

Golf has inspired inventors who

'Pop' Erswell, a father of invention, pioneer in clubs and carts

By Vern Putney

The bottom (water) line of golf ball retrieval is big bucks.

An estimated 50 million errant shots fired around the United States sink into mud, but not to a watery grave.

Sophisticated machines, along with trained divers, rescue most of these misfired balls — to be sold, resold and played again, and again, and again.

In fact, a recycled ball may have up to 16 lives before fading away on the driving range.

And what about the course revenue of the past 40 years in golf carts, for those who like to walk and don't like the rental price?

What and where were the humble beginnings of these moneymakers?

The answers may be wrapped up in one man — Charles S. "Pop" Erswell, of Brunswick, Maine.

Erswell was known to have carried in his oversized bag as early as 1919 a wooden stick with an evaporated milk can nailed onto it. That crude but effective device was his retriever should a shot stray into a pond.

Erswell was more widely known for inventing the golf cart. In the early-to mid-1900s, 20 years before the 14-club rule went into effect, Erswell often jammed more than 20 clubs into his bag. Caddies gave him a wide berth.

Ex-boxer Erswell counter-punched. While the winter of 1916 held Maine in its icy grip, Pop stripped his son's bicycle, had an axle forged for the wheels, cut some half-inch water pipe for a frame and came up with the first caddie cart.

Erswell thought he might patent the contraption, but never got around to it.

When World War I hit and caddies vanished, some smart operator pushed the carts into mass production, sold them in gross lots for about \$20 apiece and cleaned up.



Pop Erswell, left, and Ernest Randall check a new wood in about 1935. In foreground is a refinement of Erswell's 1915 golf cart, with pockets for clubs.

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Lyman Beecher's revolutionary golf cart.

Photo courtesy of Peggy Shook and Biltmore Forest CC

Golf meant more than money to Beecher, Erswell

Lyman Beecher and Charles S. Erswell had in common a long, full life and a failure to patent golf cart and golf cart inventions that would have made them millionaires.

Beecher, who in 1935 reportedly invented a vehicle considered the forerunner of today's sleek player and club carriers, died in Clearwater, Fla., at age 102.

Erswell, said to have devised in 1916 the club carrier which transferred the bag from the player's shoulder to wheels for easier transport, died in 1968 at age 104.

Beecher's son, George, said his father hit upon the idea because his legs were giving out and he wanted to prolong his golf days.

His first effort at his home Biltmore Forest Country Club in Asheville, N.C., resembled a rickshaw and required two caddies to pull it.

Biltmore is very hilly, and caddies didn't care for the uphill haul. They finally balked at such "de-meaning" (and demanding) duty.

The electrical engineer next tried a gas-powered cart. This didn't work out because, even with a muffler, it was too noisy.

Finally, Beecher devised a homemade, three-wheeled cart powered by storage batteries.

George once told the Florida Times-Union, Jacksonville, Fla.: "He never patented the cart. He always

said he would rather play golf than get involved in the rigmarole of marketing the cart."

The car served Beecher well until one day in 1960, when he was in his mid-80s.

He was on the 9th hole, coming in to wait out a shower, and somehow ran the car into a sand trap.

The cart tipped over and Beecher broke his arm. His doctor advised him to quit golf, and he did. But he always was interested in the sport. He often said there was nothing he'd rather do than play golf.

When he moved to Florida some years later, Beecher brought along his cart. Somehow, it disappeared and, with it, a valuable bit of golf history.

Inventions help superintendents' jobs and improve golf course operations

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The royalties would have put Erswell on Easy Street, but might have lessened his inventive turn of mind.

Golf officials in the United States and abroad had good reason to remember "The Father of Maine Golf."

His pet peeve was the putting cup, only 4-3/4 inches in diameter. He attacked that tantalizing target for at least 75 years.

"How can they justify such a small area?" he railed. "Two shots to reach 400 yards or more, and two or three more strokes to get the ball in that little hole. A six-inch cup is much fairer."

Erswell managed to persuade several courses to install the larger cups, but tradition and withering glances from the Royal and Ancient Golf Club and U.S. Golf Association officials soon brought Erswell supporters back in line.

Erswell continued to torment the golf powers, though. Outlandish putters among his stock of 30 weird clubs were his bedeviling weapons.

The golf brass had gathered at Pinehurst, N.C., when Erswell unveiled a putter with the head shaped like a croquet mallet. Surprise gave way to well-bred indignation as Erswell calmly ran down a 20-footer by hitting the ball with a croquet stroke.

