

November 2021

By Mr. Tom Johnson on the occasion of his being honored with the SoHG's Mike Brown Award

I met my tremendous wife, Karen, at a wedding reception for mutual friends in 1981. She was raised in Tallmadge, Ohio, the small town where we currently reside. Tallmadge is next to Mogadore, an even smaller town of 3,500 where I was raised. She has many

remarkable talents, notably she is the only woman I know who has driven a locomotive; yes, one of those big, diesel, 2,000-gallon tank machines. Not sure how the National Transportation Safety Board would feel about that.



We more or less kept track of each other for a few years after that wedding reception.

2012 FOXBURG CHAMP. Karen Johnson presents Tom with the winner's plaque.

Looking back, I'd have to admit she let me chase her a little bit, but in 1986 she finally agreed to go out with me. Whatever good things have come to me since then can be attributed to her. I would be lost without her. Her passion for Foxburg (our hickory golf event) to be a success is a small example of her desire to make something important to me equally important to her.

We do not have any children. We did have a pair of Siamese cats for quite a while, I really enjoyed them.

Mogadore was known for its sports programs and I played them all growing up. It also had a local public golf course, I started playing when I was 14, but really getting into it the summer I turned 15. I had five or six really close friends and we spent the summer at

the course either working or playing. We did all the things golf kids do: played 10 cent skins, 15 cents for birdies, played cards for similar stakes, hung out with the local golf vets, and played every day.



PORTRAIT OF TOM *taken by Chris Lane at Foxburg in 2014.*

We were all within a couple years of age, and

of course had nicknames – Bones, Barrel, Fast, T-Bird, JK, Baby Butt. My name among the group was T-Bird primarily for my penchant of throwing clubs horizontally. We won three consecutive Ohio Class A State Golf Championships 1971-1973. We were very close, long after our school days.

I attended the University of Akron for one full year, making the golf team as a freshman, the fifth player most of the season. That team qualified for the smaller school NCAA tournament in Riverside, Calif. We did not score well, placing far down the list.

We had a couple of quality players, I was not among them, at least not at that time.

The summer after my freshman year I took what I felt was a good job in the offices of a local grocery distribution center. With a decent ability to communicate and lead people, I quickly moved up a couple of levels. Thus began my 47-year career in grocery distribution operations. I've sincerely enjoyed my leadership responsibilities and the opportunity to develop a positive culture for several progressive companies.

I currently work for Vistar, a division of Performance Food Group. We've created and maintain a terrific culture; I'm enjoying this professional time of my life. Retirement is around the corner, but I want to nurture this opportunity to make a difference first.

Golf Collecting

My first set of clubs was a Spalding Doug Turnesa starter set. We later discovered a mixed set of 1930-era clubs in the rafters of my grandfather's garage. If memory serves, there were four wood shafted irons – a mashie, a spade mashie, niblick, and putter. There were two woods, a driver and a two wood, both with steel shafts. They were hardly playable, as the metal shafts were odd, and all the irons had a bend in the shafts. I've wondered many times what may have happened to that set.



2018 FOXBURG PLAYERS includes First Tee participants and Dr. Bern Bernacki (far left).

What struck me were the names on the clubs. They were Burkes

or Wright & Ditson make, with names and numbers, which I later learned dated them to the mid-1930s.

It's not surprising I would find myself drawn to antique equipment. Before golf collecting started in earnest, I had acquired several early pieces of baseball equipment: catcher's mitts from the 20s, early baseball bats with thick handles, early sports catalogs, maybe half a dozen leather football helmets. My favorites were a few laced basketballs that were in very good shape. This equipment is now in the hands of other worthy souls to enjoy, but I admit, I think about them from time to time. I still have an early catcher's mitt on my desk.

Karen is also a collector of a few things, antique cigarette holders, Chessie railroad items (Chessie was a popular cat icon used as a symbol and nickname of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway. It officially became the Chessie System after a merger in 1972), and a very nice Swarovski crystal animal collection that makes our great room sparkle when the sun hits correctly through the skylights.

My golf collection really started with putters, specifically, Spalding "Cash-Ins." I had seen Sam Snead use one on an old Shell Wonderful World of Golf series telecast and thought it looked like something I had seen at flea markets. I ran across one in a barrel that was fairly heavy and had a flat lie. The small margin for error made it great for practicing, and really improved my putting. Collected 36 of them suckers. Still have many; especially one with a pistol grip and sheath shaft, it is really sweet.

