



HOOKEED ON HICKORY

GEOFF SAUNDERS JOINS A GROUP OF DEDICATED GOLF ENTHUSIASTS WHO PLAY THE GAME THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY, WITHOUT THE HELP OF TODAY'S HIGH-TECH EQUIPMENT.

The world of golf has been characterised in the last 20 years by a golf equipment 'arms race' being waged between brands over the performance of their products. Shafts of golf clubs have lengthened by up to 13cm, driver heads have quadrupled in volume and the golf ball flies further each season. The manufacturers' aim seems to be bigger, faster and longer. The promise of longer drives is seductive and the equipment companies are not to blame; they are meeting the market for ever-increasing performance.

The collateral casualties of the trend are some of the classic golf courses such as Prestwick, Merion and, potentially, even the Old Course at St Andrews. These courses are now defenceless against technology. If equipment enhancements continue in the same direction, new golf courses may need to stretch to over 8,000 yards. It does seem the R&A and USGA may act soon to limit ball advances and even shrink driver sweet spots.

In the meantime, a small, dedicated group of golfing enthusiasts are heading in precisely the opposite direction. They are limiting the performance of their clubs – and loving it!

In their world, the ball, even when struck perfectly, flies a much shorter distance. Virtually every course in the world can provide a challenge to these golfers, who are arming themselves with the tools of 100 years ago.



The Vardon Challenge group: (FROM LEFT) Mark Lawson, Keith Love, Murray Turnbull, Phil Lever, Peter van Eekelen, Simon Howe and Dean Tucker at Christchurch Golf Club, circa 2023.

Hickory golf is starting to take a toehold in New Zealand and those who play it have become 'hooked on hickory'. The pioneers of the hickory game in New Zealand seem to be centred mainly at older clubs in the main four centres.

This year the Christchurch Golf Club celebrates 150 years since its formation in 1873. On 12 March the course was due to host the New Zealand Hickory Open for the second year. Trying hard to capture yet another national title, at the age of 86, would be Sir Bob Charles (turning 87 two days later). The club he joined 67 years ago would prove to be a perfect fit for this vintage form of the game. After a redesign process taking around 25 years, the Shirley links have been restored to their former glory, with a more traditional links character. Part of this has been due to the club board's steadfast adherence to a Peter Thomson master plan begun in 1997 and regularly updated (as recently as 2015) by the five-times Open champion.

After the pine trees were cleared and the last of the eucalypts removed, a wonderful landscape of rolling, sandy soil was unveiled. What better place to go back to the way golf was meant to be played?

Hickory wood was imported from America during the 1860s for golf shafts and remained popular right through until the 1930s when it was gradually replaced by steel. Hickory enthusiasts seek the satisfying feel of the ball coming off a club made entirely from wood and the pureness of a perfect strike. The pure strike from the middle of the small clubhead delivers a soft, satisfying sensation through the hands.

Hickory golf is a world away from the current huge-headed space-age driver from which even an unskilled player's mishits fly just as far – and just about straight – as drives struck from the centre of the clubface.

Are hickory golfers a lunatic fringe out of touch with the rest of the world? In mixing with them, playing with them and chatting to them, it is clear they are a rather different bunch. It may be

tempting for mainstream golfers to dismiss them as lunatics and Luddites – but they just seem to have so much fun!

Most of the Christchurch group are recent hickory converts and their enthusiasm is infectious. I paid a visit in January to the epicentre of hickory golf in Christchurch: the Hickory Sticks Golf Emporium. This is the domain of the eccentric 'Doctor of Hickory'

(his doctorate is self-conferred), Peter van Eekelen. PVE, as he is also known, has set up a very well-equipped workshop and showroom in Ferrymead, near the Port Hills. It is fortunate that Peter has a day job as the successful owner of a construction and property development company in the city. His part-time hickory work involves sourcing, importing, refurbishing and rebuilding clubs for play. Peter caught the hickory bug from his friend and fellow golfer at the Christchurch Golf Club, Mark

