

January 2023 – Did You Know?

My Own Caddie Days

“Golf is deceptively simple, endlessly complicated. A child can play it well, and a grown man can never master it. Any single round of it is full and tantalizing, precise and unpredictable. It requires complete concentration and total relaxation. It satisfies the soul and frustrates the intellect. It is at the same time rewarding and maddening—and it is without doubt the greatest game mankind has ever invented.”

Scottish clubmaker ROBERT FORGAN, 1824-1900

Some have asked about my interest in researching and writing about golf and Blythefield history. It stems from being a caddie at Blythefield in the early 1960's. My introduction to both Blythefield and the game was mere happenstance. There was a top-notch amateur back then named Harold Brink. He was a Blythefield member who lived in Belmont, which is where I grew up. I'd read about him in the Grand Rapids newspapers. His wife and my mom were friends; that led to me going to Blythefield to caddie for him, once. That was all the introduction to golf and Blythefield that I needed. I was smitten by the golf bug (thus, the quote above). For the next few summers, I learned about golf by being a caddie at Blythefield.

From the beginning I was impressed with the beautiful oasis of green grass and open fields. Blythefield did not have very many trees back then, and the fairways and greens were fascinating to a young boy who had not seen close-cut turf grass before. The front nine was so open that you could see from the pro shop all the way to the original farmhouse on Rogue River Road (where Mike and Linda Manica now live). The copses of red pine and scotch pine, planted in the 1950's, were so short that even a small caddie could see over them.

Here are some photos of how the course looked in the early 1960's.



view from no. 6 fairway toward green – note open right side before maples grew



view from no. 7 tee toward green – note how short pine trees were



view to no. 10 green – note the original greenside bunkers were flat with bluegrass banks; this is how BCC's original architects Langford & Moreau built them



view from no. 11 tee toward green – note open view below to Grand River valley



view from no. 13 tee - note no pilings on riverbank & no bathroom behind the green



view of no. 17 – note how open right side was

The original routing of the course by Langford & Moreau in 1928 was still intact. (Even though there have been many course changes over the years, the routing has not changed much.) Here is a grainy 1960 aerial of the course.



I have other memories besides the beauty of the golf course, such as the anticipation as a round started. There was a tall hedge row forming a horseshoe to the back and sides of the first tee. I would walk from the practice area or putting green to the first tee inside the hedge row, the start of my loop. After the tee shots our pairing would walk down from the first tee – four players making footprints in the morning dew with their caddies trying to keep the rattle of the clubs to a minimum as we lugged the bags – mostly leather Burton bags that were the choice of most members. The bags were heavy for a young boy. I don't have any photos of the bags I carried, but they were like these from the classic movie *Caddyshack*:



The actors in *Caddyshack* were a lot bigger than I was in my caddie days. I was at most five-feet, three-inches in height when I started caddying, creating issues like getting clubs out of cars. Members would drive to the back of the pro shop, stopping to open their trunk so a caddie could get the clubs out. Those were the days of long sedans with huge trunks (for example, the

early 1960's Cadillacs – see below). I wasn't big enough to reach inside the trunk for the clubs. I'd have to crawl into the trunk, hoping another caddie would not close with me inside.

