

# Berklich on the Buick

By Jack Berry



Photo: Michigan Golfer Archives

**Nick Berklich was a long-time Warwick Hills CC Professional.**

*This interview with Nick Berklich was first published in the August, 1998 issue of the Michigan Golfer.*

**M**ichigan's big-time PGA Tour championship, the Buick Open, celebrates the 40th anniversary of its rollout at Warwick Hills Golf & Country Club, August 6-9, and only three courses have been a part of the professional tour longer than Warwick Hills.

The Augusta National began hosting the Masters Tournament in 1934, Colonial Country Club in Fort Worth, Texas, began hosting the Colonial National Invitation (now Mastercard Colonial) in 1946, and Pebble Beach began hosting the Bing Crosby Clambake (now AT&T National Pro-Am) in 1947.

Feeling Flint needed another private club besides Flint Golf

Club, five formed Warwick Realty in 1955. Those five — Chuck Kelly, Homer Strahle, Bill Gregor, Ed Titus and Vic Ryden — put down \$2,500 each and convinced 60 others to invest the same amount. They bought 320 acres of mainly farm land south of Flint, in Grand Blanc and most of the 65 bought a lot for another \$3,000.

Then they sold memberships for \$1,650 and hired James Gilmore

Harrison, a Pennsylvanian who worked as a teamster and then as a foreman for Donald Ross from 1921-27. Warwick Hills is the only course Harrison designed in Michigan and it opened in June, 1957.

Nick Berklich, Warwick's golf professional ever since the 1965 model Buick and honored by Warwick members with a lifetime membership in the club, sat down with Michigan Golfer's contributing editor Jack Berry to talk about the Michigan "home" for the world's best golfers.

**Michigan Golfer:** Size up Warwick Hills as a tournament test.

**Berklich:** It's great for competition. Even if a player has a four shot lead going into the back nine, he's not safe. If he doesn't play aggressively, someone could shoot 30, 31 back there, maybe even 29 — that's been done seven times on the back. (The non-tournament record for the back nine is 28 by Denis Watson in the 1988 pro-am)

A lot of guys have lost the tournament because they didn't

play aggressively back there. It's probably one of the biggest swings on the Tour, where a player can make up a lot of ground in nine holes. A lot of people around the country I talk to say it's one of the most interesting to watch because of that. And the television ratings reflect it; it's one of the highest rated outside of the majors.

**Michigan Golfer:** Where does the attack start? On the short par 4 12th (335 yards)?



Photo by Carter Sherline / Frog Prince Studios

Tiger Woods in the tournament was pure magic at the ticket office.

**Berklich:** No, it starts as soon as they make the turn. The 10th (401 yards) is there for the taking. The green faces the player and he has a relatively short iron in there. Our 11th (190 yards) is not a real tough par 3. I would say just about every hole on the back side is a birdie hole. That's why the numbers are so low. They can tuck the pins but if the players hit the shots and they're aggressive, the greens are so good that the players just marvel at their condition.

**Michigan Golfer:** At the time, Robert Wrenn's 26 under par 262 in 1987 was one shot off the all-time PGA Tour record for low score, held by Ben Hogan and Mike Souchak, and Wrenn won by seven shots. Low scores are a tradition at the Buick but how do you explain that?

**Berklich:** Those things happen. He was in a zone that particular week and that's how good these Tour players are. He played extremely aggressive from the get-go. He had a feel for the course and a feel for the game which has never been repeated in his career.

**Michigan Golfer:** What is the best single round you know of by one of your members?

**Berklich:** We have some young members who played on college teams but none have done better than 68 or 69. And that's in regular play, not championship play.

**Michigan Golfer:** What does that tell the golf fans?

**Berklich:** It tells them that professional golfers are so much better

than people give them credit for. We have pro-ams with the best pros in the state and if someone shoots 70 or 71, they usually win it. And I don't set the course even close to all the way back, it's 6600 to 6700 yards. The Tour players are typically playing 7100 yards, back to 7150. They are head and shoulders above everyone else. Comparing it to some other sports, we are kids among giants, we're like high school basketball players to the NBA.

**Michigan Golfer:** Early in the Buick history, Warwick Hills was known as a long boring walk. Now players like Fred Couples, the 1994 champion, and Peter Jacobsen, the 1980 champion, have compared Warwick Hills to the courses they grew up playing. What happened?

**Berklich:** It was in the later 1960s and we had a young aggressive board of directors. They were concerned because they'd heard through the grapevine that our golf course, even though the purse was right, needed a little tweaking. The condition of our greens wasn't real good. They were very, very hard and they were all shaped the same way — two bunkers in the front and a narrow entrance and then they fattened out like a pear with a bunker in the back.

Every one was the same and they were straightaway holes with no doglegs. It was a very, very long monotonous golf course and the greens wouldn't receive a ball. You had a lot of bad things going for you. The board decided changes were needed to not only improve the course for the tournament but for the club as well.

The board asked Mr. Kelly, who was a member at Pine Tree (in Florida and had a house on Warwick's 16th hole) to serve on the committee. He was a very good friend of Joe Lee and persuaded Joe to come up and look at our golf course.

I was the young pro at the time and went along with Mr. Kelly and Mr. Lee when they looked at the golf course. Chuck asked him if he could do anything with it and Joe said "Oh, this has fantastic possibilities. All it takes is money?" Chuck said "That's one thing we don't have."

But we proceeded to do everything and it cost \$180,000. I recently talked to Joe Lee and asked what it would cost today to do what he did then. He said you probably couldn't get out of it for \$4 million.

