

AUGUST 1953: BLYTHEFIELD HOSTS THE WESTERN AMATEUR

By Brent D. Rector

"[Golf] includes companionship with friends, social intercourse, opportunity for courtesy, kindness, and generosity to an opponent."

DAVID R. FORGAN, winner of the first Western Amateur

This month marks the 70th anniversary of the 1953 Western Amateur Championship, which was hosted by Blythefield Country Club from August 17 to 23, 1953. The Western Am had been played in Grand Rapids only one other time, in 1914 when Kent Country Club was the host site. It is regarded as the second most important amateur golf championship in the United States, overshadowed only by the United States Amateur. The Western Am is one of three championships conducted by the Western Golf Association, located in suburban Chicago.

Blythefield has had close ties with the WGA over the years, having hosted all three WGA championships. In 1961, we hosted the Western Open. In 2005, we hosted the Western Junior. Blythefield has the distinction of being the only club outside of the Chicago metropolitan area to host all three WGA championships. (Six clubs in the Chicago area have also hosted all three.) It's unlikely there will ever be another club to have this distinction.

Earlier this year, in the March edition of *Did You Know*, we discussed how Blythefield came to be the host of the Western Amateur. This month we will focus on the tournament itself. This program has some interesting facts and figures about Chick Evans' creation of the Evans Scholarship Foundation in 1930, and the ESF's early successes in its first two decades.

The Western Am, one of the oldest amateur golf championships, was first played in 1899. It has always been at match play. Blythefield hosted the 51st renewal of the championship; it was not played in 1918 during the Great War, nor was it played in 1943-1945 during World War II. When BCC hosted, the handicap requirement for entry was five. A total of 143 contested it, beginning with two days of qualifying stroke play (Monday and Tuesday) to select the 64-man match play bracket. The early round matches were at 18 holes: first round Wednesday, second and third rounds Thursday, then the quarterfinals on Friday. The Saturday semi-finals and Sunday finals were played at 36 holes each.

Frank Strafaci, an accomplished East Coast player, was medalist with a score of 140. It took a score of 155 to qualify for match play. Contestants who made the cut included three Blythefield members: Harold Brink (150), Carl Herrud (151), and C. J. Farley (152), plus Dick Norton (149), the son of former Blythefield member Otto Norton. BCC members missing the cut included Hermie Miller, Sr. (156), Willard Rathbun (156), John Sharp (157), Rube Jordan (160), John Yonkman (161), James Badaluco (164), Joe Tangney (171), and John Bailey (173).

Other notables in the field included:

- Harvie Ward Jr. (144), the 1952 British Amateur champion.
- Jimmy Jackson (149) of Glendale, Mo., who earlier was chosen for the 1953 Walker Cup matches.
- Don Cherry (152), a renowned singer from the 1950's who was also an accomplished golfer. He also was on that year's Walker Cup team, and won the Canadian Amateur championship the week after getting to the semi-finals of the Western Am.
- Dale Morey (141), of Martinsville, Indiana, a 32-year-old veteran of amateur golf who had won the 1950 Southern Amateur and was hopeful for a Walker Cup selection.
- Hord Hardin (155), who would serve as president of the USGA (1968-69) and later became chairman of Augusta National GC (1980-91).

There were a few big-name entrants who withdrew before the tournament started:

- Charles "Chick" Evans, founder of the Evans Scholarship Foundation. Evans had won the Western Am a record eight times (1909, 1912, 1914-15, 1920-23) but by 1953 was well past his prime. His record of eight wins is unlikely to be surpassed, since the Western Am has evolved to be mostly young college players. Modern winners have mostly turned pro after their college careers.
- Frank Stranahan, two-time defending champion of the Western Am (1951 and 1952). According to the Grand Rapids Press, he withdrew just before the tournament started, apparently "peevied" at not being selected for the 1953 Walker Cup team. He had already been featured in the tournament program, which added to the WGA's frustration. Stranahan, from a wealthy Toledo family, was a controversial figure, considered irascible and a playboy.
- Chuck Kocsis, six-time Michigan Amateur champion and one of the all-time greats in Michigan golf, who decided to go fishing instead.

