



COLLECTOR SPOTLIGHT: GENE BOLDON

At one time, Gene Boldon's collection of golf clubs was perhaps among the largest ever assembled by a single individual. Two 8-by-40 foot racks lined his basement walls, displaying row upon row of irons and persimmon headed woods. The collection, which included such priceless clubs as the old Alan Lard patent perforated steel shaft, nicknamed "The Whistler" for the sound it made during a swing iron, astounded a Detroit News reporter who published a report on the collection in 1989.

Boldon, who lives in Canton, Mich., with his wife, Gaynelle, estimated he then had more than 17,000 clubs. As well as the Whistler, there was a Kroydon U5 brick face club and an older center-shafted putter. Some of the putters at the time were considered worth about \$2,000 or \$4,000, according to some estimates.

They are all gone now.

"I am 88 now and most of my valuable pieces are long gone," he says. He recently let go his last concave wedge. It wasn't easy. During his active collecting days, Boldon, like most of us, became attached to some of the rarer clubs. As he told the Detroit News, "Every time I go to a golf show and end up selling something, I'll come home sick over it and have to recover for a few days."

Boldon is one of the legendary members of the GCS, a tall man known for his booming deep voice, and his deep affection for his fellow members.

He grew up in west Detroit, the middle child of three brothers and two sisters. In 1945 Boldon entered the U.S. Air Force after high school, hoping to join the famous Tuskegee Airmen group and learn to pilot a P-51 Mustang. His 6-foot-5 frame, however, betrayed him.

"Back then," he said, "I could flex my knees to meet the 6-foot-2 entry requirement, but I have these long-a** legs and could not fold them up enough to get in the cockpit of that trainer."



PHOTO/JOHN FISCHER III

GENE BOLDON'S ready smile and friendly ways are a hallmark of the long-time GCS member and classic era club collector.

Though his dreams of piloting were grounded, Boldon took off as a ground attendant, serving with distinction until his honorable discharge four years later. He is justifiably proud of his association with one of the country's most decorated and historic fighter groups.

Following his service, Boldon completed a degree from Wayne University in 1954 and earned a varsity letter in basketball. He also earned a masters in guidance from the University of Michigan in 1963. During much of this time, Boldon was employed by Detroit Public Schools as a teacher/basketball coach. He took a fledgling program and won a state championship with Murray-Wright High School in 1968. For that effort, he was named public school coach of the year.

"That is one of my fondest memories," he says. "We took a new program and in only three years won the Public School League championship."

A few years later, he joined the staff at Oakland University as basketball/baseball/golf coach, assistant athletic director, and co-founder of the

Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference. Port Huron School District was the next stop, as director of athletics and basketball coach; then on to the U of M-Dearborn as director of athletics.

"I wore a lot hats there," he said.

Never one to sit still, following his retirement Boldon became the coordinator of adult-community education for the Ypsilanti School District, often working with foreign students trying to improve their English language skills.

Later, while traveling in Florida, Boldon met Shoso Hirota, a landscape architect from Japan, who had designed golf courses there and was interested in golf collecting and golf history. Hirota and an interpreter came to Michigan where Boldon took them around to various collectors, even to Mort Olman's shop in Cincinnati, in order to help Hirota secure items for a golf museum he was building in Hiroshima. Boldon later visited him there where the two were photographed for a news article, looking over an assortment of collectibles.

"Everywhere I have traveled – Asia, the United Emirates, Korea, the United Kingdom, Canada, Mexico, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand – I received the red carpet treatment as a golf collector," Boldon says. "Golf to me is a real connector all over this world."

He recalls a very beautiful golf course called the Windsor Golf and Country Club in, of all places, Kenya; and the greenkeeping done by women on a course in Indonesia – "they were scooting around on their hands and knees working with grass and flowers."

Boldon's collecting began with the gift of a set of left handed clubs from a friend. Intrigued, he began picking up almost anything related to golf. "I was just a golf junkie," he says. "I started collecting MacGregor woods and Staff

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Boldon shows off some of the clubs in the collection he started 37 years ago.

