



40 YEARS AGO

Where custom clubs are king

From the 1890's to the present day, Spalding has been in the forefront of this highly skilled and exacting craft.

By ROGER GANEM

In the craft of custom clubmaking, few companies can boast the wealth of experience of A. G. Spalding Bros. Back in the 1890's, the Chicopee, Mass. company brought over Scottish craftsmen who produced the first clubs made in America.

Spalding brought over the great Harry Vardon in 1900 for an exhibition tour of the nation's courses to promote the game and the company's new golf ball, the Vardon Flyer. The ball never got off the ground in sales, because the new rubber-cored ball was about to be unveiled. However, the tour was immensely successful. Vardon played against the best players in the U. S., and lost only one time. He capped this by capturing the U. S. Open

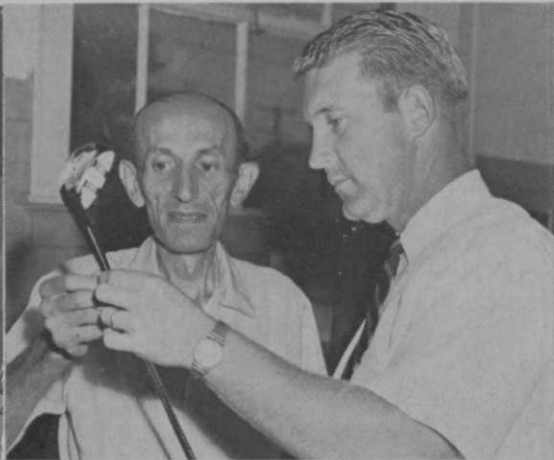
of that year with a score of 313.

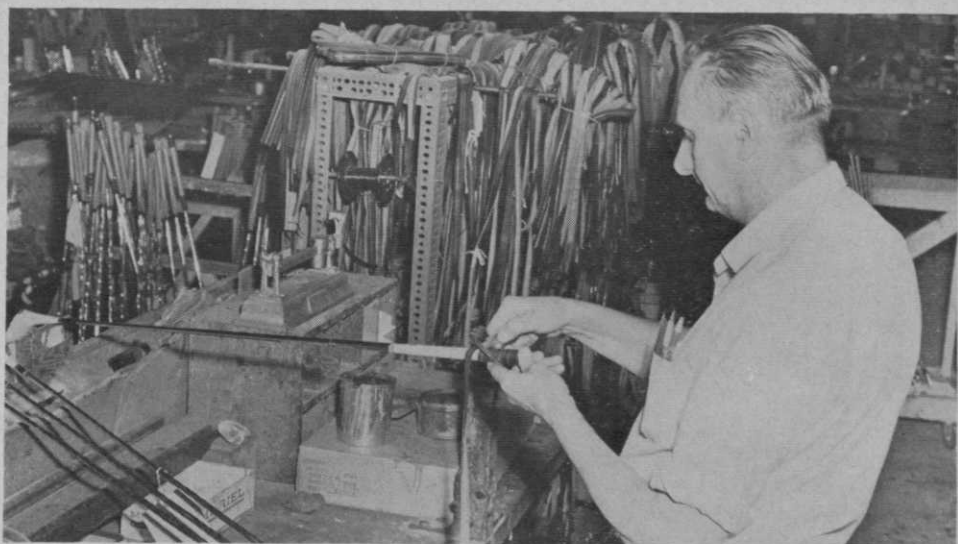
Besides this pioneering promotion, Spalding is also credited with being the first company to introduce a matched set of clubs, and the first to put numbers on iron heads, banishing such terms as cleek, mashie, and niblick to the almost-forgotten dust of golf history.

Spalding's custom-built service incorporates all the contributions of a consultant staff that included Bobby Jones and J. Victor East during the formative years of the '20s.

Now managing this vital function is John St. Clair, known as 'Mr. Spalding' to everyone on the Pro Tour. John joined the company in November of 1926, three

Mike Albano, who has been shaping wood heads at Spalding for 33 years, shapes driver for Al Geiberger, below left. At right, he confers with Dave Ragan.





Tony Dembski, John St. Clair's valued assistant for the last 37 years at the Chicopee, Mass. company is shown above gripping a set of woods.

