

Hackbarth

Sons of German immigrants, the four Hackbarth brothers made their stake in the infancy of American golf.

By James (Breck) Speed

The Hackbarth brothers – Herman Carl, Otto Gustav, John Carl, and Al(fred) Frederick – did just about everything necessary to become successful golf professionals in the infancy of American golf. They were caddies, tournament players, and teaching club professionals. They played exhibition matches, were club makers, golf book writers, course designers, builders and superintendents, tournament directors, and club managers. They competed against and were honored contemporaries with the top professionals in the first half of the 20th century

The Hackbarths were of notably large physical stature for the era. Otto is reported to have been six feet two inches tall, was described as “herculean” and “gigantic,” and was an extraordinarily long hitter.

The crowds delight in Hackbarth's long, ringing shots, but he has more than ordinary power. Wearing a high, white collar that resembles a whitewashed fence around his big neck, Otto hits an iron shot as crisply as bacon turning in the pan and there are days he has few equals as a putter. – The Cincinnati Enquirer

Alfred was described as the “big, burly pro from Park Ridge.” He was a long hitter, supposedly regularly scoring an eagle on the extraordinarily long and unusual 635-yard par six hole at the Hinsdale Club.

Early life in Wisconsin

The Hackbarth boys were born in the 1880s to Carl Frederick Hackbarth and Henrietta Sylvester Hackbarth. Carl was 16 years older than Henrietta and it was his second marriage. Census records indicate Carl and Henrietta were born in Pommersfelden, Germany and were part of the large German Lutheran movement across the Atlantic in the latter half of the 1800s.

A farmer, Carl and Henrietta lived in Milwaukee County west of the City of Milwaukee near or in what would become the town of Oconomowoc, Wisc. The area was much valued for its lakes and natural beauty and soon



HENRIETTA HACKBARTH



EARLY CLUBS contain the mark of the four Hackbarth brothers. From top: Herman Carl, Otto Gustav, Alfred Frederick, and John Carl.

became a place where the successful people of Milwaukee and Chicago took their leisure including the playing of golf.

Carl passed away in 1893 leaving Henrietta with four young boys ages 10 and under to rear. Herman, the oldest, managed to make it through four years of high school but none of the other three boys made it past 8th grade. They surely were all keen to help their mother support the household and began caddying at the nearby Folsom Avenue Club, a short lived nine-hole layout. Folsom later merged with several other clubs, including the Milwaukee Club, The Grand View Company, and the Lac LaBelle Golf Club, to form the Oconomowoc Country Club. The newly combined clubs found new, more suitable ground, hired Donald Ross as the architect and reopened in 1917.

At some point the Hackbarths made a determination, against all available evidence at the time, that golf was a legitimate pathway to success. They began to travel to tournaments and undertook other golf-related assignments which, in the first few years following 1900, led them far afield from Oconomowoc.

Tournament play

The earliest press mentioning Herman and Otto Hackbarth concerned their entry into the Western Open of 1903, when Herman was 20 years old and Otto 17. Herman failed to tee off for some unknown reason but

Otto played and finished 14th. The *Chicago Tribune* took particular note of Otto because he was the “*first homebred player to finish and showed that good golf is not altogether dependent on ancestry.*” Speaking of American-born caddies who sought to become professional, the *Tribune* continued, “*Many of them display great promise, but as soon as they cease to carry clubs they come to a stop, as there is no place for them to keep in practice. Until an era of cheaper golf clubs is ushered in there does not appear to be much of a chance of the homebred player displacing the imported article.*”

The Hackbarth brothers soon proved the sports pundit wrong.

Herman has a fairly limited tournament record as he was soon hired in 1907 to a full-time position as the first golf professional at the Country Club of Little Rock, Ark. When time permitted he competed in regional tournaments. In 1909 he finished 18th in the Western Open, 10 strokes out of the lead and five places ahead of Otto. Six years later, in 1915, Herman was joined by Otto and John in the Western Open although none of the three played particularly well. Herman also played in the Southern Open Championship in Memphis, Tenn. in November 1911 with Otto. Otto placed 10th but Herman withdrew with a shoulder injury and bad cold. As a 58-year-old, Herman played in the 1941 Senior PGA Tournament at the Sarasota Bay Country Club in Florida and finished tied for third place.

