

Golfer



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as Guardians
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ANNIVERSARY ISSUE
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YEARS

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History and **HICKORY** Resurrected

by Bob Bostwick

MEMBERS OF THE Northwest Hickory Players brought their golf, their curious equipment, their classy style, and their commitment to things Royal and Ancient to Spokane in late September, celebrating and playing in the inaugural Spokane Hickory Open.


As if entering from a door to the Jazz Age, ladies wore dresses and bonnets. Men were in slacks or plus-fours, often complete with jackets and ties. Most will complement the style with pork pie hats and, for footwear, two-tone leather wing tips or brogues, all of it bringing an atmosphere that Indian Canyon Golf Course likely hadn't seen since its opening in 1935.

The same was true on the second day of play at Downriver, the oldest public golf venue in the Lilac City, in operation since 1916.

Their golf bags, the leather and canvas of 'em as ancient as the clubs, were loaded with insert-free woods – spoons, brassies, baffies and wood cleeks, along with jiggers, cleeks, mashies and niblicks, among a few others.

For the Northwest Hickory Players, and other organizations like it, these are the clubs not only of choice, but of rule. Entrants can't play in these events without 'em, although purely authentic replicas are allowed as long as the shafts are hickory. Modern balls are allowed here, but some events may require a good ol' gutta percha. The key is hickory.

Oh, the hickory, that restless, sought-after son of the Walnut family, and cousin to the Pecan. It's the object of a love affair among an estimated 6,000



Top: Jim Von Lossow looks the part at Indian Canyon.

Middle: Steve Malmquist of Puyallup, Wash. plays in the shade of a British Empire Pith Helmet.

Above: Tom Tracy of Star, Idaho won his club championship this year at River Birch GC in Star, the only player in that tourney using hickory-shafted clubs. He also won the 2016 U.S. Hickory Open (senior division).

U.S. golfers, not to mention thousands more in Canada, the UK, Europe and nations around the world.

At the Spokane Hickory Open, players arrived somewhat ghost-like, hailing mostly from Washington, Idaho, Oregon and California, but also from as far away as Salt Lake City, Phoenix and Denver. Anyone, male or female, is welcome to join. And, when this group shows up, so does a treasure trove of clubs, extras available for use if locals want to join in.

But be forewarned. They'll get ya.

Rob Ahlschwede of Olympia is devoted to golf of long ago. His thriving enthusiasm runs deep for hickory shafts and the odds and ends of clubs that had no numbers, only names.

When I told him I had just played hickory shafts for the first time, his response was immediate.

"Gotcha!" he said.

He wasn't entirely wrong.

"In the modern game, players hit a driver as far as they can and then decide which wedge to use," said Ahlschwede. "Shot-making with these hickory clubs is always the key, and it's more interesting, and it's more fun. I can tell you this, a well-struck shot with a hickory-shafted, 100-year-old club, feels far better than the same shot off a modern club. It just feels *better*."

Spokane's Jim Von Lossow, with only five years or so playing hickory, may hold the title of "most credentialed" among NHP members. He played on the PGA Tour in 1979-80, was a PGA club and teaching pro for 26 years after that, is a lifetime PGA member, and a Master Club Maker.

He is also the 2018 amateur World Hickory champion, a title he earned at Gullane Golf Club in Scotland, playing against competitors from 10 countries.

He and son Andrew were a perfect pair to seek out as I invited myself to play a round with hickory-shafted clubs, a personal first. (Andrew would win the Spokane Hickory Open going away, aided by an albatross two on Indian Canyon's par-5 second hole. His rounds of 70-70 were seven shots better than Jeff Olson. Jim finished third.

Yes, Jim and Andrew have credentials. Other than a handicap card, I don't.

So I rigged a pair of slacks to look like plus-fours and stretched out some long hosiery. I put on a cotton broadcloth dress shirt, silk tie, wool sweater vest, and topped it all with a proper hat I'd bought from Ahlschwede for a cool \$25.

To be sure, knowing the Von Lossows is reason enough to play a round with them. But, obviously, a cleek (1-2 iron) in hand on the first tee at Indian Canyon makes for something extra special, albeit a bit yippy, from the get-go. I put it down the middle. A spade-mashie (6-iron) got me down the fairway, a niblick (9-iron) landed me to eight feet. One putt scored par.

That. Was. Fun.

Make no mistake, although I managed to par maybe a half dozen holes, this round was a fine learning experience, and it meant more as I watched those two take on this gem of a golf course like craftsmen, and well-equipped for it. Interestingly, the play with these clubs wasn't nearly as problematic as I might have expected. Distances were shorter, but not much. Good swings paid off; bad ones didn't.

As we stood on the 15th tee, Jim asked, "Wanna play stymies?"

"Stymies! Let's do that!" I replied. And, wouldn't you know it, I got stymied on the

18th, chipping for par over Andrew's ball from four feet, but leaving it just short.

We were done. Well, maybe not. It all lingers. A round of golf lasts four hours. Friendships among this group are lifelong.

"It always comes back to that," said Ahlschwede. "It's the people we share this with that make it special. We could be playing with any equipment, anywhere. The best part is seeing everyone."

With their attire, their equipment, and their commitments to ethics, etiquette, rules of the game, and lady and gentlemanly behavior, they are stewards of the game. The title comes to them not by any self-proclamation. It is a calling, as if from the ghosts of James Braid and Old Tom Morris, and of those who invented long-nose woods to niblicks, part artisan, part blacksmith.

The call is answered.

For more information on hickory equipment, tournament schedules, or to connect with other hickory enthusiasts, visit these websites:

- apnationalhickoryplayers.com
- nwhickoryplayers.org
- hickorygolfers.com
- pacifichickory.com
- bcgolfhouse.com

