



A Wee Nip from the Society of Hickory Golfers



Newsletter of the Society of Hickory Golfers Autumn 2006

www.hickorygolfers.org

A Chip Shot from the President

Hickory Golf is well and alive. This year, I have experienced more people who are enjoying the great game of GOLF with hickory clubs.

They are experiencing traditional shot values and the joy of a "pure" shot struck with hickories. What can I say, as those of us who have had this feeling for many years are now considered the "old timers" when we show up at events. We tried to tell others, but it just takes playing a game of golf with hickories for others to realize the true joy of the experience. Thanks for asking your friends to try a round with hickories.

The Arkansas Hickory Open was a wonderful event on a great old course hosted by the Country Club of Little Rock, Arkansas Golf Association and the Mountain Valley Spring Company. Breck Speed of Mountain Valley reported the results to our Web site readers. If you can make it next year, you must experience this event.

Mid Pines 2006 concluded in November – Rob Pilewski reported that nearly 80 players participated; a great Donald Ross course that is perfect for hickory golf. This event will be held in 2007 just before the National Meeting of the Golf Collectors Society – ALL in Southern Pines at the Pine Needles and Mid Pines resorts. They are right across the street from each other. This will be a great time. Mark it down as a must.

Carol and I have moved to Selma, Ala., and will host our Southern Hickory Four Ball there next March 30 and 31. I hope you and your partner will return or, if you have not come before, please plan to play. In our area, the Robert Trent Jones Trail golf courses are close, so you can come to the South and play some great golf courses as well as the SH4Ball.

The next few years are going to be very exciting in Hickory Golf. I feel we are very lucky to have the events we currently have and I am sure the list will grow as well as the numbers of players. Introduce a friend to hickories. Give him good clubs that you would play with yourself and I am sure you will have a hickory golf friend for life.

Merry Christmas to all.

Tad Moore
President, Society of Hickory Golfers

Tom Stewart, meet Ralph Livingston III

It is a modest home on a quiet street deep in the American Midwest. The landscaping is clean and unpretentious, an agreeable setting that is both welcoming and neighborly. There is nothing here that hints of anything unusual inside. Yet, the owner's basement den and workshop are home to perhaps the world's foremost collection of clubs made by arguably the world's greatest maker of hickory-era clubs, Tom Stewart.

Most of you are familiar with Ralph Livingston III. He is a commercial photographer who lives in Grand Rapids, Mich., USA, and one of the founders of the Society of Hickory Golfers. You have spoken with him, played golf with him or read of his interests in golf. His passion for the game, for fathoming its nuances and understanding the relationship between land, club and human have made him a sort of beacon for collectors, researchers and film makers.

It was not his intention to play golf. Indeed, the fever came late, introduced to

him by his future bride in a moment of triumph – on one of their earliest dates, Livingston accompanied Krista to her company's golf outing. She won. He became

hooked in two ways – they wed; he took up golf. As a wedding gift, they bought each other a membership to a local country club.

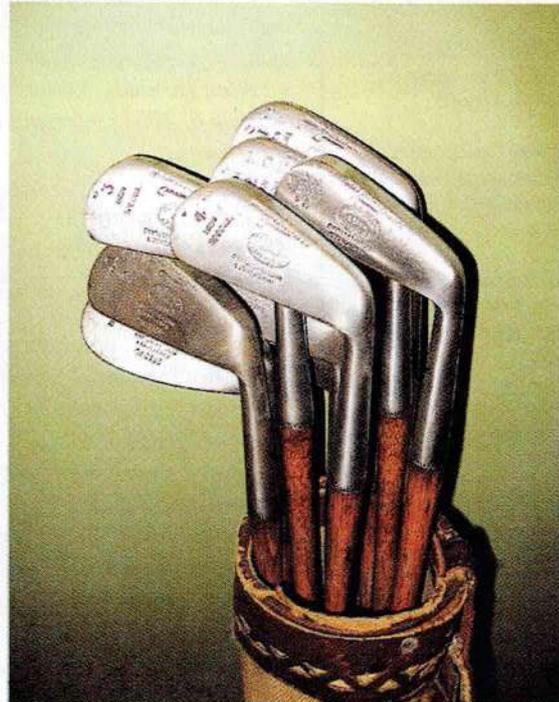
Some five or six years later, as Livingston remembers, he acquired a Tom Stewart putter.

"When I found it, I was putting very poorly and when I swung it, I really liked it," he says.

"Something just clicked with that club, and since I started with a Stewart, I felt that

I would just collect his clubs."

