



The Golf Chronicles

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



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This Game Called Golf – 1939 Style Rich Maiden Golf Club

April 11, 1996

Essence of Rich Maiden has always been family

The first time Jake Merkel played golf was in Detroit, about 70 years ago. His brother-in-law introduced him to the game and right from the start, he loved it.

Now, when most people fall in love with golf, they buy a set of clubs and one of those contraptions used to fish golf balls out of ponds. Merkel fell in love with the game and decided to build his own course.

In 1929, just as the Depression was taking hold.

Merkel, who owned the land, borrowed money from family members; used his father's farm equipment; and designed and built the course himself, with some help from golf equipment salesmen and golf course superintendents. The finished product, a nine-hole course in Kirbyville, opened in 1931.

This year, Rich Maiden Golf Course celebrates its 65th anniversary, starting Monday, with a season full of special events.

Rich Maiden is the second-oldest public course in Berks County, three years younger than the Manor. But unlike the Manor, which reorganized for a short time in January 1935 as a private club, Rich Maiden has always been a public course.

MIKE MCGOVERN



And it has always been a family matter.

After Merkel died of a stroke in 1950 at age 52, his wife, Verna, took over until her death in 1964. Their daughter, Betty Fabian, has been in charge ever since, continuing her father's hard work and keeping his memory alive.

"Oh, he was a hellraiser, to put it bluntly," said Fabian, describing her father and smiling at the recollection. "He had lots of guts and lots of laughs. He always enjoyed himself. He liked his beer; he liked to party, but he liked to work, too. He was very ambitious."

I should say. Deciding to build a golf course, with hardly any experience or background and with the economy in freefall, probably fell somewhere between courageous and crazy. Merkel considered the

reward worth the risk, but it wasn't without sacrifice.

"I can remember when I was a little girl, we didn't have much to eat," said Fabian. "Our meals were almost nil. I can remember eating pretzel soup several times a week. Lots of cheese and crackers. But he just worked and worked and worked."

When the course opened in '31, there was no charge for greens fees. Money didn't change hands until the following year, when it cost a grand total of 50 cents. Tournament entry fees in the early '30s ranged from 25 cents to a dollar.

The game has gotten a tad more expensive, wouldn't you say?

In 1947, Merkel opened the second nine holes and reconfigured the layout into the way it plays today. The 15th, 16th, 17th and 18th holes were part of the original nine.

The quarry hole, the par-3 12th that has swallowed many a Titleist over the years, had been the third hole, but in reverse. The tee used to be where the green is now. And the old green, says Fabian, was the largest in Berks County at the time.

These days, about 30,000 rounds a year are played at Rich



Leggett, Thomas. Fort and Co. Inc.

Rich Maiden's Betty Fabian stands in front of the course, which celebrates its 65th anniversary.

Maiden, a figure, said Fabian, that would shock her father. "I wonder what he'd think today if he could see all the golf courses around," she said. "He'd be really surprised."

And, Fabian allowed, he'd be "proud ... happily proud" of what she's accomplished during her tenure. She opened The Flowering Pot restaurant in 1977, where her son, Michael, is the chef, and there's also a boutique on the premises.

But it's the feel of the place

that is Fabian's biggest imprint. "It's very casual, that's me," she said. "I'm casual, earthy. I take after my father. I'm a hell-raiser, too. I like to have fun and I like my beer."

When Fabian took over the course following her mother's death, she really had no choice. She was forced into service, because she was family, an only child. But don't confuse duty with drudgery.

"Oh, I've enjoyed it," she said. "At times, I've thought of

selling it, but I'm just not ready. We've done pretty well here, especially with all the golf courses in competition.

"It's been a lot of work, but it's been fun."

Hard work and good fun. Betty Fabian has done her father's legacy proud.

Mike McGovern is the Eagle/Times sports columnist. To comment or offer suggestions, call Eagle Link at 376-6000, category 3010.

March 12, 1935

RICH MAIDEN GOLF COURSE IN DISPUTE

Lessee Asks Court For Restraining Order

Judge Schaeffer fixed Tuesday, March 19, at 10 a. m. for a hearing on the petition of the Rich Maiden Golf Course, Inc., and Jacob J. Merkel, of Fleetwood, a trustee of the company, to restrain J. A. Leon and Samuel H. Rothermel from interfering with the operation of the golf course in Maiden-creek township.

Attorney Allen K. Grim said the golf course was leased by Rothermel to Merkel, who then organized the Rich Maiden Golf Course, Inc.

Later Rothermel went into bankruptcy and the trustee sold the land to Leon. Since the sale of the land, Grim stated that Leon and Rothermel and their employes took possession of the golfing equipment, padlocked the buildings, and caused the plaintiff and his agents to be arrested for trespass.

Grim declared that the plaintiff has paid the rent for the land in accordance with the lease and is entitled to possession of the property.

