



Member Profile

Bob West

Kingston, Ont., Canada

“I was born to a long line of golfers,” says Bob West of Kingston, Ont. His father, Ted, was an excellent player whose harrowing World War II experiences were somewhat alleviated by golf.

A flight lieutenant in the RCAF during World War II, the elder West piloted a Halifax bomber that was shot down in 1942 over Dusseldorf, Germany.

“He spent five months shackled in a Stalag near Lansdorf before being transferred to the lower Silesian prison camp of Sagan,” Bob says. “It was there that he manufactured balls and clubs and gave instruction at a 9-hole course made by the prisoners. He escaped just before VE Day. Upon his return, he was rewarded with an exhibition match partnering the great Bobby Locke.”

After returning to Canada, Ted West launched what Bob says was Canada’s first sporting goods store. When it did not succeed as he had hoped, he was persuaded to rejoin the RCAF and was killed flying a helicopter rescue mission in the interior of British Columbia in 1955.

“His good friend and golfing colleague was Stan Leonard, Canada’s best professional golfer at the time,” Bob says. “When Gary Player went on an exhibition tour with Mr. Leonard in the early ’60s their stop in Edmonton included dinner with my mom and one of her friends. I was a teenager at the time and still remember that thrill of these two coming by the house to take my mom to dinner.”

Bob would go on to earn a bachelor’s degree from the University of Alberta, an M.D. from the University of Calgary, and a master’s in community health from Queen’s University. He is an associate professor in family medicine at Queen’s and has a private practice in Kingston.

Bob has golfed all his life, but there was a 10-year hiatus when the sport took a back seat to travel adventures and medical school.

“In 1968 I had just finished an English degree and was rudderless,” he says. “I traveled to San Francisco to visit friends and Haight Ashbury and then boarded a ship to Australia to see what else there was in the world.”

His future wife, Avril, was also on that ship. A singer, she had grown weary of the nightly routine of singing gigs and, like, Bob, was traveling to Australia for a change of pace. The two met on board just outside Hawaii.

“She has patiently stood with me while I taught high school in Sydney, worked in a large corporation in Johannesburg, made candles in the hills of northern Idaho, and endured years of medical academia,” he says. “These did not prepare her, however, for my first foray into competitive hickory golf 11 years ago at the NHC (National Hickory Championship) at Oakhurst Links.”

“My interest in hickory came serendipitously,” Bob says. “While browsing the web searching for a copy of Darwin’s biography of James Braid I landed on the antiquegolfscotland.com website and became entranced by the clubs for sale and their attached histories. I bought some, surfed more and discovered that there were actually players who used those clubs in modern events. That was a dozen years ago.”

Bob had earlier played well enough to compete in the Canadian amateur. Though Avril did not follow those rounds, she joined him at that first Oakhurst event.

“In my initial practice round, just the two of us, in 100 degree heat, I lost all my Oakhurst balls by the 5th hole and, if I hadn’t met up with Rob Ahlschwede and Randy Jensen, she and I might have been in the car for the long ride home,” he recalls.

“She spent the rest of the week observing from the patio and I went on to become addicted to the joy of being part of such a wonderful, knowledgeable, and happy group of players who truly appreciate the history of our game,” he says.

Two years ago Bob was honoured with the NHC’s Lynah Sherrill Award, which honors competition, participation, etiquette, spirit, and attention to golf history.

These days, he tries to play at least three or four tournaments a year, travel and time permitting.

Bob and Avril have three children. One son, Tony, is an artist, and Jordan owns a night club. Daughter, Amanda, is a golf professional and chef and is married to Bobby Sly (a two-time NHC champion). Amanda and Bobby have two daughters, Lydia, 9, and Addisyn, 7.

As for Avril, blessed with a lovely voice, she sang in a rock band on the American base in Goose Bay, Labrador; jazz in Montreal; and folk in Winnipeg. Her father was a bomb disposal expert in England during the war and her pregnant mother went there to be with him. Avril was born in Slough, England, while her father disposed of a bomb in the hospital basement.

After years of Sweet Adeline singing in Kingston, she connected with a very talented singer songwriter and, together with the songwriter’s guitar-playing husband, formed the band We’re From Earth. Strictly a local band, they play original music and practice and work toward more studio time. They have one eponymous CD.

The band has just added a drummer as well as Bobby Sly, the couple’s son-in-law, who is a superb base player, “so the music is loud and rocking,” Bob says.



Bob and Avril West on the Oakhurst Golf Links in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va.

How often do you play hickories?

Originally only to prepare for tournaments but, as I have recruited more local players, much more often.

What’s in your play set?

Smooth face long iron – unnamed
Smooth face niblick – unnamed
Pre-1900 lofted play club – Louisville Golf
Brassie – Walter Hagen
Mid iron – Stewart
Jigger – Stewart
Mashie – Stewart
Spade mashie – Stewart
Mashie niblick – Stewart
Niblick – Stewart
Putter – Dormie, by Imperial Golf Company

Favorite club?

Probably the spade mashie. Great for out of the rough, chipping, and 150 yards.

What ball do you play?

I like the McIntyre balls but usually something soft or the Pro-Vs.

Favorite course for hickories?

Brora in northern Scotland. Home of the James Braid Society and one of his masterpieces hardly changed from the original.

Favorite hickory tournament?

Masochistically the NHC, but also the CB Macdonald at Niagara-on-the-Lake. A beautiful venue and a wonderful mix of match and medal play with both pre- and post-1900 clubs.

Any particular player or aspect of golf history you especially enjoy?

I enjoy the life stories of the players from a century ago. Most came from humble backgrounds and it was their love of golf and not its riches that carried them through. Most of them respected their origins. I also like collecting, researching the history of golf clubs and trying to feel what it must have been like to hold the club when it was new.

Best thing about hickory golf?

The wonderful, different people with the common thread of the love for our game.

Ideas to promote hickory golf?

Play and have fun with your clubs. Carry a couple of spare sets in the trunk of the car in case someone wants to try. Encourage joining a society or give a membership out as a gift or prize. A single good shot with a hickory club is enticing to a new player so don’t let the catch off the hook. Help them enjoy the experience of trajectory and not air time and subtly let them know that hickory will improve their modern game.

Most recent book on golf that you read?

Sun Tzu’s Ancient Art of Golf. This is a humorous take on the original Art of War. The original is a must-read to understanding patience and preparation in the face of conflict. This new book takes the philosophy to the course in a fun way.