



The Golf Chronicles

The story of golf at Reading Country Club and in Berks County



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John Markel (right) and Bob Batdorff (left) at the 1950 Reading Open with George Stauffer of the Berks Golf Association. Reading Eagle photo.

The Remarkable Johnny Markel *Remembering One of Berks' Best*

In 1941, **Johnny Markel**, a high school senior, accomplished a feat that has not been matched. Representing Reading High, Markel won his third consecutive PIAA state golf championship. Several players have won two state titles, including **Arnold Palmer**, Latrobe (1946 and '47) and **Jay Sigel**, Lower Merion (1960, '61) but only Markel has won three.

Fact is, for about 70 years, John Markel was a big part of any discussion about golf in Berks County. He is among the greats of Berks' home-grown golfers. The list includes **Chip Lutz**, **Herman Fry**, **Betty Fehl-Fegley**, **John Guenther**, **Betsy King**, **Edith Quier**, **John Guenther** and **Cotton Hirneisen**.

John Markel, who died on February 1, 2016, at age 94, leaves a golfing legacy that most have either forgotten or never knew. It's time for a history lesson.

As impressive as is his list of bests, mosts and firsts, John Markel's life is best told in stories. He lived a life of respect for golf and those that played it.

Markel was born into the game. His father, **Harry**, started at Berkshire Country Club as assistant pro in 1922 was head professional from 1931 to 1966. The family lived on the golf course and it was there that Johnny developed the skills that would lead him to a stellar career in amateur and professional golf.

John joined the Berkshire staff in 1961 as assistant to his father and took over as head professional following Harry's retirement. John stayed until New Year's Eve 1986, when he retired at age 65. That is a remarkable run of 64 years with a Markel on the Berkshire staff.

Starting young. He made his mark at a young age. He first played in the state high school championship in 1938 as a ninth-grader at Northwest Junior High. He finished seventh with a score of 154. He came back as a sophomore in 1939 to win the first of three consecutive titles, shooting 149 for a four-stroke victory. Markel bettered his 1939 score by three in winning the 1940 championship at 146.

His third title, won in 1941, was the first to be played over 54 holes. Markel shot 71-70-72—213, for a one-stroke victory over **Charlie Heuer**, Cheltenham H.S. In third place at 221 was **Art Wall**, Honesdale H.S. Wall would go on to win 14 PGA tournaments including the 1959 Masters Tournament. Only four PIAA champions beat Markel's 213 between '42 and '67, which was the last 54-hole championship.

On June 30, 1938, he defeated **Billy Eban**, 4 and 2 at Reading Country Club, to win the Berks Junior Championship, his first title and one he would win three more times. Markel closed out the match with birdies on 15 and 16, using only six putts on his final seven holes.

Later that year, on September 5, Markel defeated **Lefty Faber**, 3 and 2, at Berkleigh Country Club for his first of seven Berks Amateur Championships. At 16, he remains the youngest champion and is the only player to hold the Junior and Amateur titles simultaneously. His seven Berks Am wins are surpassed only by **Chip Lutz** with nine.

Markel's Marks

- 117** Professional and amateur tournament wins in his six-decade career.
- 7** Berks County Amateur Championships: '38, '40, '41, '47, '53, '54, '60.
- 4** Career holes-in-one, all at Berkshire.
- 3** PIAA District 3 Championships: '39, '40, '41.
- 3** PIAA State Championships: '39, '40, '41.
- 3** Consecutive Berkshire CC Championships: '47, '48, '49. He also won in '52.
- 2** Philadelphia Junior Championships: '40, '41.
- 1** Philadelphia Amateur Championship: '49.
- 1** Philadelphia PGA Section Assistants Championship: '64.
- 1** Philadelphia PGA Section Senior Championship: '83.
- 1** Philadelphia Section PGA Super Senior Championship: '90.
- 1** Induction into the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame, Berks County Chapter, '85.



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Johnny Markel learned the game as a youth at Berkshire CC under the tutelage of his father, Harry, and Sandy Heron, Berkshire's head pro. This photo, published in the *Reading Eagle*, November 22, 1998, shows a 12-year-old Markel in 1932.

Under Lord Byron's Gaze. The 17-year-old Markel advanced to the final match in his Berks Am title defense in 1939, once again playing Faber. This time, Faber turned the tables on Markel, winning his only Berks Am 1-up at Reading CC. What's interesting about the 1939 match is that **Byron Nelson**, head golf professional at RCC, was the walking referee. Nelson was the reigning National Open champion, having won in June at Spring Mill outside of Philadelphia. A September 5 *Reading Eagle* article reports that Nelson led a sizeable gallery following the players. There is no indication that he was called upon to make any rulings.

Here are some other John Markel stories.

In 1941, he won the Berkshire Invitational, defeating **Jim Elliott** of Whitemarsh Valley CC. Elliot, famously known as Jumbo, went on to become the Villanova University and U.S. Olympic track coach.

In August 1944, Coastguardsman John Markel shot 73 to qualify for the amateur division in the All-American Open at Tam O'Shanter Golf Club in Chicago. Markel's first-round 71, one-under par, left him only one behind the leader, **Ken Heilmann** of St. Louis. His rounds of 71-80-79-82—312, were 18 strokes off the winning score of 295. The Chicagoland scrum had a strong Berks County connection with **Byron Nelson**, former Reading CC pro, winning the professional division with a 280, 8 strokes under par and five better than runner-up **Ed Dudley**. **Betty Hicks**, Long Beach, Cal., won the Women's Open division with a score of 318.

