

September of My Years

In this exclusive for On Course, Paul Voykin looks back at his formative years and a legendary career that is still going strong.

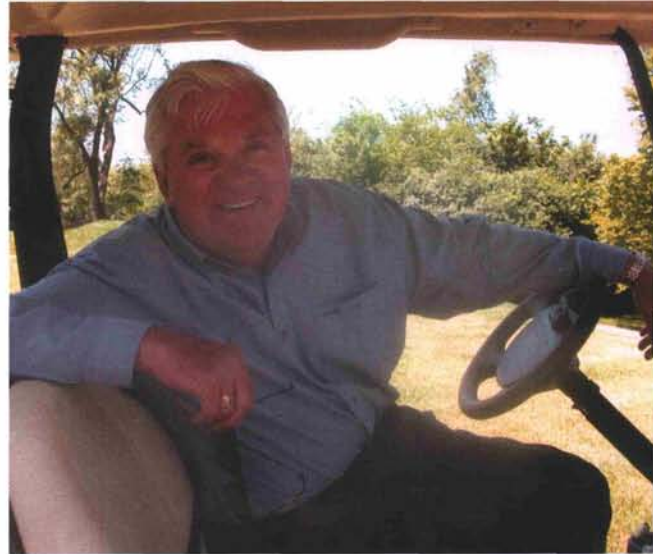
I was born in Saskatoon but spent my childhood in red pheasant Saskatchewan where my parents homesteaded. We lived in a prairie sod house nestled up against a hill. Often-



Paul in 1961.

times, geese and chickens pecked for food on top of our prairie-grass abode. I wonder if Dr. Randy Kane or Dr.

Jim Beard ever had students in their classes with this type of background. I don't think so! The Cree Indian reservation was less than two miles away. A few times we had the honor of being invited to visit and admire their ancient dances. My parents loved the great outdoors and worked hard to survive during the Great Depression. My father was a skilled hunter and a sharp-shooter, not with a repeater or automatic Hollywood artillery but a single-shot .22 and a single-shell shotgun. Prairie chickens, partridge, geese and ducks, goldeye, pickerel and sturgeon were some of the wild game that we feasted on. Sometimes we ate like kings and queens and sometime we only had lard and homemade bread to eat and milk diluted with water. My father made bridles, halters and harnesses for horses, and he traded with the Cree Indians as well as doing farming. My father was a good man but he drank a lot and we never had any money.



The author, June 2004.



Paul (R) with his son Dan and his late brother Peter at Newport Beach, CA in 2002.

After a few years, we moved to Langham then to Blaine Lake then back to Saskatoon. And here I must tell you a story. The Saskatchewan government, during the 1930s, paid a bounty of one cent per gopher tail. There were thousands of gophers digging up holes all over the province. I was 7 years old and Peter was 5, and we collected 100 gopher tails. We walked a mile to the rural mailbox and gave them to the kindly postman, who took the tails to the Blaine Lake officials and a week later he brought back a dollar—all dimes! We gave the money to our mom. I'll never forget the look on her face as she took the thin dimes from the grubby little hands of her two small sons. Of all the things I have done in my long life, that was the best thing I ever did!

My father joined the Canadian army when he was 41 years old. Dad was also a veteran of the first World War. By then I had two more brothers, Andy and Rodney. There is only me now. I believe Andy still has the record for the most touchdowns ever scored in one game for the Hilltops. Peter was a natural athlete and he shot in the 70s his second year in golf when he was only 16; he became a scratch golfer when we moved to Chicago. Rodney held the track record at Bedford Road Collegiate for many years; he was an artist and painted the centennial mural on the long walls of Bedford. As for me, I couldn't stand up on skates, miffed golf shots and got hit on the head by pucks, footballs and large hail. I am surprised I never got hit by lightning. Recently, I survived a

(continued on page 19)

tornado in Illinois and a 6.9 earthquake at the Seattle airport, coming home from a Canadian turf conference held in Vancouver in 2001.