My current club collection numbers about 30 examples. I interchange these in my primary display of clubs. My best club is a Spalding with the early times. Great condition, a/o as they say. My other examples have more senti-

mental than monetary



AN EARLY SQUARE-TOE IRON is one of Tom's cherished collectibles.

value, but that is what makes sense to me. What I look for now in my search is playable pre-1900 clubs for myself or others to use.

I also have a nice ball collection, maybe 15 balls, all in good to mint condition. These include several great gutty examples. Top pieces include a mint Kempshall Flyer bramble with an early (1902) stamp, as well as nice early Spalding balls including the Wizard.

I appreciate my collection of early golf balls because I believe the evolution of the golf ball created the most dramatic changes in golf over the years. The gutty ball brought greater availability to the masses during the second half of the 19th century; American ingenuity, by ignoring tradition and developing a longer golf ball, had a positive impact on the popularity of the game in the early 20th century.

Those changes are what I think about when I ponder those old balls in my collection. I still get a thrill when I pull a new modern ball out of a sleeve. I don't find it hard to imagine what it must have been like in the early 1900s to unwrap a new Spalding Wizard and watch it rocket off after that first strike compared to the hacked up Vardon Flyer they had probably been using. Little wonder golf took off in this country so quickly.

Makes you wonder why so many of us revert to the early periods of sport. If it was so rough then, why do we chase the old play? Because it was difficult, it was primitive, because we have a sense of history and emulate heroes, and to be with others with the same zany passion. The connection of seeing others at hickory golf events is amazing.

When it comes to playing, the greatest golf experience I have had is hickory golf. I have been fortunate, a member of three state championship golf teams, made my college team my freshman year, won maybe a dozen club championships or other decent local amateur events, plus several hickory events over the past 20 years. But what amazes me is the camaraderie among the contestants in hickory golf. Golf is fun in so many ways, not sure why the human relationship element is so strong in hickory golf, but it sure is. That is why I am compelled to attend four events a year, and others chase many more events.

My Clubs

My only play set is a mixture of pre- and post-1900 era clubs. Smooth face irons include a 26-degree William Murray long iron with a Charles Brand shaft (Brand bought out Murray in 1898); a Jack Morris 36-degree lofting iron (Hole-in One club); Willie Tucker lofter, 42 degrees; and a Tad Morris rut iron, 46 degrees. My only grooved club is a Stewart mashie (stamped James Kerr, Cairo; he was in Cairo, Egypt from 1914 through 1916). There is also a punch-dot 40-degree Hillerich and Bradsby mashie that was in Mike Just's playset (a gift from his wife, Lynn, a dear friend of Karen's). For grins, I recently added a Fairlie model Stewart post-registration mark anti-shank iron. I holed out with it a couple of times in the two weeks I've had it in the set. Just makes me laugh and gets all kinds of questions.

Woods include a post-1900 driver, a three-wood from Louisville golf, and a Tad Moore bulldog that I



NHC DUNDEE AWARD. Tom was honored with this award in 2021 for contributions to the tournament.

really enjoy. Pre-1900 woods include a replica long nose play club stamped "A Strath," plus a Louisville Golf long nose fairway brassie custom-made for me by Mike Just.

Putters include two "The Spalding" tall blade putters, one plain or nickel, one brass; plus a wooden head custom-made Samuel Ryder model that Mike also made to fit me. The SR model may be the most popular putter within the pre-1900 playing group as I see many players with this model at gutty events.

All these clubs are in and out of the set depending on the event, ball used, length of tees used. I enjoy trying to use every club other than the putters every Sunday morning.

My first foray into hickory golf in the early 1990s was trying certain clubs I had found at flea markets and auctions while playing regular golf. I had several I knew were pre-1900 and thought were interesting; they played decently even without grooves, which at the time were coming under scrutiny through the Ping groove controversy. Added a couple to my Ping Eye-2+ set, replaced the Cash-In with a bent-neck Spalding with the double-circle baseball mark, and was pretty much hooked.

So, even though I had developed a play set, I didn't really look to play in any events. Eventually tried a couple of the Golf Collector Society "Hickory Hackers" during collector shows, but these were nothing compared with the evolution that hickory golf would take over the next 20 years.

Favorite tournaments and thoughts ...

I read about the first National Hickory Championship in the GCS Bulletin, got a little more information at the GCS Spring Fever Show in Dayton (now held in Columbus), and sent in my entry relatively quickly. My first year was 1999. NHC host Pete Georgiady has now held the event for 24 consecutive years. While the past few years



NHC LYNAH SHERRILL AWARD. Tom was honored with this award in 2014. The award is presented to an NHC participant who upholds the principles of golf, and has fun while doing so. Sherrill passed away in 2005 and the award is presented annually in this name by the Sherrill family. Above with Tom are Jim and Caty Sherrill.

have been a challenge for the NHC for various reasons, I fully expect it to rise to the prominence it deserves. It is the Granddaddy of pre-1900 golf – long live the King!