'GOLF JUNKIE'

Collector Boldon's 17,000 clubs are anything but par for the course.

By JUDSON BRANAM
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

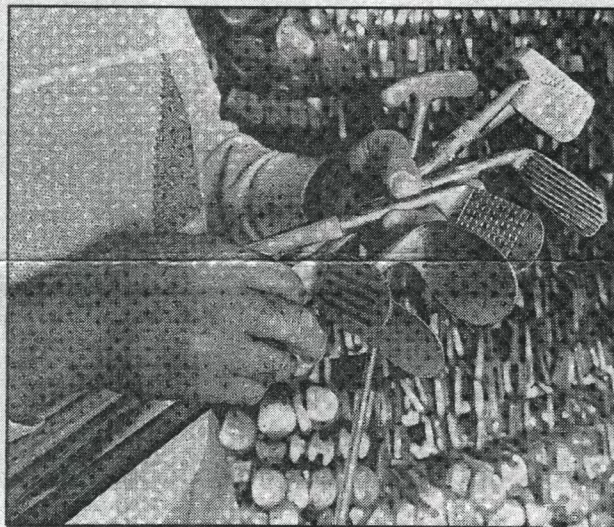
YPSILANTI — Most golfers would feel a little strange with anything beyond the usual complement of woods, irons and putter, but Gene Boldon's set includes such esoteric items as a baffle, a 19-iron and a scarred-head driver.

Then again, Boldon's collection of 17,000 golf clubs is far from ordinary.

A pair of 8-by-40-foot racks lining his basement walls contain Boldon's huge array of golf hardware, collected in the 37 years since a neighbor gave him a left-handed set of clubs rather than throwing them away.

"I pick up about anything that's related to golf," said Boldon, 62, coordinator of adult and community education for the Ypsilanti Public Schools. "I'm just a golf junkie."

From an antique center-shafted



NEWS PHOTOS • LARRY E. WRIGHT

Irons' faces display a variety of designs, grooves.

comes from across the tri from a family in the lo come bracket involved i activities," he said.

To address that prob helped set up the Inde Youth Golf and Tennis tion, providing equipme transportation for youths the group themselves.

"The purpose of it was to give them an opport learn to play the game, give them organizationa and social skills from b volved," said Boldon, who master's degree in guida counseling from the Unive Michigan.

"And I just love to give clubs or a tennis racket who's made somebody school team."

Time was tight for ass activities this year, Bold but he plans to devote round attention" to the g ter retiring from the sch

'GOLF JUNKIE' — A Detroit News article from the late 1970s featured the devoted golf collector and well-known Detroit-area athlete/coach.

BOLDON

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irons then moved into antique vintage clubs. Then I opened a golf shop called Golf Trends and operated that for 10 years.”

Boldon would buy, sell, repair, and trade all kinds of golf memorabilia. He also taught young people the craft of club building and repair.

It’s difficult to get kids interested in golf collecting these days,” he says. “All they want to do is go out and play golf.”

In the late ’70s, Boldon was invited to a GCS trade show in Indianapolis. “A bunch of guys were putting out stuff, classics and antiques. After that show, I became more serious about classics.”

Nowadays, the interest in the classic woods and irons has abated and Boldon despairs of finding a home for the remainder of his collection, about 5,000 or so he estimates. Most are classic-era steel clubs left from his golf shop days. “Classic persimmon drivers, MacGregors, were once the king on the pro tours, as were Wilson Staff irons,” he says.

Boldon met several pros at Detroit-area tournaments where they were eager to purchase the clubs, knowing that Boldon had an eye for the good stuff. “Rives McBee was one of the first guys I met,” he says. “He loved those Wilson wedges, the old DynaPower,” he says.

These days, with so much of the collection sold or given away, Boldon has other things on his mind. “I don’t go down there (to the basement storage area) so much these days,” he says. “There’s just too much stuff. I have no relatives and the kids aren’t interested, so a lot of these may wind up in the junkyard soon, and they can make cars from them,” he says.

Though he once owned a long nose Forgan and a Tom Morris play club, Boldon says he just missed out on a handful of featheries.