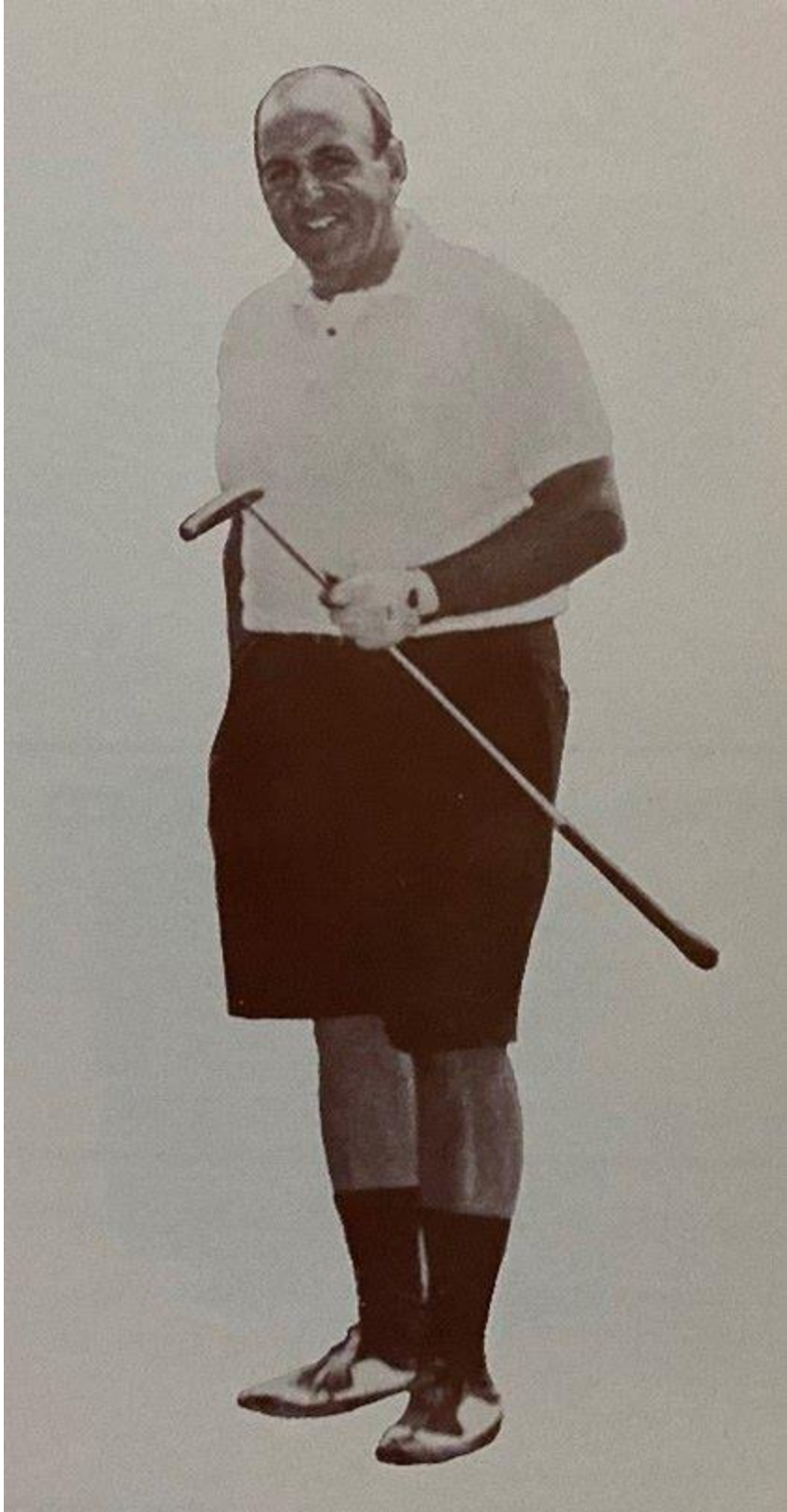


The advertisement is presented on a light-colored background. At the top center is the Cadillac winged logo. Below it, the word "Cadillac" is written in a large, elegant cursive font. The central image is a black and white photograph of a 1961 Cadillac sedan, shown from a front-three-quarter view. The car is parked on a tiled floor in a showroom setting. In the background, a man in a suit is standing near the car, and a woman in a light-colored dress is standing next to him. A large window in the background shows a city skyline at night. To the left of the car, there is a potted plant. Below the photograph, the text reads: *The new Cadillac is so practical to own and so economical to operate that it is acknowledged motordom's wisest investment.* At the bottom of the advertisement, the text "VISIT YOUR LOCAL AUTHORIZED CADILLAC DEALER" is printed in a simple, sans-serif font. In the bottom right corner, the number "27" is printed.