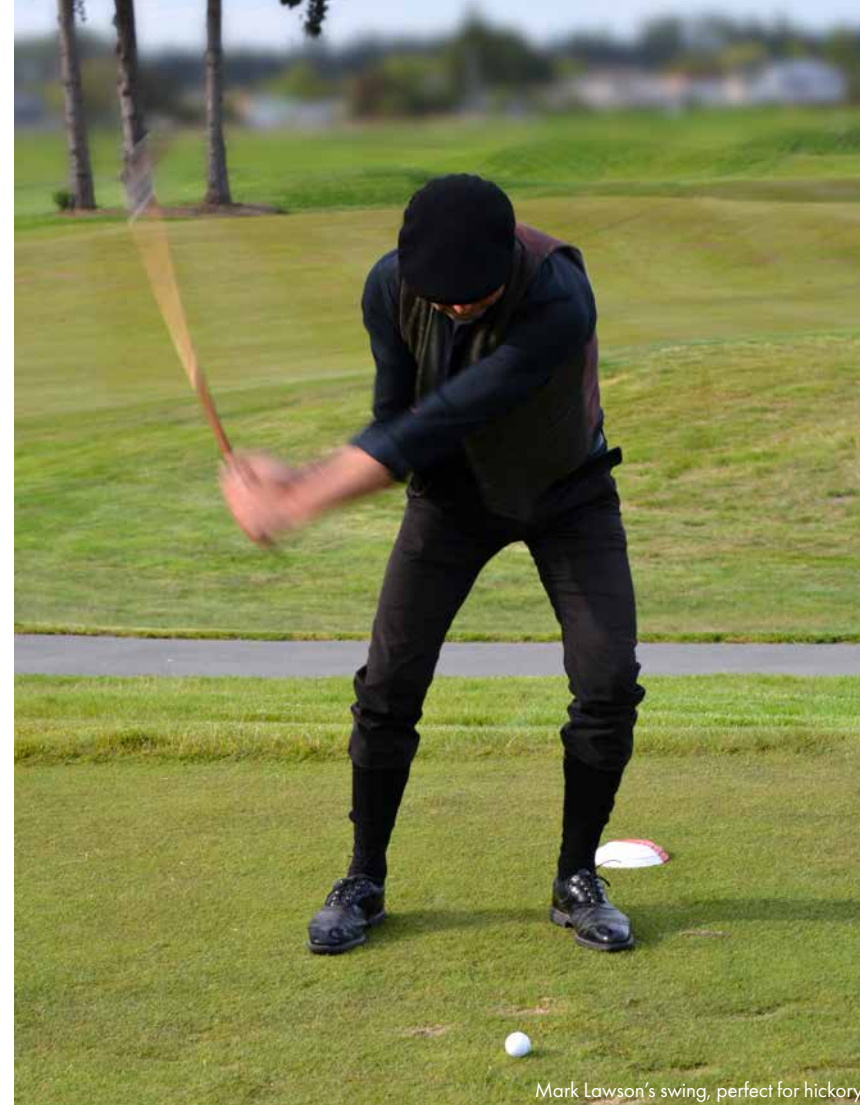
Lawson. Mark has been the superintendent at the club for over 20 years and has played a major part in the restoration of the links character of New Zealand's second-oldest golf club.

While chatting to Mark and Peter at the Emporium, the heady odours of glue varnish and polish mix nicely with their enthusiasm. Commitment is not something this pair lack. PVE has imported and sourced hundreds of hickory clubs of all makes, origins and price ranges. There are 200 sets of hickory clubs under construction or renovation in the Emporium and 50 or 60 sets waiting to go out. Classic brands with names like Tom Stewart, George Nichol and Robert Forgan line the racks, mixed with more well-known brands such as Wilson, Slazenger, McGregor and Spalding.

For those who choose the upper range of clubs, the hickory obsession can be costly. Half sets cost around \$1500-\$1800, a full set \$3500-\$4000 and, according to Peter, "specialist sets" can cost up to \$10,000. There's nothing wrong, however, with taking grandad's old clubs down from the attic and playing with those.

PVE's obsession with hickory started in March last year and has taken a firm hold on him. He notes he has moved on from the

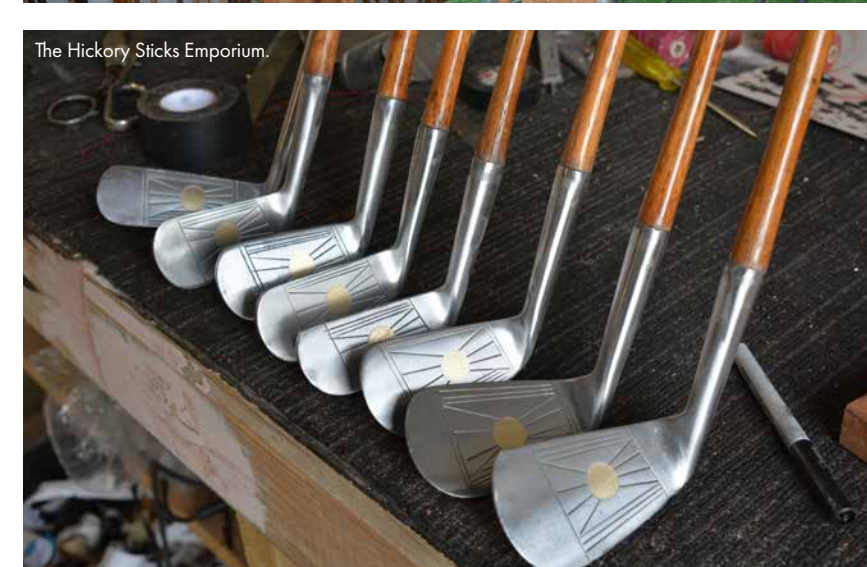
“FOR ME, THE TRUE JOY OF HICKORY GOLF IS WANDERING OUT BY MYSELF FOR A FEW HOLES WITH FIVE CLUBS IN A CANVAS PENCIL BAG OVER MY SHOULDER AND NO SCORECARD.”



