

FLUID DYNAMICS: GOLF, FLYING, AND PEOPLE



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In March, my Centurion and I flew five hundred miles south to the Sunshine State to participate in an eclectic golf championship in which the players used century-old golf clubs and old-style golf balls. I learned that golf and flying have a great deal in common: both are best on sunny days; both are time-consuming, require endless practice, have very fluid dynamics, and can be dismayingly expensive. Let's start with the flying. .

Southbound

Old N7591N and I fluttered into Orlando-Sanford International on a perfect spring morning. We enjoyed a swift GPS-direct ride from central North Carolina to Hilton Head Island at 11,000 feet. Turning south, I jumped onto Victor 1 which loops about twenty miles off-shore. I

returned to terra firma near Daytona Beach. The ride was smooth, the winds were light, and conditions were CAVU until the last fifty miles or so.

Orlando-Sanford has three runways and enjoys frequent airline service. I figured the guys flying the heavy metal would prefer the longest runway, which would be 9 Left, so I filed for 9 Right to keep out of their way. I dialed the approach on the Garmin. On schedule and as expected, I descended into a stratus layer with bases at 1,000 feet and tops about 5,000 feet. Absolutely nothing to worry about, but the controllers were jamming airplanes into whatever holes they could find in their airspace. After ATC requested "best forward speed," things got a little sketchy.

Tower decided they wanted me to use the longer runway, 9 Left, to avoid crossing the glideslope to 9 Left on my way to 9 Right. Quick-quick: what are the approaches for the longer runway? What is the initial approach fix? Where is the initial approach fix? My fingers were flying as I re-set the GPS and found the proper approach plate. It's a good thing I have a reliable autopilot.



Then the guy in front of me declared an emergency with some sort of landing gear problem. That's a big deal when your aluminum tube has 200 people cowering in the back. ATC reassigned me back to 9 Right. This was classic button-pushing: re-resetting the GPS and approach plates. "Extend your downwind," Tower ordered brusquely.

Mr. Landing Gear touched down successfully, hundreds of lungs gasping in simultaneous relief. Tower cancelled my clearance and pushed me back to 9 Right. More buttons, more maps. I flew a snappy ILS at 140 knots and broke out at about 1,000 feet, runway on my nose.

While we're on the subject of commercial airports: do you ever feel self-conscious when big jets are holding short as you cruise down the glideslope at 80 knots? Those ultra-pros are grading every bounce and jiggle as you keep your needles centered. They're burning more Jet-A in a minute than you'll burn during an entire flight, and there are literally hundreds of passengers wishing you would GET OUT OF MY WAY! No pressure, dude.

I made the first turn-off without burning up my brakes and headed to Millionaire, mission accomplished.

Above: Joey Piatek, a former Division III college golfer, examined antique clubs for sale at the "pairing party" where the golf matches were assigned randomly. Piatek went on to win the gold medal in the Braid division. **Below:** These "line cut" gutta percha golf balls show the wear-and-tear generated during the tournament. This damage causes the balls to be a less predictable in flight, adding an element of luck to the game.





Every tee box was equipped with a pail of damp sand, and the players needed good technique to build a small mound that would serve as their tee.

Hickory Golf

A minor passion of mine is playing an antique form of golf using century-old, hickory-shafted golf clubs and wearing fashions that even Bobby Jones would have found old-school. Hickory golf is a challenge because it is a deliberate choice “to make a hard game harder but a fun game funner,” according to John Crow Miller, a hickory golfer with a day job as a Dallas attorney.

But there is a sub-subset of hickory golfers who scoff at modern amenities. They play a more esoteric game using golf balls made of “gutta percha.” They use clubs made (or at least designed) before 1904 and they use rules that haven’t seen the light of day in a century. Put a few of these ideologues on an antique golf course and voilà you have the World Gutty Championship.