In 1952, after seeing a work ad in *The Star Phoenix*, brother Peter and I traveled by CNR rail to Jasper Park, Alberta to work for the Canadian National Railroad. There was a famous golf course where “Pops” Brinkworth, the dean of western greenkeepers, was the pro and superintendent; “Pops” was our mentor and one of the finest men I have ever known. It was because of him and another man I will shortly mention that Peter and I got into the business. At Jasper, we met wonderful people from all over the world. Brother Peter was always asked to play with them. I would ask, “Mr. Brinkworth, what about me?” and “Pops” would say, “Go rake traps” on no. 5 (lots of bears and cougars there). The second year in Jasper, 1953, my all-time golf hero, Ben Hogan, came there to fish and relax after winning the British Open in Carnoustie, Scotland in July; he was still limping from his serious bus accident. The Scottish gallery called Ben “the wee iceman.” He never went back again to compete. He said it was too far away. Ben’s friend prevailed on this great athlete to play Jasper Golf Course and he did. By the way, he eagled the Jasper 13th hole, which is the only par 6 I have ever played.

Peter was made a foreman by then because he had experience working at the Saskatoon Golf and Country Club in the summer and playing junior hockey for the Humbolt Indians in the winter. At that time, the pro-superintendent at Saskatoon Golf and Country Club was Pat



Paul with the late Adolph Bertucci, some 35 years ago.

Flecher, who was the first Canadian pro to win the Canadian Championship at Point Grey Country Club. Pat’s picture, donated to the club by my brothers, Peter and Andrew, hangs in the clubhouse. Anyway, back to Ben Hogan. Peter told the crew that Mr. Brinkworth gave us—even me—permission to watch Ben play the nine (I was now promoted to cutting greens with a hand-mower). Shortly after the 18 holes were played, “Pops” Brinkworth took his Ben Hogan white cap off (back then we all wore Ben Hogan white caps) and humbly asked the great golfer, “Mr. Hogan, could you please say a few words to my lads, it’s their caddie banquet tonight at seven o’clock?” I think “Pops,” on purpose, turned on his Scottish brogue just a wee bit.

Hogan looked at “Pops” with a smile and said, “Yes, I will,” and was at the clubhouse promptly at seven. Ben spoke for one-half hour and one of the things he said, which I’ll never forget, was that, “Golf is the only business you don’t have to be a millionaire to live like one.” Without going into great detail, I can vouch for that. Wonderful things have happened to me because of golf. I’ve had a great run at 73; I started my 44th year at Briarwood Country Club this May 1. They won’t let me retire.

From Jasper, I went to the Henderson Lake Golf Club in Lethbridge, where I worked for a couple of years for Jeff Cook. I met my wife in Lethbridge and we had five beautiful children. Now she is back in Lethbridge.

The Cook Course at Prince Albert was named after Jeff’s father, Hubert Cook, who was pro and superintendent there for 41 years. Jeff Cook was a wonderful boss, and our crew at that time consisted of me, another man and Jeff’s wife, Phyllis, who cut rough for us a few days a week. She was probably the first lady in Alberta to work on the golf course, and she was good at it. We had nine grass and nine sand greens, which were converted to bent turf the second year. It was here I had my first great experience with wild grass, for reasons other than you might think. I blush as I tell you this true story. One day, as I was driving the old Jeep slowly toward 18 green to change the



At Medinah Country Club in 1972, Paul (L) and a past president of the CDGA look on as acclaimed architect Robert Trent Jones explains a hole diagram.

last pin, I saw in the tall grass a commotion caused by a woman on top of a man in a horizontal position, moving rapidly in lateral action, and definitely not aware I was watching them. I backed up the Jeep slowly and found Jeff just starting his lunch at the clubhouse. “Jeff, Jeff,” I said excitedly, “there is a man and woman and they are, you know, you know, doing it.” Jeff Cook looked up at me and without a smile said, “Paul, did you ask them if they had a golf pass?”

From Henderson Lake I went to Olympia Fields Country Club, a famous 36-hole facility near Chicago. “Pops” Brinkworth’s son, Gordon, was the superintendent, and Peter and I were made assistants, Peter on the North Course and me on the South Course. After three years, I became a superintendent at nearby Calumet Country Club; then, after four years, I moved to Briarwood Country Club in the rich North Shore area of Chicago, a few miles away from beautiful Lake Michigan. I have been there ever since.

