



## Designed and Handcrafted in Louisville, Ky.

Craftsman Will Jacoby does not compromise on quality or integrity when it comes to his products or the way he conducts business.

BY JIM DAVIS

If there is a commonality among those who play modern hickory golf, it is a vague discontent with the surface values of the modern game that appear absolutely silly to the untutored. "Contempt," as Arnold Haultain said, "could be poured upon any game by anyone unacquainted with (it)."

Modern hickory golfers, though, are a discerning breed who have re-discovered, through wooden shafts old and new, golf's alluring fascinations. Their enthusiasm has fostered a revitalization of the game, a fresh approach, a new way of thinking about clubs, of shotmaking, of themselves and their fellows.

Those who adopt it wholeheartedly, who "play the game with all their heart" as Michael Murphy's Shivas Irons put it, are among the most zealous of converts, and among the most passionate in their pursuit of its enjoyment both for themselves and others. In this camp, Will Jacoby has firmly raised a standard that signals a singular devotion to modern hickory golf and its players.

A tall man with white hair and a friendly visage,



*Products from Steurer & Jacoby are displayed at the company's Louisville factory. Made-in-America golf bags, leather goods, and accessories are the main items.*

Jacoby, 69, looks like he could be the grandpa next door and not an experienced global businessman, former pilot, track star, and leather artist. He is a natural story teller with the Ancient Mariner's skill for captivation (or the "Oldest Member," if you are a PG Wodehouse fan).

He is the principle in Streuer & Jacoby, a Louisville, Ky.-based maker of first-class leather goods from golf bags to travel bags and duffels, golf pouches, bourbon bags, and many more. The company's golf bags are sold around the world. Competitors in the



**The opening of a Golfwrx article on Steurer & Jacoby. (Story link at the end of this article.)**

U.S. Hickory Opens have come to know Jacoby through his generous donations of such goods and for his welcoming personality. He will usually have a display of his goods at each USHO and those who purchase raffle tickets are hopeful their number is called when one his American hand-crafted products is on the stand.

Jacoby's path to this point in his career has covered both the highs and lows of the golf bag industry and opened his eyes to the stark realities that comprise a global economy, especially where Asia is concerned. Despite it all, he remains

much more than a fan of hickory golf, but a firm believer in the values it teaches and in the community it serves and embraces.

## Early Life

Jacoby was born in Canton, Ohio, and raised there and in St. Pete Beach, Fla. After a time in Florida while he was young, the family moved, somewhat permanently, back to Ohio because, as he explains it, "My mom was not fond of the 'Official Florida Pet,' the cockroach." Still, the family would spend most summers in St. Pete Beach from the time Jacoby was about 7 to 15 years old.

His father, Paul Jacoby, juggled careers in engineering, sales, and marketing. In the mid-1960s he built a niche business that represented companies with items for grocery stores and restaurants such as McDonald's, and retail stores such as Walgreen's. His mother, Mary, was a stay-at-home mom who volunteered at the church for fund raising.

Jacoby attended grade school in Cuyahoga Falls until about the third grade when the family moved to Elmhurst, Ill. For a time he thought of entering the priesthood as he had a great-uncle who was a Jesuit missionary.

"I went off to the seminary in Carmelite Seminary in Niagara Falls for my freshman year of high school but quickly experienced the biblical story of how 'many are called and few are chosen.' I discovered that I was not a chosen one," he says.

Returning to the local Catholic high school was no picnic either, he says, as the experience of being taught by nuns rather than priests involved a different kind of discipline. "It was great having girls in the class, a little less structured," he says.

Always interested in sports, Jacoby convinced his parents that a transfer to the local community high school would provide greater exposure to sports teams and thus greater possibilities for a college scholarship.

"I had some salesmanship skills already going for me," he says of that discussion. "That little act of rebellion also meant my two brothers and one sister did not have to attend the Catholic school."

Jacoby's two brothers were both mining engineers, both of whom were Mining Engineers of the Year during their respective senior years at Colorado School of Mines. His sister majored in textiles and fashion at Iowa State Univ. ("They got the brains," he says.) One of his brothers has since passed away of a heart attack, as did his father.

At the new school, Jacoby tried out for both football and track. In football, he played both sides as a linebacker and a blocking back. On the track squad he was a sprinter and threw the shot put. "My favorite



**Will Jacoby** at the 2016 U.S. Hickory Open on the *Lawsonia Links* in Green Lake, Wisc.

Photo by Jenn Koss Hansen

sport would have to be track," he says, "as it was both an individual as well as a team sport, which made it very unique."

