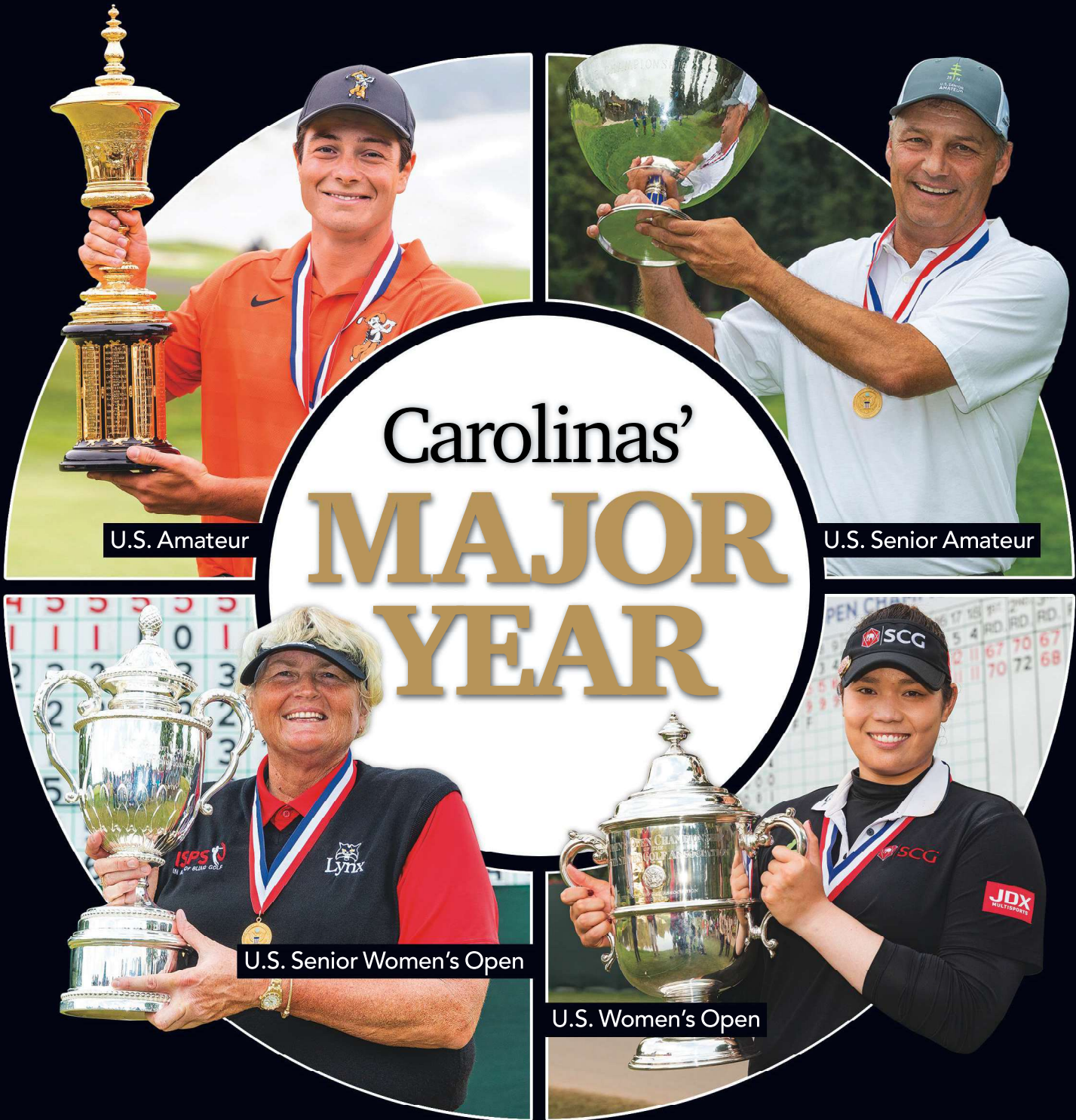


Carolinas Golf



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U.S. Amateur

U.S. Senior Amateur

Carolinas' MAJOR YEAR

U.S. Senior Women's Open

U.S. Women's Open

**Gaston Country Club**

3700 Country Club Drive,
Gastonia, NC 28056

Opened: 1919

Architect: Ellis Maples

Fast Fact: Home to PGA
Tour Professional Harold
Varner III

Inside Gaston CC:

The club has approximately
600 members and hosts
more than 16,000 rounds of
golf in an average year

**2019 CGA Championships
at Gaston CC:**

59th N.C. Amateur –
June 13-16

21st Carolinas Senior
Women's Amateur –
Oct 1-2

Gaston Country Club has
been at its present location
since 1958, and has been
home to top players such as
Dave and Charles Smith
(opposite page) and Harold
Varner III.

A Century of Golf at Gaston Country Club

Historic Carolina club celebrates 100-year history building on legacy of great golf, fellowship, and community. **BY MICHAEL J. SOLENDER**

Most every golf club with a 100-year-old history has more than a few golf yarns that garner quizzical head-shaking and a dose of healthy skepticism upon hearing. What sets Gaston Country Club in Gastonia, N.C., apart from other centenarians, however, is its members' ability to provide first-hand witness to so many of the club's most outrageous tales.

Such is the case of an account involving Jim Belton Jr., a three-time men's club championship winner from the late 1960s.

