



# Lively Lebanon turns century stone

By Tony Regina

**T**he centennial square on Lebanon Country Club's back patio is the perfect symbol.

It commemorates the club's 100th birthday, celebrated in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Members, as part of centennial fundraising, purchased stones in the square — birthday wishes, in memoriam, etc. The Lebanon community, in preserving names past and present, participated in an effort to enhance the Lebanon experience. Force of habit here.

Then there's the stone itself and what it represents. Lebanon, at 100 years old, is as solid as a rock, with membership steady at 295. Traces of stone embedded in the terrain still exist throughout the golf course. A stonewall still lines the perimeter of the club's property.

Lebanon, built brick-by-brick by blue collar in 1920, pulsates with every shot struck on its unheralded yet unparallel Alexander Findlay design.

"When you have a private club and a board

of governors that are doctors, lawyers and Indian chiefs who may or may not be qualified to run a business of this size, the golf course is what sustained everybody to keep coming back," Christian Sheehan, the club's professional, said. "You can make financial mistakes. You can make poor decisions with membership. But the golf course is what sets this place apart. Every club in America can have stumbling blocks in their history. The golf course is what saves it. If it's that good, people will continue to come. And if you're surrounded with people who promote that, then they will continue to come."

Figuratively speaking, a glowing light surrounded approximately 200 acres of Lebanon farmland in 1920. The club's origin is storybook. A group of prominent citizens seeks to start a country club. It appoints a lawyer, Charles Killinger, and a prominent businessman, Jim Shenk, to find a location for said club.

Voila. The adjoining farms of Abraham B. Horst and Samuel B. Horst fit the desired bill. A stop on the Hershey Electric Railway, the lone means of public transportation in that era, sits a stone's throw from the property, thereby

reinforcing the site selection.

"The train used to go down Oak Street. It stopped at the original entrance to the club," Peter Gebhard, who's served as Lebanon's president for three years, said. "You got off the train and walked through an opening in the rock wall, and that's how you got on the property. [The opening] is still there."

During a Lebanon Chamber of Commerce charter meeting on March 31, 1920, officials authorized development of the site — bound by train, boundless in opportunity. The estimated \$60,000 project included barn improvements to accommodate club activities and the construction of a swimming pool and skating pond, given the presence of Beck Creek.

Lebanon hired the renowned Findlay, fresh off completing Llanerch Country Club in Haverstown, Pa., as golf course architect.

"He did a lot of work around here. He was here in 1920, and that's when we built the back nine," Gebhard, 77, of Lebanon, Pa., said. "It was originally a nine-hole course with an 18-hole plan. We built the front nine in 1930. Did Findlay build the front nine? Well, we don't know



that. My best guess is Findlay routed it, but he definitely was not here when they built it. None of the mounding is similar.”

Lebanon is in the process of rectifying that. As part of the club’s masterplan, Jim Nagle of Forse Design, Inc. oversaw a bunker renovation in 2015, part of which incorporated Findlay mounding on the front nine. Other projects included the construction of family and senior tees and the rebuilding of greens. Lebanon today only boasts five original, authentic Findlay complexes: Nos. 10, 11, 12, 16 and 18.

“It was a summer renovation. We did it while play was happening so the members got to see the changes every day. They saw all of the work that went into it,” Daniel Brickley, the club’s superintendent of 19 years, said. “It really kind of took us to the next level. We were always known for good conditions, but bunkers were always the thorn in our side. We didn’t have any drainage. We had terrible sand, if there was sand in them.”

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#### COURSE TWEAKS NOTWITHSTANDING,

Findlay, at the behest of club organizers, implemented a component that’s served Lebanon well. He left ample acreage, now occupied by an exemplary practice facility, untouched.

“Originally, that was a horseriding ring out there,” Gebhard said. “We put in [a practice facility]. We were lucky we had the area. Most courses in our vintage didn’t have practice areas, didn’t have room for practice areas. They didn’t think of it.”

Lebanon, year unknown, rendered its horseriding ring obsolete. The vacant area now invited golf shots. Stu Ingraham, a former PGA TOUR player, gained shag bag notoriety following an experience alongside good friend Charlie Letcher.

“I said, ‘Charlie, go out there to about 115 yards and I’ll hit some wedges. Just shag the balls for me,’” Ingraham, 60, of Newtown Square, Pa., said. “He’s one of the nicest guys, but he’s the most unathletic guy in the United States. If you ask him to walk 100 yards, it might take three weeks. If you ask him to run, he’d die in 10 yards. So, he goes out there. I hit a golf ball up in the air. He’s looking up and doesn’t it hit the son of a bitch right in his forehead? He went down. I knew I hit him. I went out there. Blood everywhere. I felt so bad.”

Lebanon transitioned from shag bag central to practice facility, installing a short game area, dual-purpose practice bunker and sizeable driving range.

The practice space, even when “unofficial,” supplemented Lebanon’s strong Junior golf program. Names such as Bobby Huber, Greg Leshner (low amateur in the 1989 U.S. Open), Ingraham and Blaine Peffley cut their golfing teeth at the



club. Huber (1967), Leshner (1986) and Peffley (2002) are all former Pennsylvania Golf Association Junior champions. Ingraham, the 1994 GAP Open Champion, has appeared in 12 Majors throughout his professional golf career.

“I tip my hat to (Mike Swisher). It’s a tribute to the Junior program we had,” Gebhard said.

