

19th Century Golf, Modern Hickory Era

By Chris McIntyre

In the case of trying to evolve 19th century style golf into a more realistic experience, I am trying to distribute information to those interested including this type of golf in their repertoire or events...

I do believe that some hickory players, though enthusiastic and excited about playing, do not always take the time to understand the history behind what we are all doing. Since we are interested in achieving *realism* by playing long nose clubs & heavy irons (why else would we want to play them?), we will need to work hard to set the stage for even simple things like using the correct ball and understanding why we are using it. In a modern golf world where distance and power are of overwhelming importance, it may seem odd to want to make the game harder and use 19th century golf clubs and gutta percha golf balls that combine for shots that may equal half the distance. This is *one of the first appreciations* one must convince themselves of.

The player that could manage a short course with ease would have to work a lot harder on a long course, and inevitably the scores would be higher, and that is OK. In some sense, it was even a prestigious footnote that the longer home course was a great challenge for their players. It is the challenge that makes golf of interest to players around the world even today. Although some courses may be better fit for this golf, I would rate the experience of hitting the old clubs with gutta percha over the necessity of a long or short 100 + year old course. Play anywhere !



Chris McIntyre as a modern day Tom Morris

I thought I would include some information about a few of courses from the old era. This data is from USGA bulletins in 1898 and 1899. It is still the gutta percha era and the courses represent long and short layouts. The important aspect to recognize is that they tried their best but did not agonize over whether they could shoot "par" or not. The professional records were 75 and 84 !!!! This and all kinds of information found about scores usually only includes the best scores of the day. We can *only imagine* what the scores of countless other players were. Personally, I get such enjoyment out of playing the old style clubs and the feel and sound of the gutta percha upon contact that it doesn't matter the score, though it is always good to finish and say "I played well today". But *another thing one must appreciate* is that scores were just higher in this era.

If you'll notice, there isn't one mention of "PAR" in the first two quoted reference to the holes! I believe this is the most important thing to appreciate about the gutta era...

**Rosedale Golf Club, Rosedale, Toronto.*

Organized 1893. This is a most flourishing organization and recently absorbed the Deer Park Golf Club of Toronto. The full membership at the present time is 270, of which number 150 are men and 120 women. The course is a full 18-hole links situated about two miles from the city, and while the turf is good, the natural hazards are numerous, comprising gravel pits, roads, ditches, bushes, fences and ravines. It was laid out in June, 1894, by the captain, the distances being as follows:

1, Cross Roads,	140;
2, Forest Edge,	220;
3. Captain,	310;
4, East State,	400;
5, Lone River,	180;
6, Long Hole,	440;
7, Midfield,	150;
8, Cook's Corner,	120;
9, Canadian Pacific Railroad,	190;
10, Gordon,	180;
11, Bush Corner,	400;
12, Elm Tree,	190;
13, The Thorns,	170;
14, Two Fence,	160;
15, Cricket Field,	200;
16, Grand Stand,	300;
17, Plateau,	160;
18, Ravine,	210.

Total 4740

Though this is a short course, the pro record is still only 75...on what almost looks like today's executive style course with what looks like a "par 62"! Imagine if you will that an average amateur score must have been.

Again, what I am trying to point out is the fact that low scores we are used to seeing were just not happening, so don't expect them when you play with the real article, that is gutta percha.

And if you are setting up a tournament, explain this to the players so they will enjoy it !

For the complete round the professional record is 75, by David Ritchie, and the amateur 77 made by George S. Lyon in October of 1897. Three monthly handicaps for medals chiefly occupy the attention of contestants. Class A comprises players with a handicap of 12 or under and is held by Vere Brown; Class B, those who receive over 12 and up to 24, held by Dr. A. T. Scott; and Class C, over 24 to 36, held by L. Moss.

PORTLAND GOLF CLUB.

The names and lengths of the holes are as follows:—Yards.

1. Dirigo	430
2. The Mountain	490
3. The Bend	410
4. The Slope	235
5. The Orchard	535
6. The Crater	146
7. The Corner	208
8. The Meadow	320
9. The Home	320

Total 3,094

The professional record for eighteen holes, 42-42-84, is held by Arthur H. Perm. The club record for nine holes is 46, made by the president, Dean Sills.