No Disputing the Facts

In the article from 1996, Mike McGovern states that Jake Merkel owned the property when he built the Rich Maiden golf course in the early 1930s. Merkel leased the property in the 1930s, as the March 12, 1935, article reports and as is stated in the 1939 Rich Maiden profile on the first page. The Merkel-Fabian family may have owned the land at the time McGovern wrote his article.

October 7, 1935

DR. RAGER FIRST RICH MAIDEN CHAMP

Dr. S. E. Rager, of Kutztown, defeating Alex Fantilli, 3 and 2, over 36 holes, yesterday became the first champion at the Rich Maiden golf course. Kirbyville. Leading 1 up at the end of the first 18, Rager increased his margin at the end of 27 holes. Both had medals of 81 for the first 18 holes.

In the second flight, Lester Wells defeated Frank Pichini, 3 and 1, in an 18-hole match. E. Bernardo won the defeated eight final, trouncing H. Beidler, 2 up. P. Ori captured third flight honors, winning from J. Rutkowski, 2 up, while defeated eight prize went to Ted Wisner, who won from J. Miller, 2 and 1.

July 21, 1951

Plays 2,967 Courses

Rich-Maiden Golf Course, at Molltown, yesterday became the 2,967th layout on the globe-trotting golf marathon being played by Ralph A. Kennedy, New York pencil company representative. Kennedy toured the two-township course in 85.

Kennedy visited here in 1944 and played both the Berkshire and Reading Country Club links bringing his total to 2,240 at that time. In 41 years of golfing Kennedy has hit every state in the U. S. and every province in Canada and never plays the same course twice.

The near-70-year-old linksman is planning a trip to England and hopes while he is in the British Isles to make Scotland's famed St. Andrew's course his 3,000th layout.

July 4, 1938

Formal Flag-Raising On Rich-Maiden Links

An American flag, donated by Barney Fry, Kutztown, will be officially raised at a formal ceremony on the Rich-Maiden public golf course next Tuesday evening at 8 o'clock. Mr. Fry will be the speaker. The flag will be hoisted to a mast in a concrete emplacement erected between the ninth green and the clubhouse.

Following the ceremony, there will be a hoe-down on a platform to be built around the flag-pole. John Cook's clown band will furnish the music with the Highland Serenaders also entertaining. Red Moyer will call the figures for the dance.

A Record-Breaking Feat

The subject of this article from July 1951 will come alive in 2017 with the publication of *Golf's Iron Horse: The Astonishing, Record-Breaking Life of Ralph Kennedy*. The book, by John Sabine, is scheduled for release on February 7, 2017, (Skyhorse Publishing). The publishers blurb is as follows:

So many works of golfing history focus on the greats: the best players, the most prestigious championships, the hardest courses, and the like. But most avid golfers are average players, relishing in the joy of the sport itself. In *Golf's Lou Gehrig*, celebrated golf writer John Sabino chronicles the previously untold story of Ralph Kennedy, a golf amateur whose love of the game set him on par to play more courses than anyone before.

A founding member of Mamaroneck, New York's prestigious Winged Foot Golf Club, Kennedy had long been an avid golfer when he met Charles Leonard Fletcher in 1919. When the Englishman told Kennedy that he had played more than 240 courses in his lifetime, Kennedy took it as a challenge and became determined to play more.

August 19, 1988

Sally Starr golf benefit tees off at 9

The Sally Starr Celebrity Golf Tournament will be held today at the Rich Maiden Golf Course, Fleetwood R.D. 2.

The tournament will benefit the Bar-None Ranch, a Reading non-profit organization for battered and abused children. Funds are needed to acquire land and construct homes.

First tee off is at 9 a.m.; last tee off at 2 p.m. A registration fee of \$25 includes a catered buffet; the buffet alone is \$10. More than 100 prizes will be awarded throughout the day.

Starr, a television personality from the 1950s to the 1970s, will sign autographs and pose for photos.

The tournament is open to the public.

In a feat that caused the *New York Sun* to declare him "golf's Lou Gehrig" in 1935, Kennedy succeeded in beating Fletcher's record, and then some. He played golf on more than 3,165 different courses in all forty-eight states, nine Canadian provinces, and fourteen different countries during his forty-three year love affair with the game. In addition to the 3,165 unique courses he played, the unrelenting Ralph also played golf a total of 8,500 times over his lifetime, the equivalent of teeing it up every day for twenty-three straight years. Lou Gehrig's mere seventeen years in professional baseball pales in comparison.

According to *Firsts, Facts and Failures in the World of Golf*, by Ken Janke (John Wilen and Sons, 2007, page 137) Kennedy teed it up at St. Andrews, his 3,000th course, on September 17, 1951, just two months after his visit to Rich Maiden. Before an audience of townsfolk, golfers and news reporters, Kennedy split the first fairway with a belt of 180 yards.

Janke states that Kennedy played 3,035 different courses, each authenticated by a scorecard signed by the club professional. We'll have to wait a year for Sabino's book to find out how he arrived at a higher total. But once you pass 3,000 courses played, a difference of 130 or so doesn't much matter.