“Back when I was a Junior, I think our course offered the finest Junior program that existed,” Steve Schulte, a Lebanon member of 60 years, added. “When I was a Junior, we hung around the pro shop until 5:30, 6 o’clock at night. My parents dropped me off in the morning and I

but I felt embarrassed.

“To make a long story short, three days later, he calls me and says, ‘Stu, would you like to work in my bag room?’ I said, ‘Absolutely.’ That’s how my life in the golf industry started, with that phone call. Mike Swisher is the salt of the earth. He catapulted my career because of his influence. I would not be here speaking this way if I never set foot on Lebanon Country Club.”

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**Grow up at Lebanon. stay at Lebanon. Forty members, give or take, worked in Swisher’s pro shop at one point during their youth.**

was out here all day. [Tom Strohman and I] went to practice range. I was always Arnold Palmer and Tommy was Billy Casper. We just were out there for hours. What a great place to grow up ... a nice, safe environment.”

Grow up at Lebanon, stay at Lebanon. Forty members, give or take, worked in Swisher’s pro shop at one point during their youth.

At age 13, Ingraham, who serves as head professional/director of instruction at MGOLF Driving Range & Learning Facility, met Lebanon through his cousin Rich Behney, who caddied at the club.

“One day, in the middle of summer, he said, ‘Stu, why don’t you come over and we’ll caddie together.’ That’s how I started,” Ingraham said. “After the round, we’re ready to go home but he’s like, ‘No. Let’s go up to the 15th tee and set off some firecrackers.’ He starts blasting firecrackers. Two minutes later, Swisher, who’s the legend of Lebanon, comes up and says, ‘What are you guys doing?’ He was pretty cool about it,

goes a long way.

“There are so many wonderful people here. I was so lucky to end up getting the head pro job here at age 23. They gave me a chance,” Swisher, Lebanon’s head professional from 1969-2011, said. “The people just make you feel so much at home.”

“I always told Chris Sheehan, up until this year, that if I didn’t get a hug or two a day from a member, it didn’t feel right,” Brickley, 44, of Cleona, Pa., said. “Those are the relationships you build. Everyone looks forward to seeing each other every day.”

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#### TWO MORE INDIVIDUALS WHO LIKELY

received Lebanon hugs and praise: W.B. Sullivan and William Weik. Sullivan, a longtime member and past club president, worked as a sales manager for Bethlehem Steel. He invited a litany of clients to Lebanon for golf in the 1930s. Those excursions turned into an outing. That outing



turned into the W.B. Sullivan Four-Ball, a four-day amateur event in its 75th year. Buddy Lutz, father of nine-time GAP Senior Player of the Year Chip Lutz, and Billy Eben won the inaugural edition.

Weik, the 1983 PGA Senior Amateur Champion and three-time Lebanon County Golf Association Amateur Champion (1963, 1966, 1971), captured 15 club championships, including nine men's titles. Lebanon renamed its men's championship the William Weik Cup in 2019.

Weik, who joined Lebanon in 1959, is considered a "lifetime leaderboard" at the club. He carded a 1 on every par 3, a 2 on every par 4 and a 3 on every par 5. Weik's last ace came at the age of 92 courtesy of a driver on No. 9. He died in June at the age of 101.

In addition to interclub icons such as Sullivan and Weik, Lebanon welcomed a handful of notable PGA TOUR professionals for golf exhibitions: Bruce Crampton, Doug Sanders, Raymond Floyd, Jim Furyk, to name a few. Even a famous boxer once graced the grounds.



Lebanon's Centennial square


"Muhammad Ali came here in 1972. He had a training camp, Deer Lake, in Schuylkill County," Swisher, 75, of Lebanon, Pa., said. "He was looking to buy a motorhome, and Sharon Schulte's father had a motorhome business. Her father brought him out for lunch. He walked right by my pro shop with a big entourage. [After lunch] he walked into my pro shop and started looking at the merchandise. Then he had his wife in kind of a headlock. 'What's a matter? Can't you box anymore?' He drops her, starts dancing around, throwing punches to himself. I got him to sign a scorecard, which is really neat."

In conjunction with its centennial, Lebanon served as site of both the PGA Junior Girls' Championship (June 29-30) and Women's Amateur Championship (Aug. 3-5). Moreover, the evolution of women's golf at the club is noteworthy. Upon inception, Lebanon only offered one set of tees for its inaugural class (17 single female members). It since added a forward tee-box and expanded women's programming. Lebanon today offers a Thursday night ladies league and a Thursday night ladies league for beginners, which averages 20-30 participants.

Fortunately for Lebanon, the COVID-19 pandemic didn't prevent a birthday celebration altogether. The club conducted a centennial gala Sept. 12-13. Festivities included a vintage golf club tournament; putting, tennis and swimming events; a centennial painting auction and an evening under the stars complete with food trucks and a fireworks display.

It finally dedicated its centennial square, too. A fitting nod to a pillar (this motif is a stonecold lock) of the Lebanon community.

"We've always had a good core group of members and staff. The golf course has always been great. The golf operation has always been great. That's contributed to the longevity," John Gross, a Lebanon member of 30 years, said. "We're continuing to grow with younger families, trying to adapt to the industry changing. We need to continue to focus on getting the younger members involved, and hopefully we're successful at that and can be around for another 100 years." ○



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