The course was set up to play at 6,650 yards and par 37-35, 72. A new back tee had just been added in the woods at the 6th hole, converting it to a par 5 back-to-back with the par 5 7th hole. The 17th hole was played as a long par 4 from its original tee.

The WGA was pleased with the course. Stanley J. McGiveran, who was then WGA President, had this to say about our course:

“Blythefield Country club is a good test of golf. When we visited Grand Rapids many months ago to view Blythefield, we were looking only for a golf course that would afford a good test of the game. We were not looking for any ‘souped up’ layouts or any that were freakish in any detail. We wanted a good, normal, everyday course and we decided that Blythefield would fit the bill exactly. Of course the home grounds committee has tightened some of the fairways, set back some of the tees and controlled the rough, which is as it should be for an event of this kind. I doubt that the Western [Amateur] has ever been played on any finer course in the entire long history of the association. {Referring to our back nine, he stated that} those holes, 11 through 16, are as fine a stretch of beautiful golf holes as I have seen anywhere.”

Scores for the 36-hole qualifying went from medalist Strafaci at 140 to the last position at 176. No playoff was necessary, with exactly 64 players at a score of 155 or better. There was one disqualification, caused by a competitor’s confusion over the change to par 4 on no. 17. He made 5 on the 17th and told his scorer that he made par erroneously believing it was a par 5. His scorer wrote down 4, resulting in an incorrect scorecard.

Large galleries were present throughout the championship, estimated to be around 4,000 for the final match on Sunday.



First round matches on Wednesday generally followed form as most of the favorites won their matches. Brink won his first-round match. Ironically, the other two Blythefield members who qualified, Carl Herrud and C. J. Farley, met in the first round of match play, with Farley winning.

Thursday had two rounds. In the round of 32 Thursday morning, Harvey Ward, one of the tournament favorites, was upset. Brink and Farley, the remaining Blythefield contingent, also exited, with Farley losing to the eventual champion Dale Morey and Brink extending his opponent John Levinson only to lose on no. 18. (More on Levinson below.) Dick Norton, the local Grand Rapids golfer who had learned to play at Blythefield when his father was a member, went 25 holes to beat his opponent. He had enough gas in his tank to win his second match that afternoon. Also on Thursday afternoon in the round of 16, Frank Strafacci continued his march to the semis with another convincing win.

The matches on Friday were all close: Strafacci d. Cochran, 2&1; Morey d. Foreman, 1 up, and Cherry d. Palmer, 20 holes. The match involving local favorite Norton in his match with John Levinson, a Chicago attorney, was especially noteworthy. Levinson was a fine player, and quite meticulous. Through 13 holes Norton had not yet won a hole, with Levinson three up with five to play. On the 14th hole, Levin's second shot was in the left rough near the river, where no one else was nearby. As he addressed his ball, he saw that it *might* have moved. He immediately alerted Norton that he was adding a penalty stroke. This resulted in him making bogey to Norton's par, cutting the deficit to two holes. Norton then won the 15th with par and the 17th with a birdie, squaring the match going into no. 18. Levinson was already in for par while Norton had a long putt for birdie, which he made to the delight of the gallery.

The semifinals were played at 36 holes on Saturday. Norton, co-captain of the Purdue golf team, ground out a 4 & 3 win against stroke play medalist Frank Strafacci. Singer/golfer Don Cherry ended his run, bowing out 6 & 4 to Dale Morey, setting up the Sunday final. Ever the entertainer, Cherry amused the gallery on no. 13. Five down walking to the tee, he suddenly stopped on our "bridge of sighs," gripped the cable and swung out over the river, yelling to the astonished onlookers, "Think I'll end it here."