Beating the Pros. In the first round of the 1946 Philadelphia Inquirer Invitational at Llanerch Country Club (designed by **Alex Findlay**, who also designed Reading CC, opened in 1928) Markel shot a respectable even-par 70, five strokes behind the leader, **Mike Turses** of White Plains, N.Y. Among the professionals Markel bested that day were **Ben Hogan**, 73, and **Sam Snead** and **Lawson Little**, 76. Harry Markel shot 84. **Herman Barron** won the title, defeating **Law Worsham**, 70-73, in an 18-hole playoff.

Markel won the 1947 Berks Amateur by sinking a 25-foot putt on the final hole to defeat **Buddy Heckman**, 1-up, at Berkshire.

GAP Fame. He won the Golf Association of Philadelphia's Amateur Championship in 1946 by defeating **William Hyndman III**, Huntingdon Valley CC, 3 and 2 at Philadelphia Cricket Club. Hyndman is a member of the GAP hall of fame. In a *Reading Eagle* article published on November 22, 1998, Markel called the GAP amateur his "biggest career win." He reached the finals in 1949 but lost to teenager **Lincoln Roden III**, also of Huntingdon Valley.

Markel played in all five Reading Open golf championships. The PGA-sanctioned tournament enjoyed a five-year run starting in 1947 at Berkshire CC.

1947, Berkshire, 75-83-74-69—301, tied for 41st place, **Frank Stranahan** was low amateur at 282; **Dutch Harrison** won with 277.

1948, Berkshire, 291; **Frank Stranahan** repeated as low amateur at 281; **Ben Hogan** won with 269.

1949, Reading CC, 74-76-71-71—292, 38th place; **Robert Davis** was low amateur with 284; **Cary Middlecoff** won with 266.

1950, Berkshire, 74-75-77-75—301; he and **Bob Batdorff, Jr.** shared low amateur from 45th place (a playoff was to decide who would get the low-am trophy, but no report of the event was found); **Sam Snead** won with 268.

1951, Berkleigh, 80-77-77-78—312, 52nd place; **Buddy Lutz** of Reading was low amateur with 300; **Jim Turnesa** won with 280.



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Although he was a freshman at Northeast Junior High in 1938, Johnny Markel was about to begin his Reading High School golf career. This photo appeared in a season preview article in the Reading Eagle, April 10, 1938.

Going Low. In 1993, Markel tied the Berkshire course record of 64. He was 72 at the time. He shares the record with **Sandy Heron**, a Scotsman who was head professional at Berkshire when he shot 64 in 1930, and **Ben Hogan**, who accomplished the feat in the 1948 Reading Open.

The only thing better than reading about Johnny Markel is listening to him tell the stories. His interview for the Golf Association of Philadelphia's Legends of Golf series is available on YouTube. You can [go here](#) or go to YouTube and search "John Markel gap golf".

Scholastic Success

Berks County golfers won six PIAA state high school golf championship between 1939 and 1949. **John Wentzel**, Wilson H.S., won in 1942 following Johnny Markel's three consecutive titles. Wentzel began the third round four strokes off the lead. He shot a final-round 70 to win by four.

Following high school, Wentzel served 22 months in the service, mostly in Italy. On June 25, 1944, he was injured when fragments from a German shell penetrated his knee. He spent three month in hospital to recover. Upon his return to civilian life, Wentzel became the golf professional-operator at Manor Golf Club from 1946 to '49. As a youth, he learned the game at Manor and worked there as a caddy.

He left Manor in 1949 to become head professional at Colonial Country Club in Harrisburg. In 1952, he moved to Hershey Country Club as head professional, a position once held by **Ben Hogan**.

Tragic End. Wentzel won numerous professional and amateur tournaments, including the Berks Amateur in 1942 and the Pennsylvania State Open in 1955 and '56. He played in all five Reading Open golf tournaments. Wetzel died on September 19, 1956, as a result of injuries suffered in an automobile accident on September 10 while driving home from a golf tournament. He was 31.

Berks scholastic golfers closed out the '40s with back-to-back titles. **Jackie Wentzel**, John's brother, also from Wilson H.S., won in 1948, and **Rod Eaken**, Reading H.S., won in 1949. Jackie Wentzel won as a junior. The following year, Eaken, a junior, shot 227 to win by one stroke. Wentzel finished tied for third. In his 1950 title defense, Eaken finished third at 224, 13 strokes behind the winner, **Charles Strack** of York H.S.

Two other Berks Countians have won PIAA state high school golf championships: **Ron Reitz**, Conrad Weiser, 1959, and **Nate Menon**, Wyomissing, 2015.

Penn State Blue. There is a discrepancy in reports of par for the Penn State Blue Course on which Markel, the Wentzels and Eaken won their championships. Markel won in 1941 with a 54-hole total of 213, which was reported as 3 over par. This would indicate a par of 70. Johnny Wentzel shot a final round 70 to win in 1942, a score reported as one over par. Of course, the results of these tournaments could have been reported in error. A web search indicates that par is currently 72 and that the course has undergone significant changes over the years.

Par for the course is irrelevant; total score is the only number of significance. Chalk this up to another golf mystery.