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Dr. Jay Harris - The Hickory Doc of Pinehurst

By Jim Davis

Golfers working their way up the 7th hole of Pinehurst No. 2 might occasionally hear the lovely melodies of a classical number or perhaps an elegant show tune. It's likely Jay Harris on his piano, a world of music to which he retreats now and then in his comfortable home in the pinewoods.

Harris, a native of Mebane, N.C., and the son of a golf course superintendent, learned the game early and became very, very good. He retired from a 40-year career in dentistry in 2006 and now enjoys refurbishing wood-shafted golf clubs and making rental sets available for hickory events. Harris and his wife, Jackie, are noted by friends across the globe for their friendliness and hospitality.

"I was fortunate that the small town (population 3,000) had a golf course" Harris says of Mebane. "It was the only one in Alamance County until 1948. The layout was designed on the back of an envelope and was built and maintained by the townspeople during the depression years. I was also fortunate that my dad was the manager, pro, superintendent, etc."

Harris' father flew for the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II and became a freelance pilot for the emerging airlines after the war. Flying took him away from home and family, however, so when the golf course job came up, he applied for it and got it. He stayed in golf until his death in 1995.

"I started going to the golf course in the sixth grade and got fatally bitten," Harris says. "I still am."

In 1959, playing for Wilmington H.S., Harris won the North Carolina High School Championship, playing against such future stars as Raymond Floyd.

Later, Harris attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where, as a junior, he was the No. 2 man on the golf team. He left before his senior year for dental school at the University of North Carolina, where he graduated in 1966.

"I played Hogan Apex irons and MacGregor woods," he says. "Pre-dental curricula prevented me, perhaps, of reaching my college potential. I did not



win any tournaments, but I shot a few rounds in competition under par."

Harris decided that, maybe, the professional tour was just a bit out of reach, and so opted to concentrate on his promising dental career.

Golf Collecting

Golf books dealing with the instruction and science of the game were Harris' earliest interests.

"I had an insatiable curiosity in that area," he says. "One of the older members at my country club collected everything including books. That was the catalyst for hickory clubs. He scoured all the flea markets, etc., and I was hooked.

"We went to Myrtle Beach for a GCS annual meeting in the early '80s, I believe, and from then on, I was really hooked. I collected, initially, any and everything. But 10 years ago, I met Bob Hansen, and he got my attention on pre-1860 items. He suggested I sell the bulk of my common things, and pare my items to a manageable level. I probably have 30-40 such items. I have woods, early irons, balls and paper in this arena."

One of his favorite pieces is the written record of an 1824 match of the Thistle Golf Club. Included are the two winning scorecards of the match.

"(John) Gourlay had a part in providing feather balls for prizes and wrote as such, including his signature, which is very rare," Harris says.

He still has hopes of finding additional pieces and has his sights set on some very early treasures.

“I feel fortunate to do what I’ve done.”

“I would like to get a club from the 1700s,” he says. “I have one club that might be 1790s, but it’s not a sure thing. I do have one paper item that is 1786 vintage. It’s on sheepskin paper and is a membership certificate from the ‘Links of Leith’ for a member of the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers.”

The earliest collectible pieces usually come with a considerable price tag, though. “That’s the drawback of any club of the 18th century and before – affordability,” he says. “They are very expensive, often in six figures.”

Also in his collection are several autographed Ben Hogan photographs, other Hogan memorabilia, and a few rare golf balls.

Hickory Golf

“My most memorable battle was the Michigan tournament (Belvedere Hickory Open) a few years ago” Harris says. “It was a close contest with Chuck McMullin, John Sherwood, and Dave Brown. All great and competitive guys. I thought I had the tournament



Dr. Jay Harris with Frank Boumphrey, an early guiding light of the SoHG, and Doug Marshall at the 2006 Hickory Haggis, a fixture on the annual schedule of the Carolina Hickory Golf Association. Dr. Harris was a co-founder and enthusiastic supporter of the CHGA.



These photos of Dr. Harris were taken during a 2004 Region 4 GCS hickory golf outing in Austin, Texas. He had a lovely, smooth and powerful swing.





For several years, Dr. Harris enjoyed competing at the Belvedere Hickory Open at the Belvedere Golf Club in Charlevoix, Mich. In the photo at left he is with Ed Ronco, center, and Wally Bills, both from Michigan. Ronco, a former president of the SoHG and co-founder of the Wyandotte Hickory Organization, passed away in February 2022. In the photo at right, Dr. Harris is with Jim Davis, left, and Fred Muller, right, the former head professional at Crystal Downs Country Club in Frankfort, Mich. Following that particular round, Dr. Harris kindly took Davis aside and offered some free golf lessons.

in my pocket at the 16th green. I had a straight 10-foot putt for birdie that would have given me a 3-stroke lead. I very carefully analyzed the putt and proceeded to run it 30 feet off the green! What a shock. Somehow, I persevered and won on the first extra hole against Dave Brown.”

There was also a tight match at Mid Pines several years ago.

