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Local course turns back the clock on the game of golf

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Tom Johnson prepares his tee the traditional way, using water and sand. The original stone tee box at the Foxburg Country Club is divided, one side for sand and one side for water. Although some of the hickory stick golfers use a mold, Johnson likes to use his hands to be certain there is enough sand in the mix. He said the only drawback is that the tees are not reusable.

FOXBURG — The oldest golf club in the United States held a tournament Friday and Saturday that relied on some of the oldest clubs.

The 15th annual Hickory Stick Tournament drew 36 golfers from 14 states. Tom Johnson, one of the organizers of the event said there are numerous hickory stick tournaments held in the nation.

"I play modern golf as well," he said. "There is just something about playing with the clubs that were used historically," he said. "Golfers have to understand that the long drive is possible but not necessary. A drive using a Gutta-percha ball will only carry about two-thirds of a modern drive. This is more about the short game.

"It's a more tedious, close-to-the-ground game," said Johnson. "You are not going to hit a long, parabolic drive. If someone hits a drive 250 yards they will hit this about 160 yards. A 100 yard drive is a full shot here."

He said there is a unique challenge in playing the Foxburg course. "Modern courses are designed to be flat," said Johnson. "This course is natural, the way the early courses were. They didn't remove nature from the course. Here, if a ball takes a roll, it will keep rolling. This course is not very forgiving. At most places the course is made to capture the ball. Here it is made to run away. Everything here runs into the Allegheny River and that controls the ball."

The participants use golf clubs that have hickory shafts. Many used golf balls that were based on the original Gutta-percha balls. The balls were made from the dried gum of the Malaysian Gutta-percha tree and in 1898 a rubber core was introduced.

Johnson only plays in three or four pre-1900 "gutty" tournaments a year. "The balls we use are \$15 dollars apiece," he said.

Johnson got into the hobby by collecting the Gutta-percha balls. "There was just something about them," he said. "Later I started collecting the clubs. I think most of the golfers here today have their own collection of hickory sticks. Everything I buy now, I use."

Johnson said the tournament isn't just about the competition. "There is a lot of camaraderie," he said. "When you play against the same people all of the time, you become friends," he said. "This isn't just a game for old guys. We have a lot of younger people playing. Hickory players are one or two in a thousand. There is a subset in that group that is one in a hundred. Those are the people who play pre-1900. You have to be really into it."

Logan Pistorius, a social studies teacher in the Union School District played in his first hickory stick tournament at Foxburg. "I was pretty pleased. I hit in the 80s and that is a pretty good score," he said. "I play a lot of modern golf, and this is a big change of pace. The ball doesn't fly as far as in the modern game, and the clubs don't have grooves so there is no spin at all."

He has been piecing together his own set of hickory sticks for the past few years. "I enjoy it and I'll be back," he said. "Jason Kronnenberger has been the champion here for the past three years. Maybe I can give him a challenge next year."

Johnson said Kronnenberger shot a 74 on the first day of the event.

There are reproduction clubs available, but Johnson said a person with a trained eye can tell the difference. "A lot of the originals have been repaired," he said. "It takes a lot of skill to repair the hickory sticks."

Tournaments using hickory clubs are held throughout the U.S., but Foxburg is favored as a true pre-1900 golf course. An historical marker on the course dates it to 1887 and designates Foxburg as the "oldest golf course in continuous use in the United States."

"The Golf Club allows us to come in and have a tournament. It is a great partnership. We have two compatible goals, one is to have a blast and use historic equipment," said Johnson. The tournament also benefits the club financially.

Johnson said a number of the participants in the tournament have joined the 1887 restoration project. "I would say 10 of the 36 participants are long distance members. It is pretty important to them," he said. The 1887 project is designed to raise funds for the preservation of the course and the 1912 clubhouse.

Jeff Texter was the superintendent at the Foxburg Country Club for 35 years, retiring in 2021. "My job was to maintain this historic golf course," he said. "The greens are number one. We don't move many holes, we try to keep it the way it is."

The equipment changed but not the mission. "They have an old lawnmower from the 1940s. Pushing that would make for a long day," said Texter. "Today we use a specialized mower that can cut down to a one-eighth of an inch."

Texter said there is little vandalism at Foxburg but there have been early birds. "They see a little sunshine in March or April and they want to hit the links," he said. "They can actually leave footprints on the greens. I urge them to wait until the course is open."

Texter said he hears complaints about the greens being too fast or too slow. "In that case we just keep doing what we are doing," he said. "It's a bit more of a science than people realize."

The golf club purchased the 1912 private home in 1941. The clubhouse has a dining area, bar and gift shop. The second floor is dedicated to a golf museum. Among the numerous hickory stick clubs is a guest book with some very familiar names in golf. Art depicts famous golfers and scenes from early golf matches.

The Foxburg Golf Course is registered with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission as the oldest golf course in continuous use in the U.S. Joseph M. Fox purchased the land in 1924. The course was improved from five to nine holes in 1888.