Otto played the most frequently of the brothers in all types of events from golf’s majors to local tournaments. He had a genial air about him most times. And while his prodigious length with drivers and irons was a strength, putting was a noticeable weakness. His desultory putting may have been why he was so interested in putter design.

“Off the tee and through the fairway, Hackbarth had no master in this district. But on the greens he had a tendency to jab at his putts at times and when he is doing that his scores suffer materially.” – Cincinnati Enquirer

Otto played in 16 U.S. Opens from 1904 to 1932. His best finish was seventh in 1912 in Buffalo, N.Y. where he collected \$45 in prize money. He played in two PGA tournaments, finishing 16th in 1919 after being eliminated by “Long” Jim Barnes. The Western Open was his particular focus and he finished fourth in the tournament three different times. His best medal score in the Western Open was at the Mayfield Country Club at Cleveland, Ohio in 1919 when he averaged par. Otto won the Ohio Open (twice), the Queen City Open, the Cincinnati PGA, and the Chicago PGA. His one major win was the Senior PGA played in Tampa, Fla. in 1940 where he had to struggle through two 18-hole playoffs before overcoming Jock Hutchinson. He also took delight in telling people about the year “Johnny Fisher (one time national Amateur



OTTO HACKBARTH, in the inset of this newspaper feature, shot his best medal score, par, in the 1919 Western Open at Mayfield CC in Cleveland, Ohio.

Champion) and I won a best-ball pro-amateur tourney at Carmargo with a 59, a record which held for many years.”

Al Hackbarth teed it up in five U.S. Opens with a best finish of 11th in 1921 and winnings of \$60. His sole appearance at the PGA was in 1923 where he tied for 16th. He played in numerous Western Opens as well but never fully broke through to challenge the leaders.

John Hackbarth was quite active locally in club events but as a professional was more of a teacher and exhibition player. He only played one major tournament, the 1914 U.S. Open, where he finished deep in the pack at 44th.

Exhibition play

The more famous touring professionals in the first several decades of the 20th century sought to supplement their tournament winnings and product endorsements with exhibition golf gate money, often more lucrative than the potential winnings in tournaments themselves. Local golf pros were the usual opponents in such exhibitions, which helped increase the interest of local spectators.

Alfred appeared in a number of exhibitions while he was the pro at Park Ridge Country Club in Illinois. In 1919 he played with Ernestine Pearce, a semi-finalist in the Western Championship, against Chick Evans and Elaine Rosenthal, the Western Open Women’s Champion. Al and his partner were routed by their competition but raised \$4,500 for the Red Cross.



In 1921, Al teamed up with La Grange Country Club pro Jim Carberry to play Australians Joe Kirkwood and Victor East. “*The homebreds notched three birdies, each good for a win, so that at the terminal point they were 7*

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up on the Antipodeans.” (Chicago Tribune)

Jock Hutchinson and Al paired up to play Abe Mitchell (an Open Championship winner) and George Duncan, losing 4 and 2 in a 36-hole match in July 1922 at Park Ridge. Al later paired with Jock to defeat Britons Archie Compston and Aubrey Boomer prior to the U.S. Open in 1928.

John Hackbarth played in an exhibition against Joe Kirkwood in 1928. He paired with local pro Guy Martin of Madison, Wis., to compete against Kirkwood and Dorothy Page, winner of the Women’s Western Amateur Championship in 1926. Page and Kirkwood lost 2 and 1 in 18 holes. In 1934, John teamed with Karl Schlicht, the professional at Nakoma Country Club, to play Walter Hagen and Olin Dutra, the reigning U.S. Open Champion. The touring pros beat the locals 5 and 3 over 36 holes.

Golf club affiliations

Herman –

Country Club of Little Rock, 1907-56.