Collect he has. Though he is coy about the official number, Livingston estimates he has between 500 and 3,000 clubs, most of them Stewarts. This includes 76 unique Stewart putters, the only part of the collection he has bothered to count. It is the result of at least 15 years of dedicated collecting. Their value is open to guess,



THE ARTISTRY of clubs made by Tom Stewart has been a longtime passion for noted hickory enthusiast Ralph Livingston III.

STEWART

CONTINUED FROM I

but a layman might put it easily in six figures. Monetary value, however, is but a crude and arbitrary measure of a hickory collection. An ancient Vedic saying goes that knowledge comes to him who is ready to accept it. It is easy to believe that the clubs have found Livingston and not the other way around.

"I wanted to document them, to find out what they were all about," he says. "After a few years of accumulating them, Pete (Georgiady) urged me to maintain a collection. So, I continued studying what I had and added anything that was different from what I had. What I learned is that Stewart was an incredibly versatile maker. There are so many different clubs. I mean, you are talking Tweenies, Sammies; there are 44, 66, 88 irons that are alternatives to existing named irons. Many are variations on the same club, but have different trajectories, such as the Mongrel Mashie, Jigger and 3-Iron. There's the Benny, the Young Benny, the Swlican Pitcher..."

As Livingston continues, we might take a moment to note that his Hickorygolf.com Web site has become a sort of central server, a touchstone for hickory golf aficionados and those seeking both introduction and information about play with hickory clubs. It has been many years since he played with anything other than his beloved set of "Tommy Stewarts." He has become a familiar and welcome figure at events both in the U.S. and the U.K. and has won several of them. It is also worth noting that his expertise in the matter of hickory golf clubs has brought him to the attention of the motion picture industry, which has sought his advice – and his clubs – in the making of such films as "The Legend of Bagger Vance" and "The Greatest Game Ever Played."

Livingston's basement showroom is about 13-by-32 – a small space indeed to contain such a wealth of history. Clubs are displayed along the walls in traditional fashion, but in an ordered system that indicates their natural relationships.

Kingdom – Golf clubs
Phylum – Hickory clubs
Class – Tom Stewart
Order – Iron heads
Family – Approach clubs
Genus – Mashie

Species – Mongrel Mashie

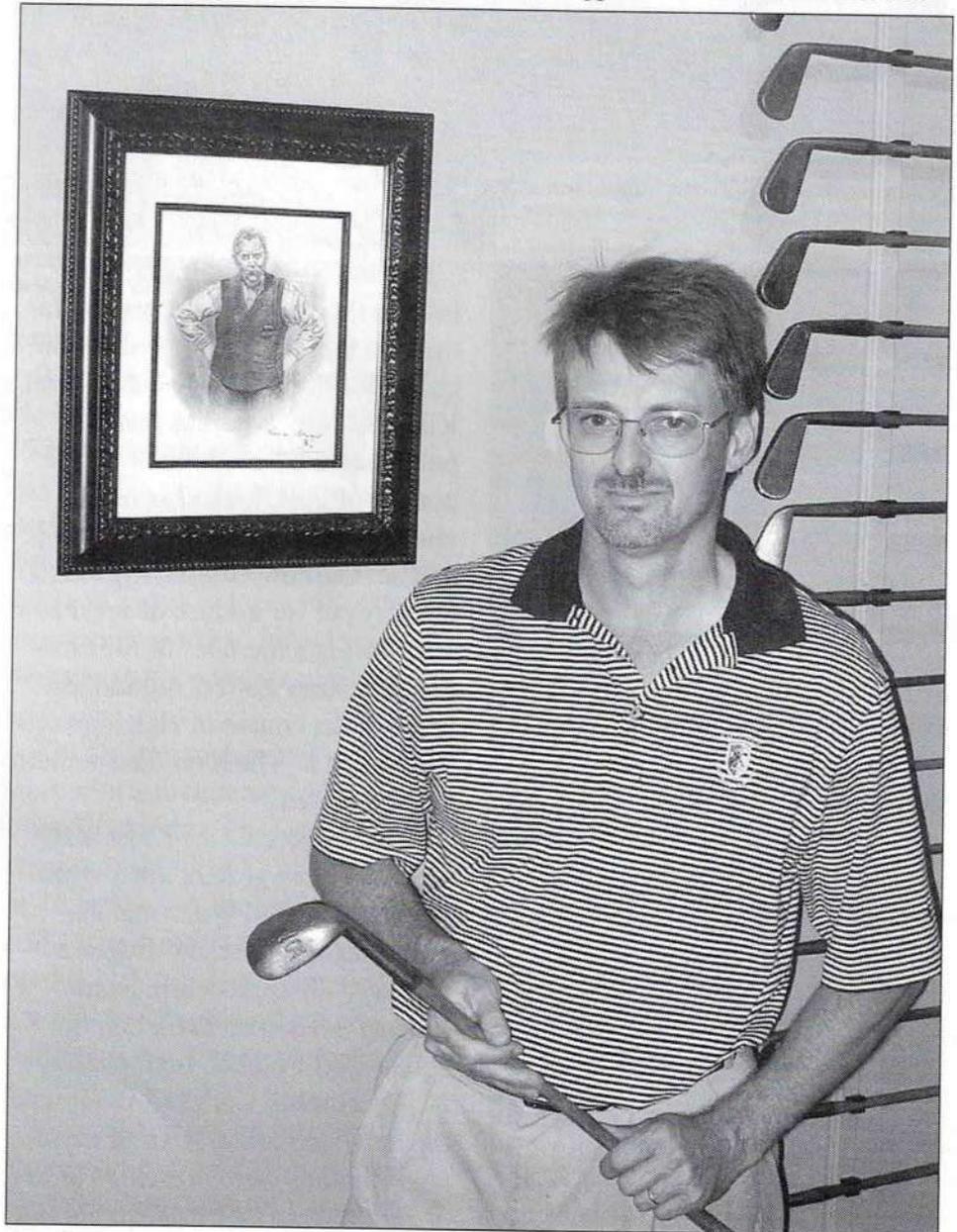
But, back to Livingston who is pointing to a beautiful Jigger on the wall. "Stewart would do special orders. For example, you could order a 1-, 2-, 3-, and 4-Jigger set. It all depended on the nature of your game, the courses you play and the type of shot shape you were trying to accomplish. Every club was designed with a shot intent. What I like to do is try to figure it out from the head shape and the original shafts characteristics.