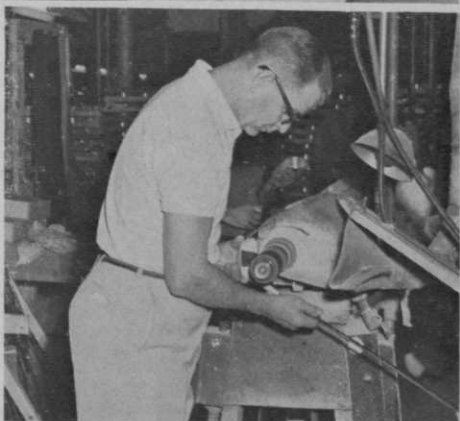
short months before GOLFDOM's birth in February of the following year.

At that time, steel shafts were beginning to appear on an experimental basis, but hickory shafts were still very much in use. Clubmaking consisted of fitting the hickory shafts to the heads produced from the professional's own dies.

The iron heads were forged by hand, and as meticulous as the old craftsmen were, no two heads from the same die matched exactly. On each iron blade, Spalding would stamp the individual pro's name, such as "made expressly for Al Watrous by J. Victor East." The old woods were also fashioned from the pro's own models, and the stamping of these blocks was a ticklish operation. So much stress was needed to make the necessary imprint on the head that often the finished product would crack!

Today's custom-built clubs at Spalding's are the result of close attention to details and closer teamwork on the part of St. Clair's staff whose combined experience totals some 150 years.

There is Mike Albano, who has been shaping the wood heads and making the



Clem Boutin, who puts the finishing touches to custom-made clubs, shown at work, above.

master models for 33 years. Incidentally, the driver he fashioned for PGA Champion Al Geiberger is considered a masterpiece. During the PGA presentation ceremonies on TV, Al publicly thanked all his Spalding friends. This department rightfully took a bow.

There is Tony Dembski, John's right arm and valued assistant for 37 years.; Bill Duncan, the expert who has forged the iron clubheads for a quarter century—Spalding, alone among club manufacturers, has its own forging plant; Clem Boutin, who puts the finishing touches to the clubs, and John's Gal Friday, Joyce Creitian, who handles all orders placed

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Al Geiberger, current PGA champ, and Spalding's John St. Clair, left, discuss desired features of irons.

U.S. CLUBMAKER

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by telephone. If any uncertainties remain at the time of the initial order, this capable team speedily makes them disappear.

Through their efforts Spalding's custom-made business has increased some 25 per cent each year and the 10,000 square feet devoted to this service is proving too limited. Soon, this company within a company will be expanded.

When it comes to ordering custom-built clubs, the professional needs to know: 1. Who among his members really needs these special-order clubs. 2. How much will these clubs cost. 3. How does one evaluate the golfer's needs and write up the order.

Not all your members, of course, need custom-built clubs. The majority can be fitted from the standard sets you carry. However, if your member is short or tall, exceptionally heavy or light, is short with long arms or tall with short arms, or in your opinion is just not playing up to his potential, then you have a good argument

for ordering custom-builts for him.

The cost of custom clubs is usually not any more than the price of a standard set, unless the order calls for special hand-forged iron heads or unique shapes to a wood or additional welding of metal to change the shape of the basic model of iron. The larger plants ordinarily fill special orders at regular pro-line prices, and are happy to do so.

Also, it won't take the better part of a year to get these clubs. You can figure on only three or four weeks in-process time, plus shipping time, before the clubs reach the hands of your customer.

When evaluating the golfer's needs, St. Clair points out, it's as well to remember "feel" should not be the absolute factor in the selection of woods and irons. A club may *feel* good but its components—such as grip, shaft and clubhead—may be in improper balance for the golfer's physical characteristics and for his personal requirements.

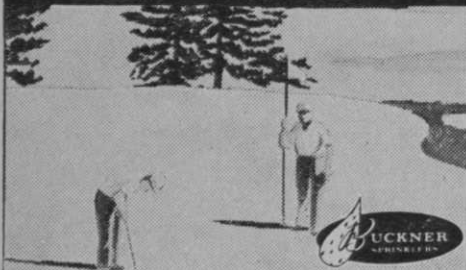
For example, a golfer might think that by adding weight to the back of the club through use of lead or lead tape he can get extra yardage. But he finds he has lost his accuracy. Why? He altered the location of the club's center of gravity.