Herman was the luckiest of the brothers in finding a long-term base for his golfing career in Little Rock, Ark. Although that doesn’t mean his life as a professional was easy. As an early golfing pioneer in the Mid-South, “I was an engineer, designer, laborer, teacher, and club maker during the day, chief cook and bottle washer at night. I supervised serving meals, and after dinner I played the piano for dancing. After 15 years my duties were

limited to the pro shop, but I am still fairly proficient at the piano, as some of the pro seniors will testify.” – *Golfdom*, 1947

And if all that wasn’t enough to keep him busy, Herman developed and marketed a grip wax. “The Hackbarth compound supplies adhesiveness in any kind of weather and permits lighter gripping with firm control. It does not soil or injure the hands. It has leather preservative qualities. Price is moderate and pro discount is good.” – *Golfdom*, 1937

Otto –

Westwood Country Club, St. Louis, Mo., 1907-1911.
Alexandria Country Club, Alexandria, La., 1909-1911.
Hinsdale Golf Club, Clarendon, Ill., 1911-1917.
Cincinnati Country Club, 1917-1951.

Otto struggled to find his first job as a club professional and in 1905 sought reinstatement of his amateur status

from the United States Golf Association. He managed to secure seasonal work in 1907 as a teaching pro at the new Westwood Country Club in St. Louis, which formed to accommodate a Jewish membership. He supplemented the part-time work with an additional winter appointment at the Alexandria Golf Club in Alexandria, La.

“Mr. O. G. Hackbarth, the golf expert, arrived in the city last night to take charge of the Alexandria Golf Club for the coming season. He has been at the Westwood Golf Club at St. Louis during the summer season which is the leading golf club of St. Louis.” – *The Shreveport Times*, 1909

Eventually he moved on from those two clubs to a full-time job at Hinsdale Country Club in Illinois.

The Cincinnati Country Club appointment was quite a plum for Otto. The exclusive club was established in 1895 and the future president and chief justice of the United States Supreme Court, William Howard Taft, was the club’s first president. In addition to the prestige, Otto found ample time to continue his play in tournaments.

John –

Midlothian Country Club, Ill., 1914-16.

Skokie County Club, Glencoe, Ill., 1916-20

Barton Hills Country Club, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1920-23.

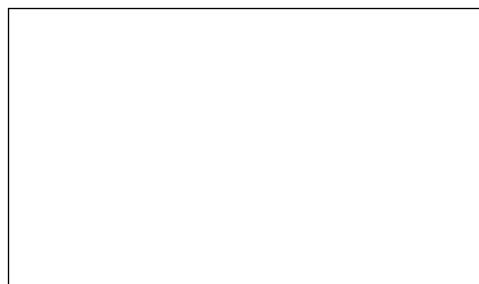
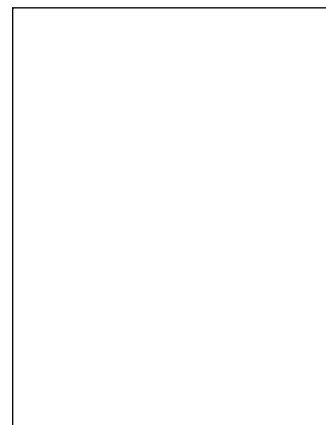
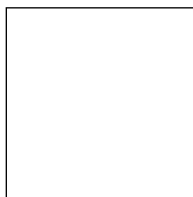
Blackhawk Country Club, Madison, Wis., 1923-35.

John followed Herman south to Arkansas in 1908 and found a teaching position at what is now known as the Fort Smith Country Club (a 9-hole municipal course opened in 1903, designed by Alex Findlay). The following season he moved to the newly opened Helena Country Club in eastern Arkansas before returning to Hinsdale, Ill. in 1910 where, speculating by his location, he likely shared accommodations with



brothers, Otto and Al. John was still looking for steady club work in 1913 when he advertised in *Golf* magazine offering his services. “I will visit any club, on approval, seeking the services of a golf expert. Strictly of good habits and morals. Unmarried. An eighteen hole course preferred.” He finally found his first head pro job at Midlothian in 1914 but bounced around somewhat until settling down at the relatively new Blackhawk Country Club in 1923.