It didn't hurt that nationally celebrated coach Joe Newton was the track and cross-country coach. Newton's teams at York High School won more championships and titles, 44 – conference, state, and national – than any other coach in the history of high school and college sports. Among these were 28 Illinois State Championships and four National Championships. He was a manager and coach for marathon runners on the 1988 U.S. Olympic Track Team.

"Newton was the greatest mentor in life I ever had," Jacoby says. "I might also say he taught this Catholic boy a whole new vocabulary in one week. He also taught me perseverance and the desire to do nothing but my best in all that I do. He had a banner from when he went to Northwestern in the 1950s that read:

*Do you want to remember this moment for the rest of your life, or spend the rest of your life trying not to remember this moment?*

Jacoby, by the way, ran the 880 relay, the 220 relay and flat 220. He was a conference champion one year,

and a runner-up in state indoors track another year. He lettered in track in both his junior and senior years.

Though golf wasn't much on his radar at the time, Jacoby's best friend, Mark Dwyer, now a retired judge, enjoyed the game and so it was the two buddies would go round a local muni now and then. The natural athlete in Jacoby discovered the game to be an enjoyable sport, but it would be a few years yet before it would figure prominently in his life.

After high school, Jacoby tried to enlist for service in Vietnam but was denied because his knees had football injuries and he developed osteomyelitis in his right leg. "That truthfully has haunted me my whole life as I lost friends in Vietnam and I felt that everyone should serve," he says. "I am so grateful for all who have and continue to serve. All my uncles and my father, who was a pilot in WWII, as well as his sister, served. She is also a hero to me as she was an Army Nurse, a colonel, who volunteered to be in the first group to go ashore in Europe in order to attend the wounded. She later died because of a sickness from being there. My favorite photo of my father, his sister and their two brothers is them having to salute her before they all left for deployment as she out-ranked them!"

### Early Business Career

Denied military service, Jacoby entered a small college in Minnesota on a track scholarship, but left early when offered a job with Wilson Sporting Goods as a sales trainee. "It was a dream job," he says. The three-year program exposed him to all facets of the business – sales, marketing, inventory control, warehouse, factories, and shipping.

One of the perks was meeting and working with such Wilson athlete representatives as Patty Berg, Sam Snead, Carol Mann, Billy Casper, Stan Smith, Billie Jean King, Dick Butkus and Paul Horning. One of his business-side mentors was Leo Kiley, retired chairman of beer maker Coors-Molson, who taught him valuable marketing skills.

"What they all taught me was: know your product, ensure quality, and take care of the customer," he says. "Oh, yes, Patty taught me how to bet on horses, but I did not learn very well!"

Though he never thought to take photos with these sports greats – selfies were not yet a thing – Jacoby did meet Muhammad Ali through a friend who was an attorney and the boxing legend gave him a pair of match-used boxing gloves.



**An article from the Louisville Courier Journal hangs in the company office. Jacoby's high-quality work garners wide attention in an age when consumer goods are often excoriated for shoddy workmanship.**

"It was during my tenure at Wilson that I really learned to love golf," Jacoby says. "I had the opportunity to play with some great names [like those mentioned above], because they would attend our sales meetings and company outings. My best handicap ever was 15."

Despite playing with some of the greats of the game, Jacoby never became a "golf-aholic" and was active in sailing, skiing, canoeing, and tennis. During his mid-teens flying also became a focus. "I have multiple ratings in both fixed wing and "air bags," he says, "including hot air, smoke, and gas balloons as well as rotor-craft and air ships (blimps). I am out of flying these days because I just don't have the time to be proficient and that is a very important part of flying."

(Jacoby once flew Elmore Just above the latter's Persimmon Ridge Golf Course as it was under construction, so that Just could get an aerial view of how things were progressing.)

During his 13th year at Wilson, Pepsi bought the company and Jacoby felt he did not fit the profile the new owners espoused. In 1981, he accepted an offer from Brunswick Corp. to become the business manager for its golf products – bags and golf club shafts. Brunswick had disposed of most of its other MacGregor Sporting Goods divisions but kept the two factories that made bags and shafts as these were making items for other Brunswick businesses.

From this position, Jacoby rebuilt a relationship with MacGregor/Jack Nicklaus to make their golf

bags and developed relationships with contacts from other companies from his Wilson days, such as the Ben Hogan Company, Austads Golf, H&B and others.