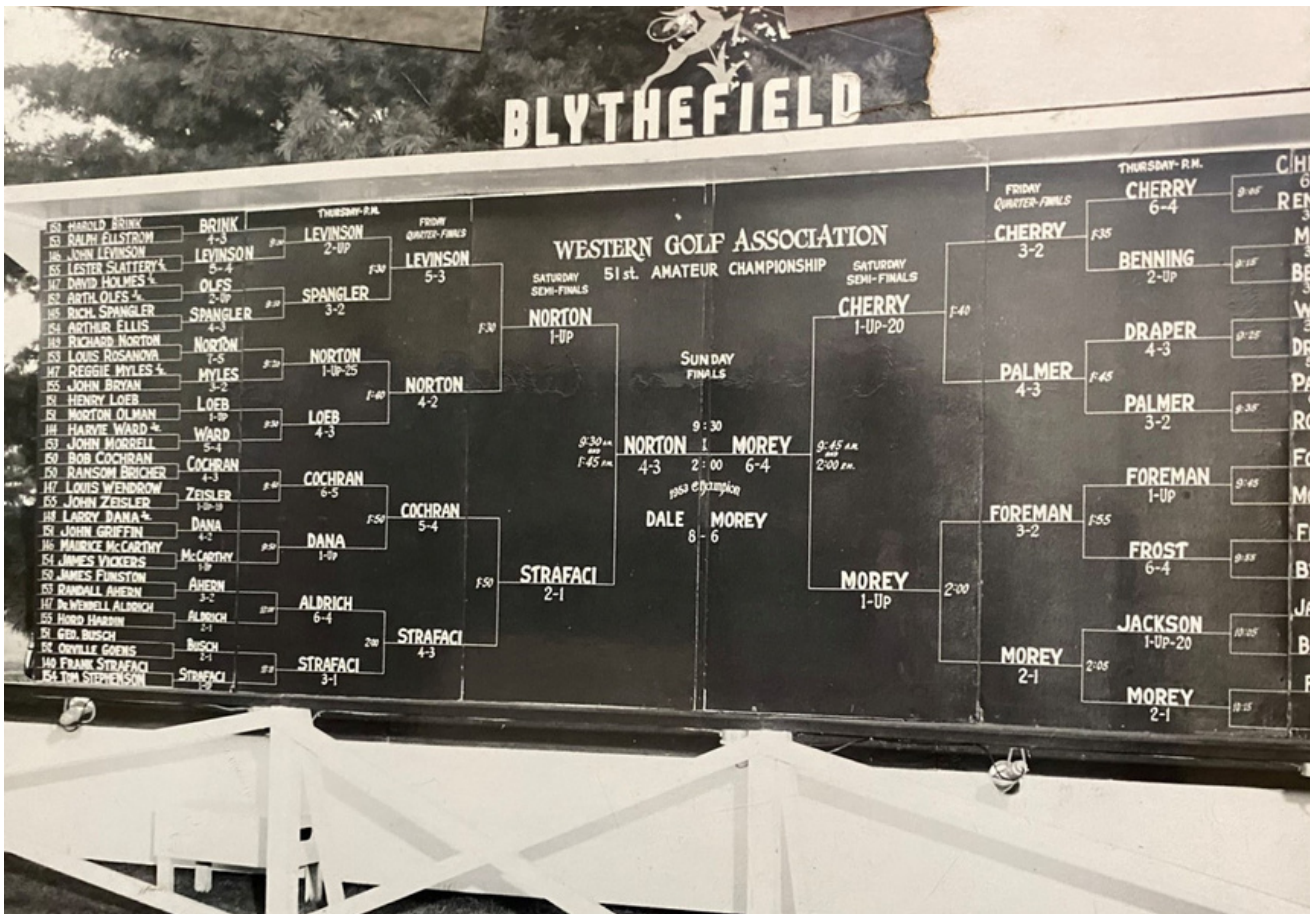
The final featured the local favorite Norton in the biggest match of his life on the course where he had learned the game, against Dale Morey, a seasoned veteran of amateur golf. A good athlete, Morey had played both basketball and golf at Louisiana State University, where he was a three-time All-American in golf. He later played both sports as a professional, but got his amateur status in golf back after a short stint as a pro.

The final match was also played over 36 holes. Morey built a comfortable cushion on the first round, up four holes with a brilliant 5-under-par round. Norton also played solid golf, one-under par. While the players had a rest, Paul Hahn, a famous trick shot artist, displayed his talents for the gallery on the practice tee. (More about Hahn in a future DYK.) After lunch Morey continued his assault on par, going three under par on the front nine. The match ended on the 12th hole, Morey winning 8&6. For the 30 holes of the final match, Morey was eight under par with an eagle and seven birdies offset by only one bogey. Norton was one under par in the first round but was a few over par in the afternoon, conceding the match when he made bogey on no. 12.