"Tom Stewart would shut down the shop so workers could see tournaments. He had a good work ethic and was a good manager. Other manufacturers tried to lure his men away so they could have a Stewart foreman in their shops. From what I've seen, his clubs as currently found, have

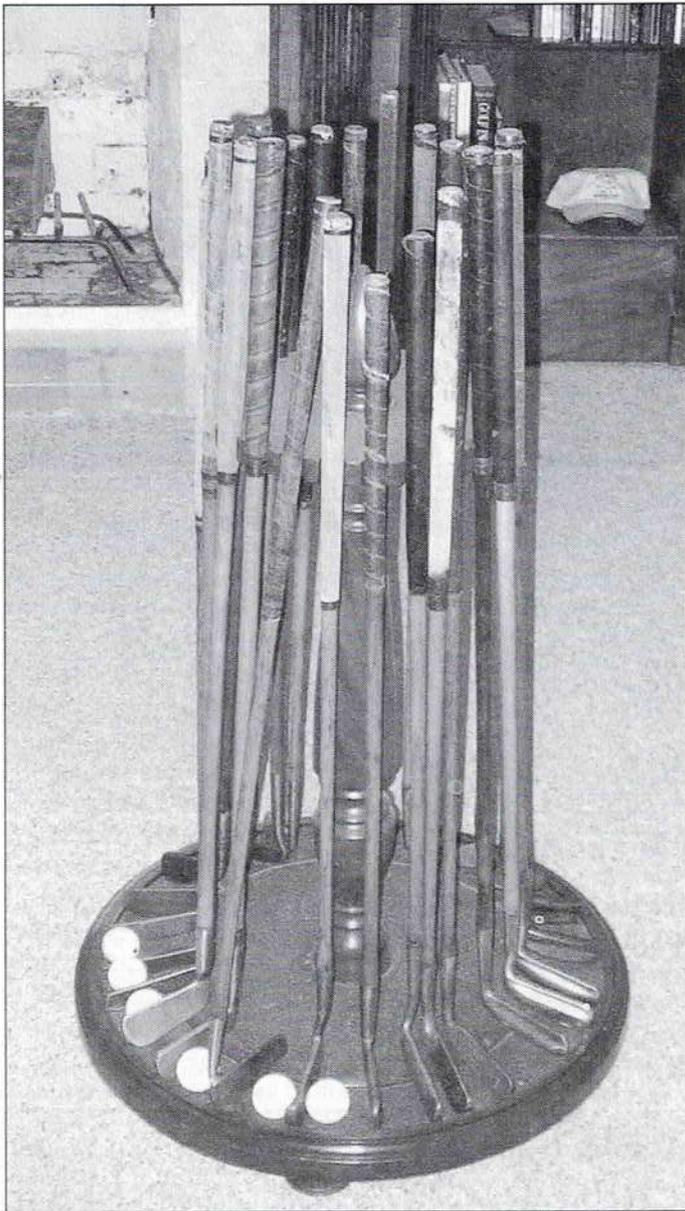
the highest percentage of playability of any maker. He made them for top players and well-heeled players, either good or rich. He made the first Jigger and the first Approaching Cleek. This man was dedicated to high standards."