Advertisement in the WGA program for the 1961 Western Open, hosted by Blythefield CC

Caddying was usually fun. I enjoyed the banter of the golfers with each other, typically with a good helping of humor and trash talk. I particularly enjoyed one member for whom I looped back then, Paul Goolian. He was gregarious and especially friendly with the caddies. He must

have liked having me as his caddie because he would sometimes pick me up from home and drive me to Blythefield so I wouldn't have to walk. Here is a photo of him that I found in an old BCC yearbook:



Paul Goolian, 1967 BCC yearbook

During my caddie days I learned that he was a lawyer. He was one of the reasons that I eventually chose law for my career.

My summers as a caddie were mostly rewarding, meeting many (successful) people while making some spending money – flat rate \$2.75 was for singles, \$5.50 for doubles, and hopefully a generous tip. I didn't attempt doubles for the first couple summers; one leather bag was enough! I learned to avoid the few members who were known to "flat-rate". I also learned how to pitch pennies against the north wall of the men's locker room while waiting to get a loop. I enjoyed the banter among the players and caddies for rounds that typically were played in under four hours. I also learned some things about life, especially caddying for women on Wednesdays which was "ladies' day". The ladies would freely engage in girl talk oblivious to impressionable young bag-toters within earshot.

The practice tee wasn't used much back then, maybe just a couple full shots to warm up before the players headed to the first tee. Only a few of the better golfers would use the range to practice, using a caddie to "shag" for them. One of the regulars to practice full shots was head pro John Barnum. I'd dump the balls (new Haig Ultras) from his shag bag on the practice tee and run out to the range while he hit. He'd motion for where he wanted me to stand – and then aim at me! (I hope no one would do that today.) He was an excellent player, very accurate. I'd watch the ball coming at me, step to the side as it landed and try to catch it in his shag bag on one hop. If he hit a shot and I didn't see it in the air, I'd just start running because, like I said, he was very accurate.

One of my fond memories of those caddie days was a man by the name of Major. He was a long-time caddie at Blythefield, and also worked in the rack room when I caddied. If you were a good caddie, Major would make sure you got a good tipper for your loop. He was the only adult I recall who caddied. He was a big, strong man, not like us kids who had trouble with the heavy bags. On occasion if there weren't enough caddies (which would happen on weekdays during the school year), Major would be called into duty to caddie for an entire foursome. He put two bags on each shoulder and walked down the middle of the fairway, with players going to him for the club they needed.

Importantly, caddying introduced me to the game of golf. I looked forward to Mondays when caddies could play Blythefield. The course was closed for maintenance until noon, but caddies and club staff could play in the afternoon. I'd be there at noon and play until almost dark, sometimes two rounds or more. I'd usually end the day by playing the back nine up to no. 15 green. There was a two-track path from no. 15 to Rogue River Road. I'd use the path to walk back home, carrying my clubs.

Once I learned the golf course fairly well, I would sometimes roam around after my loop looking for golf balls. Not many could be found in the rough; it was not deep and by August was usually quite thin. The only irrigation then was a single row down the middle of the fairway and from tee to green. The best place to find golf balls was in the Rogue River, which was not very deep below no. 13 tee.

My caddie days ended while I was still in high school. I reached age 16, then found a job at a burger place called Kewpie's, just down the hill from Blythefield and across the Grand River bridge.

Several years later when I'd finished college and law school, Page and I moved back to Grand Rapids. One of my goals was to join Blythefield, which we did in the fall of 1977. Major was still the caddie master when I joined. He remembered me from my caddie days over a decade earlier. I'll never forget the smile on his face in the spring of 1978 when he saw me at

Blythefield, knowing that one of his boys had become a member.

Brent Rector

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p.s. I'll end with quotes from two famous golfers:

"Don't play too much golf. Two rounds a day are plenty." HARRY VARDON

"The older I get, the better I used to be." LEE TREVINO