon and Ted Ray — in a three-man playoff at The Country Club outside Boston.

"I started to wonder what it was like to hit those clubs," recalled Hobson, who was living in Virginia at the time. "A friend of mine had a bunch he got from a yard sale. He brought them over and one Friday we started to hit them. I couldn't believe how well they hit."

Before long, Hobson had his own set and found a group of hickory enthusiasts that would play around northern Virginia.

"If I play my hickories, I can say that's why I dress like this," he said. "If I've got my modern clubs, they ask, 'What the heck's wrong with that guy?'"

Though Hobson offers his playing partners a chance to take a few swings with his hickories, he said few take him up on the offer. Many express concern they'll break.

"Bobby Jones had a golf swing that was (close to) 120 miles an hour," Hobson countered. "He didn't break them. If you get an old one and it's dried out and brittle, they will break. But the majority of them — if you get a good shaft and take care of it, they don't break."

Hobson has a workbench in his garage where he tends to his clubs — replacing his leather grips, or a homemade device to straighten any shaft that starts to bend.

One benefit from playing hickories, he said, is that it's ingrained a smooth, rhythmic swing.

"The best training aid I've ever had," he said. "If you don't swing these things right, the ball's going all over the place. You have to have a nice, smooth swing with these. And if you transfer that to your modern clubs, you'll be amazed."

He recalled one day when his playing partner, who had just bought a \$500 driver, asked if he could try Hobson's big stick. He caught it flush.

"We went up there and it was like 20 yards shorter than (with) his 500-dollar club," Hobson said. "He says, 'I can't believe this.'"

Hobson couldn't resist hammering home his point. "Five hundred dollars at the pro shop," he said, gesturing toward the two balls. "Seventy-five dollars on eBay."



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Mike Hobson, of the Village of Hadley, whips the cord around the wooden shaft to help reinforce the joint where the club head is glued to the shaft in his garage on Tuesday.