

Henry Martell

“A great golfer playing at the wrong time.”

Clyde Martell, Henry's son.



Henry Martell's best golfing years coincided with the Great Depression of the 1930's and World War II, 1939 – 1945 when golf tournament prize money had dwindled to almost nothing.

During the lean years between 1936 and 1947 inclusive, Henry Martell worked, raised a family and still managed to win nine Alberta Amateur Championships and might have won two more if the events weren't cancelled for two years during the war.

In addition, between winning the 1935 Edmonton City Amateur when he was 22, to the the 1971 CPGA Senior when he was 59, Henry also won four Alberta and Saskatchewan Opens, the Canadian Amateur and two CPGA Championships.

He also posted some astounding lifetime statistics provided by his son Clyde:

- A clean sweep in 1936 of the Edmonton and Alberta Open and Amateur titles
- Winning the 1944 Alberta Open by 23 strokes
- Shooting 8 birdies in a row
- Shooting a 65 at age 66 to become Canada's youngest golfer to shoot his age

When asked why his gifted father never tried playing as a touring professional, Clyde's reply reflects his father's pragmatic attitude:

“Sponsors willing to provide backing were hard to find. Golfers couldn't even afford to pay their expenses from prizes in those days. They were living in their cars.”

Henry and his three athletic brothers (Burns, Herman and Emil), the sons of a Polish blacksmith, grew up knowing that if they wanted to play sports, they had to pay their own way. They worked paper routes and whatever else they could do to afford sports. They spent their spare time at the local YMCA playing basketball, table tennis, and even managed to get a start as tennis players. Henry, for example, won the city junior tennis championships twice. The brothers were competitive with each other at every sport, but especially golf.

“They could all shoot their age when they were older,” Clyde says. “They all had tremendous hand - to - eye coordination.”

As a young man Henry considered his athletic choices carefully before choosing golf over tennis or basketball. Golf, he reasoned, was the only sport where you saw old players competing and that made it the right choice for a young man thinking ahead.

From a start playing on a makeshift course with an old iron he and his friends found, Henry at age 18 began developing his smooth golf swing over the winter by swinging between attic rafters and driving balls into a tarp.

Henry's classic, self-taught swing, Clyde says, would eventually be known throughout North America by professionals such as Bobby Locke, Sam Snead, Byron Nelson, Gary Player, Arnold Palmer, and Babe Zaharias who played exhibitions with Henry.

Henry Martell's classic, self-taught swing was envied by professionals throughout North America.
Photo Credit: Highlands Golf Club.



Always the entrepreneur, Henry introduced golf carts early on to the Highlands Golf Club. Henry (right) with his golfing friend Jim Harper. Photo Credit: Highlands Golf Club.

Married and starting a family when he won the Canadian Amateur in 1939, Henry had to make a choice: get a job or continue the almost futile struggle to make golf pay during the War. The choice must have been difficult for Henry as he was named “Canada's Golfer of the Year” by *The Canadian Golfer* magazine.

The Martell brothers had all worked during the Depression in the GWG clothing factory in Edmonton. Henry had hoped to become a teacher and passed the one year course but the only positions available were in remote northern towns such as Fort Chipewyan.

However, because he was well-known as a golfer, Henry was offered a job by the golfing chief of the Edmonton Police, Reg Jennings. Henry accepted, thankful that he would have a steady income.

The Golfing Policeman

Henry served with the Edmonton Police for nine years and, as he continued to make headlines in the sports section, he became known as ‘The Golfing Policeman.’

After the war ended and golf began to make a resurgence, Henry became the head professional at the Highlands Golf Club where he would stay from 1948 until his retirement in 1979.





Henry Martell with his protégé Betty Stanhope-Cole (L) and Canadian Champion Marlene Stewart Streit.

Photo Credit: Highlands Golf Club.

“A Heart of Gold”

In his later years Henry developed a reputation for being gruff and impatient, but few knew that he was living in almost constant pain.

If Henry had a weak spot, it was his knees. He had 11 operations on them without long-term relief.

“He was eating aspirins like crazy when he did the CBC series – and his swing was perfect,” Clyde says.

Ray Milne, who took over the pro shop when Henry retired, worked with him starting as a club cleaner in 1962. For Ray, Henry was a father figure respected as much for his life lessons as his golf game.

“I know he was sometimes short with people because of the pain in his knees,” Ray says, “but he had a heart of gold. Henry was a second father to me.

“To work with a man like Henry was more than I could ever hope for. He taught me anything I wanted to learn. The more I asked, the more he gave.

“Here was somebody who could work as hard as he did, golf only six months a year and still accomplish all his feats ... I don’t think anybody will ever equal that.”

While Ray can – and loves to – tell hundreds of stories about Henry’s golf accomplishments, there is an unusual story he believes sums up Henry’s straightforward attitude and determination.

At a time when passersby could stroll along the edge of the Highlands course by the river, Henry hit a new ball near the river and saw a boy dart out of the woods, grab the ball and start running away.

Henry yanked a club from his bag – it turned out to be his favorite Calamity Jane putter – and chased the boy.

“It brought out the policeman in Henry,” Ray says with a laugh.

After running almost 600 yards with knees long past repair, Henry caught up to the boy and tripped him with the putter – which broke.

Henry pulled the boy to his feet, admonished him more than severely, and returned to his game. With his broken putter and recovered ball in hand, Henry told his partner:

“I’ll guarantee that kid will never steal another golf ball.”

A Couple of Sets of Clubs

As the club pro, Henry was expected to provide the shop inventory and teach lessons, without financial backing from the club.

“It was tough starting out,” Clyde remembers. “He had a couple of sets of clubs to sell and some balls. Everything he had went into building up the shop. We couldn’t even afford a car.”

Henry, it turned out, was an astute businessman. He expanded his business every way possible and didn’t mind working hard to save money. He and his brother, Herman, built an addition to the shop and began a lucrative year-round club repair business that brought them customers from shops all over the Edmonton area.

“He spent all his time at the Highlands. He would open his shop at 6 and close it at 11. But it wasn’t until the 1960’s that he started to have some money.”

“Go take lessons from Henry Martell.”

Henry turned his natural aptitude for golf towards teaching and immediately became recognized as the man to go to when you were having trouble.

“Go take lessons from Henry Martell,” Sam Snead told an Edmonton golfer having swing problems. Jackie Burke, a World Golf Hall of Fame member, offered Henry a teaching position in Houston.

While there are untold golfers in Alberta today, of all abilities, who give Henry credit for improvement to their game, none is more notable than Betty Stanhope-Cole who joined the Highlands as a teenager and went on, with Henry’s guidance, to join him in the Canadian Golf Hall of Fame. (See article page 110)

In addition to his regular teaching, Henry participated in the television-based golf instruction series sponsored by CBC and hosted by Ernie Afaganis: Tee to Green. He also participated in the *Par 27* televised events, winning it four times.