The face bulge is shaped by the manufacturer so as to compensate for shots hit off center. At the moment the face of the club is in contact with the ball, it receives a backward impulse which is directly related to the center of gravity of the club. When the impulse is off the toe or heel, it sets up a rotating motion around the center of gravity. The compression is greater at the point of impact, so that it sets up a gearing action which throws the ball back into the intended line of flight.

If the weighting of the club is moved further from the impact area than the manufacturer planned, the ball does not get the automatic correction the face bulge

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CUSTOM CLUBS

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was designed to provide. In fact, a greater radius to the face bulge would be required to offset this tampering.

This does not mean that feel or opinion is non-existent in selecting clubs. It is just a warning to go a bit easy with it. It may well distort the final formula. "I believe in what Lord Kelvin said," St. Clair explains. "He pointed out that unless you can measure what you are speaking of and express it in numbers, your knowledge is meager and unsatisfactory. I like our customers to specify, *in numbers*, what they want. Then we can be sure to satisfy them."

Here is John's check-list of what to include when ordering custom-built clubs:

- Your customer's physical characteristics and personal requirements: Is he tall, short, heavy, thin; does he have long arms, short arms; is he young, middle-aged, or a senior?
- The type and speed of his swing: Is he a hitter who booms them a long way, or a swinger who rhythmically pops them down the middle?
- His shot-making skills or problems: Does he hook, slice, hit them high or low?
- The size of his hands, wrists, forearms and legs. Describe fully.
- Length of clubs now in use—swing-weight, grip size and preference of grip material: use as a reference the driver for all woods, the 2-iron for all irons.
- Total weight: not a factor—it is automatically arrived at.

Amplifying on some of these points, St. Clair observed: "As a guide in swing-weight selection, request the lightest swingweight your customer can possibly use without turning the blade over the ball.

"The ideal club will have the head in proper hitting position precisely at the instant the hands are in position. When the swingweight is too light, the head will

turn over the ball too early in the swing, producing a hook; when too heavy, the clubhead comes in too late and he'll either hook or slice. Selecting the lightest swingweight your customer can repeatedly use will enable him to be more accurate with less effort. He will also get the greatest clubhead speed, and therefore distance.

"I would like to see the home professionals furnish us with specifics when ordering custom-built clubs for his members. Using the technical data booklet Spalding gives to each, he should ask for grip size, shaft length, lie and loft *in numbers*." (The standard club specifications are obtainable from manufacturers.)

"Shaft deflection, the heart of the club, can be ordered by describing the member's swing. This is why we have to know whether he is a hard hitter or a swinger with a lesser clubhead speed. Also, an evaluation of his strength, size of hands, wrists, forearms and legs is important, because all have a direct bearing on the final specifications. Generally, the stiff shaft will give more control and the softer the shaft, the higher the ball will travel.

"Do not generalize on the size of the hands, and please don't send us an outline of your customer's fingers and ask us to give him the proper grip measurements. There's no way," says St. Clair, "that this method, by itself, can assure correct grip size. Some hands which might have the same over-all shape might more fleshy or leaner, and circumference of the grip will have to be changed to fit the inside diameter of the person's grasp.

"For instance, the standard men's grip at Spalding is .90" measured 2" down from the cap. This will fit a hand with a middle finger $3\frac{1}{4}$ " to $3\frac{1}{2}$ " long. At 6" down from the cap the grip measures .780". When ordering oversize or under-size grips, it's most important to send us the adjustment of the grip size from normal expressed in either fractions of an inch or decimals. A good rule for fitting the correct grip size to your custo-

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CUSTOM CLUBS

continued from preceding page

mer is that a good left hand grip will have the second and third fingers barely touching the palm.

"Another important measurement is the lie—the angle formed by the shaft and the sole of the clubhead. The lie is correct if the sole of the club sets almost flat to the ground at address, with just a bit of daylight under the toe, say about $\frac{1}{4}$ " to $\frac{1}{2}$ " worth. The toe should be raised this fraction to accommodate the heel-to-toe bend the shaft undergoes during the hit. If the club were to set precisely flat on the ground, the forward bend would cause the toe of the club to contact the ground first, ruining the shot.