In August of 1976, I gave a controversial talk in New York to the USGA. It was entitled “Overgrooming Is Overspending.” In essence, my presentation was simply that we superintendents should not overgroom the whole golf course so meticulously. Yes, concentrate even more on greens, fairways and tee management, but don’t carry out the ridiculous wall-to-wall manicuring and overgrooming to such a steep degree that we are pricing ourselves out of the golf course business.

Leave some pasture land for wild animals, birds and flowers. Make the

(continued on page 21)

golf game more challenging and enjoyable, the way it was meant to be by the founders and architects of this wonderful game; let's forego this present-day look of manicured, expensive, turf backyards clipped to an unnatural perfection. Whenever I have given that overgrooming talk to my fellow superintendents and others, or wrote about it, or was quoted in articles and magazines, the reaction by some was that I had lost my marbles. Most of the others didn't take me seriously. Some even wrote strongly against my "natural look" concept.

But then something happened: inflation! The high cost of maintaining country clubs drastically accelerated in the 1970s. Concern set in about the high cost of maintaining golf courses, and then my ideas of wildflowers and the natural look suddenly didn't sound so loony because it saved some money. Every bit helps! Now the elite golf course architects began shouting the virtues of the natural look whenever they broke expensive land for a new golf course.

Something else happened, also. People began to be deeply concerned about our ecology and environment. Scientists who had been warning us for years about old Mother Earth and the dangers facing her due to too much technology and poisonous emissions, began to be closely heeded. A little old lady from Texas began planting wildflowers along our highways and roads. Her name was Lady Bird Johnson. The natural look began to make sense.

Today, I am happy to say that hundreds of golf courses have set aside natural areas to prosper and spread. Many golf courses enhance these restful areas even more (such as I have) with beautiful native flowers and grasses. And of course, golf course architects continue to build courses with that "Scottish look." Landscape firms and seed companies are doing a good business providing the natural look to golf courses, parks, industries, schools, highways, mining sites and even homeowners.

The natural look has taken over in our landscape and not just spread

in forgotten old graveyards and railroad rights-of-way. It is now easier for all of us to follow the great Walter Hagen's advice to "be sure to stop and smell the flowers as you go by." I am glad to have had a part in providing this opportunity.



Wildflowers and native grasses framing areas of holes 9 and 10 at Briarwood Country Club illustrate Paul's belief that "overgrooming is overspending," a concept he first articulated 28 years ago. At the time, Paul's viewpoint was controversial; now, golf courses nationwide have embraced this school of thought.

And finally . . .

Perhaps the real reason a person wants to improve himself can be better explained by something I read 40 years ago in the *Wall Street Journal* under the heading "What is an executive?" I changed a few words to suit our

profession, and you can easily substitute "superintendent" for "executive."

"He is called by many names: The Boss, Top Management, Head Man, Chief or just plain Tom or Bill. Each day he lives with problems and every day he's on the lookout for solutions. A good executive is understanding, fair, a cajoler, coordinator, arbitrator, listener and decider. In addition he is efficient, hard-working, patient, impatient, aggressive and ambitious for himself and his golf club.

"His constant companions are work, too little time, budgets, inventory, ideas, materials and equipment, employee relations and club dollars. No one knows better than he the meaning of pressure. He is second-guessed, loved, appreciated, tolerated, respected, blamed, praised, understood, misunderstood, needling and needed, but never ignored.

"The executive knows the loneliness of management. For there comes a time for decision. Despite all the counsel from associates above and below, it is he who says yes or no. He can't afford to err in judgment. Whether it be selection of personnel or the kinds of materials or equipment he purchases, he is always responsible.

"The good executive is the voice for his club . . . both written and spoken. Thus, he is reader, student, speaker, moderator, writer . . . as well as the subject of a speech or article. He is the product of business and means business. What he does can produce a ripple or tidal wave of activity.

"For this he has learned . . . to get a better job, keep doing a better job. That's how executives are made."

Last of all, I would like to conclude by sharing a prayer that my late brother Peter left me prior to his passing.

*Lord, when my last putt
has dropped into the cup,
and the light of my last day has faded,
may I be able to turn into you,
a scorecard to show I did my best.*

