



Retro by design

Connecticut salesman injects new life into nostalgic clubs



Scott Michaux

Cory Crelan got a lot of strange looks when he stepped to the first tee at Oak Hill Country Club the day after the 2023 PGA Championship and pulled out his MacGregor Tourney persimmon driver with the gamma fire insert. He teed up his Wilson Duo ball, took a few waggles and swung away. His slight push ended up in the thick right rough and led to an opening double.

"It's a hard hole," Crelan said of the par-4 that ranked ninth toughest of the week for the world's best professionals using the latest modern equipment.

Crelan shot 84 at Oak Hill without the latest equipment. The 49-year-old from Norwalk, Connecticut, toted a collection of sticks from another century. His Hogan Apex II "Cameo" irons were bought by his father in 1980. His Titleist Dead Center putter (bought for \$5 and refurbished) is a mid-'80s model. His MacGregor driver and Eye-o-Matic 4-wood as well as Hogan Anniversary 3-wood ranged from the 1960s to '80s.

Crelan's affection for the clubs of his youth generated a concept to tap into the nostalgia of the game before it became such a technological arms race with titanium-headed "woods," game-improvement irons and wedges for every conceivable occasion. With a garage full of vintage clubs from the era between 1970 and 1990, Crelan launched **Retro Golf Club** in April. His day job is sales manager for Weatherman Umbrellas, but he's driven to advocate for the original and fun experience that "second-era" clubs can offer.

Retro Golf Club delivers the chance to step back in time and use clubs that Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, Tom Watson, Lee Trevino and Seve Ballesteros used to challenge places such as Augusta National, Oakmont, Pebble Beach and St. Andrews. Crelan believes corporate outings, club tournaments or buddy weekends can be enhanced with organized opportunities to experience carefully refurbished clubs from the era when persimmon and laminated woods and blade irons filled everyone's golf bags.



MacGregor Tourney persimmon driver with the Gamma Fire insert that Cory Crelan used to shoot 84 at Oak Hill after PGA Championship

COURTESY CORY CRELAN

"As golf equipment continues to advance to various technologies, I felt that something was missing from the time I grew up using the same equipment that my favorite players, and my dad's favorite players, would use as they strolled the fairways sporting the fashion made famous by Ty Webb, Al Czervik and Judge Smalls," said Crelan of the "Caddyshack" generation. "I'm playing less competitive golf today at 49, so I wanted to find a way to maintain and even increase my interest in the game because I'm less worried about my score and just want to have fun. Playing with this equipment from the '70s and '80s allows me to enjoy a richer playing experience, and I'm positive those using these clubs will have a similar reaction."



Cory Crelan has turned a garage in Wilton, Connecticut, into "a 1980s bag room."

COURTESY CORY CRELAN

Crelan's idea started with that set of his late dad's Apex IIs and other assorted old clubs that were gathering dust in a bag in his garage. He read about a humble nine-hole course Seth Raynor designed at the Hotchkiss School in Salisbury, Connecticut, and he went up there on Labor Day weekend in 2019 with his retro set and teed it up. Except for an uncooperative driver, he had fun playing a game that more resembled the one he learned as a kid.

Curious to find a better "old" driver, he started surfing Internet marketplaces and "was kind of taken aback by how little money they commanded," he said.

A couple of months later, Crelan drove to Manhattan to see a friend of a friend whose father-in-law had died and had all these old clubs clogging his storage area. For \$200, Crelan stuffed as many vintage clubs as he could into his sedan and took them home to clog up his own storage area instead.

"I really had no idea at that point what I was going to do with them," he said. "But I just kind of stewed on it for a while and that kind of just set things in motion."



Jones Sports bags filled with Retro Golf Club sticks stand ready for a throwback outing.

COURTESY RETRO GOLF CLUB

He started amassing old clubs to try to build an inventory of 100 sets – a number he figured could accommodate a club event. The process accelerated during the pandemic. He outgrew his own space and his wife's tolerance, so he relocated his stash to a rented garage in Wilton, Connecticut, which doubled as a workshop where he could regrip and refurbish more than 1,200 clubs to get them in working condition.