Livingston shows the visitor a current proof of his book on Tom Stewart and the clubs. It is a substantial work, as detailed and thorough in its approach as any club made by its subject. It is sure to be well received and will stand as a definitive work on this most revered of the old masters.

Livingston's interest in Stewart clubs far transcends their collectible value. "I like to know what they did, what they were supposed to do. After the first time



WITH TOM STEWART looking over his shoulder, Ralph Livingston III holds one of the many clubs in his collection. He has devoted himself to the research and collection of Stewart's work.



LIVINGSTON'S PUTTER collection includes 76 examples of Stewart's work among other unique clubs. Putters are one of the few collectibles that still offer unique finds for the knowledgeable collector, according to Livingston.

I played in Scotland I started seeing an architectural relationship to the clubs, and especially to the links courses. I wanted to know why there is so much diversity to these old clubs. And then, my god, then you had the changes in the ball and that also changed the nature of the clubs.

"You had two pull-backs in the ball, in 1921 and 1930, to establish performance limits. Before 1921, the balls ranged from 1.57 up to 1.75 inches; and this is just the sizes I have seen in advertisements, they could have produced balls that were even smaller or larger. The weights were just as far ranging with offerings of light (1.5x oz.), medium (1.6x oz.) and heavy (1.7x oz.) in all those different sizes. That year they limited the ball to a 1.62" minimum size, and a 1.62 oz. maximum. The ball

"It would be interesting to know how and why which clubs were made to suit certain courses."

manufacturers continued their distance orgy and by 1930 the USGA further reduced the distance of the ball. The highest performing balls had to be similar to, or exceeded the ProV1 of today. Some of the shot distance examples are truly remarkable."

His spirited digression on the nature of the ball notwithstanding, it is course architecture that interests him most. If you have had the good fortune to play golf with Livingston, you will have seen him stop at various points on the course, studying the outline of a bunker, noting fairway contours and the shape and slope of the greens.

"I can see some of the difference in the club changes, with

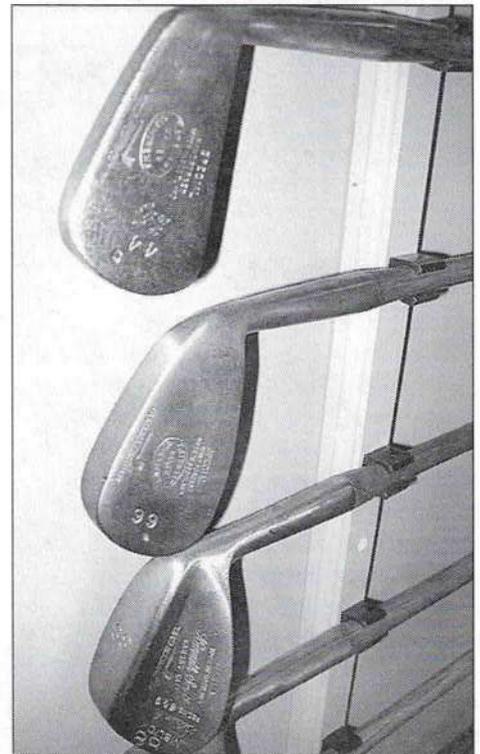
respect to the courses that were being played in that era. It would be interesting to know how and why which clubs were made to suit certain courses. Styles of play were so different. Stewart was an absolute genius when it came to understanding the challenges a particular client would face on his favorite golfing ground. This is one reason his clubs are so fascinating. Just putting together the relationships of the weights and sizes of the clubs to the weights and sizes of the balls will require significant study. I have clubs that make absolutely no sense with the modern ball but must have performed with a ball of appropriate weight and size."

It is hard to settle one's focus when

viewing Livingston's collection. From the stand of unique putters in the center of the room, the magnificent Stewarts on the wall, the collection of woods, an entire genus of driving irons, the classes of other collectibles – including a wonderful iron that belonged to the great Francis Ouimet – and the various bags of Stewarts that serve both as movie props and loaner sets to lucky friends and acquaintances. He estimates that he has made three to five dozen sets of Stewarts over the years. One set in particular deserves mention, his own.

