

## ASSOCIATION

BY BOB LABBANCE

*In July of 1900 Ekwanok Country Club in Manchester became Vermont's first eighteen-hole golf course and the championship layout ushered in the second era of Vermont golf.*

*Tomato cans in a pasture had given way to modern green construction and maintenance, and a new standard of play. Encouraged by*

the success of the first five national championships sponsored by the fledgling United States Golf Association, thoughts turned to a state wide tournament and an organization to administer it here in Vermont.

In 1902 Ekwanok invited all twenty-one of Vermont's clubs to send their best golfers to the first Vermont Amateur. They also organized a meeting of seven key clubs and formed the Vermont Golf Association, one of the first such organizations in this country. The founding members were the Mount Anthony Club, Ekwanok, Dorset Field Club, Rutland Golf Club, Montpelier Country Club, and two courses that no longer exist, Waubanakee in Burlington and Old Pine of St. Johnsbury. Each club was allowed one member on the executive committee, and George B. Worthington of Mount Anthony was elected the first president.

For the past ninety-three years the Vermont Golf Association has provided a wealth of services and excitement to Vermont's golfers. Today there are fifty-five member clubs and nearly 10,000 member golfers who enjoy the fruits of this volunteer organization's labor. In the early years the VGA was little more than a local committee from the host club of that year's amateur

tournament; today's body has taken the responsibility for so many more programs for our state's golfers.

From handicapping to course ratings, scholarship programs to state days the VGA reaches golfers from Newport to Bennington from its modest offices in Rutland. Jim Bassett has been executive secretary for more than a decade. "I took over in the fall of 1983 and at that time my job was to oversee the tournaments. There was the Amateur, we didn't have a Mid-Am yet, and the Senior Amateur, Junior Stroke Play Championship and Father and Son were all one day events." Today there are three times as many tournament days, and fifty state days as well, in addition to course slope ratings, pace of play ratings, GHIN handicaps, scholarships, and scheduling. The job description reflects how much the organization itself has grown.

Despite the changes since its inception, the VGA has not enjoyed a smooth and steady progression from its founding. While there were twenty-one

clubs in Vermont at the turn of the century, not all of them stayed around long enough to join the organization. In fact, by the great golf boom of the 1920s the original seven members had been joined by only seven other clubs. The 1925 membership list showed the addition of the Barre Country Club and the Barre Golf Club, Barton, Brattleboro, Hour Glass of Windsor, Mountain View in Greensboro, and the Woodstock Country Club. In the second half of the decade new courses joined but others fell by the wayside. At one point even the Woodstock Country Club resigned.

The tradition of making the president of the host club for the amateur tournament the president of the

VGA led to an interesting situation in 1928. The tournament had been awarded to the brand new Burlington Country Club, but according to the minutes of the annual meeting, "In February 1928. Mr. James F. Dewey notified the members of the Executive Committee of the Association that he had been notified by the Burlington Country Club that their course was not in sufficiently good condition to justify them in holding the Championship there in 1928. The new 18-hole golf course of the Equinox Links Club at Manchester, Vt., was suggested for the 1928 Championship and submitted to the club for their approval, which was given unanimously, and Mrs. George Orvis, President of the



The Vermont Golf

Association logo,

prominent in the

Vermont golf

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Equinox Links Club was appointed President of the Vermont State Golf Association for 1928."

Mrs. Orvis was owner of the Equinox Hotel at the time, and since the hotel had paid Walter Travis to design the Equinox Golf Links, she was president of the golf club. This was a first, to have a woman as president of a men's golf association, but not the last for Mrs. Orvis. She would be returned as president in 1932 and 1936 when the Amateur was again played at Equinox.

As early as 1928 the VGA began appointing committees to study the establishment of a state-wide handicap system. Previously handicaps were established at each member club and it had become obvious that they did not travel well. Clearly a ten handicap player at Ekwanok was not a perfect match for a ten handicapper from Barton, and the state felt an equalizer was called for.

The VGA stepped in the middle of a very controversial situation and it took a few years to iron out the problems,

factors and rate purely on length, before the advent of the current Slope system. No matter what the system, there would always be grumbling about handicaps, so the VGA appointed a committee to review the scores every year and adjust the course ratings if needed.

In 1935 members of the VGA got together with representatives of Maine and New Hampshire's golf organizations and initiated a competition for the Rust Trophy. The Tri-State Classic was first played in 1935, and then suspended during the war years. The competition was dominated by New Hampshire, but Vermont often scrapped out a victory when the tourney was played on home turf. Such was the case at Ekwanok in 1939, and Burlington in 1952. Win or lose, the camaraderie that was established between the best ama-

ever waged in the history of the 33-year old tournament," Tom Pierce won with a par on the 40th hole, and would go on to win a total of seven Amateur titles. If it wasn't for the interruption of World War II he probably would have won more.

