

INTRODUCTION

The state of Iowa covers 56,272 square miles, ranking 26th nationally. Agriculture, Iowa's bread and butter, gobbles up a lot of those acres. Mention this state to anyone living outside its borders, and corn is an expected and well-worn stereotype.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. Waterloo's Jack Rule learned a lot about competitive golf by playing in one-day amateur tournaments that once dominated the Iowa golf scene.

"Some of those tournaments were generally down between the cornfields," Rule said. "You had to hit the ball straight. But the pressure was still there, and you still had to compete. And I think it was a big part of bringing my game along early."

Rule would go on to become one of Iowa's greatest players. His career highlights include two wins over Jack Nicklaus as a junior, two Iowa Amateur titles and a pair of victories on the PGA Tour.

In an upper-Midwest state where the game is an unplayable lie for several months each winter, Iowa has a surprising and bountiful golf history.

This is a state that ranks 30th in population, at a shade over 3 million people. According to the latest figures from the National Golf Foundation, Iowa ranks fourth nationally in golf holes per capita, with 11,771 residents per 18 holes. Iowa also has 254 nine-hole courses, the most of any state in the nation.

The sport got its start here in the late 1800s. The Iowa Golf Association was founded in 1900, when the first Iowa Amateur was contested at the Des Moines Golf and Country Club. Indiana, New Jersey and Utah are the only states that have conducted more state amateurs than Iowa.

The Iowa Women's Golf Association was founded in 1922, and played its first event at Sunnyside Country Club in Waterloo. Those organizations formed competitive tournament schedules annually, helping create wave after wave of outstanding players.

"Every weekend there were at least 15 or 20 tournaments you

could play in through the golf season,” Rule said.

Jerry Smith of Oskaloosa learned to play competitive golf in Iowa, too. Like Rule, he won an Iowa Amateur. When he landed at Baylor to play his final two seasons of college golf, he wasn’t intimidated. One reason is because of his experience in Iowa.

“I could see early on, when I got against a different group of players, that I was competitive against them,” Smith said. “I knew I had to get better, but that fueled me to work harder and harder.”

Smith, who went on to make a living on the PGA Tour and now the PGA Tour Champions, looks back fondly on his golfing days in Iowa.

“I’m impressed with the quality of golf here, and what players have been able to accomplish once they leave and test the waters around the country,” Smith said.

Iowa’s reputation has been enhanced by the kind of players Smith referred to, accomplishing great things on a national stage.

Like Zach Johnson of Cedar Rapids, who won major championships at two of golf’s holy grails – the 2007 Masters at Augusta National Golf Club and the 2015 British Open at St. Andrews.

Johnson also gained valuable experience playing in the Iowa Amateur four times. His first one came in 1994 at the Ottumwa Country Club, when he was listed as Zachary Johnson in the newspaper scores and tied for 29th. His best finish came in his final appearance, a tie for seventh in 1997 at Gates Park in Waterloo.

“Those experiences helped me and fueled me to want to work to get better,” Johnson said.

There was Jack Fleck of Davenport, a club pro who left his shops at Duck Creek and Credit Island, drove to the Olympic Club outside San Francisco and beat the great Ben Hogan in a playoff to win the 1955 U.S. Open.

Judy Kimball of Sioux City won the 1962 LPGA Championship at Stardust Country Club in Las Vegas, Nev., just four years after winning an Iowa Amateur.

Barb Thomas Whitehead also won on the LPGA Tour after dominating the Iowa scene.

“I just think it was the competition I was afforded through the Iowa Women’s Golf Association,” Whitehead said. “We had a lot

of good players in Iowa. It wasn't a cakewalk by any stretch of the imagination."

Mike McCoy of Des Moines has won more than anyone else inside the state's borders including six Iowa Amateurs. He's also won the U.S. Mid-Amateur, twice been low amateur at the U.S. Senior Open and represented his country at the Walker Cup.

"We're very lucky," McCoy said. "We've got a very good golf association, and a lot of great players have come through here. It's been terrific."

Iowa has also opened its arms to welcome most of the game's greatest players by hosting numerous elite events. That list includes a U.S. Amateur, a U.S. Senior Open, the Solheim Cup, the Western Open, the Women's Western Open (a major in 1956), the men's and women's Western Amateurs, the men's and women's Trans-Mississippi, and annual tour stops on the PGA Tour, LPGA Tour and PGA Tour Champions.

In addition to the majors mentioned earlier, Iowa-born players have won a U.S. Senior Amateur, U.S. Public Links, Western Amateur, Women's Western Amateur, Men's Trans-Mississippi, Women's Trans-Mississippi, Boys' Western Junior, 21 PGA Tour titles, five LPGA Tour titles and three PGA Tour Champions titles.

But the real pulse of golf in Iowa takes place at the grassroots level. Numerous golf courses in our state carry national reputations. Some of the game's greatest architects, an all-star list that includes Donald Ross, Perry Maxwell, Pete Dye, Rees Jones, Tom Fazio, Tom Bendelow and Arnold Palmer, have left their imprints on Iowa soil.

And the game is played just as passionately on the nine-hole courses that dot Iowa's landscape and serve as a source of civic pride. Many of them were built through loans from the U.S. Farmers Home Administration (FmHA).

From the Vardon Flyer to Pro V1s, from hickory to graphite, golf has taken us on quite a journey.

From Harry Vardon and Ted Ray coming to Sioux City for a match against Rudy Knepper in 1920 to Edith Estabrooks winning the 1935 Iowa Women's Amateur at 14 years of age.

There was Byron Nelson coming to Dubuque the day after winning the PGA Championship and losing an exhibition match in

Dubuque during his 11-tournament PGA victory streak in 1945. And reliving memories of Fleck over Hogan at the 1955 U.S. Open never get old.