“After a few years I tried to buy that portion of the Brunswick company as it became clear that golf bags did not fit their profile,” he says. “They were focused mainly on boats, billiards, bowling, and medical fields.”

The price Brunswick presented made no sense to Jacoby, who promptly left to begin his own golf bag business from the ground up, with new and advanced equipment – for about half the amount that Brunswick wanted.

### Royal Dublin and Firebird

The new company would be called The Royal Dublin Golf Company and from the start it was focused on innovation.

“When I started that first business, my dad, who always wanted a factory, said he wanted to be part of it, so he sold his business,” Jacoby says. “For me it was great having someone who had great business knowledge, engineering skills, and knew how to buy. He was my ‘whatever needed to be done’ guy until he passed away suddenly when I was 44.”

Jacoby’s Royal Dublin R&D team came up with a major patent for cart-style bags with pockets located facing the front of the bag with no rear pocket. Orders began to build until they were doing some 300,000 bags a year with a customer base that included such companies as Spalding, Tony Pena/Rawlings, Dunlap/Nancy Lopez, Mizuno, Bridgestone, and many others.

“Things were going great,” Jacoby says.

That is, he says, until economic and political shifts during the Bush and Clinton administrations affected the entire sewing industry. Royal Dublin took a hit as well.

“The implementation of NAFTA during the Bush years coupled with reductions in import tariffs under Clinton had the effect of toppling my business like a falling tree,” he says. “Royal Dublin went south and, frankly, I lost everything. The reduction of the tariffs from overseas created a situation where I could get a finished golf bag made in China and bring it all the way here to the U.S. for less than what my raw materials cost. Economics! It mentally hurt me letting almost 100 employees go.”

To survive, Jacoby, consulted with other golf bag company managers and owners, and started the Firebird Group which, for seven years, offered bag design



*This article describes a bag Jacoby custom-made for Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf. It was created during Jacoby’s period as owner of the Royal Dublin Golf Bag Company.*

work and sourcing of imported golf bags, golf accessories, and clubs from China, Korea, and the Philippines. The work involved intense travel for months on end, much of it overseas, as well as in the states. That got old, he says, and the changing golf bag business was in such flux that many former customers merged or went bankrupt.

“By 2002 I decided to retire because the fun and profit were gone,” he says. “The Chinese were masters at working the internet and selling for 40 percent less the same product that I designed and purchased from them.

“Short political digression here – if we, as a country, don’t learn soon, we will all be owned by the Chinese who were trying to sell my customers direct. They control manufacturing and now they are buying more companies here for our great technologies.”

It was about this time that Jacoby and his wife,



*Meghan Leezer, Jacoby’s daughter, works from a pattern to create trim for a golf bag.*

Rhoda Ann, were trying to decide where to live – the family home in Kentucky, or Florida. Rhoda’s mother and Will’s uncle both lived in Florida, and their own children were out of college, so the couple decided on the Sunshine State.

In St. Petersburg, both became involved with their St. John Vianney parish, through civic events and Will with the city. From 2005-13 he was both a member and two-term chairman of the city’s planning board and spent endless hours in meetings and appearing in zoning lawsuits on behalf of the city. He even mounted a bid for mayor at one point but could not match the hundreds of thousands of dollars hotel developers and owners raised to run against him.

Then everything changed again. Both Rhoda’s mother and Will’s uncle passed away leaving a void. Then their children began having grandkids...all of a sudden there were eight and Rhoda wanted to be in Louisville. “So, when my stint on the zoning board came to end, I was real tired of the politics and decided that maybe Louisville wasn’t such a bad idea,” he says. “I might be able to get another paycheck (ha!), we could spend more time in Louisville, and I could finally get Mike off my back about making golf bags.”

“Mike” refers to the late Mike Just, former owner of Louisville Golf. “He as well as Elmore (Mike’s brother) and I knew each other from the late 70s as I made bags for them,” Jacoby says. “Mike told me that if build a top-quality bag here in the U.S., I’d never have to worry about business. Well, that statement is debatable given the way things turned out. Fully against my accountant’s advice, Steurer & Jacoby came into being.”

### Steurer & Jacoby

The couple returned to Kentucky and Jacoby resurrected the Firebird Corporation to start the Steurer and Jacoby brand of golf bags.