Norton's showing was a surprise. He was not among the pre-tournament favorites, and three of his victories on his way to the finals were considered upsets.



Above: Morey and Norton with a WGA referee at the 12th green, the final hole of their match.



Above: The championship scoreboard. Below: BCC President Paul Cholette receives a plaque from the WGA President. Does anyone know whatever happened to this plaque?



At age 21 in 1953, Dick Norton became the youngest player to reach the Western Am finals since 1909, when Chick Evans won his first Western Am at age 19. Norton remained an amateur, working as a stockbroker and living in Grand Rapids. He was an outstanding golfer in local tournaments, but also spent time enjoying other outdoor sports – fishing, hunting, and skiing. He died in 2011. His obituary requested that, in lieu of flowers, memorial donations be made to the Evans Scholarship Foundation.

Blythefield's caddie program was large back then – golf carts would not be used much for another decade – but there were not enough caddies for the large Western Am field. We put out a call for new caddies and trained them. Training was done the week before the tournament, and bus transportation was provided from the Rowe Hotel downtown. To encourage boys, the caddie rate was \$3.50 per round plus another dollar for shagging in practice.



WGA President Stanley McGiveran presents awards to caddies for the finalists. Can anyone identify the caddies?

The Grand Rapids press summed up the Western Am week this way: "It was a story-book week of golf and one the American public, which loves the dramatic touch, will not soon forget."

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PS: In researching this DYK, I had a trip back in time to the early 1950's. Most of us are too young to remember that far back. The US president was Dwight Eisenhower, the British prime minister was Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin was dictator of the USSR, and US Senator Joseph McCarthy led a crusade against Communism.

1953

51st Western Amateur

August 17-23 Blythefield Country Club, Grand Rapids, Mich. 6,650 yards, par 72

Dale Morey finally captured the Western Amateur, his 8 & 6 victory over Richard Norton the widest final margin since 1931.
Entered: 156 Started: 143 Qualifying score: 155 Medalist: Frank Strafaci, 140.

Round of 64 (Wed 9/19)

Upper Half

Frank Strafaci (140), Garden City, N.Y., d. Tom Stephenson (154), 36, Kansas City, Mo., 1 up
 George Busch Jr. (151), Grand Rapids, Mich., d. Orville Goens (152), Des Moines, Iowa, 2 & 1
 Wendell R. Aldrich (147), Angola, Mich., d. Hord W. Hardin (155), St. Louis, Mo., 2 & 1
 Randall R. Ahern (153), Detroit, Mich., d. James Funston (150), Detroit, Mich., 4 & 2
 Maurice McCarthy (146), Muskegon, Mich., d. James W. Vickers (154), Wichita, Kan., 1 up
 Lawrence Dana Jr. (148), Bradford, Pa., d. John Griffin (151), Lansing, Mich., 4 & 2
 John Zeisler (155), Chicago, d. Louis Wendrow (147), Lansing, Mich., 19 holes
 Robert E. Cochran (150), Normandie C.C., St. Louis, Mo., d. Ranson Bricher (150), Aurora, Ill., 4 & 3
 E. Harvie Ward Jr. (144), Atlanta, Ga., d. John Morrell (153), Elgin, Ill., 5 & 4
 Henry Loeb (151), Highland Park, Ill., d. Morton Olman (151), Cincinnati, Ohio, 1 up
 Reggie Myles Jr. (147), Lansing, Mich., d. John Bryan (155), Aurora, Ill., 3 & 2
 Richard S. Norton (149), 21, Grand Rapids, Mich., d. Louis Rosanova (153), Mount Prospect, Ill., 7 & 5
 Richard Spangler Jr. (145), Lincoln, Neb., d. Arthur "Ace" Ellis (154), Wilmette, Ill., 4 & 3
 Arthur Olf's Jr. (152), Detroit, Mich., d. David Holmes Jr. (147), Kendallville, Ind., 2 up
 John O. Levinson (146), 38, Tam O'Shanter C.C., d. Lester A. Slattery Jr. (155), University City, Mo., 5 & 4
 Harold Brink (150), Grand Rapids, Mich., d. Ralph Ellstrom (153), Dearborn, Mich., 4 & 3

