

Golf in Michiana from John Wooden to Today

By John Fineran

Long before he was “The Wizard of Westwood,” John Wooden was “The Earl of Erskine.”

Wooden, who coached UCLA to 10 NCAA men’s basketball championships in a 12-year span from 1964 to 1975, pulled off a golf feat that even left his old-time coaching rival, Notre Dame’s Digger Phelps, speechless. Phelps, whose Fighting Irish ended the Bruins’ 88-game winning streak on Jan. 19, 1974, did not know that Wooden, who coached high school basketball at South Bend Central in the years before World War II, was a natural when it came to the game of golf.

There aren’t many golfers, maybe a dozen or so, who have accomplished what then 28-year-old Wooden did eighty years ago, on June 26, 1939, at South Bend’s still young Erskine Park Golf Course during a round with his friends. During a round of 75, Wooden made a hole-in-one at the par-3 sixth hole and a double-eagle 2 at the par-5, 504-yard 16th.

It is arguably the greatest feat ever accomplished in one round in South Bend, one not likely to be matched during the 40th U.S. Senior Open, set for June 27-30 at Notre Dame’s renowned Warren Golf Course, a Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw design that opened for play in May 2000 just north and east of the school’s famed golden dome, which can be seen from many places on the course.

Within a 25-mile radius of Warren, both above and below the Indiana-Michigan state line in what is known as Michiana, there are more than 20 golf courses, both nine and 18 holes, that you can play.

Golfers with varying handicaps from low to high have visited Michiana through the years to play these same courses and left with fond memories.

Warren itself was the site of a hole-in-one made by former United States Secretary of State and current Augusta National Golf Club member Condoleezza Rice, who was in town to watch her alma mater play Michigan State on September 17, 2011. She used a 7-wood to ace Warren’s 14th hole (the eighth hole for the tournament) from 150 yards while playing with Notre Dame women’s basketball coach Muffet McGraw, who has eight fewer NCAA titles on her resume but is as fond of golf as Wooden was.

In an interview with *Golf Digest* in 2010 just a couple of months before his death at the age of 99, Wooden said his ace/albatross feat occurred while playing with some teacher friends “at Erskine golf course in South Bend in the 1930s, before I went into the service.”

Wooden got proficient enough at the game, receiving lessons from Scottish pro John Watson, who was Erskine’s first professional and later the head pro at South Bend Country Club, which in its 100-plus years of existence has hosted the 1935 Western Open, the 1938 and 1951 Western Amateurs, and the 1942 NCAA Championship.

As Wooden told *Golf Digest* about that glorious day: “The par 3 was on the front nine, about 175 yards with a 5-iron. I didn’t see the ball go in, but the players standing by the green, I knew it was in from their reaction. On the par 5 on the back nine, I had no idea I could reach the

green, but that same group was in front of us. I still have the hole-in-one silver (gift) ball given to me and the scorecard. They’re here somewhere.”

The card, signed by his playing partners and those in the group ahead, was found shortly after Wooden, a native of Hall, Indiana, died on June 4, 2010, just about four months shy of his 100th birthday. His daughter Nan Muehlhausen found it while cleaning out Wooden’s two-bedroom condo in Encino, Calif.

Erskine Park, seven miles south of Warren in South Bend, opened on June 27, 1925. It was designed by noted architect and golf professional George O’Neil, who also designed South Bend Country Club and other notable courses around the country. O’Neil, the first professional at Beverly Country Club, numbered among his golf students one Charles “Chick” Evans Jr., America’s most notable amateur golfer before Bobby Jones and the founder of the Evans Scholarship program administered by the Western Golf Association that sends caddies with financial needs to college.

continued on page 28



Wooden Golf Card



Blackthorn



Ebel

At 94, Erskine Park is the second oldest of South Bend's three municipal courses. The construction of nine-hole Studebaker Park Golf Course, about two miles north of Erskine on South Bend's south side, began 100 years ago and is home to Michiana's First Tee program. Elbel Park, about 10 miles northwest of Warren, opened in 1963.

To the east of Elbel Park is Blackthorn Golf Club, which was designed by noted architect Michael Hurdzan and opened

25 years ago this August. It's been the site for the last 10 years of the Four Winds Invitational, a stop on the Symetra Tour for aspiring LPGA Tour players. About five miles east of Warren is Juday Creek Golf Course, an 18-hole masterpiece in Granger by architect Ken Killian that opened in 1989 and once hosted none other than cigar-chomping former Chicago Bears head coach Mike Ditka for a Special Olympics charity outing also attended by late Notre Dame and Northwestern football coach Ara Parseghian.