“I walked into flea market one day and I was zipping through because I had a tee time at the golf course nearby. A guy came up to me with a fruit can. He said ‘Mr. Golf Club Man, would you like to buy some old golf balls?’ I didn’t want any old balls, so I said no and went on my way. I left the market and stopped in at the pro shop on my way to the course. The pro says to me, ‘Gene, a guy came through here with old golf balls to sell.’ ‘Well, I said, did you buy them?’ ‘No, he says, they were old, leathery looking things.’ I went looking for that guy right away. Here he had a can with about half a dozen or more featheries and I just shooed him away. Well, he was gone and I went out to play golf, but I couldn’t get my mind on the game because I was thinking about this old fruit can full of featheries.”

During the mid-90s, Boldon served a term as the Region 5 director for the GCS and staged an annual trade show in Ypsilanti in 1994. He is quite proud of that show and the many letters he received congratulating him on how well it went, one letter in particular.

“Joe Murdoch wrote to tell me how much he liked the meeting. That was nice because I don’t think he complimented anybody. He also liked the benediction I gave at the start of the banquet and wanted me to sing “The Impossible Dream” at the next meeting. (“It would be

appropriate, because that’s what the Golf Collectors Society is all about,” Murdoch says in the letter.) That made me really nervous, because that is not an easy song to sing. Joe was a really nice man and I would have tried it for him. I even practiced it a little bit, but he forgot about it and I am glad I didn’t have to go through that painful thing.”

Still robust at 88, Boldon looks back on a lifetime of memories of the students and players he has coached, of the sports trophies that he has earned, and of the friendships he has made through golf and basketball, including the great Bill Russell, baseball great and pioneer Jackie Robinson, boxer Joe Louis, and Earl Lloyd, the first black player in the NBA.

“I’ve gone from a lone ranger in the mid-70s to someone who feels he is now in a fraternity of brothers and sisters,” he says of his membership in the GCS. “The GCS has really become more meaningful to me than the simple hobby of collecting. At the very first show I attended, I was the only black person there and nearly ignored, but the guys warmed up to me and I warmed up to them and since then I never thought I would become so involved, or care that much, or create so many close relationships. I want them all to know how much I really appreciate them.”

A familiar figure at trade shows and the annual meetings, Boldon hopes the GCS will do more on its website and through emails to notify members of those who have passed away, as well as to help members stay in touch with one another, especially the older members who may be ailing and would benefit from a word of comfort from fellow members. “I’d sure like to know about them and I know I would feel better if only I could make a call.”

He’d also like to see the flight of steel shafted clubs eliminated at the GCS national championship, or at least replaced with a flight of pyratones. “Those clubs are the bridge between wood and steel and we need to give more attention to them,” he says.

Boldon, who will travel for miles to see a friend or help someone in need, looked in at the 2015 GCS annual meeting in St. Charles, Ill., mainly to see old friends and to have a quick peek at the room trading. He had to get back to Detroit the next day because he was being inducted into the Class of 2015 Detroit High School Hall of Fame through the Detroit Sports Zone.

“It was a nice honor,” Boldon says. “It was because of my coaching young kids in the city and at Oakland University, and for my playing career at Wayne State.”

Boldon and Gaynelle, have been married 55 years. They have two children, a son who is a hospital administrator, and a daughter who is an elementary teacher in Southfield. They have two grandchildren.



SPORTING his customary pair of old plus-fours at a golf outing, Boldon said “They look good, but man when it gets warm that old wool feels like there’s a lot of bugs in there.”



GOLF COURSE UPKEEP done by women in Indonesia, c. 2002.



WINDSOR GOLF & CC in Nairobi Kenya, c. 2002.



GENE at The Emirates Golf Club in the UAE, c. 2002.



TOM MORRIS AND ALLAN ROBERTSON
A print of the old painting by Thomas Hodge is one of Boldon's favorite images.



WITH MR. HIROTA

Gene Boldon's visit to Japanese collector Shoso Hirota in 2008 to help lay the foundation for a golf museum is a treasured memory, despite his parting with a favorite old long nose club for the museum.