"During a post-round poker game in the club's card room overlooking the ninth hole," says Walter Gray, longtime member, past president, and unofficial club historian, "Jimmy was chiding a playing partner about his inability to par the first hole, a five-par he deemed quite tame. Jimmy said the hole was so easy, he could score no more than bogey playing it from right there in the card room."

"Money got to flying as bets were made. The guys opened the window while Jimmy, one-iron in hand, stood upon the table, lashed a bullet onto the ninth fairway, hit his next shot onto the practice area, followed with a shot to number one green, where he two-putted for par."

Stories like this are woven into the fabric of club, founded in 1919 in the backyard of the textile mills that once framed the area, 35 miles from Charlotte.

It was Gray's great uncle, Charles Gray, who—after falling in love with the game of golf in the mountain

community of Linville, N.C.—convinced the superintendent and golf professional at the club there to follow him to Gastonia. Once there, a tract of land was acquired, and a nine-hole course built.

GCC expanded to its present location in 1958 after purchasing a 200-acre dairy farm and retaining renowned architect Ellis Maples to design the course.

"We interviewed both George Cobb and Maples," says Gray, "Cobb put some concept drawings together that were later 'borrowed' by Mr. Maples. Most notable is the par-3 8th that replicates a pencil drawing we have from a Cobb proposal."

Almost immediately upon opening, the course caught the attention and earned the respect of the N.C. golfing scene, hosting the Carolinas Amateur in 1961 and the N.C. Amateur Championship four years later. Subsequently, Gaston has hosted nearly every high-level amateur Carolinas golf event over the past six decades.

"Ours is a course that challenges players of every skill level," says Thomas Troncoso, Gaston's PGA Head Professional, in describing this classic, old-school design. "Everything is right there in front of you. You know exactly where you need to land the ball, taking risks that reward if successful, but penalizing those coming up short."

Many of the region's top amateur and professional golfers have been tested here, as GCC has held qualifiers for U.S. Amateur, Mid- and Senior Amateurs, and U.S. Open Qualifying in 2005 and 2008. In 2016,



the club hosted its first Pre- and Monday Qualifier for the Charlotte-based Wells Fargo Championship, an honor that continues this year.

GCC may be best known by golf historians as the home club of Charles and Dave Smith. The fabled Smith bothers were two of the finest amateur players in the country during the '60's.

Charles' trophies include championships at North South Amateur, Southern Amateur, Eastern Open, N.C. Amateur and Carolina's Open. He played on three U.S. Walker Cup teams and played in the Masters Tournament four years running, from 1962 to 1965.

Dave won the N.C. Amateur and notably took Jack Nicklaus to 18 holes before succumbing to the Golden Bear in the fifth round of the 1959 U.S. Amateur Championship.

More recent GCC ties to golfing elite feature local prodigy, Harold Varner III who once worked in GCC's bag room. Now on the PGA Tour, Varner played many rounds here while attending Gastonia's Forestview High School, a 3-A N.C. golf powerhouse.

GCC is also home track for Gaston Day High, Gaston Christian High, and nearby

Belmont Abbey College.

"Our club touches the community in many ways," says Gray. "From charity-fundraising tournaments to hosting the local chamber meetings, to holding weddings and community events. We cherish our role as a community gathering place and home to multiple generations of area families."

A year-long celebration of the club's hundredth anniversary is underway. Members are excited about the Centennial Hickory Golf Tournament, a men's and women's scramble where pairings will play with hickory-shafted clubs and gutta percha balls.

Formal and more casual galas are planned as are charitable and community outreach events, and a commemorative book.

One tale certain to be told in the tome is that of Gray's older brother, Jim. Over the course of playing more than 6,000 rounds at GCC between 1959 and 2002, Jim "Eagle Eye" Gray, recorded an eagle on every single hole on the course, a feat memorialized by *Golf Digest* in 2004.

"Jim was a terrific golfer," says Walter Gray, who noted his brother has since retired from the game. "He holed the first hole-in-one recorded on the course in 1959, at the par-3 14th, and completed the circuit with a deuce on the par-4 4th hole in 2002."

As Gaston Country Club begins its second century of golf in the Carolinas, it's evident that more great stories are just waiting to be born. ■

Michael J. Solender is a Charlotte-based writer who covers golf, luxury travel, pop culture and business.

Harold Varner III Shares Gaston Country Club Memories

PGA Tour Professional Harold Varner III grew up in Gastonia, N.C., just a chip shot from Gaston Country Club. Varner began working at the club at age 16, tending clubs in the bag room, through high school and into his sophomore year at East Carolina University. He estimated he's played more than 1,000 rounds on the course.

Varner shares a few thoughts on GCC:

The key to going low: "It's a ball striker's course, especially on the approach shots. You don't ever want to be past the hole. Pin high is where you want to be on these greens."

Favorite memory:

"I remember after I first started working there, I asked (former PGA Head Professional) Bruce Sudderth if he would work with me one

afternoon. I was nervous, but he just said, 'I'll see you tomorrow at 10.' Up until just a few months ago, he was the only person I'd ever taken lessons from. He taught me how to play golf. I would not be where I am today without him."

His best shot: "I had a double eagle on the par-5 13th while playing with some buddies for a small wager. I hit a 5-iron from 203, a left-to-righter that fell in. I had just pressed, so the \$25 bet was doubled to \$50. It was a lot of money then and still is today."



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