

The Last of the Western Open



Its time to say goodbye to another tradition. The Western Open, widely acknowledged as the oldest PGA golf championship is no more. Along with persimmon drivers and balata balls the Western has become a historical footnote.



Last July the Western Golf Association (WGA), appropriately headquartered in Golf, Illinois, successfully presented its 107th, and last, Western Open at the Cog Hill Golf and Country Club in Lemont, Illinois.

The PGA tour, in an effort to breathe new life into the world of televised golf, has axed the Western Open. Years of declining ratings and the lack of “notable” participation in its late season events motivated the tour honchos to attempt to heat things up with a point system and a late season series of tournaments patterned after NASCAR’s “Chase for the Nextel Cup.” Details of the points system and final series of tournaments leading up to the Tour Championship are better explained elsewhere. In fact, ask the guy in your shop who’s driving the pick-up with all the decals on it. Suffice it to say that in exchange for the Western Open, Chicago will share the third and final qualifier with St. Louis and Minneapolis, (Cardinals or Twins – pick your poison). The good news is that the new BMW Championship still “belongs” to the Western Golf Association. They will continue to run it and use the proceeds to underwrite the Evans Scholars Foundation. Sharing the tourney with other cities is no new thing either. Back in the day the Western was played all over the place before it settled in Chicago in 1962.

The list of Western champions is second to none, and, like Cher, they need no last names: Arnie, Sam, Jack, Byron, Walter, Bobby, Tiger and of course Chicago’s own Charles “Chick” Evans. In 1916, Chick Evans came into some money from recording golf instruction records (imagine getting golf tips by listening to a record). In order to protect his amateur standing he decided to use the money to establish a scholarship fund for deserving caddies. In 1929 the WGA agreed to administer the scholarship program and the Evans Scholars Foundation was born. The WGA really ran with this one and today over 8,000 deserving caddies have benefited from Evans scholarships. All of the proceeds from the Western Open Tournament go to underwrite the Evans Scholars Foundation. It remains the largest privately funded scholarship pro-

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gram in the nation.

The Western Open, inaugurated in 1899, was preceded only by the USGA's Men's Open Championship, first played in 1895. The tournament was well traveled in its early days, making stops around the Chicago area at many of the fabulous venues that make our area such a golf paradise. Then, just before and after the three year hiatus caused by WWII, the WGA decided to take the show on the road. The '40s and '50s were all over the place: east as far as New York, west to San Francisco, north to St. Paul and south to Houston. Except for that blip in New York, it truly was a Western Open.

Later the left coast appeared and made us Mid-western. The tournament rattled around until settling in the Chicago area again in 1962 at Medinah Country Club.

If we take a ride in Sherman and Mr. Peabody's Way-Back Machine we find ourselves in the middle of America's empire-building era. Golf was still a rich man's game, and golf professionals were viewed in much the same way as tradesmen. The WGA was established to protect the game in the wild, wild west, when getting from here to anywhere was a week-long rail journey. The Western was a chance for the local money to roll out the red carpet for the nation and welcome the eastern elite to the heartland.

The early years of Chicago area Western venues reads like a list from "Lavender and Old Lace:"

Glen View Club	1899
Midlothian CC	1901
Homewood CC	1906
Hinsdale GC	1907
Skokie CC	1909
Beverly CC	1910
Idlewild CC	1912
Glen Oak GC	1915
Westmoreland CC	1917
Olympia Fields CC	1920 -27 -33
Calumet CC	1924
North Shore CC	1928
Medinah CC	1939

The war years put things on hold and the event packed up and moved around until 1962 when it returned to Medinah. It was during

this time that the game began to attract a wider audience. Champions like Ben Hogan, Sam Snead, Chi Chi Rodriguez, and Arnold Palmer (of course) brought golf to the masses and public golf began its boom.

Medinah CC	1962 - 66
Beverly CC	1963 - 67
Tam O' Shanter	1964 - 65
Olympia Fields CC	1968 - 71
Sunset Ridge CC	1972
Midlothian CC	1973
Butler National CC	1974 - 1989

From 1974 through 1989 the WGA made Butler National CC, in Oakbrook, the permanent home of the Western Open. Everybody loved Butler National, but golf was no longer just a rich man's game. It had been co-opted by the middle class and with them came women and minorities - well. The PGA tour had had its scrapes with discrimination and had successfully dodged the bullet until the Shoal Creek episode in 1990. Shoal Creek was an exclusive all-white country club located in Birmingham, Alabama, and slated to host the PGA Championship that year. Anti-discrimination groups voiced protest, boycotts were threatened and two million dollars of sponsorship money was lost. Bowing to the pressure, Shoal Creek opened its membership to minorities (one black) and was able to host the PGA Championship. Butler National, on the other hand, wasn't going to let anyone tell them who they had to admit to their membership. Consequently, they told the PGA and WGA to buzz off.

Cog Hill Golf and CC	1990 - 2006
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For many years part of the allure of the Western Open was the requirement that the competitors use local caddies many of whom were recipients of scholarships from the Evans Scholars Foundation. The golf world crossed a line when contestants were allowed to bring their own caddies. The players had become bigger than

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the tournaments. The Western Open adapted to the growth of the game. The WGA managed to shepherd the event around the rocks and shoals. It remained an attractive stop for touring professionals who had by now become a bit more than tradesmen, unless you call counting money a trade. Symbolic of the evolution of the game the Western - I mean the Beatrice Western Open - no... Centel Western - no... Sprint - no ... Motorola - no ... Advil - no ... 100th Western Open Presented by Golf Digest - no ... Cialis - anyway, symbolic of the evolution of the game, the "fill in the blank" Western Open was being contested at a public golf course. The fabled Joe Jemsek brought the event to a place anyone with a greens fee (and a lot of balls) could play.

Over the years the Western Open developed a "big shoulders," working class kind of reputation that distinguished it from the run of the mill. Who can forget Lee Trevino being struck by lightning and laughing it off by vowing to carry a 1- iron

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for protection because “Even God can’t hit a 1-iron.”


Scott Verplank won in 1985 as an amateur, the last person to accomplish that feat in a PGA tour event.

1987 saw the area inundated with flooding and, then superintendent, Oscar Miles attained semi-celebrity status by bringing in the water hogs and helicopters to dry the golf course. He showed the world that we can roll up our sleeves and get the job done.

The 1997 Motorola Western Open was the site of Tiger Woods being catapulted onto the celebrity A-List when hundreds in the gallery broke through the ropes to escort him to the eighteenth green at Cog Hill to capture the championship.

Perhaps you noticed the extraordinary number of acronyms and corporate tags in this piece. Professional golf has joined the entertainment business. We see the Sox at U.S. Cellular Field and the Bulls or Blackhawks at the United Center. We all wear logos and watch

shows presented by... Heck, even instant replay has a sponsor’s tag line. If it can be sold it will be sold. I really don’t mean to pick sides here – change happens and if it means more people have access to the game and jobs are created, kids get a chance to go to college, green space is created and preserved in the name of golf then we need to embrace this evolution.

Maybe it’s best that we say goodbye to the Western Open now. It really never was the Advil Western or the Cialis Western — it was too old and distinguished to be tagged that way. Like your grandfather in baggies and a hoodie – it just never fit. Perhaps that, in itself, contributed to its demise. There was too much baggage to repackage. If so, then its best that it settle comfortably in history with a measure of its dignity intact. So long Western Open you had a good run. 

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