

KC's Sunflower Hickory Open Returns Golfers to Game's Infancy



Words and Photography by Alan Hoskins

It was a nostalgic retreat to the days of golf's infancy when Bobby Jones, Walter Hagan, and Harry Vardon were known worldwide. Golf shirts were replaced by knickers and plus fours. Clubs had hickory/wood shafts and carried such colorful names as mashies, niblicks, baffies, and spoons.

Despite temperatures that hovered in the low 50s, it was at the 4th Annual Kansas Sunflower Hickory Open held April 20 at Falcon Lakes Golf Course that 14 teams participated in the tournament hosted by The KC Area Hickory Golfers. Players came from as far away as Omaha and the Lake of the Ozarks to golf with hickory-shafted clubs like those manufactured before 1935. Open to men, women, couples, and "newbies" wanting to try hickories for the first time, rental sets were available. Period attire was encouraged but not required. The cost to join the fun was \$115 per player and included golf, cart, range balls, and awards BBQ.

"It's golf as it was meant to be played," says Mike Needleman, the founder and event coordinator of the Kansas City organization and a member of The Society of Hickory Golfers (SoHG), a worldwide organization promoting and supporting golf played with hickory clubs. In the U.S., there are easily two to three hickory tournaments or events every weekend.

"The only difference is that hickory clubs don't carry the ball as far, about 40 yards shorter," says Needleman. "So we play the shorter

tees. If a course is 6,000 yards, we play at 5,500. But otherwise, the shots are the same. The idea is to get to within 150 yards on second shots, and then it's all even."

Needleman carries six to eight clubs, including a mid-iron, mashie, niblick, mashie-niblick, putter, and the equivalent of a 2-wood off the tee. "The swing is slower, but the pure feeling of a well-struck shot is still there," he says. Over-the-counter golf balls are played, although many players prefer balls with less compression.

Original antique hickory shafted and modern replica hickory clubs can both be found at most tournaments. Thanks to two companies, Spalding Golf and Tad Moore, replica hickory sets of clubs approved by the Society of Hickory Golfers are available.

Needleman became interested in hickory-shafted clubs in 2015 while bouncing in and out of hospitals for 60 days with a rare lung disease. "I had exploratory surgeries, and suddenly, one day, it was just gone," he says. By then, Needleman had spent a lot of time reading about woodworking and, specifically, hickory clubs.

"I decided I'd give it [hickory golf] a try and bought a starter set of hickory clubs, said Dale Hallock who heads Omaha's active hickory club and was one of the participants in this year's Sunflower Hickory Open event dressed in classic all-red knickers (see photo next page). Hallock says, "Over the



Mike Needleman founded the KC Area Hickory Golfers Association.

next few years, I would travel to tournaments throughout the Midwest, primarily to Omaha and Des Moines, where a ‘hotbed’ of hickory golf had been established and draws enthusiasts and nationally known personalities of the hickory world.”



Nattily clad in knickers (from left), Tad Standbury, Dale Hallock and Mike Needleman await their tee time for the 4th Annual Kansas Sunflower Hickory Open at Falcon Lakes. Needleman heads the Kansas City hickory organization; Hallock heads up the one in Omaha.

An Overland Park resident, Needleman hosted the first Kansas Sunflower Hickory Open in 2020. “It’s held each April and designed to be an early season event based on having fun while playing nostalgic golf,” said Needleman. “It encourages interested players new to the hickory club game to come out and feel what it is like to hit original clubs like they did in the era of Bobby Jones, Walter Hagan, Francis Ouimet, and many others.” Rental clubs are available for newcomers wanting to join the fun and challenge.

In the two-person scramble, teams square off in a match-play format. Handicapped to ensure parity within the matches, match winners receive gold medals, and the others receive silver medals.



Mike Needleman’s hickory clubs used at the Sunflower Hickory Open at Falcon Lakes.

The KC Area Hickory Golfers Association, a not-for-profit organization, has a chosen charitable organization, “Carl’s Cause,” which promotes mental health awareness, combats the stigma surrounding mental health, and proclaims “A game changer for mental health.” Visit www.carlscase.org for more information. Golfers seeking more information about hickory golf and The KC Area Hickory Golfers should contact Mike Needleman at Muzical13@aol.com.

Find The Society of Hickory Golfers’ upcoming nationwide hickory golf tournaments at www.hickorygolfers.com/tournaments.

What’s a Mashie or Niblick?



If you’re wondering what antique hickory shaft clubs would have been used the way a current golfer plays, here’s how the British Golf Museum compares them.

These hickory shaft clubs all had wood clubheads.

Play club – The historical equivalent of the driver.

Brassie – Closest equivalent of a modern 2- or 3-wood. So named because of a brass plate on the soles.

Wooden Cleek – Modern 4-wood.

Baffle – Equivalent of higher-lofted wood such as 7-wood or hybrid.

The following antique hickory shaft clubs all had iron clubheads.

Cleek – A driving iron most closely associated with 1- and 2 irons.

Mid-iron – Equivalent to 2-iron.

Mashie – A mashie resembles a modern 5-iron, but there’s also a mid-mashie (3-iron), mashie iron (4-iron), and spade mashie (6-iron).

Niblick – Along with the mashie, the niblick is the best-known among the old clubs because of its distinctive name. It’s a higher-lofted club, such as a modern 9-iron.

Jigger – A short shaft with not a lot of loft, it is used for chip shots.

Putting Cleek – Yep, a narrow, flat, or very low-lofted clubface used for putting. In the early days, greens were quite slow (they didn’t have modern-day mowers for greens), so the putting club had some loft. It was like a chip-and-roll putting technique. Greens were only slightly shorter than the fairways and rolled about 5-7 on the stimpmeter. Comparatively, modern day greens roll between 8 to 10 and a very fast 12.

What’s the History of Golf Knickers and Formal Attire?

In the early 19th and 20th centuries golfers would wear knickers (Knickerbockers) or short pants that ended below the knee and heavy tweed jackets. Their ensembles would also include starch shirts, neckties, and matching tweed caps. Golf wear was meant to show authority and wealth, and the more formal the outfit the more money you had. An aristocrat’s sport. Plus, they played year-round in rough, windy, and damp weather conditions.



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