"I say," exclaimed Erswell's opponent, "are you quite sure they'd allow that monstrosity at St. Andrew's?"

"I wouldn't be certain about that," retorted Erswell, "but I do know the club is legal under USGA rules."

"Nevertheless, I believe I'll ask the Tournament Committee for a ruling," decided Erswell's adversary. To his amazement and the committee's chagrin, it was discovered that the wildcat Erswell club and the unorthodox Erswell stroke were well within the regulations. Pop went on to easily defeat a thoroughly demoralized opponent.

One by one, the implacable Rules Committee caught up with Erswell's clubs. Finally, he was forced to adopt the ordinary woods and irons. Still, he rang in a bronze head reversible club on which the weight could be changed from bottom to top, a ball joint putter adjustable to any position, a lofting putter and a brass Schenectady gadget that was introduced in the spring of 1903 and declared illegal that fall.

The furor raged anew the next day, when Erswell lined up a five-footer, then chose for the shot a putter that looked like an oversized billiard cue.

Bridging his left hand exactly as though he were trying for the eight-ball in a side pocket, Erswell sank the putt. His opponent swooned.

Erswell had gone too far. The committee granted that the regulations did not clearly define the shape of a putter's blade, and admitted that the croquet and billiard strokes were accomplished in one "continuous stroking motion," as demanded by the rules.

"However," said the perspiring chairman as he wrestled with one of the greatest crises in the history of golf, "we are bound by certain traditions and customs and these, Mr. Erswell, you have violated."

"Therefore, you will desist from using these outlandish clubs and bizarre strokes in matches here."

Erswell recalled gleefully that Pinehurst was rocked to its staid foundations when the story got around. The next year the rules were clarified and he regretfully laid aside his mallet-headed and billiard-cue putters.

However, he pricked the rules makers in rapid succession with an accentuated goose-neck job, a concaved blade and a club whose face was undercut to impart overspin on the ball.

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He foresaw that good steel shafts would replace the hickory handles, and was the first to adopt them in Maine.

Erswell ground down the early stiff metal shafts at certain places to obtain more whip. Some of his test clubs became standard with the manufacturers.

ERSWELL'S BEGINNINGS

Erswell's introduction to golf came about 1897. He worked as a train dispatcher and telegrapher in Ohio and Wyoming, and played baseball during the summer.

While playing ball in Cheyenne, he saw a six-hole course not far from the ballfield, apparently laid out on a buffalo range. The ground was cupped and rough.

"I used to see men walking around and swinging sticks. Every once in a while there would be a puff of dirt and they would start walking again. We found out the men were hitting at a little ball. We ballplayers thought those guys were crazy. Most were Scotsmen and Englishmen."

Gov. George W. Baxter of Wyoming one day said: "Charlie, I should think you would try golf. You ought to be good at it."

Erswell's first attempt at the "gutta percha"

Handicapped golfer may have led to cart

Dr. J.W. Jervy was part patient, part guinea pig and all golfer in a 1914 tournament match at Sans Souci Country Club in Greenville, S.C., which may have given birth to the now-streamlined golf car.

Nowadays it would be called "The Great Caper."

The June 1914 issue of "The American Golfer" included a picture of Jervy in a cart similar to that used to transport baggage at railroad stations.

Wheeled in the push cart, he was able to play for the Caper's Cup against fellow scratch player John Milam. Immediately after the qualifying round, Jervy, who had qualified in the first flight, developed a serious lameness. John W. Arrington, another scratch player, suggested Jervy be wheeled around the course in order to play the match.

Jervy liked the idea. George W. Brunson joined Arrington in providing the push-cart "muscle."

While Jervy may have made history, he lost the match, 4 and 3.

ball was a whiff. Two or three more swings moved the ball only a few feet. Erswell quit on the second hole, mounted his bicycle and wheeled home.

The setback was temporary. Obtaining a leave of absence from the railroad, he moved to Denver, Colo., where he took lessons for three weeks from a Scottish pro.

Returning home, he practiced constantly, "pushing the pill" around so relentlessly that his baseball friends began calling him "Bug." The nickname stuck.

Two years later, in 1899, Erswell won the Wyoming state championship at medal play.

That was Erswell's golf career highlight until 1916, when he hooked up in a playoff with Poland Spring (Maine) Country Club's Arthur Fenn, believed the first American-born golf pro, for the Maine Open championship and the Maine State Golf Association's first medal.

Erswell triumphed in nine holes and long treasured that medal, which became a watch fob.