"In arriving at the lie of our clubs," says St. Clair, "We measure the height of the hands when in the *bitting position*—when the left shoulder starts to come up and right shoulder goes down and through. When customers come to the

plant, we ask them to take at least six practice swings, stopping at the impact point, and then we determine the average from them.

"If his hands are higher or lower than our 32" measurement (from the center line of the shaft at the end cap straight down to the ground), this deviation will have to be corrected by a different shaft length. For example, for every $\frac{1}{2}$ " difference in hand height, there is corresponding one degree in angle of lie. A $32\frac{1}{2}$ " hand height measurement would call for a driver with a 56° lie, instead of the standard 55° .

"Do not give us the hand height as it is at address. On occasion this might be the same as during the hit, but it is not positive enough. Any resulting error in design can cause a person to change his natural or grooved swing, and the new clubs would be working against him."

One man who can perhaps more than any other bridge the gap between the era

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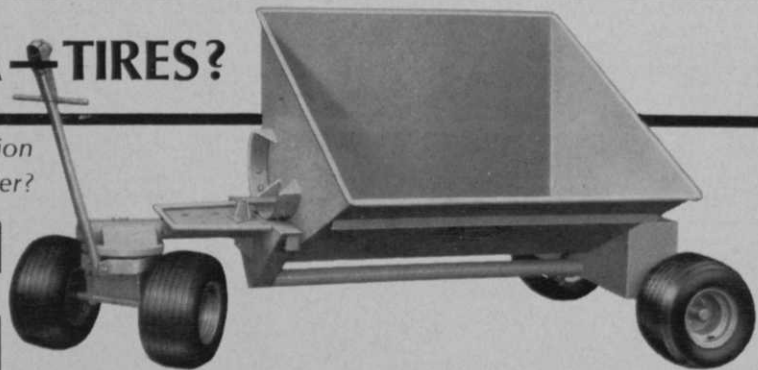
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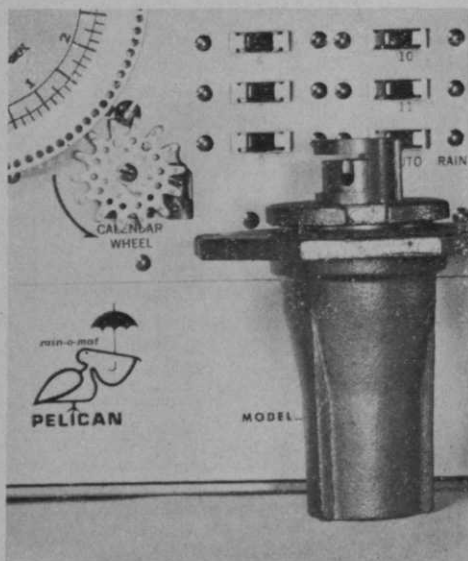
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Coming Events

Nebraska Turfgrass Conference, Nebraska Center for Continuing Education, Lincoln, Nebraska, January 11-13.

PGA National Golf Merchandise Show, Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., January 21-24.

Virginia Turfgrass Conference, Hotel John Marshall, Richmond, Virginia, January 24-25.

United States Golf Association, Green Section Conference, New York, Jan. 27.

International Turfgrass Conference & Show—GCSAA, Washington Hilton Hotel, Washington, D. C., February 5-10.

CMAA National Conference, Century Plaza Hotel, Los Angeles, Feb. 7-11.

Cornell Turfgrass Conference, Statler Hall, Cornell Univ., Ithaca, New York, February 20-23.

Maryland Sod Conference, Center of Adult Education, details later, March 2.

Midwest Regional Turf Conference Purdue University, Indiana, March 6-8.

Annual Michigan Turfgrass Conference, Kellogg Center, Michigan State University, March 15-16.

CUSTOM CLUBS

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of the hickory shafted custom club and today's beauties is Al Watrous, who was selected for the first Ryder Cup team in 1926 and today is head professional at Oakland Hills CC, Birmingham, Mich.

"I couldn't say enough in behalf of John St. Clair," Al says. "He checks out all my orders for repairs or custom clubs and channels them to his super staff. I agree with him about the need for personal evaluation, but I get my break by going to John in person, every year for the last twenty-five.

"To me, states Al, "if a person loves the game and gets pleasure out of playing, he becomes aware that there are some clubs especially suited to him. It then becomes a matter of reasonable research in finding them." •