Here is some more data from Chicago in 1899:

“Owing to the tees being constantly put back, the Onwentsia course seems to grow longer year by year. A few months ago the distance was 5,835 yards, but a member of the club writing on March 20th, gives me the latest figures as follows:”

Out...388 210 485 315 295 330 338 285 350—2,966

In.... 445 400 520 350 327 340 140 300 210—3,032

Total 5,998

“The actual playing length is probably fifty yards longer, as the first hole is oftener 400 than 388, and numbers 5 and 8 are usually 10 to 15 yards more than the above figures. Although shorter on paper, the journey out is notoriously longer than the journey in, as the last three holes have frequently been negotiated in eleven strokes. The bogey for the course is now 82 and the most recent record 75. This was made by Jamie Anderson on an occasion when he experienced a wonderful run of luck. It will not be touched by any player next July.”

***NOTE** the term bogey is used here to describe the score to shoot for, the average...here is the definition of bogey from a dictionary. I find this very interesting...

bo·gey also **bo·gy** or **bo·gie**

1. also (b^og^ē, b^og^ē) An evil or mischievous spirit; a hobgoblin.

2. also (b^og^ē, b^og^ē) A cause of annoyance or harassment.

3. *Sports*

a. The number of strokes that a good player is likely to need to finish a golf hole or course.

b. A golf score of one stroke over par. (modern definition)

These are just a few examples that show that it isn't necessary to have the perfect course layout so that the players can have a crack at "par". In the older days of golf as they were working their way up in the caliber of play and in the technology of the equipment, they just played their game on the course that presented its self. Obviously, in setting up a 19th century tournament today we would cherish the opportunity to play the old courses that are still in existence. Usually these courses are still on the shorter side, but it shouldn't matter a bit if it is on the long side. As you can see, high scores were prevalent and I guarantee you will be amazed at the feel, sound and historical accomplishment of the old style clubs striking the gutta percha from a good smooth hit.

Here is some interesting data from Charlie Hunter about the clubs used (assumed by the pro level or top player) while playing Muirfield in 1898:

	Par	Yards	
1. Driver, brassie	4	333	
2. Half iron	3	110	
3. Driver, brassie, iron	5	433	
4. Driver, cleek	4	314	
5. Brassie	3	178	
6. Driver, iron	4	297	
7. Driver, mashie	3	193	
8. Driver, brassie (uphill)....	4	331	
9. Driver, brassie, iron	5	437	Although "Par" is indicated in this chart it is still interesting that it is 75.
	35		
10. Driver, brassie, iron	5	419	
11. Driver, iron	4	284	
12. Driver, brassie, iron		426	The courses were just laid out and ended up what they were it seems, not designed to be exactly par 72 necessarily.
13. Driver, brassie, iron	5	408	
14. Driver, brassie	4	344	
15. Driver, iron	4	323	
16. Driver, iron ,	4	272	
17. Driver, brassie, mashie	5*	378	
18. Driver, iron	4	252	
	40		
	75	5,732	

*The seventeenth hole is only 378 yards in length, but the Alps lie in the way of the player's second stroke, and to clear the summit and bunker beyond and reach the green in two, extraordinary fine play is required.

The par of a green in strokes gives a better idea of the round than figures merely, for a hole which is shown to require two drives is obviously much harder, other things being equal, than one which requires only a drive and a short iron, although both are par fours. But what may be the exact value of the difference between a short iron and a full iron, or between a full iron and a full drive, who shall say? A three-quarter iron at one hole may be more difficult than a drive at another. Compare, for instance, the seventh hole at Glen Cove with the seventh hole at Morris County. For the same reason the so-called "par" of a round, either in figures or words, is not an exact expression of its difficulty in relation to other courses.

The wood clubs are projected to be hit 25 times during a round. This really talks to the difficulty and difference from today's modern driver / wedge mentality.

In these examples, the year is 1898 or 1899. It is common practice that when we talk about playing 19th century golf in the hickory world that we are actually leaning toward the 1880-1890 era as we prefer the players to use the longer nose clubs and larger old irons. It must be pointed out that in the documented examples, golf clubs and balls had begun to change and improve playability, therefore it is not out of line to expect that the game and scores were even a little harder and higher than in the examples....

