



Who's Your Caddie?
Golf's Grand Tradition Lives on Sea Island
By Jameson Gregg
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It is a balmy Saturday morning in January at Sea Island Co.'s Retreat golf course on St. Simons Island, and a rarity within a rarity is occurring. Twenty-year-old Kelly Gallagher, a petite blond and the only full-time female caddie in Sea Island Co.'s stable, is walking the loop, toting the bag for a male scratch golfer twice her size.

Gallagher is a rare breed, a female caddie, at one of the rare properties in America – and the only one in this area – with a full caddie program.

The golf cart, introduced to the game in the early 1960s, spelled the end of most caddie programs. Such was the case at the Brunswick Country Club.

"Most people ride in carts and a few walk with their own bag, so the demand is not there for us to have caddies," says Dan Hogan, PGA director of golf and club marketing at Brunswick Country Club.

"We have photographs of caddies on the course in the 1940s and '50s, in the pre-golf cart era. Over time, the demand may come back."

Sea Island Co., on the other hand, has always offered caddies to its players, and even now encourages players to take either a caddie or forecaddie along for their games. The Sea Island golf tradition began in the 1920s when Detroit car baron Howard Coffin envisioned bringing the game to Georgia as an amenity to the hotel he was building on Sea Island, The Cloister. Then, the only way to play golf was to walk and carry your bag, or have a caddie. Thus, caddies were an important early element of golf at Sea Island.

If you scrutinize the photos of the first rounds of golf at the new Sea Island Golf Club in 1928, you'll see men in knickers and outlandish stockings and women in bell-shaped Cloche hats with dresses below their knees. You will also see caddies in the background shadowing their patrons.

"Sea Island caddies rake bunkers, read yardages and putts (if asked) and a hundred other subtle things," says Eric Schneider, director of golf and retail operations.

"A caddie carries the bag for one, sometimes two players. A forecaddie, usually one per foursome, is positioned in the fairway in front of the players, who typically ride in carts, when tee shots are hit."

A good caddie is a helpmate to a golfer no matter the player's level of experience. A great caddie is so much more.

"The difference between a good caddy and a great one is whether you put your heart and soul into it," explains Rob Hanft, 54, a seasoned pro and key figure in Sea Island Co.'s caddie program. "A good caddie must know the course, but a great caddie will read the player, stay a step ahead, have a positive attitude and a pleasant demeanor, and try to make it fun."

Hanft began caddying at his father's club in Minnesota at age 7, and has caddied for most of his life. He caddied at Pebble Beach in the 1970s and '80s and travels throughout the year to work at various amateur and professional events.

Gallagher, on the other hand, is a neophyte, learning the game – and a whole lot more – as she goes.

"The hardest part is consoling a player who is having a bad round," says Gallagher. "I'm learning how to deal with all types of personalities."

Caddies are the unsung heroes of the game, and Robert "Mighty Fine" Davis, who has delivered his trademark greeting to golfers visiting the men's locker room of the Sea Island Co. golf club for 46 years, says the resort has had its share of greats over the years.

"There was Tiger (Willie Reynolds)," says Davis. "He started caddying when Seaside opened in 1929. He stopped caddying in mid-1970, but still came around to the club until he died five or six years ago."

Reynolds earned his nickname as a boxer at Madison Square Garden.

"He was a mighty fine golfer and played on the black professional tour sometimes," Davis says.

The guests' favorite caddie was Johnny Jackson, known as "Jabo."

"If he was caddying for you, man he would be pulling so hard for you to win," Davis recalls. "All the Atlanta crowd wanted Jabo on their bag."

The friendships that formed between caddies and their "regulars" transcended all, including commitment to the game. That's the way it seemed, anyway, as age robbed A.J. Branch of his former prowess.

"As A.J. got older, his eyes got bad. He wore glasses," Davis recalls. "Mr. Peter Grimm of Sea Island always had A.J. on his bag. One time, Mr. Grimm hit a bad shot off the first tee. A.J. couldn't find the ball, so Mr. Grimm says, 'Let's just call it a day and go back in.' We laughed about that one for a long time."

When Sea Island Co. reopened its Seaside course after extensive renovation and redesign in 1999, the resort contracted with CADDIEMASTER of Pinehurst, N.C., to manage its caddie program. Nowadays, caddie programs are pretty much limited to the great courses, and in fact, CADDIEMASTER is responsible for hiring and training caddies at Augusta National, Pebble Beach and Whistling Straights.

Given the notoriety of those courses, it's not surprising that most caddies have stories of memorable brushes with fame and fortune, and bear witness to a side of history that rarely makes the books.

In 1965, when the South was a cauldron boiling with racial segregation, Sea Island hosted the Southern Governor's Conference.

"Yeah," Davis recalls, "and they played a little golf tournament. They all had an entourage and state troopers everywhere and we had a ball. George Wallace, the

Alabama governor, came back to the caddie shack. He was the best, a real cut-up, and we had a lot of fun with him.”

Davis saw Wallace for who he really was, not the angry segregationist so well known to the nation at the time. “I didn’t like that Governor Wallace was a racist,” Davis says, “but I liked the man. I thought he was doing what it took to get elected, and then later when he changed his mind about segregation, I thought the truth came out.”

Caddies aren’t what they used to be, either.

“Historically, caddies were just ‘bag-toters,’ kind of a wild, unreliable bunch,” says Hanft. “The original credo was the three ups: show up, keep up and shut up. And it helped if you showed up reasonably sober.”

Hanft credits CADDIEMASTER with elevating caddying to a profession.

“There’s drug testing. Many (candidates) are weeded out in the training. You have to be a good caddie and in good shape to keep your job,” Hanft says. “Caddies spend more time with a club member or resort guest than anyone else. So, it’s important for us to be courteous and knowledgeable.”

And that makes for a mighty fine game, indeed.