

Experiencing golf history

14th annual Foxburg Hickory Championship sends golfers back in time

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Steve Alger of Hershey putts on the third green during the Foxburg Hickory Championship Friday at Foxburg Country Club. Shane Potter/Butler Eagle
SHANE W POTTER

FOXBURG – Established in 1887, Foxburg Country Club is considered the oldest golf course in the United States.

The facility is doing more than showcasing history. The 14th annual Foxburg Hickory Championship – taking place at the course this weekend – gives golfers a chance to experience history.

Hickory golf events are played with hickory sticks (clubs) that date back to the era of the 1920's. Tourney participants also hit golf balls commensurate with

those times and wear knickers and other clothing from that era while they play.



A number of historic wooden drivers are put up for sale at the Foxburg Country Club clubhouse. Shane Potter/Butler Eagle.

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“If people are willing to travel, and many of these gentlemen are, there are hickory golf events taking place somewhere in the country almost every weekend,” said Karen Johnson, who is helping her husband, Tom, run the event this weekend.

“We serve as a trading post for equipment as well. Golfers bring excess hickory clubs with them. Golfers buy, sell or trade them in addition to playing.”

The Foxburg Hickory Championship this weekend features a 40-golfer field from 16 states – Washington, Oregon, Iowa, Nebraska, Wisconsin, Michigan, Kentucky, Ohio, Virginia, New Jersey, Florida, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Texas and Arizona. This year’s field is the largest in tournament history.

While hickory golf tournaments may be readily available, the Foxburg Hickory Championship is one of only three hickory golf events in the United States that

feature a pre-1900 Open, Senior (ages 55-70) and Master (over 70) divisions. The other two are the National Hickory Championship and Wisconsin Gully Challenge.

Tom Johnson is a member of Foxburg Country Club.

"I can drive the ball 140 to 150 yards with a hickory club," he said. "Some of the younger golfers can hit it 200 yards. No one is going to drive it any farther.

"Golf is more of a ground game with hickory clubs. The balls are fairly dead and are much lighter ... It almost feels like you're hitting a ping-pong ball."

Greg Smith, 71, of DeForest, Wisc., played in roughly 15 hickory golf events last year. He runs a hickory golf tourney of his own at Eagle Springs Golf Resort in his home state.

"The field of golfers for our tournament is somewhere in the mid-20's," Smith said. "It grows every year. When people come to play in a hickory event, they keep coming back.

"Our (Eagle Springs) course has been around since 1893. It's not as old as this place. The history at Foxburg is incredible."

Smith said he plays golf with clubs from any era, but prefers the pre-1900 hickory sticks.

"This era is more fun, more authentic," he said.

Bill Reed, 79, is from Des Moines, Iowa. He is a member of the National Golf Hall of Fame and has been playing hickory golf since 1986.

"I've probably played more than 4,000 rounds," Reed said. "This is the best golf there is. It's pretty much all I play anymore. Foxburg Country Club is a national icon. This little community should be on every golfer's radar.

"Whether you play golf with clubs that were just made yesterday or clubs from the 1850's, it's all about playing smooth and steady. That's what this game is about."

Twenty of the 40 golfers in the Foxburg Hickory Championship field are first-time participants in the event.

Bern Bernacki, a doctor in Greenfield, is one of the event's regular players. In fact, he's played in all 14 Foxburg hickory tournaments.

"It's fun to collect things and I collected old golf clubs," Bernacki said. "When I discovered people played in these (hickory golf tourneys) and used that equipment, I had to play in it.

"This golf course should be on the bucket list of every golfer. They should visit Foxburg for the beauty, ambiance and history that is here. It's a wonderful golf opportunity."

The Foxburg Hickory Championship consists of 36 holes of play, 18 Friday and 18 Saturday. The course plays at 4,609 yards, with small greens and tricky layout testing the skill and patience of players.

Robert Gettis of The Poconos made the trip to Foxburg "for the history of the game," but added that "all of the players are very competitive. It's a good challenge and a great bunch of people.'

Duane Baylor, 74, of Omaha, Neb. made his first trip to Foxburg Country Club this weekend. He said he enjoys "the history and the friendship with all the people.

"And I will be coming back," he added.

The Golf Heritage Society has a website and puts out a newsletter promoting hickory golf events. Karen Johnson said many golfers hear about them through word of mouth.

"We don't have to do too much to promote it. People just come," Tom Johnson said. "There's about 60 hickory golf events in the United States and some in Canada. England and Sweden have them and one is starting in South Africa.

"We've probably made \$3,000 through this tournament over the years. It all gets put back into Foxburg Country Club. This is well worth the effort."