If you have a course that is 2300 yards and can be managed by most players using a gutta percha golf ball that might only be hit 150 yards, that is great. Foxburg GC (Pennsylvania) is an example of this, and while Old Bandon Golf Links (Oregon) is only 2000 yards it can be very tricky. If you have a course that even from the modern front tees is 2800 yards, you must realize that they played even longer courses during the gutta era. This is the important shift in thought that we need to make in hickory golf as we discover our way into a more realistic gutta percha era. It wasn't all about driver / wedge...*we must appreciate* that it could often be two very long shots or more and the scores will no doubt be higher than what we are used to. If the players will take the time to learn the history and appreciate the opportunity, I think they will learn to enjoy the rare chances that they have to play this way. The scores will take care of themselves. I shot a 38 at Old Bandon at 2000 yards, but would hardly expect to shoot that low at Niagara on the Lake (Canada) at 2600 yards from the shortest tees.

Let's talk about how Jamie Anderson might have been able to shoot 75 on the Onwentsia course at almost 6000 yards. I believe it must have been much like a modern pro shooting a 65 on a modern course today. There are just days when things go your way, where every shot seems to be on target. His approach shots must have been like good lag putts enabling one putt greens when he didn't hit the greens "in par". But, the good player's score on average (the Bogey) was 82.

A personal comment about this game of golf. It's a game of skill, practice, patience and luck. Most of us think we are better than we are. Until you study the real difference between the top pros and the amateur ranks you really might think you are a pretty good player. But I remember seeing my first pro tournament and my jaw dropping at how far they hit the ball, and how good they were around the greens...I have to think that there was some of that going on back in the gutta era. How could Young Tom and Harry Vardon be so much longer than the rest of the pros? Well, I've read that Harry was quite the sporting man. He played soccer skillfully and was said to be so graceful when swinging the club. The other thing is that all of the low scores of the old era were by golfers in their prime...20 or 30 years old, maybe older but not 50 or 60. Most of us as hickory golfers are in the second group, and many of us have played all our lives. And some of us may say that this ball or that ball doesn't go far enough, not as far as the Pro-V1 that can be played. But I've seen a guy hit the same ball that I was using with a mashie that equaled the distance I was hitting with a spoon! When it comes to 19th century golf, I believe we must all get on track and hit and use the gutta percha ball for what it is worth. Some will hit it short and some will hit it far, but all will be able to enjoy the realism and the scores that went along with the era.



19th century golfers did not wear knickers ! Get it right...playing in a jacket on a cool day is classic.

Let's talk 19th century golf equipment: GOLF BALLS



Gutta percha golf balls made from authentic 1890 line cut cast iron mold

Unfortunately, there are many golf balls that have been marketed as gutta percha. Most of these have been made from a rubber and injection molded in poorly made or improper, modern era molds. People like the *ring* of "Gutta Percha" and it gives a historical sound to the product.

Today we have gutta percha golf balls that fit the bill. Golf balls made by hand, one at a time by heating the material in warm water, forming an egg shaped putty ball, and pressing the material in a cool golf ball mold that slowly draws the heat away from the newly formed golf ball.

Until you hit one for the first time, you only have what you've heard or read about them. You know they were played for 50 years, by Old Tom and Young Tom Morris...by Willie Park...by young Harry Vardon, JH Taylor, and James Braid. Of historical significance is the fact that Harry Vardon mourned over the rubber band wound golf ball in 1898 and how "the game of golf as we know it will never be the same" once it took hold. He held on to playing gutta percha for as long as he could until the one time longest hitter was being beaten down by the Bounding Billy.

There is a unique click to a well struck gutta, a kind of energetic pop off the face of the club. It flies straight and true, yet it will only go so far as a 5 iron in the hands of a PGA pro. On the Niagara on the Lake website it states that in 1896, on opening day, CB Macdonald hit the longest drive of 179 yards 6 inches. Conditions have obviously got something to do with every shot. The Vardon Invasion states that Harry was the longest hitter around and could whack it 200-225 yards! We've found out that there were different kinds of gutta that had varying weight, and if a player could handle a heavy ball it was possible to hit it farther in favorable conditions.