Parseghian, a scratch golfer, called South Bend Country Club his golfing home

and once played in a charity event there with Arnold Palmer. But Parseghian liked to get out and about Michiana's golf courses with former Notre Dame football coach Lou Holtz and recently retired Chicago White Sox broadcaster Ken Harrelson. All three were friends of the late golf professional George Thomas, who bought Brookwood Golf Course in Buchanan, Mich., back in the early 1990s. Thomas' son Joe is the professional now at the course about 14 miles from Warren.

Also north of the state line in Niles, barely 10 miles from Warren, is Blackthorn Group-owned Signal Point Golf Club, an innovative 1963 Robert Bruce Harris design above the St. Joseph River. It features two tees and two pin locations for each of its nine holes, one a challenging double-dogleg par 5. It was completely private until the Blackthorn Group bought it, and now can be played via a Blackthorn pass program.

North of Niles is the 36-hole Hampshire Country Club, 18 miles from Warren. Hampshire's two courses, which opened in 1961 and 1995, sit off a country road outside of Dowagiac. The oldest of the two courses, which measures 7,014 yards, was used by the Western Golf Association as a qualifying site for the Western Amateur when it was played at nearby Point O'Woods Golf & Country Club from 1971 through 2008. Among those who once qualified there in the early 1980s was Rocco Mediate. The Western Amateur, by the way, returns to the Point this July 29-August 3.

The Burke Golf Course opened in 1929 as an 18-hole course and is now nine holes because of campus expansion at Notre Dame. It was the home of the school's 1944 NCAA champions, and the late Billy Casper was on scholarship for one semester in the early 1950s before returning to his native San Diego to marry his wife.

While walking to the Burke's first tee, stop on the way past St. Mary Lake to offer a prayer at the prettiest place on the Notre Dame campus, the Grotto for Our Lady of Lourdes. (The Grotto's plaza and staircase are currently under construction, but you can still stop a distance away.)

And depending how your round goes, you might pass by on your way back to your car and ask for forgiveness for the bad thoughts or words you expressed.

John Fineran has covered golf in Michiana and beyond in parts of three decades, including a long stint at the South Bend Tribune.

ON THE SHELF

TIM CRONIN

Even as we come to the end of the majors season, and a month earlier with the switch of the PGA Championship to May, echoes of the Masters endure. Augusta National, the most natural looking artificial place on the planet, has that hold on people, and when Tiger Woods wins, the echoes linger longer.

David Sowell's definitive book, *The Masters: A Hole-By-Hole Chronicle of America's Golf Classic*, can keep them reverberating all year long. Sowell, a golf historian, issued the first edition in 2003 and followed with another in 2007. This most recent version, occasioned by the clamor of those bidding up the prices of the earlier editions, carries through last year, weaving in more recent tales of wonder and woe with others dating to the commencement of the Augusta National Invitation Tournament in 1934.

Care to read about Gene Sarazen's albatross on the 15th hole in 1935? It's here. Jack Nicklaus' "Yes sir!" putt on the 17th green in 1986? It's here. As is Billy Joe Patton's ace on the sixth in 1954, and just about every other stroke of significance in Masters history – or strokes, as in, for instance, the legendary and ignominious 13 Tom Weiskopf authored on the devilish par-3 12th in 1980. You may remember the number, but did you know it was in the first round? And that Weiskopf dumped two more balls in Rae's Creek in the second round for a 7, and thus 20 strokes on one hole over two days? That's the level of detail, entertainingly told, Sowell provides, hole-by-hole, chapter-by-chapter.

This is not a dry recitation of numbers and facts. This is a lively read, starting at the first tee – which has moved backwards from even with the door of the golf shop over the years to somewhere in Aiken – punctuated by twists of fate.

Sowell explains how the holes have changed over the years and puts everything into context. Each chapter begins with a diagram of how the hole appears today. The only possible addition would be diagrams of the original incarnations, especially the drastically changed 10th, 11th, and 16th.

A Tome of Triumph and Tragedy

He details the great plugged ball controversy between Arnold Palmer and Ken Venturi in 1958, smartly quoting each side from their biographies before explaining the ruling that aided Palmer's victory, the first of his four at Augusta. He digs into stories previously untold, such as who paid the bill for the original changes to the seventh hole.