In 1937 the best amateur golfers in the northeast visited Ekwanok for the New England Amateur.

Johnny Levinson of Kennebunk, Maine made tournament history by being the first player to successfully defend his title. His opponent in the final was

Massachusetts star Eddie Lowery, who was best known as Francis Ouimet's caddy when Ouimet won the US Open twenty-four years before in 1913. After the tournament George McKee, the Handicap Committee Chairman wrote "I can report now that Vermont is on the map in golf after the successful tournament in Manchester last week. Vermont was the perfect host." It was further noted that "Golf in Vermont received considerable publicity, a total of 62,400 words being sent over the wire relative to the matches."

After the 1937 New England Amateur was played in Vermont the VGA came to a monumental decision at its annual meeting. "On motion it was voted that the VGA be on record and notify the USGA that stymies would not be played henceforth in the Vermont State Tournaments." The stymie would not be formally abolished by all of golf's governing bodies until 1951.

A Vermont Seniors Golf Association, consisting of thirty-one members was formed in 1938. Once again, the home of the new group was Ekwanok and there the annual championship would be played. An art critic for the New York Tribune, author of the literary gem; *Nine Holes of Golf*, and member at Ekwanok, Mr. Royal Cortissoz was elected the first president.

In the late 1930s the VGA was very concerned about a drop in participation. Secretary George McKee wrote the following memo. "Sunday baseball and week day baseball is still a serious threat to the popularity of golf, and with financial conditions of our clubs it is necessary that interested golfers do everything possible to stimulate the playing of golf. I cannot too strongly

In 1902 Ekwanok  
invited all  
twenty-one of  
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send their best  
golfers to the first  
Vermont Amateur.



The officers of the VGA.

but in 1931 a plan was adopted, modeled after a system used in Massachusetts. The criteria to rate each course was visionary, reflecting what would become the basis of the Slope system half a century later. Seven features, including playing distance not yardage, topography, condition of the green, slope of the green, width of the fairway, strength of prevailing wind, and the character, quantity and location of traps, bunkers and natural hazards were all factored in. Later on, the USGA would abandon many of these

teur players of northern New England led to life-long friendships and rivalries.

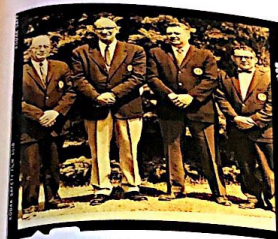
Vermonters also met the young man who would become the state's greatest champion in 1935. Tommy Pierce of Rutland was only sixteen when he shot 70, the lowest qualifying round recorded up until that time in the Vermont Amateur. Then after winding through days of match play, Pierce met Leslie Mercer in the final. Mercer was also sixteen when he won his first Amateur, but that was now fourteen years ago. Described by the Rutland Herald as "the most grueling and dramatic battles





Tommy Pierce after his second victory in the Vermont Amateur in 1938. He would go on to win seven times.

Jim Turnesa and champion Mike Turnesa. Burlington sports writer Walt Hickey described Turnesa as "one of the coolest golfers ever to swing a club on the Burlington course." Writing about the exciting conclusion to the tournament, Hickey wrote, "When the tenseness of the last few holes caught the crowd and finally Patroni, Turnesa was still as calm and as cool as if he was playing a practice round." Hickey also noted that "Mike took quite a bit of kidding from the other pros about deserting his



(L to R) Lee Davis, Treasurer, Kiki Price, President, John McDonough, Executive Secretary & Leonard Quintin, Secretary. Each served the VGA for decades.

One event that attracted a great deal of attention to Vermont golf was the inaugural Vermont Open, hosted by the Burlington Country Club in August of 1940. Several of the country's top professionals came to play including Dutch Harrison, Horton Smith, Tony Manero, Harry Nettleblatt, Bob Toski,

bride of a month to come up to Burlington and play."

There was a plan to make the \$1500 Vermont Open part of the PGA Tour, and Fred Corcoran, secretary of the PGA was being courted by host pro Charles MacAndrew. But the following year they were unable to agree on a date, and then World War II intervened. The Open was staged for three years starting in 1948, but then it lay dormant until Lake Morey Resort revived it in 1955. The full service resort has hosted the tournament ever since.

Vermont golf virtually shut down at the start of World War II. In 1942 President Leslie Pierce sent out a questionnaire to member clubs "most all of which were returned with the answer in the negative about holding the tournament this year." Citing tire and gas shortages on July 18, 1942, the VGA cancelled the Amateur, and it would not be played again until July of 1946.