“The idea and mission was to hand-craft products made in the USA that offered quality not quantity, tradition not modern, and customer service with a smile,” he says.



**Will puts the finishing touches on a new leather bag.** Clockwise from top left: checking placement of components; riveting; turning the bag so the outside is out; a detail of the bottom of the bag.

The decision to start up a fresh sewing business was a challenge on many levels. To begin with, about 99 percent of all sewing and textiles left the U.S. by 1999, he explains. That meant equipment that was worth anything was scarce. To capitalize with the proper equipment meant an eventual investment of some \$200,000, about 20 percent of the amount initially invested in the original Royal Dublin business. That business also came with a 40,000-square-foot building as well as machinery.

Jacoby also discovered that quality seamstresses were becoming scarce. There were few sewing businesses and trade schools had abandoned this niche. To get the project off the ground took almost eight months of demanding legwork.

The name “Steurer & Jacoby” is derived partly from Jacoby’s desire for a name that sounded old and traditional, such as Courier and Ives, Smith and Wesson, or Wells Fargo. Secondly, his original patterns were made by a designer, Steve Steurer, who worked with him both at Brunswick and Royal Dublin, and even at the original Firebird. Steurer, though he is not part of the company, agreed to the use of his name.

Jacoby’s daughter, Meghan Leezer, is the shop’s

manager and has largely taken over production responsibilities, as well as design and modifications, based on her father's "scribblings," he says.

"The most pride that I have in this business is in my daughter, Meghan, who joined me a little over four years ago," he says. "She was impressed with what I started and with the products and the quality that I demanded."

Leezer told her father that she considers what he does more art than manufacturing. "I don't want to see these efforts end when he retires," she said. "I wanted to learn the business."

"Many of our clients whom I consider personal friends have either met her or talked with her on the phone and know she is very organized and helpful," Jacoby says. "Meghan is committed to crafting our products for many years to come."

("But don't criticize her University of Louisville Cardinals or your order could get lost for a while," he says with a laugh. "Just ask Chris Deinlein.")

Today, the Steurer & Jacoby shop employs three full-time seamstresses and a customer service manager in a 3,000-square-foot shop with a mixture of new and rebuilt machinery, some which cost in excess of \$5,000. There is a laser, a 25-ton die cutter, a skiver, a riveter, and eight different types of sewing machines for different operations.

"Yes, there are a few pairs of scissors as well," Jacoby says.

The new company learned what worked and what didn't from its early products and doesn't give an inch on quality. It is Jacoby's driving mantra.

"My team members have all been with me through



**With the exception of tartans that can be found only in Scotland, all of Steurer & Jacoby's materials are purchased in the U.S. Hides, above left, and waxed canvas, top right, will soon be turned into golf bags, duffels and other goods. At right, a portion of the shop where sewing and design work are carried out.**



**A canvas bag nears completion, left. At right, the detail on a leather duffel.**

thick and thin and believe in what they do," he says. "They reject things that you would not believe. We do not sell rejects or seconds."

As an afterthought, he says that, "If anyone has one of those original bags and would like a newer one, I will provide 15 percent off the purchase of a new one if the old one can be returned, because we make such a better product today."

Tailoring and finishing techniques were improved to work with cotton duck and waxed cotton duck materials. The initial frame was improved with a better divider system. Full-length dividers were added for stability.

“We still use the same leather and same weight of fabric,” he says, “however, the waxed cotton duck is a better version of the material. Our hardware is still solid brass as are the rivets. It is best to say we are at version 7.5 from version .5 when we began.”

Jacoby likes to emphasize that, with one exception, all Steurer & Jacoby products are made at its shop in Jefferson-town, Ky., by Americans from American raw materials. The exceptions are tartan plaids that are imported from a Scottish mill. As well, he says the company makes the only golf bag crafted with American bison hides.

“We are providing a ‘Born in the USA’ product,” he says.

Jacoby credits Bob Georgiade of North Carolina, an expert on hickory golf clubs who has contacts around the world, with his first big order. That came from Joe Lauber of Davos, Switzerland, who ordered 30 bags. “Unfortunately, I shipped him 30 bags in olive green, which was the color of the bags in all our samples and correspondence. Joe wanted British Tan!” Jacoby says. “I had missed that request in one of our emails back and forth. Boy, was I feeling bad!”

Thankfully, Lauber and the hickory golfers in Switzerland and Europe also liked the green and said they would keep them, but requested another order of the British tan.