From Art Bartlett of Ottumwa winning seven Iowa Amateur titles to Lucile Robinson dominating golf in Des Moines and Iowa and making her mark nationally.

From Ann Casey Johnstone's phenomenal accomplishments in 1958 to the amazing achievements of Iowa's other six-time Iowa Women's Amateur champion, Corkey Nydle.

Some notable stories continue to fly under the radar of the public eye.

There was Willie Dunn Jr., who won what was to be the first U.S. Open in 1894, only to have it erased from the books. He finished second to Horace Rawlins the following year, but wore that 1894 medal proudly for the rest of his life. He landed in Iowa later in life, giving lessons in Des Moines and other Iowa cities and designing the Algona Country Club in 1930.

Or Joseph Roseman, the head golf professional at the Des Moines Golf and Country Club from 1907 to 1916 whose inventions made him the "father of the modern mower."

When Bendelow designed the second version of the Des Moines Golf and Country Club in 1904, it was the longest course in the nation at the time at 6,827 yards. Bendelow admitted he had added length because the rubber-cored Haskell ball had just replaced the gutta percha. It's likely one of the first examples of a designer creating a course to keep up with technology.

Native Iowans have represented their nation and the state of Iowa in the Ryder Cup, the Curtis Cup, the Walker Cup and the Presidents Cup. Not a bad trifecta for a state of 3 million.

Golf has always been a great conversation piece, the source of stories that pass the test of time. Between the covers of this book, you'll read plenty of them.

For many years, no one told those stories like Bert McGrane of *The Des Moines Register*. He followed the trail of Iowa's greatest golfers, in both state and national events. He did it in an age when television wasn't a household staple and his descriptive words told the story.

McGrane was the voice of Iowa golf, and that's why you'll see a lot

of his work on the pages to come. He brought up the idea of Iowa of having a golf hall of fame in 1941. He was enshrined in the inaugural class of the Iowa Golf Hall of Fame 48 years later.

McGrane's job was to paint a picture of what he saw. And he often painted it with robust colors.

I especially love this description of Des Moines golfer Billy Cordingley during his qualifying round in the 1936 Western Amateur, on a sweltering day at Happy Hollow in Omaha:

“Four under par for the round, Cordingley paced the sweltering pack through a day of torture as the blazing Nebraska sun bombarded the countryside with shafts of fire. Out of the mocking blue overhead, with light clouds hanging tantalizingly on the rim of the sky, came waves of withering heat which fairly curled the leaves on the trees.”

I was fortunate to cover golf at *The Des Moines Register* for 33 years, taking over the reigns from another newspaper icon named Buck Turnbull.

My job took me to three Ryder Cups and dozens of Masters, U.S. Opens, U.S. Senior Opens and PGA Championships. Getting to walk courses like Augusta National, Oakmont, Medinah, Southern Hills, Oak Tree, Riviera and Hazeltine, soaking up their rich history at the same time, were pinch-me moments.

But covering Iowa championships were equally important, because I knew I had the tradition of McGrane and Turnbull to uphold. And there were plenty of great stories to be told.

Some moments stick with you, beyond the numbers you write on a scorecard or notes scribbled during a round.

I can still remember looking into John Jacobs's riveting, blue eyes during an interview. Or spending two hours with Arnold Palmer, riding around Tournament Club of Iowa in Polk City during a site inspection.

I cherish the moment I sat down with Mike McCoy at Augusta National, recounting his second round at the 2014 Masters. And interviewing Jack Fleck about the day he beat Ben Hogan.

There was the day I stood in the fairway at the K Club in Kildare, Ireland, watching Zach Johnson hit a do-or-die 3-wood over the River Liffey and onto the green at par-5 16th at the 2006 Ryder Cup. It was a career-changing shot, one that opened the door to major success.

There was nothing as entertaining as watching Barb Thomas Whitehead overpower a golf course, or experiencing Corkey Nydle's unsinkable spirit and grace.

I took great pleasure spending time with Sarge Fontanini, both at his home and on the golf course. What a wonderful, special man he was.

I don't mean these stories to be a self-serving legacy. I tell them as a way of acknowledging how lucky I've been to rub elbows with greatness, and how rewarding it was to be asked to write this book.

Jon Brown, another Iowa Golf Hall of Famer, met me over lunch a few years back to discuss an idea he had. He thought it was important that the story of Iowa's golf history be told.

The idea intrigued me, but the project never got off the ground because time constraints.

When Chad Pitts, the executive director of the Iowa Golf Association, approached me again in 2016 to talk about a possible book, I had left the newspaper business and dedicated 2018 to getting it done.

I thought I had a good grasp of the history of the sport in my native state. I was wrong.

I've learned so much during the research for this book. I hope you find the stories as interesting as I did. I probably missed an important thing or two along the way, but I can tell you the research and reporting were done with due diligence.

If you read this book, you probably have a deep and abiding love for the game of golf.

I worked at the Fort Dodge Country Club as a kid. There, I met an eternal optimist named Marion Joselyn.

Every day was sunny for Marion at the golf course, no matter how dire the weather forecast. On more than one rainy day, I can remember Marion sticking his head out the pro shop door, looking to the sky and reporting, "It's clearing in the west."

Golf is like that. No matter how bad things look, one good shot brings you back.

I talked to a lot of people in the reporting of this book. One day, during an interview with Sean McCarty, he spoke about his love for golf and competing.

“Golf is a challenge every day,” he told me. “It’s never easy. When you think you’ve got it figured out, it kicks your butt. And I absolutely love it.”

The story of Iowa golf is, in essence, a love story. I hope you enjoy it.

Rick Brown

Pleasant Hill, Iowa