Interest in golf began to build after the war, and then boom in the 1950s. In 1954 *Vermont Life* ran a seven-page review of Vermont's courses, penned by Floyd James, Secretary of the VGA. Mr. James would go on to serve the state association and play in the state Amateur for decades, and still gets out at Burlington Country Club at age 90 saying "I can hold up for nine pretty well."

In 1954 the VGA initiated the Tournament of Club Champions, an idea whose time should come again. All present or past club champions were eligible to enter, and the weekend event proved quite popular. Vermont golf had come back once again and by the end of the decade there were twenty-eight member clubs, caddy programs, new

course construction, an expanding list of events, and a safe place for golf in Vermont's recreational future. When the ski areas started building resort courses in the early 1960s, Vermont golf was ready to take the next evolutionary step and invite others to come and play.

Dr. Ed Simpson has seen the growth as a player at the Burlington Country Club and as an officer in both the VGA and the Vermont Seniors. He describes a noble undertaking of the state golf associations in the 1960s. "The thing that's close to my heart is the Vermont Golf Scholarship Fund. At a meeting at the Burlington Country Club in 1962 the Vermont Senior Golf Association set aside \$50 to go towards a permanent account. This account grew up in the Vermont seniors and we are still putting five, six, seven thousand dollars into the account every year. We gave away \$400 the first year to George Phinney, Jr., in 1994 we'll give close to \$32,000."

Ten new scholarships are awarded each year to deserving young men and women with good grades and an interest in golf. It will reward these college bound Vermonsters with \$800 per school year for four years. The account is also funded by a percentage of GHIN cards, tournament entry fees, plus the generosity of people like you.

Both Floyd James and Ed Simpson give each other much of the credit for nursing this fund from birth to its robust state, but Mr. James summed it up succinctly by saying "I think for a small state trying to raise money, the golf association has done pretty damn well. We've had some good people."

At the 1967 annual meeting "John McDonough spoke on new course ratings by yardage only. All clubs will receive new material. This will raise

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everyone's handicap." Not a good idea or a popular move, but the system would be in effect until the addition of Slope in the 1980s. When Slope arrived it was the VGA who went out and rated the courses, then went back multiple times to insure the standardization of the system without regard to weather, personalities of course raters, or other acts of God.

As the VGA watched the Sherman Hollow project be tortured by Vermont's regulatory process, and heard the state considering pesticide legislation that would be costly and detrimental to the golf industry, they

felt they must be able to speak on behalf of, and lobby for Vermont golfers. In 1987 they established the Golf Industry Committee. The positive effect on the golf atmosphere in Vermont has been staggering.

Elsewhere in this magazine we profile F. Ray Keyser who spearheaded this committee. A former Governor of Vermont, Keyser brought his legislative talents to Montpelier to spread the word about the economic and spiritual good golf was bringing to the state. Thankfully reason has prevailed and golf construction has broken free from a regression that lasted most of the 1980s.

A well researched booklet called *Golf in Vermont 1991* was also produced, and for the first time some valid data was made available. It was found that golf had at least a \$25 million a year impact on the state's economy, with perhaps a half million dollar per annum contribution to charity. The group has slowly spread the word that golf is enhancing the environment, the quality of life and the state's economy.

The VGA is in good hands in this positive period. Decades ago the procedure for picking the president was changed to an ascendancy through the other offices, and then a two-year term before service on the ex-officio board. Patrick Kennedy of Burlington is current president and represents the organization's long heritage well. Kennedy has been the unofficial historian for years, and as an author of two other books on golf patents he has been researching the history of the Vermont Amateur for eventual publication.

Probably the oddest finish to the Amateur that Kennedy will document occurred in 1971. Todd Plimpton of Crown Point and Bill Sebasky of Rutland were even up after the scheduled thirty-six hole final match. On the first playoff hole Plimpton nailed his drive down the middle, while Sebasky hooked one into the trees. After a search turned up his ball in a pile of leaves at the base of a tree, Sebasky played a remarkable recovery shot out into the fairway. As the crowd cheered, Premo Ratti, president of the VGA was informed of an unfortunate turn of events. "I hate to make this announcement," he told the large gallery, "but it has been discovered that Billy hit the wrong ball and automatically loses the hole. The match is over and Todd Plimpton is the champion." A return trip to the tree showed the correct ball still nestled in the weeds, while another ball had been launched back into play.

In the true spirit of the game Sebasky accepted his fate. "It's just one of those freaky things," he said, and then he turned to compliment the new champion. "You are one hell of a golfer. You never missed a shot all day."

The honorable tradition of golf is what the Vermont Golf Association is all about. For ninety-three years it has provided for Vermont's golfers while protecting and upholding the rules and codes of this venerable game. With the VGA at the helm, golf in the Green Mountains will sail smoothly into the next century. ●

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