

GHS SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Tom Johnson Tallmadge, Ohio

An avid golf ball and club collector, Tom Johnson, along with his wife, Karen, also hosts the Foxburg Hickory Championship, now in its 12th year. It's a pre-1900 gutty ball tournament held at the Foxburg CC in Foxburg, Pa., one of the country's earliest courses. Below, Tom writes about his golf and collecting interests.



TOM JOHNSON at the 2017 Columbus Trade Show with two of his very dear friends, Lynn Just, left, and Rachel Just Irwin, right.

I grew up in the Village of Mogadore (3500) just outside of Akron, Ohio. The north side of the town was home to a public golf course and by the time I turned 15 I had really gotten hooked.

Six of my friends were very close, within a year or two of the same age, and close in skill levels as well. As a group, we were fortunate and talented enough to win Ohio Class A State Championships in 1971, 1972, and 1973.

I had limited success over the years, winning my share of local club events, and really enjoyed competing, but I never would have imagined the most interesting and rewarding golf was yet to come.

Collecting, for example.

Spalding Cash-In putters became a favorite in the late '80s, and I started gathering them at estate sales and flea markets. They had pyratone shafts and I enjoyed practicing with them. But I began to notice a few wooden shafted clubs at the estate sales I was visiting. I believed the irons stamped "Made in Scotland" were cool and started looking for cleekmarks that I found intriguing.

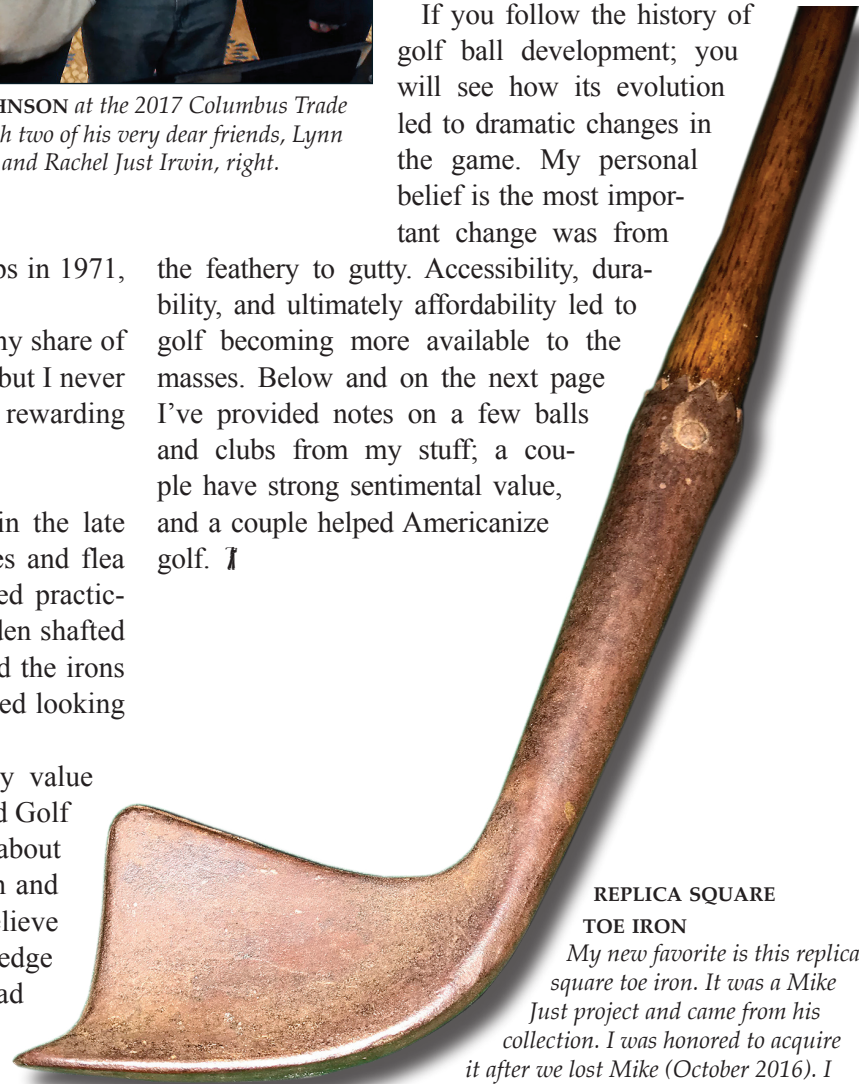
I came across one of Pete Georgiady's early value guides at an antique mall, which led me to the old Golf Collector's Society. Checking into it I learned about trade shows that were held in January in Dayton and went to my first one in the early '90s. I couldn't believe the assortment of golf stuff, let alone the knowledge of the exhibitors and sessions lecturers. I was head over heels over the gutties I saw that first year. I bought eight to 10 balls, half of them gutties, and half turn of the century "bounding bil-lies." As with most of us, I spent a couple of years collecting everything, but eventually focused on early golf balls, primarily gutties.