“Joe has been such a ‘Johnny Appleseed’ for our products in Europe,” Jacoby says. “I do not know how I will ever be able to pay him back. Thanks to him, fully 50 percent of our business is in Europe.”

In fact, thanks to Lauber, Jacoby’s bags have been carried in the Avian French Open as well as elsewhere in Europe. Senior Tour player Miguel Angel Jimenez, winner of the Senior Open Championship in 2018, is



**The Steurer & Jacoby shop in Louisville proudly displays its finished products, including handbags, golf bags, coasters, bag tags, tumblers, leather luggage, and several other specialty items.**



one who carries a Jacoby golf bag.

As Steurer and Jacoby has grown, its product line has expanded.

“We craft products for some of Kentucky’s best known distilleries and a winery,” Jacoby says. “With the addition of our laser machine, we sell many items that we personalize for big corporations in and around Louisville. For example, I never thought that we would be selling over 500 Yeti-style tumblers a month. Never thought I would be selling 200 bread cutting boards monthly, each lasered with recipes. Flasks, too. All I can say is there are a lot of folks who

like to carry their bourbon.”

Over the past several months, the company has introduced a popular 8-inch golf bag in a tartan, leather, and waxed cotton duck with a lot of leather trim; tartan wood head covers; and two 6-inch bags – one with a frame and the other with a stick – and each with a metal top ring.

## Hickory Golf

About the time that Mike Just was encouraging Jacoby to consider making golf bags again, he also introduced him to hickory golf. It had been about 30 years since Jacoby played much but the self-described work-aholic gave it a go.

“After I played, I thought, ‘How cool is this!’,” he recalls. “Returning to the roots of the game of golf – a game of honor, tradition, and obviously skill. I was hooked and all I use today are my hickory clubs when I play.

“The attraction of hickory golf to me is the fellowship, the people and the playing the game as Bobby Jones and the other greats did. It is like taking a Model T or 1968 GTO with 400 cubic inch ram air, out on Sunday afternoon for a drive, but better!”

Instead of memberships with aeronautics groups, golf manufacturers, sporting goods associations and planning/zoning associations, Jacoby now prides his memberships with such as the SoHG, the Carolina Hickory Assoc., the Wisconsin Hickory Players, the Florida Hickory Golfers, and the Wyandotte Hickory Assoc.

When it comes to hickory golf, he is all in from his staunch support of the SoHG to the many individual hickory golfers throughout the world who have supported him. “There is NO other company that has donated more in value than us since we started and we continue this practice,” he says.

Which may explain why it rankles him that the SoHG, on its website under Resources, lists suppliers that are not members of the Society.

“Why do we support them?” he wonders. “It is not good to try and dilute this core source of SoHG member-suppliers because sooner or later one or all will dry up,” he reasons. “We as a group need to support each other if we want a strong Society and suppliers to that Society.”

Jacoby, and others such as Tad Moore, Dave Brown with McIntyre Golf, and Jeremy Wright with Louisville Golf (and Mike Just before him), all have all been staunch supporters of the Society, donating generously to the USHO raffle among other things.



*Jacoby has become a hickory golfer and is devoted to the sport. Above, he readies for a practice round during the 2015 U.S. Hickory Open at Miami Valley Country Club in Dayton, Ohio.*

For its part, the SoHG Resources tab on its website was meant to share a list of impartial sources from many areas that would be of interest and benefit to hickory golfers. The idea, says past SoHG President Bill Geisler, was that the “website was, and is, meant to be a resource.”

“Still,” Geisler says, “Will has a point. We should be supporting him strongly as well as others like Tad Moore, Dave Brown and Jeremy Wright who do so much for our Society. We have tried to make it very clear on the website just who our preferred SoHG suppliers are and encourage our members to buy from and support them.”

Indeed, thanks to Jacoby’s strong views, the SoHG website was amended to strongly showcase and identify its member suppliers/sponsors.

Though it is not a large market, hickory golfers do appreciate the made-in-America high quality of Jacoby’s products. And Jacoby is grateful in turn.

“We have been blessed with great support from many members of the SoHG,” he says. “Many find a way to buy a new item every few months. The encouragement from people about our products continues to excite me. The customers and clients we have are unbelievably loyal and supportive of our products. Eighty percent of our customers are repeaters and into many of our items.”

**Looking back** on his life in in business and his connections to hickory golf, Jacoby, like so many others,



is grateful for the individuals he has met through the sport.