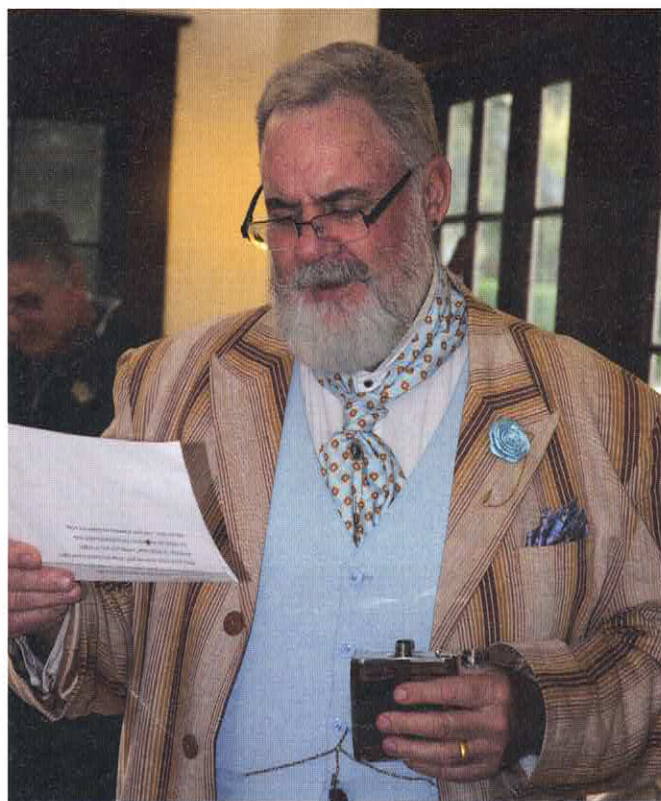
The match-play tournament was held over three days at Winter Park, Florida. That 9-hole, par-35 layout course dates back to 1914. Laid out in the shape of a “P,” the course is bisected by six city streets, a cemetery, and the local AMTRAK line. It stretches just over 2,000 yards for nine holes, and the primary defense of the greens are the treacherous bunkers.

The competition was organized by the dapper Bill Geisler with the assistance of his wife, Elizabeth, plus Julie and Scott Staudacher, Marcie Lykens, and a lanky newspaperman of uncertain years, Jim Davis, and officiated by the Society of Hickory Golfers (yes, Virginia, that’s a real organization).

Technology and Strategy

I enjoy hickory golf, which is just another reason why my almost-sainted wife has often questioned my mental health. But I didn’t realize so many others were so deeply afflicted.

“ Hickory golf makes a hard game harder but a fun game funner. ”
— John Crow Miller, Dallas



Top: From left to right: Gary Pomichter, Deal Hudson, master of ceremonies Bill Geisler, Frank Flood, and David Webster. Host and tournament organizer, dapper Bill Geisler welcomed each foursome to the first tee. **Inset:** Dressed for style, hickory poet laureate Greg Smith of Kentucky penned a charming rhyme to kick off the pairing party.

Golf is always about the ball. A hickory driver imposes a 15% distance penalty over modern clubs, and a gutta percha ball only goes about 75% of the distance of a modern ball. In combination, a long drive is only 150 yards. And it gets worse.

A gutty ball doesn't fly far because it is so light; a gutty ball actually will float in water. Instead of the dimples found on modern golf balls, a gutty ball may have pimples or are faceted with a hundred thin cuts, because the aerodynamics were not well understood. A gutty ball is also easily dented, which makes it wobble in flight. Gary Pomichter, one of the better players at the event, reported he's seen disfigured gutty balls circle backwards like a boomerang, and putting with a lop-sided ball is a heart-breaking challenge.

But the torment doesn't stop with the ball. Gutty golfers play with "long-nosed" woods and "smooth faced" irons, two technologies that became obsolete at the turn of the century — the last century. Most gutty players have only

“Modern clubs are all made to help you overcome your inadequacies.”

— Mike Stevens, Tampa

a few clubs — typically a driver, a mid-iron, a mashie, a niblick lofter, and a putter. Even tees are a thing of the future. Instead, golfers carefully balance their ball on a lump of damp sand.¹

Elfin John Crow Miller, the Dallas attorney, explains that the delight of the game is in the challenge it presents. “You’re handicapping yourself, twice over,” he said. “You’ve got a ball that is singularly ill-adapted for the game, and equipment that barely gets the job done.”

It turns out that golf was originally a ground game. When gutta percha was the best technology of the day, the object was to roll the ball while avoiding the bunkers. “Whatever the cost, stay out of bunkers,” Geisler warned me, because the sand wedge had not yet been invented.

Which gets us back to the shared science of golf and aviation. Inspired by a conversation with Howard Hughes about aerodynamics, Gene Sarazen invented the modern sand wedge in 1931. Sarazen hypothesized that if sand behaved like a fluid, a properly shaped golf club could act like a wing and “fly” through that fluid. Sarazen enlarged the base of his niblick to create the first sand wedge and promptly went on to win both the British and U.S. Opens in 1932.

I asked Mike Stevens, a retired Tampa pharmaceutical executive and a retired golf pro, why he thought fifty people would fly across the globe to play a game the world hasn’t seen since before World War I. He said it is the challenge of antique weapons combined with the strategy they require.

“Modern clubs are all made to help you overcome your inadequacies,” Stevens said. “I want the outcome based on my skill. With hickory, there’s no forgiveness. You need a good swing to play well.”