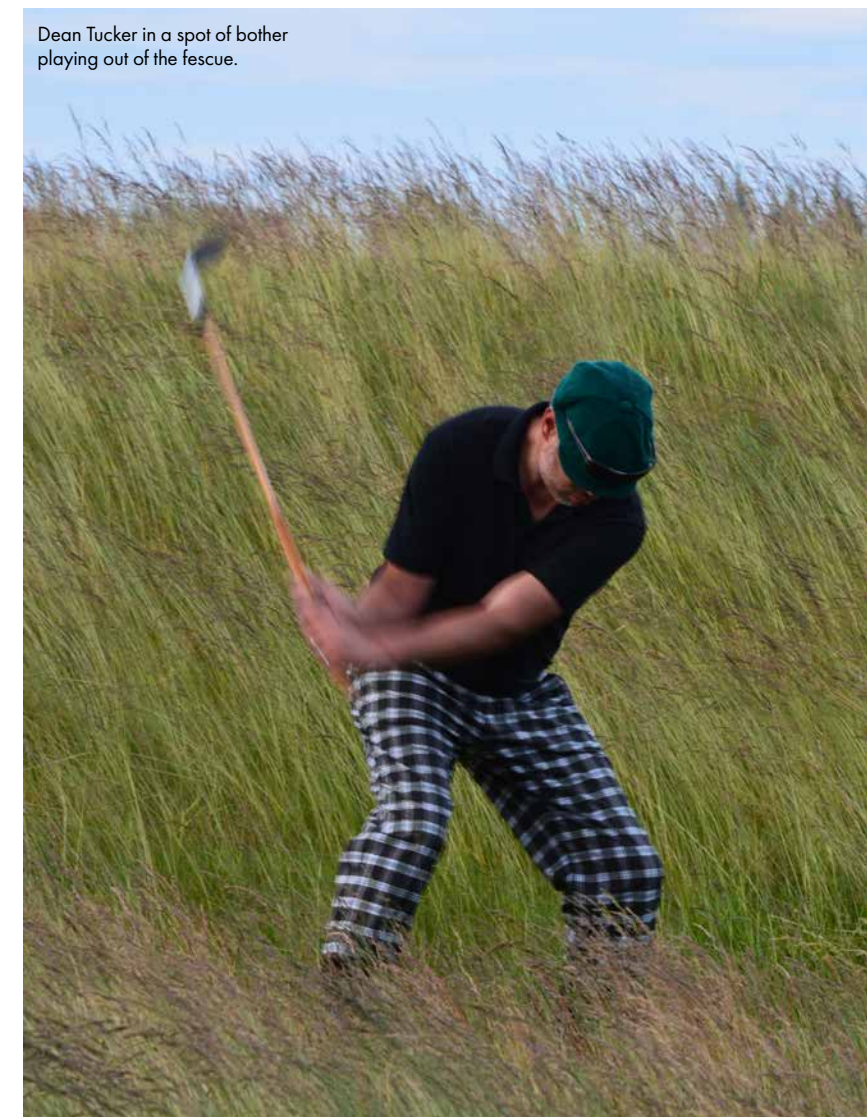
Mark Lawson's swing, perfect for hickory.



The Hickory Sticks Emporium.



The Hickory Doctor, Peter van Eekelen.



Dean Tucker in a spot of bother playing out of the fescue.

stage of trying to be “the longest or the best and using the latest or the greatest clubs” to “playing for the joy of playing”.

During summer a regular group plays hickory on Thursday evenings at Christchurch. I joined them for a few holes and the banter and competition was much the same as in regular golf. With tiny clubheads and hickory shafts, some of the misses can be rather dramatic and bunker shots definitely require a higher skill level with a niblick – its head resembling a butter knife – rather than a modern sand wedge. One thing I did learn is that it is essential to finish the backswing and ‘feel’ the clubhead at the top.


Both PVE and Lawson have taken hickory golf to another level by turning up to regular club matches at Christchurch on Wednesdays and Saturdays with a set of entirely hickory clubs. They make quite a statement in their period dress of plus fours and flat caps. But they somehow still seem to fit happily into a field of club members armed with the latest technology.

Mark Lawson seems to have a swing made for hickory and can propel the ball vast distances off the tee with his vintage driver. He admits to having caught an extreme form of the hickory disease and now plays exclusively with hickory clubs in both social and competition play. His handicap has only gone out from 5 to about 6.6 after the change to vintage clubs. “The fascination for me,” he says, “is that people who may have become bored with golf will find their love for the game can be rekindled with hickory.”

I succumbed to the sales pitch from the Doctor and bought a full set of George Nichol irons. I did manage to economise a little by re-commissioning my 100-year-old putter, a Rollins and Parker putting cleek I started playing the game with at the age of eight (carefully restored and re-gripped for me by another enthusiast, Stu Upton).

For me, the true joy of hickory golf is wandering out by myself for a few holes with five clubs in a canvas pencil bag over my shoulder and no scorecard. The perfect time to play is in the evening, on a deserted course, with the wind gently swaying the fescue and the rolling contours of the course highlighted by the setting sun.

All is at peace with the world of golf and the game seems simple again. ◻



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