The Way It Used to Be

For hickory golfers, using old-time equipment brings back the soul of an ancient game. BY THOMAS DUNNE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW LEVINE

My introduction to the world of hickory golf came, fittingly enough, in Scotland. On a trip to St. Andrews in the spring of 2011, I paid a visit to the Hill of Tarvit, a National Trust estate in the hills west of town. On the grounds spread beneath the Edwardian mansion, Edinburgh businessman David Anderson and former Walker Cup captain Peter McEvoy had recently revived the property's nine-hole course, Kingarrock, which had been plowed into farmland during World War II.


EAST COURSE
CENTER COURSE
Hole
Middle Marker
1 337 433 5 1
2 475 345 4 2
3 382 440 5 3
4 485 149 3 8
5 177 184 4 7
6 259 335 4 6
7 377 96 3 9
8 116 323 4 4
9 352 2609 36
Total 2960
PLAYER
MARKS

Members of the Metropolitan Hickory Society at Ridgewood Country Club in June: Rich Willemin, Ed DeSalvio, Mike Policano, Jack Crosby, John Esposito, Jeremy Barth, Bill Martin, Asher Fried, Lloyd Cole, Tim Alpaugh.

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Anderson supplied our group with pencil bags full of hickory-shafted brassies and mashies, all from the early 1900s. Passing through a garden gate, we made our way around the simple course. Anderson had stamped the golf balls with a reminder from Bobby Jones: *Wait For It.* As we quickly discovered, "it" referred to the clubhead; making a quick transition with these whippier wooden shafts spelled disaster. Amid the sclaffs and tops, the occasional good strike was greeted with cheers. Glancing back at the great house, the scene felt straight out of "Downton Abbey."

The experience was enchanting, but it remained a one-off curiosity for the next year or so, until my friends Mike Policano and Tim Alpaugh invited me to give the hickories another try, this time at Ridgewood Country Club. Mike and Tim hadn't been playing the old-school way for long, but they were advanced. Alpaugh is a master carpenter, and he'd restored their sticks to glorious condition. His irons were polished to a high shine and free of pockmarks. His grips, in contrast with the slick leather found on mashies mounted behind clubhouse bars, were soft chamois. "Bobby Jones would never have played with shot grips," he said. "So why would we?

For the woods, Alpaugh wrapped colorful nautical thread as whipping ("Scottish bling," he calls it) so that each strike would tighten its bond with the hosel. In our early days, we used to break clubs fairly regularly. While playing the ninth at Chambers Bay with architect Jay Blasi, I snapped a mid-iron in spectacular fashion, the club head plummeting some ninety feet down into a crater with a swishing boomerang sound. It took us well over the allotted five minutes to find it. (The ball, I hasten to add, wound up on the green.)

If you play regularly on a Golden Age design, going around with a set of hickories allows you to see it with new eyes. Even moving up a couple of sets of tees, features play differently. A few years ago, an acquaintance made a remark about the Principal's Nose bunker complex on the 17th at Yale University, my home course. He didn't understand its positioning some fifty yards short of the green, as it never seemed to come into play. I didn't get it either until I played the course, which opened in 1926, with the equipment for which it was designed. The tee shot on the 17th plays across a pond and blindly up and over a ridge – a landform that was also six feet higher in the course's early days. This hill would have taken the heat off all but the highest, most powerful drives, leaving old-school Elis with approaches of almost 200 yards. From that distance, the Principal's Nose is entirely relevant, and the twenty yards of short grass

beyond the hazard would have slowed long-iron shots that successfully carried it enough to hold the green.

Why would you want to make the game harder than it already is? This is a line you'll hear a lot if you take up hickory. And it's true, but not by much, and not in the ways that the uninitiated might expect. For me, the challenge starts with the clothes – the plus-fours, the shirt and tie. Most outside observers write this off as a nostalgia trip, but it's hard to overstate how much we take our moisture-wicking technology for granted. Some folks – like Brian Schuman, dapper founder of the Metropolitan Hickory Society – can pull the look off, while others (ahem) wilt like commuters stuck between stations in the one subway car with broken A/C.

Second on my list: bunker play. Gene Sarazen was on to something when soldered a flange onto the sole of a niblick. Trying to escape one of Seth Raynor's pits with a bounce-less hybrid of a spatula and a crowbar (my "Dreadnought" niblick's swingweight is a beastly E-7) is not a task for the faint of heart. My bronze for hickory difficulty goes to: putting, surprisingly enough. The old school butterknife blades were often as light as the niblicks were heavy, designed as they were for slower greens and punchier strokes. Never mind the extra strokes, though; after all, hickory should come with none of the self-imposed pressure of playing your "usual game." And the pendulum goes both ways: The demands of swinging a small-headed brassie with a smoother tempo can have salutary effects when you go back to modern clubs.

Paramount Country Club's head professional Steve Scott has played five rounds with hickories, and he says, "You have to transition the club much more smoothly from backswing to downswing than you do with modern equipment, and you have to be really precise with the strike. There's not as much sound at impact – it makes a smooth *thud*. They're not very forgiving, but they're very cool."

When I returned home from Kingarrock those years ago, I learned that the writer Geoff Shackelford had been there a few months prior, in the company of former US Open champ Geoff Ogilvy. Ogilvy, he reported, had been charmed by the fact that for the first time in some years he could actually *see* his ball land and bounce down the fairway. I don't share Ogilvy's "problem" with the modern equipment, but I appreciated that insight into a simple pleasure. Hickory golf, it seems, means different things to different people. Some converts play all their golf with the old clubs; others, like me, break them out a couple of times a season. Some take part in the ever-growing competitive circuit; others play just for fun. What we have in common, though, is the understanding that it can be valuable to experience something distilled to its essence. Against the rush of technological progress – both in sport and in the world at large – somehow, with a whoosh and a muted click, the lessons and rewards of our pastime shine through a little more clearly. ■

Acquiring a Play Set

Hickory clubs are available in two varieties: modern replicas and antiques. In the former category, companies like **Louisville Golf** (louisvillegolf.com) and **Tad Moore Golf** (tadmoore.com) make high-quality sets. More time-consuming, but also more fun, is piecing together a vintage set via eBay (as always, buyer beware), at events held by groups like the **Golf Collectors Society** (golfcollectors.com), or by trading with friends. These clubs often come cheaper than replicas, but with a catch – they almost always need to be restored. The "Resources" page of the **Society of Hickory Golfers** website (hickorygolfers.com) lists just a few of the craftsmen who fix up old woodies.

What to look for? Generally speaking, the best equipment in the hickory period was made in England and Scotland. Seek out makers like Wright & Ditson, Ben Sayers, and George Nicoll. Tom Stewart of St. Andrews, known for his distinctive "pipe" stamp, was Bobby Jones's clubmaker. His stuff is incredible, but Stewart's cult following means prices can be higher. As for balls, the new "Ouimet" by **McIntyre Golf** (mcintyre-golf.com) is probably the most popular sphere for hickory play, but it's fine to use certain modern balls too. Soft, low-compression models like the Wilson Staff Fifty are best, but the Pro V1 and its ilk also work well. Surlyn covers and especially driving range "rocks" should be avoided; these harder balls are believed to put more stress on the connection between the shaft and the clubhead. More importantly, they feel terrible; hickory shafts communicate a lot more vibrations (good and bad) to the hands and arms than their steel counterparts, and hitting a Pinnacle thin with an old Wright & Ditson feels a bit like getting jammed by an inside fastball in forty-degree weather.