Lanky Joey Piatek of Indiana agrees the allure of hickory golf is in the strategy. “[Modern golf] is repetitive: hit over the trees, over the water, over the bunker, over everything. All the designer is asking you to do is hit it long and straight,” he said. “But hickory brings the thinking back because you can’t hit it as far. You can

play short of something, or go left, go right, try to avoid certain spots, play for angles. Hickory golf brings the focus back onto the strategy of the layout.”

A Stymied Finish

The tournament was a “match play” event with each golfer pitted against another player, earning points for winning individual holes. The field was bifurcated into two divisions with the better players in the “Braid” division while higher-scoring (worse) players challenged each other in the “Taylor” division. There was a practice round on Friday, three rounds were played Saturday, and two final matches were played Sunday morning. It was all walking, mostly carrying our bags. The ultimate championship within each division was decided by a highly entertaining playoff round on Sunday afternoon.

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¹ The first commercially successful wooden golf tee, the “Reddy Tee,” was invented in 1921.



Left: Deep, soft bunkers are the bane of gutty golfers. Here, Adam Raftshol makes a brilliant play out of the sand. **Right:** Three female players joined the field, dressed—as were most of the gentlemen—in period garb. Petite Rachel Weaver is a tremendous athlete and came within inches of victory in the Taylor division.

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After five grueling rounds, Joey Piatek and Frank Flood finished at the top of the Braid division while Scott Staudacher and Bill Andrews were the contenders for the third-place medal. On the ninth green, Piatek “stymied” Flood’s putt and carried home the gold medal.²

“They went toe-to-toe, all the way down, and finished on a stymie,” explained a delighted Geisler. “They took it down to the last putt on the last hole. That’s great golf!”

In the Taylor (higher handicap) division the top spots were captured by Rich Grula and Rachel Weaver. In their championship battle, Grula edged out Weaver while Bill Hamilton defeated Ross Snelling for the third-place trophy.

Getting Home

After the tournament, I dragged my weary butt back to Millionaire and preflighted. The afternoon weather was deteriorating across all of northern Florida, and I was

² A stymie is a rule from the 1800s and occurs when a ball rests on the putting green directly in the line of another player’s putt, obstructing that player’s path to the hole. Unlike modern golf, where players pick up their balls and mark the location, in gutty golf the obstructing ball is never moved, forcing the other player to putt around it or chip over it. This usually costs that player a stroke or more.



This screenshot shows 7591N flying through a canyon of clear air which separated two virulent storms over northern Florida on the return trip to Pinehurst. The weather across most of northern Florida gave both pilots and controllers a challenging day.

delayed by finding my Cessna buried among row after row of high-priced turbines. At least I felt like I was living in a good neighborhood.

Clearance Delivery offered an ominous warning: a marine layer was blowing in which would push the entire airport into low IFR conditions. Time to hustle. I jammed my clearance into the Garmin, received clearance to taxi, and was routed to 9 Left. Seeing the fog building behind me, I requested an intersection departure and lofted myself into the sky with minutes to spare.

The flight home was intense. Storms were building all across northern Florida, as they so often do. I waggled my way northeast, dodging the biggest build-ups. At one point, a slightly confused controller assigned me a “Q-route.” We chatted tersely about it — Q-routes are not depicted on low-altitude IFR charts—until I ended the conversation with a blunt “unable.” He found a T-route that he liked and within 45 minutes I was over the Atlantic, pounding northward on the well-loved Victor 1.

As the afternoon went on, the chatter between controllers and pilots became more frantic. Two regions of severe weather were building, a large one to my east but a more troublesome one to the west, smack dab over the Georgia-Florida border. Planes of all sizes were scurrying around that red and purple mess. By sheer luck, my route steered me comfortably between both storms. I flew in VMC comfort as my compatriots battled some very nasty weather. With just three hours in the cockpit, I wafted into the Pinehurst airport uneventfully.

Delightful Dynamics

It’s hard to say which is more fun: sinking a long putt with a wobbly golf ball, or landing gracefully after a complex

flight. Both are rewarding, both make me smile, and both empty my wallet. But there can be no doubt that these two worlds are tightly related: the dynamics of golf and flying are similar, and the dynamics of pilots and putters are equally entertaining. There are other similarities: both groups gather together to share their adventures, and there are louts and angels amongst both.

My father used to say, “In a week, nobody will remember who won the tournament, but everybody will remember who was the jerk.”

Attorney Crow Miller would agree with my pater. “Sportsmanship is an indelible feature of a golfer’s makeup,” he said. “You must make sure that after a tournament you don’t end up with the same number of friends, you have more of them. If you don’t have that, you’re not playing the game.”



Dr. Mike Jones is a 4,000-hour commercial-rated G.A. pilot who uses his plane for business, family, and fun, such as hickory golfing in Florida. This photo shows his hickory style on a recent golf trip to Ireland. You can always reach Jonesy at PilotMike2012@gmail.com. ✈