I have had the pleasure of attending all but the first of the NHCs. I was extremely fortunate to capture the championship in 2014, succeeding in a four-hole sudden victory playoff with Mike Stevens, a retired teaching professional and organizer of the Florida Hickory Players. Mike was 1 under par for the four holes, and hit what is the greatest hickory golf shot I have witnessed – a niblick from the road on Oakhurst's first hole. With his ball lodged between two stones, he exquisitely played a niblick to within 18 inches of the hole some 20 yards away. A tremendous shot by a fine gentleman. The playoff is something I will never forget. Not a weak shot hit between us. Mike has assembled a significant hickory play group in the Florida region and is an extremely important figure in modern hickory golf, as well as a multiple NHC champion.

Another favorite event is the Wisconsin Gutty Challenge hosted by the Wisconsin Hickory Golfers in Eagle, Wisc. Eagle Springs has a long history as a resort, creating the golf course in 1893 to lure Chicago vacationers. Even with my devotion to Foxburg, Eagle Springs is my favorite gutty course. Like Foxburg it is only nine holes, but there is plenty of variety. The second hole is reminiscent of a motivational poster where you see a tiny golf green perched atop a tiny column of land. Curiously, for the second round, the second hole is a downhill pitch to a crater green, hence the names Volcano and Crater! Love the place. Not easy, but fair and so unique.

Karen's favorite event is, or was, the C.B. Macdonald Challenge in Niagara-on-the-Lake (NOTL), Ontario, Canada. It had generally been held in September, and Karen and I attended each year from 2003 until its last playing in 2017. I sincerely enjoy the NOTL golf course. Created in 1875, it also has the features popular during gutty period play. Karen and I certainly look forward to seeing our great Canadian friends soon.

NOTL was a favorite for another important reason, as the place was a great destination for wives and guests. While the players enthusiastically enjoyed the golf course and competition, it was much fun to hear how the non-players spent their day up and down busy Queen Street with its shops and attractions. The friendships made during those trips are now lifelong, many of them our dearest friends today.

Foxburg

Karen and I have had the opportunity to host the Foxburg Hickory Championship for 13 years. I won't say I could not manage without Karen, but the Foxburg Hickory Championship is what it is largely because of her organizational skills. It has made it possible for me to play



2016 FOXBURG CHAMP SETH LOMISON *is congratulated by Tom on his victory.*

knowing someone was watching out for the peripheral aspects, food, guests, meeting the press, you know that kind of stuff.

I first heard of Foxburg in the early 1990s, and had visited there once without playing, not sure of the year, but believe it was 1993. In 1995, I traveled to Shinnecock Hills for the U.S. Open (Corey Pavin's famous 4-wood) and stopped to play a few holes in Foxburg, but the weather held me to only three holes. Sill I checked out its museum where I discovered it held artifacts far older than those in the USGA's Far Hills museum.

The Foxburg Hickory Championship originally started in a discussion over gutty balls with Tad Moore at the GCS Dayton Spring Fever Show in January 2009. We were talking about Chris McIntyre's new line cut gutties compared with balls in use at the NHC and at the C.B. Macdonald events. We talked about Foxburg, and my annual visits there with friends. I had recently tried Chris' ball and it changed the how the course played. Between Chris, and now Dave Brown, the new Park gutty ball was developed and it has become my favorite for ball for pre-1900 use.

Anyway, Tad and I thought Foxburg would be a perfect venue for a gutty event. Later, I emailed Mike Gardner, then general manager of Foxburg, and got a reply a few weeks later. He said Foxburg's board had been wondering how to get a period event going and would be thrilled if something could be arranged.

Hence it began, 2009, 13 years ago and still going strong.

We generally have 24 to 30 contestants, and another 15 guests. Thirty-two players would be the upper limit, especially with the First Tee of Pittsburgh (FTP) players joining us on Saturdays.

The First Tee goals are to build character and values in young people by introducing them to golf and its moral principles. The FTP does an excellent job of integrating local golf history into its program. A large portion of that history is Arnold Palmer and various major USGA golf events. Foxburg as well figures into the golf history of western Pennsylvania.