"A bonus of my collecting mainly Stewarts is that I can obviously put together the best set available," he says. "Tiger Woods could play them. They are powerful clubs, though, you've got to have the physical strength to swing them properly."

This last he says with a rueful touch, for he has been slowed the past few years as he recovers from operations to remove



NUMBERED STEWARTS, such as the 44, 66, 88 clubs above, represent an attempt to order clubs by loft as an alternative to existing irons of the day.

two brain tumors. "The old bean doesn't recall things as quickly as it used to," he says. The visitor finds that hard to believe, as Livingston speaks with knowledge, authority and passion about his favorite subject. If the name or origin of a particular club escapes him at the moment, we can forgive this easily. The fellow has hundreds if not thousands of other clubs committed to memory!

The exact contents of Livingston's play set are documented on his Web site, hickorygolf.com. It is enough to note here that many of them are highly-prized RTJ Stewarts, made to the specifications of one Bobby Jones, an American golfer of some note.

Over the years, Livingston has seen his share of clubs.

"I have looked through something close to a million clubs over the last decade and a half," he says. "The National and Dayton GCS shows, I think, had over 100,000 clubs when the society was larger. I'd love to see those quantities at a show once again."

Given a club at random, he can quickly size up both its value as a player or a collectible by a quick examination of shaft, head and cleek marks. "The first thing I look for is playable characteristics," he says. "I look for anything I don't have and I haven't seen anything that fits that



THE ULTIMATE PLAY SET. Perhaps the best set of playable Tom Stewart clubs in the world belong to Livingston. For a complete description of the clubs, visit the hickorygolf.com Web site and click on "In Their Bags."

description. Putters probably get my attention more than anything else these days. You can still find something different here and there. There was more experimentation with putters than anything else." (Some things never change.)

The section of wooden headed clubs boasts several Jack Whites and a set of James Braids. Of this collection Livingston says "I enjoy the playing aspect of them and like to see what the heck they did. The majority are playable



A RARE GIANT NIBLICK is among the Stewart collection in Livingston's golf den.



DRIVERS, SPOONS AND BRASSIES line the wall in this section of the room. There are several Jack White clubs and a number of James Braid models.



PLAY SETS STAND READY among the more collectible items in the Livingston collection. They have been used in such movies as "The Legend of Bagger Vance" and "The Greatest Game Ever Played."

and in collecting the group of woods, most are utility clubs in function, was one of the few diversions from the Stewarts."

Perhaps the most interesting club in Livingston's collection is an old Tom Morris long-nose Putter that he calls "Old Tommy." It is probably the oldest in his collection, dating to the 1870's. This club was his primary putter for a little over two years and was even treated to a trip to visit it's makers grave in 2001.

Ever the man to test his limits, Livingston acquired a burl of Applewood and carved as exact a replica of a Tom Morris play club that he could manage. He prepared the shaft which was "borrowed" from another splice club, wrapped on the grip and took the result to a National Hickory event where the club was good enough – at first glance only, mind you – for Pete Georgiady to recognize it as a Morris club.

A man of exacting standards when it comes to hickory history and research, Livingston has a pet peeve he wishes would be laid to rest. "Please, stop calling mashies "5-irons." Mashies are mashies, they are their own club. There is no such

thing in that era as a 5-iron. That nomenclature depended on the numbering of a particular set. The driving Iron down through the mashie are "approaching" clubs. The mashie through the niblick were considered "pitching" clubs. How the mashie was played depended on the players preference."

A bit of advice from Livingston on hickory play –

"In the 20's and earlier, there was no philosophy of hitting a long way up the fairway to flop a niblick on the green. It was a strategic game of drive and approach, or drive and pitch. And drive didn't necessarily mean driver. So, when playing today, try to find an approach club that works well, a high percentage club, one that you know you can hit accurately into the greens, and try to lay up your drives to that distance.

"Nowadays, it is a game of graduated lofts and graduated distances. Back then, half and 3/4 swings were the norm and most shots inside 150 yards were approached as a pitch shot. They were done entirely by feel using anything from the mashie through

the niblick. It is unfortunate that the longer pitches are generally not seen today and have been forced out of use in the U.S. because of course conditioning."

One could spend the better part of a day discussing hickory golf and club history with Livingston. There are few who take the pastime as passionately as he, and fewer less who have so devoted themselves to it's history and development. This writer is one who, among many, no doubt, owes a debt of gratitude to Livingston for an introduction to hickory play.

As the Stewart book nears its date with the printer, Livingston is likely in his workshop, cleaning a club, measuring a shaft or researching the origins of a puzzling Mongrel Iron or Mashie Cleek. There's always something more. ☺

"Man, I have so much stuff to research..."