“With hickory golf it is a whole new cultivation of friendships,” he says. “I am thankful for having known Mike Just in particular for over 30 years, because it was through him that I met such a great group of people.”

Making products he believes in, with daughter Meghan and his team members, with friends at his side, and supportive customers throughout the world of both hickory and modern golf, Will Jacoby measures his business world with a satisfied, if cautious, eye. He is secure in the belief that his products are second-to-none in quality and his customers bear out the truth of that belief.

“I feel proud and blessed with this company and what we have accomplished,” he says.

Away from the shop and the paperwork, the reams of leather, the clack of machines, and the scissors and sewing, he finds peace in the tropical sunsets of his beloved St. Pete Beach where he tries to spend at least one week a month – he’s shooting for two. He’ll tackle yard work or take his boat out on the Gulf to hook amberjack or a kingfish and, if he is lucky, in the spring a tarpon. “Unless the Gulf is too choppy,” he says. “Then golf might get a shot.”

He plays only hickory golf, sometimes a couple of times a week and sometimes once every two weeks. “It all depends on the shop load, the weather, and the grandkids’ events,” he says.

He and Rhoda Ann are entirely devoted to their eight grandchildren. In July 2019 the whole family visited the Florida home. “The grandkids love sea kayaking from the house and fishing,” he says. “But they prefer the swimming pool versus swimming off the dock, except when the manatees are behind the house.”

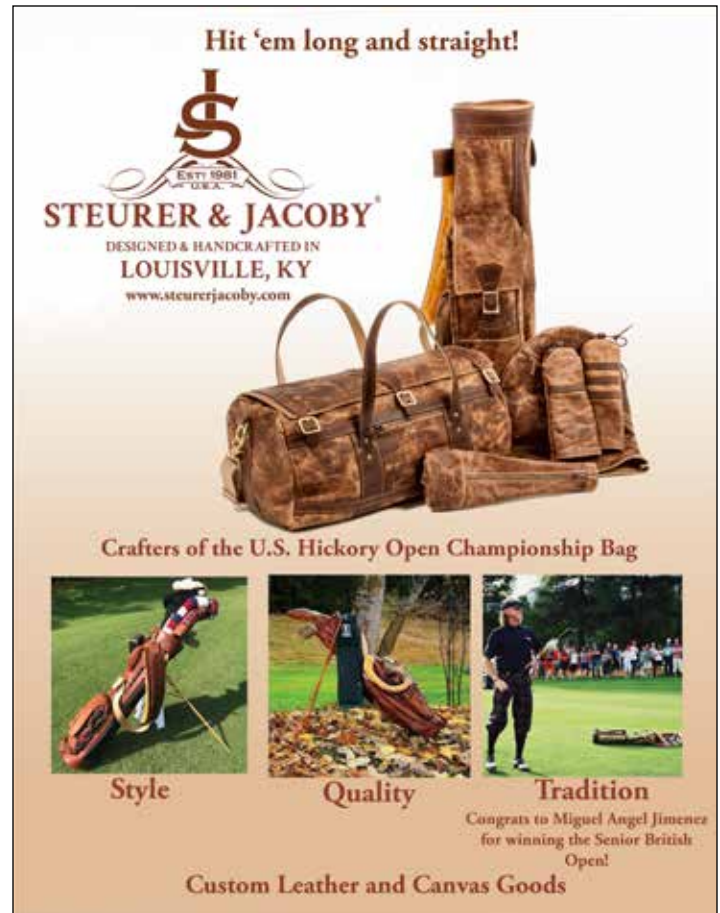
From his business to his family, Will Jacoby is one who definitely “plays the game with all his heart.”

Check the links below for articles on Will Jacoby and his golf bag journey.

<http://www.golfwrx.com/481982/bag-chatter-an-interview-with-steurer-jacoby/>

<https://www.courier-journal.com/story/life/shopping/2018/05/31/steurer-jacoby-custom-leather-golf-bags/590919002/>

<http://www.townepost.com/kentucky/jefferson-town/carrying-tradition/>



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*Steurer & Jacoby's advertisement as seen in the U.S. Hickory Open programs.*



**Pros who have carried Steurer & Jacoby bags include Miguel Angel Jimenez. Above left is Swiss hickory golfer Joe Lauber with Azahara Munoz taking the photo. Bottom right is Adam Scott, who was playing with Lauber and using his JBL Swiss-crafted irons and woods.**