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Like his brother Herman, John wore every hat at Blackhawk including planting the initial sand greens with grass. “I brought a small piece of turf up from Chicago in the spring of 1924. And got enough vegetative bent stolons from this one small piece to plant all the greens.”

Alfred –

Hinsdale Country Club, Clarendon, Ill., 1917-20
Park Ridge Country Club, 1920-35.

Alfred got a hand from Otto when at age 28 he followed his brother as the head professional at Hinsdale

in 1917. Alfred moved on to another local Chicago club, Park Ridge, by 1921 and remained there until the Great Depression caused Park Ridge to eliminate its professional staff. ¶

This review of the Hackbarth Brothers and their contributions to early American golf will conclude in the Spring 2020 edition of The Golf.

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The Hackbarth brothers and their impact on American golf

Author Breck Speed completes his look at this extraordinary foursome of brothers. The article continues from the Winter 2019 edition of The Golf.

By Breck Speed

Golf Club Affiliations (continued)

Alfred –

Alfred got a hand up from Otto when at age 28 he followed his brother as the head professional at Hinsdale in 1917. Al moved on to another local Chicago club, Park Ridge by 1921 and remained there until the Great Depression caused Park Ridge to do away with its professional staff.

Hinsdale Country Club, Clarendon, Illinois, 1917 – 1920
Park Ridge Country Club, 1920 – 1935.

Course Design and Construction

Herman was far and away the most prolific course designer of the brothers with 35 to 40 course designs or re-designs credited to him from his time in Arkansas. Credits include Fair Park Golf Course (now “War Memorial,” an 18-hole, par 64 layout); Pine Bluff Country Club, par 71, 1914; El Dorado Golf & Country Club, 1925; and Twin Lakes Golf Course, a 9-hole layout in Mountain Home, Ark., 1957.

When Herman arrived at the Country Club of Little Rock in 1907, there were just a handful of golf courses in the state and most were rather rudimentary. The Country Club course consisted of just six sand greens and the turf was rocky and thin. After a great deal of work, the course was expanded to 18 holes and steady progress in growing Bermuda grass made it a respectable layout.

In addition to being prolific as a designer, there are numerous references to Herman in golf media regarding best practices in growing Bermuda grass. He specialized in practical tips like how to judge the appropriate time to plant Bermuda. “Water coming from hydrants, which if when drawn has no decided chill, indicates the earth has warmed up to a certain extent.”

Or the best method of watering – “(It) should be done after sundown during the dry season – each green to be watered thoroughly every third night. A thorough watering at regular intervals is much better than watering slightly each night.” (*Golfdom* magazine, December 1929, page 22).



OTTO HACKBARTH is shown with other golf professionals in the 1919 *Spalding Golf Guide*. He is standing to the far right.

It is not fully known what Alfred’s role was in designing courses but in 1931 he was credited with a being the “Course Architect” of a private course for W. C. Grunow, the president of an early radio manufacturing company. (*The National Groundskeeper Magazine*, February 1931, page 37.) Albert also had some association with a Chicago company named “American Park Builders,” which was led by renowned golf architect Tom Bendelow. The Grunow course is currently a nine-hole course named “Country Club Estates Golf Course” of Lake Geneva, Wisc.

John’s record as a course architect is scant as well but he is credited by the club with designing and constructing the second nine at Blackhawk in the 1920s.

Club Making

Most golf memorabilia collectors today are familiar with the Hackbarth name in association with the putter Otto designed and began marketing in 1910 while in the employ of the Hinsdale Golf Club. An ad for the putter appeared in *The Golfers Magazine*, August 1910 (referenced in *The Clubmaker’s Art*, revised edition, V.1, by Jeff Ellis). The putter is stamped with a patent number issued in 1901 to Isaac Palmer, so the technology may have been licensed by Otto. The patent illustrated a method of stabilizing golf club heads by bifurcating the shaft and attaching the resulting two ends to the toe and heel of the club head. Its purpose was to eliminate the tendency of a putter to turn in a player’s hands.