Clubs are great and it's nice to show off the wide variety of unique models, but I get the biggest kick out of my ball collection. They are all basically small and round but there is no question to me which piece of equipment has had the biggest impact on golf – it's the ball.

I mean, try taking a modern driver and hitting a Park replica gutty ball. That is why I collect, play, and learn everything I can about early golf balls.

If you follow the history of golf ball development; you will see how its evolution led to dramatic changes in the game. My personal belief is the most important change was from

the feathery to gutty. Accessibility, durability, and ultimately affordability led to golf becoming more available to the masses. Below and on the next page I've provided notes on a few balls and clubs from my stuff; a couple have strong sentimental value, and a couple helped Americanize golf. ¶



REPLICA SQUARE TOE IRON

My new favorite is this replica square toe iron. It was a Mike Just project and came from his collection. I was honored to acquire it after we lost Mike (October 2016). I knew of his work to reproduce this and several other early heavy irons. This beast would require orthopedic intervention if I took a full swing. Looks terrific in the rack, and it's the club I show off the most. It is one of several things I have that are strongly connected to Mike.



SILVER KING HV

This c. 1920 ball was made by Silvertown in Great Britain. This Silver King High Velocity was my first wrapped ball. I picked it up early in my collecting career. I always got a kick out of opening sleeves and grabbing a new ball, even more so to unwrap a pristine ball. (Certainly might reduce the sting of hitting a shot in the pond!) Wrapped balls are elegant. I'm not sure why they came out of favor. Affordability and convenience possibly, but I like the well-dressed look and would enjoy a return. I have quite a few better examples, but this one was first.



KEMPSHALL FLYER

This was made by Kempshall Manufacturing, located in New Jersey, and is stamped 1902. I have seen a few other Flyer's with a 1902 stamp on the pole, but none this clean. The poles are very clear, and it has a great patina. The 1902 stamp seems to be the most difficult to find; the 1903 stamp is much more prevalent. This is the best example of this ball I have seen.

SPALDING WIZARD

This ball was made by Spalding about 1903. I had been looking for an early Spalding manufactured ball, and found this one at the GCS National Show at Virginia Beach. While this one is a nice example, it is not quite perfect – it has two light strike marks, but has great poles and a nice patina. I use it in displays with several early Spalding irons and woods. I always found it was easier to talk about a common name like Spalding when talking to folks about early equipment. Spalding is coming up on 125 years of golf manufacturing.



SPALDING SEELY PATENT, C. 1912

This club has strong Spalding Gold Medal markings, an original stamped 'Gold Medal' shaft, and a punch dot face. The patent date of May 14, 1912 is cleanly stamped on the head. I believe this one was made early in the series as it does not have the reinforced hosel added to later examples to improve the durability of the club. The shaft is tight within the times, which gives it the unique splice/fork look that makes this iron so attractive. This mashie has very few scratches on the sole and the face is clean, overall in very good condition.

EARLY HAND FORGED IRON, UNKNOWN MAKER, C. 1870

I obtained this iron at the Dayton show, maybe 18 years ago. It was a barter for a mint red Silver King mesh ball. It is a nice example, and the earliest authentic club I own. The hosel nicking is very early, and the markings are long since vanished, which prevent identifying the maker. But it is a long thin blade with 35 degrees of loft. Of the dozen or so clubs that rotate in and out of my 'handy' rack, it is a constant.

