

Celebrating 50 years of Golf and Champions



Pictured: Bill Hermanson (Left) and Philip Perry (right) have combined for 31 of Black Hall's Club Championships.

The year 1965 was an important year, both in the United States and in the world of golf. Just a few of the many stories included: The first U.S. combat troops arrived in Vietnam with more than 190,000 American soldiers in Vietnam by the end of the year; 2,600 African Americans were arrested in Alabama, during three-day demonstrations against voter-registration rules; Astronaut Edward Higgins White makes the first U.S. space walk; and President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Social Security Act, establishing Medicare and Medicaid. Not to mention a postage stamp cost 5 cents, gasoline was 31 cents, and the average income was \$6,450. Different times, indeed.

Though obviously not as significant as war or discrimination, 1965 was a big year for golf as well. At nearly 53 years of age, Sam Snead won the Greater Greensboro Open, his 82nd and final PGA Tour victory. The U.S. Open was switched to 18-holes per day over four days, instead of the 36-hole final day as previously played. The U.S. Women's Open becomes the first women's tournament to be nationally televised.

In the early sixties, the game of golf witnessed a metaphorical boom, with a plethora of new courses opening across the country. In the early 1960s, the lower Connecticut Valley was becoming more populated with the existence of I-95 along the shore and the advent of Route 9 running from Hartford down the Connecticut River to Old Saybrook. A group of prominent Old Lyme residents felt the "existing area golf courses were inadequate to meet the demands of a new-found interest in golf generally."

In 1962, the group came together and commissioned Robert Trent Jones, Sr. to design a championship-caliber golf course in Old Lyme. Jones, who has designed over 500 courses around the world and whose list of courses includes Hazeltine National, Spyglass Hill, and The Patterson Club (host of this year's Connecticut Open). The club was officially incorporated in 1965 and opened for play in July of 1967, and has since hosted numerous amateur championships including the 2003 Connecticut Open and 2014 qualifying for the PGA Tour's Travelers Championship.

But a championship course like Black Hall Club was not built without its share of struggles. In fact, the present clubhouse wasn't constructed until 1980, and the course began on what is now the 12th hole. The practice putting green was a section of the 18th (now 11th) green with three holes, and the temporary clubhouse was nothing more than a house with two bedrooms sectioned off into the men's and women's locker rooms.

The present front nine was built on rolling farmland, but the present back nine consisted of a abundance of rocks and boulders buried below the surface. In fact, the soil was so rocky that one of Black Hall's original members, Ron Soccoli, Sr., recalled the playing of a "Rock Tournament" in the club's second year of existence. The tournament was an 18-hole shotgun start, with members playing 17-holes of golf, and then spending an hour on their finishing hole prying up rocks from the fairway.

No doubt the course has stood the test of time – at 6,664 yards, it poses a stern test that demands precision and accuracy off the tee. In the 2003 Connecticut Open, Steve Sokol shot a three round total of 209, the second-highest winning score recorded at the Open since 2000. With its difficulty, it has produced some of Connecticut's best amateurs, including the likes of Bill Hermanson, Philip Perry and Jeff Hedden, all of whom have won CSGA major championships in their career.

"This course forces you to be a good driver of the golf ball. If you don't drive it well here, you're not going to be successful here," said Hermanson, 2012 inductee into the Connecticut Golf Hall of Fame. "So over the years I figured out how to drive it straight, and I think that really helped me playing in state and national events at other courses. I don't think it's by accident that we have so many good players like Phil [Perry], Scott [Farrell], Jeff [Hedden], and Adam [Rainaud], just to name a few."

Hermanson, has a resume of accomplishments that includes five Connecticut Mid-Amateur titles and one Connecticut Amateur title. However, the accomplishment he might be most proud of is amassing an incredible twenty-three club championships at Black Hall since joining the club in 1978.

"I truly love this place, it has a special place in my heart. I've made so many great friends over the years and rivalries, friendly but competitive rivalries where we were competitive but happy for each other's success."

Hermanson enters this year's championship looking to become the first player since Fred Kask (1987 – Wethersfield CC) to win the Connecticut Amateur at their home club. The format is a

grueling one to win indeed, with two rounds of stroke play followed three consecutive days of 36-holes of match play. In fact, the last player over the age of 25 to win the tournament was Hedden in 2002 at the Country Club of Farmington. However, Hermanson enters the Amateur fresh off a win at the Senior Match Play Championship, where he knocked off longtime friend and six-time reigning Senior Player of the Year Dave Szewczul in convincing fashion.

Along with Hermanson, Perry is hoping to impress in front of the home crowd. He has won eight Club Championships at Black Hall and won the 2008 Russell C. Palmer Cup Champion, and more recently finished second at the Connecticut Mid-Amateur in both 2013 and 2014. Perry has had several close calls at the Amateur - he was a semifinalist in 2008 and a quarterfinalist in 2009 and 2014, and he hopes that this will be the year he finally breaks through to the final match.

"I've made match play seven out of the last eight years, so I'm just hoping to make it back to match play and see what happens," said Perry. "I think it's one of the best courses in the state, and it's really a great club with great people."

No doubt, Black Hall Club holds a special place in the hearts of its members, as well as its Head PGA Professional Andrew Campbell, who is now in his fourteenth year at the club. Campbell, along with Assistant Professional Adam Rainaud and the Black Hall membership, have been actively involved in the preparation for the Amateur.

"Celebrating our fiftieth anniversary is a special week for the club, and having the Connecticut Amateur here means a lot to the membership and our staff," said Campbell. "Bill McNamara took the role as the chair of the Connecticut Amateur and he's truly been unbelievable. When we met earlier this year, he said his goal was simple - for the competitors to leave on Friday and to not want to go anywhere else but here."

In conjunction with the fiftieth anniversary, the club organized an anniversary tournament and reception on Saturday, June 13th which saw 184 players compete and many more participate. The two-person team stableford format featured opportunities throughout the course to play with equipment from 1965, including playing certain holes with vintage clubs from 1965 along with fun contests for all.