

# Higher Recreation

IN RECENT YEARS THE RALPH MYHRE GOLF COURSE HAS  
BECOME A VALUABLE ATHLETIC ASSET TO MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE

BY BILL NOBLE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLIE BROWN PRODUCTIONS



INSET: THE EARLY GOLF HOUSE, CIRCA 1920S.  
BACKGROUND: THE CLUBHOUSE ALSO SERVES AS A  
BANQUET FACILITY FOR GROUPS OF 200.







**A**ROUND FOUR O'CLOCK ON AN EARLY fall afternoon when the football crowd at Middlebury College's Youngman Field is dispersing, you can stand in the concrete bleachers and feast on a panorama of outdoor exercise. Beyond the stadium are acres of playing lots devoted to soccer; along a wooded boundary are unmistakable signs of a cross-country ski track. Look farther east and you'll see the rolling terrain that marks the Ralph Myhre Golf Course, where the late afternoon sun is turning the land purple, green and amber. By now there's a chill in the air, but you'll still be able to spot golfers on almost every hole. After all, there's another hour of daylight left.

The Ralph Myhre Golf Course is unique, being the only college-owned golf course in Vermont. Even larger institutions such as the University of Vermont don't own a golf course, and while not owning a course probably won't hurt one's prestige (though you couldn't say the same in Texas or Florida), having a golf course has to be a plus.

"Not many students come here because of golf," explained Mike Schoenfeldt, Middlebury's Director of Admissions. "[They come] because we offer lifetime sports experience and excellence. Call the golf course a spoke, an important spoke, in our wheel of general excellence."

It has only been in the past 50 years that Middlebury College could boast that it owns a golf course. For an institution approaching its bicentennial (in the millennial year 2000), golf course ownership represents but a modest portion of its overall history. Yet in recent decades, the facility has become increasingly important to the college.

"What small colleges sell is excellence and tradition," Schoenfeldt said. "The golf course fits in because it's been here awhile, it hosts excellent events and it has established a tradition with these events." Two events in particular stand out: the Sheehan Classic and the Walter (Duke) Nelson Small College Championship.

The Sheehan Classic is hosted by Middlebury's Sheehan family and uses a captain-and-crew format, with Ladies Professional Golf Association star Patty Sheehan playing along with the teams. Bobo Sheehan, Patty's father, attended and coached at Middlebury College, and Middlebury is



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where Patty Sheehan grew up. Each year, in the week before the summer LPGA event at Stratton Mountain, Patty Sheehan comes to see her family, and the tournament takes place. Proceeds from the event benefit local charities.

The Small College Championship is named for former Middlebury golf, football and hockey coach Walter (Duke) Nelson, and it is contested in the fall each year. Golf teams from approximately twenty-five Division III Colleges in the eastern United States participate in 36-hole medal play, with the aggregate team score determining the winner. The tournament was conceived and first conducted during Duke Nelson's life, and throughout its formative years, Duke was an active supporter of the idea that young men should compete fiercely and fairly in a game he loved and played extremely well.

But tradition at the Ralph Myhre Golf Course doesn't stop with the naming of a couple of tournaments. As you walk the course, you'll notice solid wooden benches on most of the tees. Take a closer look and you'll see a bronze plate affixed to the back support of each bench. On the plate is etched a dedication—"In the memory of . . .," "Class of . . .," "Given by his friends . . ."—and you realize that Middlebury College's sense of tradition is now ingrained in a physical way. Missing is the name of Ralph Myhre. It doesn't appear on any bench, nor does it grace any tournament title; yet there are many reasons why

the golf course is named for him.

Ralph Myhre was the moving force behind the conception, creation and development of the current golf course. In 1950 the Middlebury course resembled a golfing layout in only the vaguest sense. Though nine holes had been laid out in the early 1930s, the course—which was not owned by Middlebury College at the time—was all but abandoned during World War II. In the late 1940s Middlebury College bought the land, mostly because it adjoined other land the college owned. At best, the college was ambivalent about keeping the golf course (local historians recount that players had to call to see whether the grass had been mowed recently before playing). Then along came Ralph Myhre, a local businessman, who also happened to be a fine golfer.

In the early 1950s Myhre came to work for Middlebury



College, first at the Snow Bowl (the college-owned ski area), then at the golf course. He managed both sites, and it was a 12-month job. Howard Kelton, Myhre's longtime assistant and, since 1979, the college's golf course and ski area manager, remembered what it was like in the 1950s. "When Ralph Myhre came, we had raw pasture here without many trees and with wide open terrain," Kelton said. "Ralph started defining the holes and planting trees."

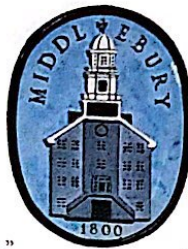
Few people really played the course in those days. Dud Phinney, Middlebury pro from 1952 to 1990, recounted that a big day was when twenty people would show. One year there were only two college student memberships sold, compared with more than 200 today. For a number of years, Myhre had only four people working for him on the course.

But by the 1960s, the golf course had developed a distinct character. It was still only nine holes, but most offered elevated tees or greens, and there was fairly regular fairway mowing. Ralph Myhre had become synonymous with the golf course, and both Middlebury College and the local high school began to play matches there.

"Ralph Myhre was a wonderful man," Howard Kelton recalled. "He was interested in people, and he had a unique ability to do things with as little as possible."

Kelton described how, when it came to replanting trees, Myhre would take a bulldozer, gently dig under the tree and push it onto the hood of a waiting automobile. The car would then race over to the hole prepared to receive the tree, and the transplant would be slid into place. "Ralph was a man dedicated to Middlebury College," Kelton said.