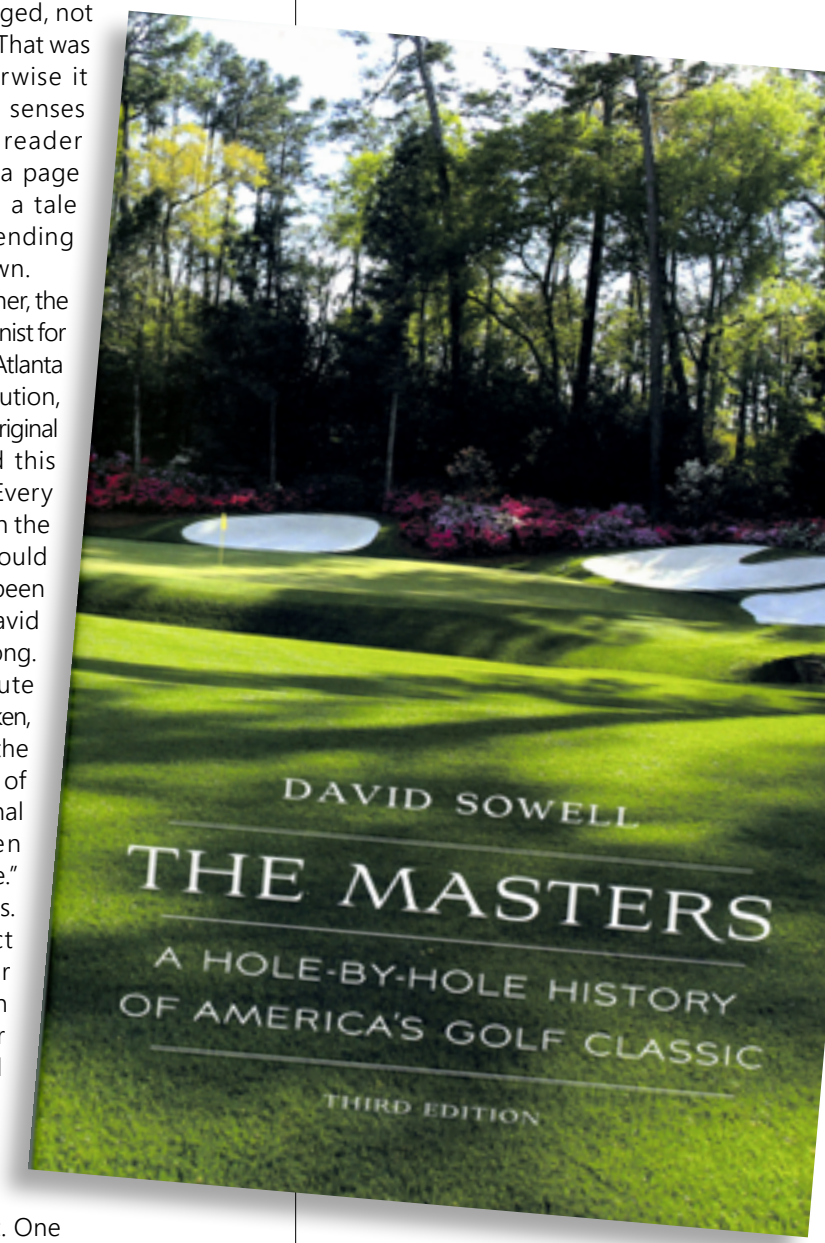
While the format is hole-by-hole, each chapter is thematically arranged, not chronological. That was wise, for otherwise it might dull the senses or tempt the reader to skip ahead a page or two to find a tale to which the ending is already known.

Furman Bisher, the estimable columnist for decades for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, took in Sowell's original work and paid this compliment: "Every kind of book on the Masters that could be written had been written until David Sowell came along. He takes a route previously not taken, giving each of the eighteen holes of Augusta National its own fifteen minutes of fame."

This he does. It's the perfect golf book for curling up with on a rainy summer day – or a cold winter night. It can be read start to finish or in spurts, skipping about. One can imagine another edition every few years, ready to be snapped up by the

cognoscenti. Sowell has given the Masters enthusiast a treat, and created for himself a cash cow.

The Masters
By David Sowell
University of Nebraska Press
287 pages
\$29.95



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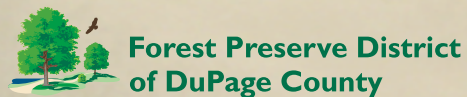
Green Meadows Golf Course
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