Although a maverick because he always was searching for a new and more effective way, Erswell recognized the need for order and organization.

With the help of Ernest A. "Di" Randall of Portland, he formed in 1903 the organization which 14 years later became the Maine State Golf Association.

Erswell promoted the first Maine Open Amateur championship tournament in 1902, and in 1904 started the Maine Resident title tourney for the Owen Moore Company trophy of which he obtained permanent possession.

He won the Open Amateur title in 1918 and the Resident title six times between 1905 and 1917.

Several times he was champion at Brunswick Golf Club and Portland Country Club.

A member of the U.S. Senior Golf Association, Erswell organized the Maine Seniors in 1930 and was the first official state Senior champion in 1933.

Erswell died Oct. 27, 1968, at age 104. A daughter, Margaret, of Brunswick, died Jan. 20, 1990. A grandson, George Erswell of South Harpswell, Maine, survives.

Lloyd's groomer means equal greens

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"You want approximately the same surface and speed on all 18 greens. And you don't want to have to fight grain. Our experience is that regular use of a grooming reel will help superintendents meet these goals."

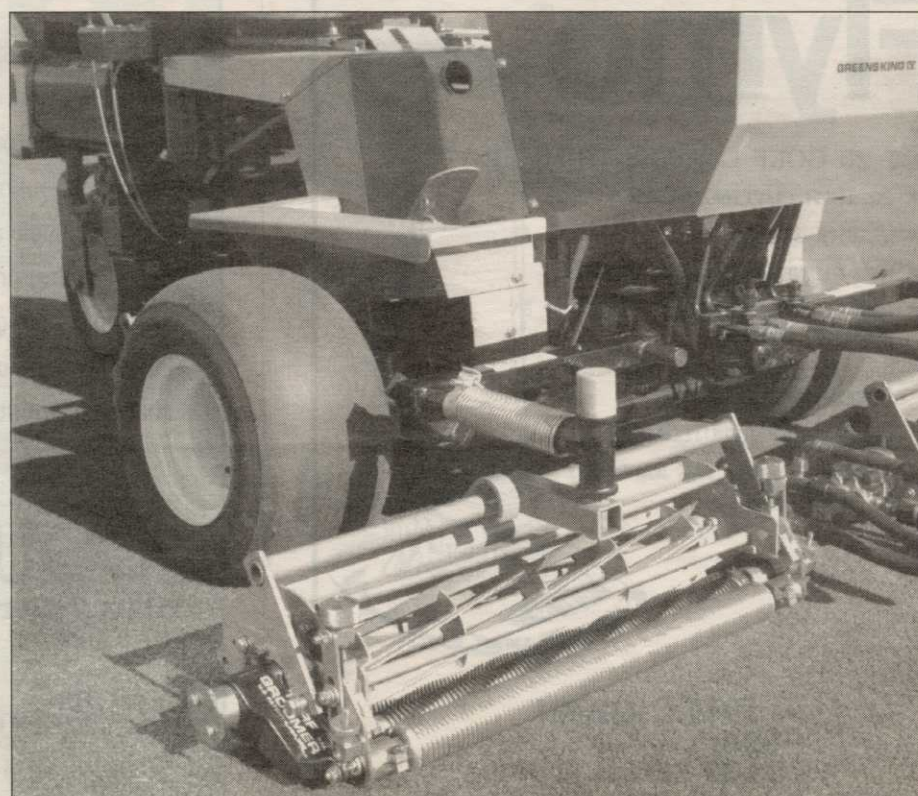
"It gets the grain out," said Carl Edmonson, superintendent at Arrowhead Country Club in Montgomery, Ala. "A verticutter just won't get it like the Groomer will."

Jack Barton, superintendent at Uniontown Country Club near Pittsburgh, Pa., is impressed with putting surface consistency. "With the groomer, I can get any speed out of the green I desire without double-cutting, and I can make the ball break at the same spot every time."

Some superintendents have gone from below a one-eighth-inch cut to 3/16th of an inch with no appreciable loss of speed. This gives them the desired uniformity and smoothness and more plants, more leaf surface and deeper roots for those plants to survive.

Lloyd's widow, Barbara, twice was Rancho Canada women's champion. She still scores in the low 80s.

Theirs was a warm love story. They met when Larry was 9, she 8. They were married when Barbara was "Sweet 16." Children are Rickie, Julie and Lauri.



Jacobsen has taken Lloyd's invention and run with it.

Photo courtesy of Jacobsen