"It's like walking into a bag room in the 1980s," Crelan said of his garage.

After running ideas past some of his club-pro friends, the reinstated amateur developed the idea for the Retro Golf Club. His inventory included more than 100 complete sets featuring persimmon woods, blade irons and putters from brands such as Ben Hogan, Daiwa, Ram, Spalding, Toney Penna, Wilson, MacGregor, Ping, Powerbilt, Orlimar, Arnold Palmer, Walter Hagen and more. Each set uses bespoke Jones Sports leather carry bags with bag tags using his retro-style colorful logo.

In September 2022, he sourced his first event at Stonewall Golf Club outside Philadelphia, where he was friends with the pro. For the club's fall member-guest, after a practice round and cocktail party, Crelan's clubs were available to play a three-hole loop ending on 18. Folks pitched in some money for a prize pot, and nearly everyone grabbed a bag and started playing with the vintage sticks – many of them playing the loop more than once.

"Most people had a drink in hand, and everyone carried the bags and it was very successful," Crelan said.



Remember 2-irons? Retro Golf Club is stocked with them.

COURTESY RETRO GOLF CLUB

Through his contacts as a former golf pro and sales rep, Crelan has developed Retro Golf Club largely by word of mouth as an opportunity to do something original and fun during the same old club events. He curated an 18-hole event at Canoe Brook Country Club in New Jersey in November and another for the Sugarloaf Social Club. In June, Retro Golf Club will be in New York at Mill River Club on Long Island. He supplies the clubs for hire and recommends inexpensive softer-compression, high-spin balls such as the Wilson Duo to pair with the sets (because balata balls are in short and expensive supply).

"Cory has done a great job of curating all this stuff, and I think it's going to be one of the better collections of vintage clubs in the world, would be my guess," said Reed Lansinger, the head pro at Canoe Brook. "I think at some point that is going to really show itself as a nice little part of golf history, and if people want to experience what the game was like before, you know, 1991 Callaway Great Big Bertha, then you're playing Retro Golf stuff."

Lansinger said his club offers different fun events on Sundays in the fall, such as select-drive alternate shot or cross country formats. About 30-40 members participated in the Retro Golf Club event despite wind and 45-degree weather in November.

"I'd say it was fairly successful," Lansinger said. "I think that those guys will all do it again, and hopefully it's something we'll try again and get a bigger crowd the next time."

Crelan launched his **Retro Golf Club website** in December, has an **Instagram site** filled with photos and put together a **promo video** in March to explain the concept. Because he handles the inventory himself, he'll ideally serve clubs within a reasonable drive of his Wilton home base.



Vintage headcovers complete the Retro Golf Club sets.

COURTESY RETRO GOLF CLUB

"Whether it's 18 holes or nine holes or three holes is completely inconsequential to me," he said. "I'm just looking to expose people to this sort of era of equipment in a fun way."

Crelan swears he isn't some kind of nostalgia evangelist. He just believes the clubs everyone used to use have become maligned in the era of game-forgiveness and club fittings. While really old-school hickory golf has its enthusiasts, Crelan modeled the concept after Radwood, which hosts auto shows celebrating the cars and lifestyle from the '80s and '90s that got lost between classic and modern eras. In a similar vein, Crelan thinks people will love the challenge of playing those bygone brands that bridged the decades between the hickory and modern eras – experiencing something familiar but forgotten.

"The game has given me so much over the last few decades of my life, and I feel as though, for me, I'm giving back some life to the game I love by shining a light on this largely overlooked era of golf equipment," Crelan said. "There's an all-time high level of interest in golf these days. Not only will we give golfers a fun experience using clubs they likely only see in old photos, but these clubs are shockingly economical, potentially opening the game to a far wider audience."

E-MAIL SCOTT

Top: Retro Golf Club brings back the nostalgic beauty of hitting persimmon woods.

COURTESY CORY CRELAN, RETRO GOLF