Lower Half

Dale Morey (141), 32, Martinsville, Ind., d. Harry Allen Jr. (154), Grand Rapids, Mich., 4 & 3
 C.J. Farley (152), Grand Rapids, Mich., d. Carl Herrud (151), Grand Rapids, Mich., 2 & 1
 John Barton (147), Davenport, Iowa, d. Russell Van Ess (155), Grand Rapids, Mich., 6 & 4
 James Jackson (149), Glendale, Mo., d. Donald Guariglia (153), St. Louis, Mo., 2 & 1
 Perry Byard (154), Rochester, Mich., d. Daniel Molyneaux (145), Davenport, Iowa, 1 up
 James Frost (151), Battle Creek, Mich., d. John Royle Jr. (148), Indianapolis, 2 & 1
 Earl Moeller (147), Pine Lawn, Mo., d. Allan M. Loeb (155), Highland Park, Ill., 5 & 4
 Harold "Junie" Foreman Jr. (153), 39, Lake Shore C.C., d. Joe Conrad (150), San Antonio, Tex., 4 & 2
 Hillman Robbins Jr. (141), 21, Memphis, Tenn., d. John Lehman (154), Bob O Link, 2 & 1
 Raymond Palmer (152), 41, Wyandotte, Mich., d. Ted Lach Jr. (141), Indianapolis, 5 & 4
 Tom Draper Jr. (147), Birmingham, Mich., d. Ted Schoonback (155), Grand Rapids, Mich., 3 & 2
 Buz Wohl (149), Chicago, d. Jack Coyle (149), Springfield, Ill., 3 & 2
 Robert Benning (154), Dayton, Ohio, d. Arthur Hoff (145), La Grange Park, Ill., 3 & 2
 Lloyd Martz (148), Detroit, Mich., d. Clifford Taylor (148), Spring Lake, Mich., 3 & 2
 David Reniger (155), Lansing, Mich., d. Dan Sheehan Jr. (147), Park Forest, Ill., 3 & 2
 Don Cherry (152), Wichita Falls, Tex., d. William Hendrich (150), Cleveland, Ohio, 6 & 5

1953 continued

Round of 32 (Thu 8/20 morning)

Upper Half

Strafaci d. Busch, 2 up
 Aldrich d. Ahern, 6 & 4
 Dana d. McCarthy, 1 up
 Cochran d. Zeisler, 6 & 5
 Loeb d. Ward, 4 & 3
 Norton d. Myles, 25 holes
 Spangler d. Olf's, 3 & 2
 Levinson d. Brink, 2 up

Lower Half

Morey d. Farley, 2 & 1
 Jackson d. Barton, 20 holes
 Frost d. Byard, 6 & 4
 Foreman d. Moeller, 1 up
 Palmer d. Robbins, 3 & 2
 Draper d. Wohl, 4 & 3
 Benning d. Martz, 2 up
 Cherry d. Reniger, 6 & 4

Round of 16 (Thu 8/20 afternoon)

Strafaci d. Aldrich, 4 & 3
 Cochran d. Dana, 5 & 4
 Norton d. Loeb, 4 & 2
 Levinson d. Spangler, 5 & 3
 Morey d. Jackson, 2 & 1
 Foreman d. Frost, 3 & 2
 Palmer d. Draper, 4 & 3
 Cherry d. Benning, 3 & 2

Quarterfinals (Fri 8/21)

Strafaci d. Cochran, 2 & 1
 Norton d. Levinson, 1 up
 Morey d. Foreman, 1 up
 Cherry d. Palmer, 20 holes

Semifinals (36 holes, Sat 8/22)

Norton d. Strafaci, 4 & 3
 Morey d. Cherry, 6 & 4

Final (36 holes, Sun 8/23)

Morey d. Norton, 8 & 6