Golf in the Middlebury area goes back many years before Ralph Myhre arrived. In the 1890s a few holes were laid out behind the Heights, a lovely old home that is across the highway from the current football field and golf course. Sylvia Keiser, who now resides in the Heights, remembered her grandfather, Thad Chapman, speaking of playing golf on the property. And recently, a Middlebury College student doing research for a thesis affirmed that during the



1890s some golf was probably played informally in Middlebury "on a few holes laid out behind the Chapman place."

It was another quarter century before organized golf became a reality in Middlebury. The sport was growing in popularity throughout the country, and in 1921 a group of local citizens decided to form a golf club. A farm adjacent to and south of the Chapman land was selected, with enough room for nine holes. *The Middlebury Register* of November 11, 1921, tells why the choice was made: "The location was

chosen as it lends itself very naturally to golf and will require very little work and expense to put it into shape. It is also near the village and will be very accessible."

Rent was \$100 per year, and four of the holes were part of a sheep pasture, which meant little mowing was required because the sheep would perform the task. There was one drawback, however: the sheep couldn't distinguish between fairway and green. Undeterred, the founders erected barbed wire around the greens to keep the sheep away.

The course opened in May 1922, and within two years there was a small clubhouse and a resident pro. Dick Hubbard, now in his 80s, described the course back then. "It was quite popular at the time, mainly for the professional people in town—the doctors,

lawyers, bankers and such," he said. "They'd tee off at 6:00 a.m., then finish by 8:00 so they could all get to work."

Hubbard caddied there, and he remembered that the holes were short (some little more than 100 yards), with a few modest grass bunkers. "There were no water holes, either," he added.

Within a few years, the golfing membership had grown large enough that a new and longer golf course was sought. In 1927 or 1928 farm property was bought across the highway where the present golf course sits, and Tom Reilly, then pro at Rutland Country Club, was hired to lay out the holes. Here the course remained, essentially unchanged, until 1978, when the second set of nine holes was developed. The first hole began, as it does today, from the top



DUD PHINNEY (LEFT) WAS THE PRO FOR 38 YEARS, AND HOWARD KELTON HAS BEEN HARD AT WORK FOR THE CLUB SINCE THE 1950S.



of a hill, flowing toward the east and the Green Mountains just several miles away. Each of the other holes jumped to one side or the other of the first fairway, but all stayed east of the highway. This was the layout that greeted Ralph Myhre when he took over in the 1950s.

Twenty years later, it was time to think about expanding the golf course. The game was catching on with Middlebury College students, and the idea of an 18-hole course would add prestige to an already well-endowed outdoor recreation program. It would fit, as Admissions Director Schoenfeldt put it. "We're rich in outdoor experience, and all these activities started modestly," he said.

Ralph Myhre worked long and hard to get college approval, and in 1975 planning for a new nine holes finally began. He had been a member of the Vermont Golf Association for many years, and since the late 1960s he had been on the Junior Committee of the USGA. His credibility was high with college officials, and he was persuasive by nature. Myhre knew what he wanted, and he was single-minded about it. Yet there would be no high-priced golf architect here, no expensive group of "experts." It would be local talent working on this local project.

"We all had a part in planning the new nine," Howard Kelton recalled. "There were many nights at Ralph's house in the cellar discussing the new layout. We all learned together; there was a lot of reading and trial and error. We started with a backhoe, bulldozer, dump truck and some tractors and chain saws. We hired just two new people to help."

The course took three years to build, and in September 1978 it opened to rousing cheers. But it was a bittersweet triumph. After all those years of shepherding a cow pasture into what would become a fine test of golf, Ralph Myhre passed away from lung cancer four months later.

But his golf legacy continues. "The golf course has become a great tool for student recruitment and staff recruitment," Kelton said. "It enables us to have major tournaments, including the Vermont Amateur, Vermont Mid-Amateur [twice], Vermont Ladies Amateur [twice] and qualifying for the USGA Senior Amateur; as well as our



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At 6,379 yards from the blue tees (6,014 from the white tees and 5,309 from the red tees), with water, elevated tees, greens and occasional fairway bunkers, the course is a challenging test at par 71.

The Middlebury College connection remains crucial as well. Each year in September, alumni from across the country return for a weekend of golf in the annual Gordon Perine Invitational Alumni Golf Tournament (named for the longtime Middlebury Director of Development). It is the essence of how the college and the golf course work together, each providing a special niche that the other can fill.

The tournament began modestly almost 20 years ago but has grown tremendously in that time. "People are beating in the doors now," Kelton maintained. "Fifteen years ago we had to beg people to play, but in the last couple of years we're cutting it off at 120 players."

A cynic might say this is a subtle way to encourage alums to make contributions, and perhaps it is. But it's a lot more, too. According to Mike Schoenfeldt, it's a "friend-raising weekend," not a fund-raiser. "For many alumni, the Perine Tournament is the reason they come back to Middlebury each year, and it's an occasion for them to get together with friends and classmates," he said. "We think it's a major event for the golf course."

With 350 fully paid members and membership increasing from outside Middlebury, the future looks bright for the Ralph Myhre Golf Course. "Most days we're full from early morning to early afternoon, whether weekday or weekend," Kelton reported. "Every year our play goes up."

He let his gaze run out the wide first fairway, then turned and looked at the college buildings blending into high trees behind. "I'm pleased with the support we get from the college . . ." he said, his voice trailing off like a long, straight drive.

Looking down the lush fairway, one gets the idea that the feeling is mutual.