The 2010 model by McIntyre White Authentic Golf is the size of a popular 27 pennyweight line cut ball but actually weighs in a bit less. I think this ball is a favorable combination for today's gutta player...being of good size, and being lighter makes it easier to play. It also protects our old clubs from being beaten up by a rock hard, heavier ball... but it sounds and feels solid.

Let's talk 19th century golf equipment: CLUBS



Here is an 1890 semi-long nose Forgan playclub & a look down on a small 1893 niblick, 2 ½ x 2"

Both of these clubs are authentic 19th century clubs that I use in play. My other irons are large heavy irons from the 1880's to early 1890's. They measure 4" long with 3 1/2" hosels. Though smaller, later model clubs have been used, playing with these larger clubs is really *more in the spirit* of the experience, as is sticking to the longer heel to toe designs of play clubs. If I were to pick a date for the best clubs to assemble I would choose 1880 – 1890. The 1890's were tremendously experimental and the closer you get to the turn of the century the more modern the clubs become, thus whitewashing the "19th century" norm. Authentic clubs previous to 1880 are much more rare and valuable and not many owners would usually play with them. I would though, much more prefer to be sure and proud of my older clubs than to be arguing or testing the authenticity of a club made close to or even after 1900.

As for putters, a long nose wooden putter is the most unique and fun experience, though there are some great old crude iron or gun metal brass blade putters.

There are choices to be made for authentic and reproduction golf clubs and in some cases reproductions are the way to go. Of course, the player with a consistently playable set of authentic clubs will always have the pride of ownership that a true enthusiast deserves. I do not think that in this era there would be a great advantage to reproductions other than the durability and affordability factors. Usually though, they have been modeled after clubs or made with a taller face on the wooden play clubs, as in the later models I have seen (not necessarily like the low profile long nose woods of earlier years). Also, the shafts are made to spec, whereas the authentic clubs you find may not be a good match for you. Unless you are a good craftsman and can fit a shaft to your liking, you may have trouble hitting them.

I will say that I am discovering many things about play with the old clubs as I continue to read and gain play experience with the gutta. I believe that *after we have agreed to play the gutta ball as the standard*, an additional importance will be placed on the composition of the clubs. I'm finding that the flex and weight of the head can make a huge difference on the playability and feel of hitting a good tee shot and experiencing the sensation of the gutta. I'm not giving advice yet, just pointing out it will make a difference to the competitive player.

The fact may be that given the premise everyone would be playing the same authentic-play gutta ball, this alone will lead to compromises in one's play. We could essentially leave the club selection fairly wide open (with basic guidelines) as that is the one area that the club makers and players had control.

Example:

Wooden clubs (authentic or replica), splice neck, longer heel to toe than face to rear (generally a 2 to 1 ratio), varied lofts of all kinds.

Irons, smooth faced, my personal feeling is that the hosel diameter and length tells more about the age of the clubs than anything, with many gutta era irons in the ¾" diameter and 3 ½" length.

Putters, splice neck wooden (authentic or replica)(generally a 2 to 1.25 ratio)

Putters, yes they had iron blades but I think this is an area where we should stick to wooden heads for the fun of it...

Any combination of clubs, wooden or iron, carried without a bag.

Tips for setting up a 19th century golf tournament:

Make custom score cards without the mention of "par", just Hole #1 – 287yards with a box for score.

Gutta golf is better in cool weather, 45 to 65 degrees F. This encourages more appropriate clothing, especially jackets and it is better for the gutta percha golf balls. Gutta percha softens for molding at 160 degrees F. so it only makes sense that playing at 90 degrees will begin to affect the golf ball.

Maybe play match play for added fun and realism. 16 players can play 4 matches in 2 days. All the other players can continue in consolation matches or a low round play for the second day.

References and Resources:

USGA Museum digital archives www.usgamuseum.com

Society of Hickory Golfers www.hickorygolfers.com

Golf Collectors Society www.golfcollectors.com

McIntyre White Authentic Golf www.mwauthenticgolf.com
Gutta percha golf balls

Old Bandon Golf Links www.oldbandongolflinks.com