“I won my first professional tournament at Westward Ho Golf Club,



Sept. 28, 1911. Forty players participated. I can truthfully say my putter won it.” – Advertisement placed by Otto in *Golf* magazine, fall of 1912, page 61).

Otto was successful in getting leading players of the day like the great amateur Chick Evans to use the club but his putter enjoyed less success than he surely was counting on because of a rule change by the R&A. Walter Travis won the British Amateur Championship in 1904 using a Schenectady Putter that was designed with a shaft attached to the center of an aluminum head. British golf pundits claimed Travis was successful only because of a technological advantage provided by the center-shafted putter.

Resentment grew over the next several of years until the R&A acted in 1910 to ban all clubs whose shafts were not attached to club heads solely at the heel. (Travis Society Website, <https://travissociety.com>)

The USGA adopted the same rule but interpreted the term “mallet headed” differently so the widely owned Schenectady and newer Hackbarth could continue to be used in the United States. (USGA Website, <https://usga.org>).

Although Otto’s putter was not banned in the United States, the resulting split in R&A and USGA rules eliminated the important United Kingdom market for Otto and he stopped marketing the putter after 1912.

Besides selling clubs of his design, Otto marketed clubs manufactured by other leading manufacturers with his name on them. Examples of Stewarts with stamped with “O G Hackbarth” can be found (photo at right, top).



At one time, Herman assembled hickory shafted clubs in his shop in Little Rock (sample shown at right). “He fashioned himself most of the hickory shafts he used, obtaining iron club heads from local manufacturers or from abroad.



A set consisted of a driver, brassie, spoon, four irons and a putter.” (*Golfdom* magazine 1947).

The anvil cleek mark suggests the club head was made by P.G. Mfg. Co. based in Homewood, Ill., and run by Robert White, whom Otto knew. P.G. was one of the first co-operatives in the golf business.

In the pyratone covered steel shaft era, Herman allied with Hillerich & Bradsby to market an H. C. Hackbarth-stamped club to golfers throughout the state of Arkansas. In the 1947 interview for *Golfdom*, he claims to be the first, in 1936, to design “an iron club with the currently popular heavy, convex sole.” It was named the “Streamlined” club

and was marketed by H&B under Hackbarth’s name and through H&B’s own “Power-Bilt” line.

Alfred didn’t design clubs to anyone’s current knowledge but like many professionals sold clubs to his members and other local golfers with his name stamped on them. Examples of full sets of “Al. Hackbarth” irons have been found which were manufactured by Spalding under the company’s Kro-Flite line.

Publications

John, shown at right, is the only Hackbarth brother known to have produced a writing of any type on golf. The hard-cover, 183-page *The Key to Better Golf* is quite an achievement by the third oldest Hackbarth, particularly if one considers his limited formal schooling. Self-published in 1929 while John worked at Blackhawk, *The Key* received many favorable notices in newspapers in late 1929. It is possible the wide coverage in newspapers was generated by a publicity campaign undertaken personally by John. The book reviewed for this article is inscribed in John’s beautiful handwriting to the owner and publisher of the Madison, Wisc., newspaper *The Capital Times*.



A few features of this instruction book are a little out of the ordinary. Along with standard technical advice regarding grip, stance and coordination of the mental and physical aspects of golf, John promotes the idea of instructors utilizing three mirrors. These mirrors were to be located to the front and rear of the golfer’s stance, to the backswing side, and protected with wire mesh. He believed visualizing the coordinated movements of a new golfer’s swing helped improve and standardize it.

Also notably different are the photographs used to illustrate the golf swing. Alongside plates of the “correct” swing (heel position, wrist position etc.) are plates showing the “incorrect” swing. In other words, half of the photographs in the book are images of bad golf technique!