“I had a good shootout with Rob Pilewski and nipped him by a stroke. I went to the 19th hole after my round and sat down with Frank Boumphrey. He had a pitcher of beer and asked how I did. I said ‘Frank, I think I won the tournament’. Everyone who I thought had a chance to beat or tie me was already in. So I celebrated with Frank and swigged down 3-4 glasses. Then someone came in and said Marty Joy had tied me, shooting a final round of 75. The greens were particularly fast that year, and I had thought no one could shoot a 75. Marty’s 75 that year is the best achievement I am aware of in the hickory tournament world. I think Randy (Jensen) was in the high 80’s both rounds. Anyway, I go to the first tee for the play-off. Needless to say, I had a good buzz. I make a side-hill 15-foot putt to win. Numerous people told me if I had missed I would have gone 15 feet by. I must have been pretty inebriated because I did not sense that!”

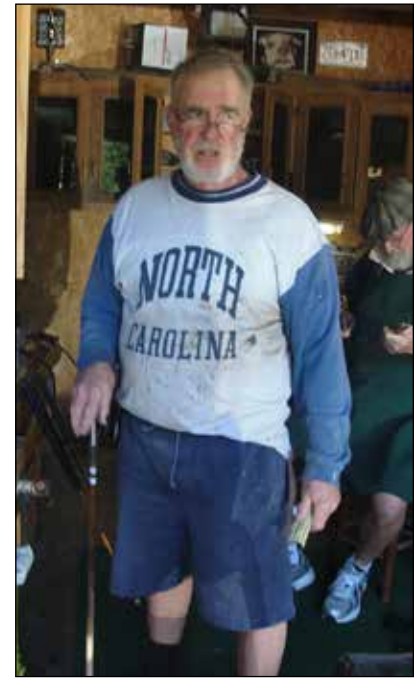
Harris has one National Hickory Championship title

on his resumé (1999) as well as the title to the inaugural U.S. Hickory Open at Morganton, N.C. on the Mimosa Country Club course (2008). He has two Mid Pines Hickory Open titles, one Belvedere Hickory Open title, and is three-times winner of the Haggis Cup, the match play competition of the Carolina Hickory Golf Association.



Dr. Harris with friend and golf partner Doug Ellis on the Highland Park Golf Course for the 2012 Southern Hickory 4-Ball Championship.

“My memory of Morganton is that I made five or six long putts and a lot of 5- and 6-foot par putts,” he says. “Is that not the way it is for almost all winners? Putting is my weakness. It has been for the 60 years I have been playing.”



These photos of Dr. Harris in his workshop were taken at his Pinehurst home in 2011. In the center photo, close friend Rob Ahlschwede can be seen working on a club. He was visiting for the Mid Pines Hickory Open. Over the years he was active, Dr. Harris introduced countless players to the game and loaned or rented many dozens, if not hundreds, of play sets for golf outings and fundraisers. He referred to himself as “the pied piper of hickory golf.” An old license plate on the wall says “2thfixr.” Dr. Harris by this time had retired from a 30-year dental practice.

Harris is the only hickory player to hold both an NHC and a U.S. Hickory Open title.

“I had a good two-year streak five years ago and feel fortunate to do what I’ve done.”

Club work

Nowadays, Harris loves his work on the old hickories, learning about their strengths and weaknesses, trying to figure out what makes them tick.

“When I started refurbishing hickory clubs 10 years ago, I had no idea what I was getting into,” he says. “My curiosity led the way – trial and error, being mentored by numerous others, asking questions. There are continual insights and the aha! moments. You can exhaust yourself at times, but never the subject.”

His workshop area is outfitted with all the tools of the trade. Barrels of hickories await attention. Requests for clubs and repairs come in from far and wide. He does not promote his activities. Referrals seek him out. Harris, probably conservatively, reckons that he has personally brought 30-40 people into the hickory experience.

Club rentals also keep him busy. He rents clubs for up to eight events each year and is looking to grow that business. One such rental, in Pinehurst, may find pros handling his clubs.

“The Pinehurst Resort is going to host a Hickory Pro-Am on Dec. 9,” he says. “Hopefully that will include a \$5,000 purse. I plan to supply the clubs to the pros. This is Steve Herron’s idea, and he and Rob Pilewski did the initial planning.”

Harris also rented clubs to the initial U.S. Professional Hickory Championship on the Temple Terrace Country Club course in Temple Terrace, Fla. in 2011. Mike Stevens, the pro at MacDill AFB, organized the event. Harris took great care to assist each participant in club selection. Senior PGA Tour player David Frost was in the field that year, a bonus for Harris who was tickled at the idea of such a talent playing his clubs. In fact, Harris went out on the course to see Frost play, approached him on a tee on the back nine and engaged him in a brief conversation before “allowing” him to return to his game.

His own favorite clubs include a Maxwell flanged jigger, Jack White brassie, and a “Goldie” deep groove niblick – “my go-to club from 75 yards in.” Among the irons in his playset are Starella Danga shaft Gibsons. Of his two putters, one is a Tom Stewart 15-degree approach putter. The other is “Slab”, profiled in the fall 2010 edition of the Wee Nip, the newsletter of the Society of Hickory Golfers. It is a 22-ounce piece of serious looking metal, c. 1830s.

Harris is a member of the Pinehurst Country Club.