I am proud of the nature of the relationship with the First Tee. They, of course, use hickory shafted equipment with period style balls and often play with our FHC contestants. Barry Markowitz and Gordon Beggs immediately come to mind, but there have been many others. I have always been very appreciative of their



THE FOXBURG TEAM. Tom and Karen have combined to make the Foxburg Hickory Championship one of the best-loved hickory tournaments on the annual fixture list. Above, the two of them do a little organizational work on the Foxburg clubhouse porch. Good friend John Crow Miller looks on from behind.

desire to make a difference.

Dr. Bern Bernacki is our liaison with the Pittsburgh chapter. Dr. Bern, an advisory member of the First Tee board, suggested involving First Tee youngsters in some fashion. Not even sure we started out talking about them playing. Scoring, assisting on the course, those activities were the initial thoughts. Dr. Bern and the First Tee had the equipment, and quickly turned into them playing. Truly a joy to have them and their families join us, we look forward to them in 2022.

Foxburg has some of the best local publicity on the hickory circuit. Annually one of the local newspapers publishes a nice story and photos. In 2021, Karen was quoted in one Saturday article by the Butler Eagle; I really got a chuckle out of seeing that.

Our dear friend and keen gutty enthusiast, John Crow Miler, authored and published a small but comprehensive book about Foxburg in 2020. He made a strong case for the hand-cut stone sand and water boxes at the course being the oldest existing golf artifacts in the United States. His book also included a tribute to Jeff "Tex" Texter, long time keeper of the green at Foxburg Country Club, very nice.

It is difficult to describe the emotional attachment I have with the Foxburg Hickory Championship. It is so heartwarming to see old friends. Many of the relationships are now lifelong connections. We know we are not going to be able to manage it forever, I am hopeful the club or someone will want to maintain the continuity when the time comes, but not yet.

My lovely wife is such a strong supporter. The effort Karen puts into keeping entries organized, managing Thursday's registration process, and the work she, Dawn, and the others do to keep us fed is just amazing! She started assisting me because of my passion for hickory golf and desire to expand the game, but she now views the time at Foxburg as an opportunity to spend three days with friends who have quickly become part of the family.



THE 2019 MIKE JUST KEEPER OF THE SPIRIT AWARD was presented to Tom, left, by Greg Smith and the Wisconsin Hickory Golfers. The award honors one who, like the late Mike Just, was a keen hickory golf enthusiast and upholder of golf's cherished traditions. In the photo at right, Tom shares a moment at a trade show with Lynn (left) and Rachel Just, Mike's wife and daughter.

I have had a few awards in my life-

time beginning with the Most Valuable Player during my senior year at Mogadore High School, and our Golf Team was inducted in the Mogadore High School Hall of Fame.

I was awarded the NHC's Lynah Sherrill award in 2009. "The Lynah" is a most prestigious award, presented by the Sherrill family in his name. Lynah, who passed away in early 2005, was a grand individual with an extensive career as a rules authority in the Tennessee Golf Association. To be honored by his family in his memory is the epitome of my NHC experiences. In 2021, I was awarded the NHC's Dundee Award for my contributions to the tournament. I've always considered this a fellowship award, and am very grateful to be honored.

In 2019, I was awarded the Mike Just 'Keeper of the Spirit Award' by the Wisconsin Hickory Golfers. I am not sure, but I believe this was the first year for this award. This recognition in Mike Just's name is very sobering. I know how much he meant to Greg Smith, Wally Koss, and the many others in the Wisconsin group. Really something.

I am truly humbled, and deeply honored to receive the Society of Hickory Golfers' Mike Brown Award. Being recognized by peers is the highest of honors, especially peers who appreciate the creation and continuance of modern hickory golf and of providing opportunities for others to enjoy this game. There are many others as worthy as me, maybe just hanging in

there longer.

I had conversations with Mike at several collector shows, always stopping by with his quiet demeanor and that trademark smile.

I understand the respect the early organizers of the SoHG had for Mike. As with previous honors I have been privileged to receive, I fully expect to carry forward the same quiet, consistent, steady demeanor Mike displayed.

I am fortunate to have access to one of the greatest venues available in this country for our sport and to have a club whose membership is open for us taking it over for three days. I am blessed to have a terrific wife who encourages me to visit other events, and who tremendously assists in making Foxburg the success it is; and to have great friends who can't wait to get together year after year and enjoy similar struggles and successes.

On top of all this, to be honored for all of these things I enjoy, is a reminder of how truly fortunate I am.

MIKE BROWN passed away in February 2010. The award in his name honors those who have a respect for the traditions of hickory golf, are dedicated to growing the game and to promoting lasting friendships through the sport.