Despite the unfortunate timing of releasing a book on the eve of the Great Depression, John seems to have done reasonably well with the publication. It is not terribly difficult to find a copy for purchase today and he certainly used the book to bolster his standing as a “golf expert” for many years to come.

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Final Years

Herman stayed at the Country Club of Little Rock for 49 years until retiring at age 73 in 1956. He continued to live in the Little Rock area until 1974 when he passed away at 91. Herman was part of the first class inducted into the Arkansas State Golf Association Hall of Fame in 1994.

Though younger than Herman, Otto retired from the Cincinnati Country Club at age 65 in 1951 “for health reasons.” Despite the alleged health concerns, Otto lived until 1967 when he reached the age of 81. The real reason for his decision to retire was probably to attend to his wife and mother. His wife, Nina, passed shortly after he retired, and his mother, who had come to live with her son in Cincinnati, passed away in 1952 age 98. The three of them are buried under a common headstone in Summit Corners, Wisc.

Otto built a home for his mother in Oconomowoc in 1922 and maintained ownership until his death in 1967. He wrote his own will – “*personally typing the will in the sun room of his home. He ordered he be buried in a wooden casket, and that he be lowered into the grave in a wooden box in which the casket will be shipped from Cincinnati to Oconomowoc. He further requested the head of the casket be clearly marked and he be buried facing east with special care that the casket be placed in the grave face up.*” (*The Times Recorder*, July 31, 1967, page 22). He left cash bequests to several relatives and friends but also mentioned some relatives to whom he left nothing saying, “they will understand.”

Otto was inducted into the Southern Ohio PGA Hall of



HERMAN HACKBARTH photographed in his Little Rock pro shop for *Golfdom* magazine in 1947.



OTTO HACKBARTH'S illustration in the Southern Ohio PGA Hall of Fame.

fame in 2004 (<http://www.thesouthernohiopga.com>) alongside golf legends Jack Nicklaus and Jim Flick.

John's employer, the Blackhawk Club, suffered setbacks in the 1930s and 40s as “the Great Depression seemed to hit everywhere and the second World War took many sons and daughters off to Europe and the Pacific.” (Blackhawk Country Club website, <https://www.blackhawkcc.org/>). The club was forced to sell and lease back its property from the Village of Shorewood Hills in 1932. John and his wife managed to hang on until 1935 but eventually left Blackhawk's employ. He marketed himself in various golf publications as available for hire but could not find any work. “Available in 1938. Twelve years service with Blackhawk, membership 300, as golf professional, greenskeeper and club manager.” (*Golfdom*, January 1938, page 44). At age 51, the 1940 Census finds him living in Milwaukee with a wife, three kids, and no income for the year. John was a survivor, though, and found “war work” until he retired in the late 1940s. (*Wisconsin State Journal*, Aug. 19, 1962, Page 37). Eventually John returned to golf, in Madison, Wisc., where he instructed at the Odana Hills Course from 1956 almost until his death in 1968 after a brief illness at age 78.

Alfred apparently was never able to generate quite enough income from golf to make it through the Great Depression. His last job in the golf profession was at Park Ridge Golf Club where he worked until 1934. The 1940 Census records his profession as “farmer” and he was living in Schaumburg, Ill., with a wife and four children. Al passed away in 1958, age 67, and is buried in Lancaster County, Pa., with his wife, Elizabeth.



Closing Observations

The story of the golfing Hackbarths is really a quintessential story of Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. “Homebred” sons of Lutheran emigrants, they made a life in America through dogged determination and the willingness to travel for opportunity. They understood how to work the media of the day and appeared regularly in newspapers as contestants, agronomists, and experts in golf instruction. They were innovators in everything from instruction to clubs to hand wax. And the Hackbarths helped each other. They lived together at times in their early years, networking for jobs, traveling together to competitions over several decades, and crediting each other in the media. Golf was their chosen profession but it is a fair wager the hard striving Hackbarths would have prospered in many other pursuits as well. ¶

Thanks to Bob Georgiade, Pete Georgiady, and Jeff Ellis for help with fact-checking.