He built all the greens to USGA specifications, changed the location of some greens, expanded the tees, and put in big Augusta-type bunkers. Architecturally we have one of the real hidden gems in Michigan. It's not only good for PGA Tour play, it's good for member play. We have tees for ladies, seniors, juniors, regular membership and PGA Tour play and not many courses can say that.

Joe also has been back several times and told us where to plant trees and that's so much help. We're really happy with everything that Joe has done.

**Michigan Golfer:** What is your favorite hole?

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**John Daly** was super impressive in his first Buick, hitting a driver and a 5-iron to the 7th green, a par 5 584 yard hole.

**Berklich:** The 18th. I think it's one of the great finishing holes in golf. You can see everything from the tee, every possible problem you might have. You must drive the ball in the fairway and you get an extra 50 yards because it's so firm.

In the old days it was kept much softer. The new technology has given the players a lot of length and the grasses are much better than the old days and don't need as much water. Everything is better, much better. The ball and the clubs are so much better.

In the old days, before Joe Lee, a player could drive into the ninth fairway to stay away from the out of bounds on the left of the 18th. And there was only one splash bunker between the ninth and 18th. Now there's a big fairway bunkers and a lot of trees. The hole probably was 30 yards longer originally because the tee was back farther and so was the green and there weren't any pine trees. It's a much better hole now.

**Michigan Golfer:** The Buick and big galleries are synonymous. How did that begin?

**Berklich:** When Buick started the tournament, it wanted it to be a community event so tickets cost only \$1 and parking was free. We were one of the first tournaments to draw big, big galleries. Whole families came. And we had beer sales in cans, not in cups. I remember players saying they'd never seen anything like it; they were ankle-deep in cans going through the grove (where the 10th, 11th, eighth and 17th holes converge). The cans were constant noise but players learned to block that out. A lot of players said they'd played in National Opens and not seen that many people. I'd estimate we were drawing 20,000 to 25,000 people.

**Michigan Golfer:** How about Tiger Woods' crowds last year?

**Berklich:** I never thought we'd be able to handle the crowds that Tiger brought. I'd seen big crowds with Greg Norman but they were nothing like Tiger Woods. We had a different type gallery. We had people who wanted to see Tiger

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The 18th is Berklich's favorite hole and one of Jim Furyk's as he putts out for his 2003 win.

Woods who knew nothing about golf. I had ladies coming through the golf shop wearing high heels and long skirts. I said where you going? "I'm going to see Tiger Woods." I told them they'd better get some different shoes or take off the high heels because they wouldn't be able to walk very far. And I'm not talking about a few people. A lot of people had never been to a golf tournament before. And we didn't cut off our gate sales.

We had the biggest galleries I had ever seen. In fact, we had the biggest galleries on Thursday and Friday that I'd ever seen for any weekend round. My sales (hats, caps, shirts and other souvenirs)

indicated that. I set a record Thursday and broke that record Friday and broke that record Saturday. Then I ran out of merchandise. That was fun.

**Michigan Golfer:** There was a dark period after Dave Hill won the 1969 Buick. General Motors ordered the Buick Division to drop the tournament and it didn't return until 1978. What was that time like?

**Berklich:** I don't know the politics but whoever was in charge didn't think they were getting their money's worth through golf and they dropped it. And we lost it. The Tour lost it, the club lost it and

the community lost it. It was very depressing for this club. We got down to 80 members.

It was a very, very tough period. We had 5-6 years where it was touch and go. We survived that and we're very, very strong today. When we came back, it was wonderful because Warwick Hills became a growth organization. We built a new clubhouse, we improved our greens, we improved our irrigation, we improved our practice area, we improved everything to do with golf and added a whole lot of capital improvements and there is such a demand today that we have 32 people on the waiting list with a \$25,000 mem-

bership fee and I never thought I'd see that.

**Michigan Golfer:** It takes behind-the-scenes people to make tournaments successful, too. Who have the major Buick players been?

**Berklich:** Jerry Rideout and Bob Coletta have been big. Jerry was Buick's Director of Public Relations and was the General Chairman of the tournament for years. He was a master at public relations and had the vision to bring in celebrities for the pro-am. The celebrities, like Perry Como, George Gobel, Ray Bolger, the Fan Fare cartoonist Walt Ditzen, Tom Harmon and Alan Hale Jr., attracted people other than golfers. Those people saw how much the stars loved the game and that in turn got those non-golfers interested in the game. Jerry got the Buick a lot of national publicity. When Doug Ford was in the field, Jerry had the caddie bib read DOUG BUICK and that picture got a lot of play.

When the tournament was transferred from Buick public relations to the sales department, Bob Coletta did a study as to what sports people watched on television and how that segment related to buying automobiles. It showed that 90 percent of the people who watched golf tournaments were candidates to buy Buicks. Buick was sponsoring different events then and decided to concentrate on golf. Now there are four Buick tournaments, in San Diego, New York, Callaway Gardens, Ga., and here. And Buick is the official car of the PGA Tour. It's done wonders for sales and Coletta has gone from sales to the head of Buick.

**Michigan Golfer:** Billy Casper collected \$9,000 from the then record \$52,000 purse for winning the first Buick. This year's winner will take \$324,000 from the \$1.8 million pot. How else have things changed?

**Berklich:** Everything is a business today. Players want to go out and have a quiet dinner. There are exceptions but in the old days everyone was out on Dort Highway. If they weren't at the Shorthorn of The Embers, they were over at the Karasel on Grand Traverse. Lionel Hebert used to play his horn there. George Karas would buy their dinners and everyone in Flint would try to be there that week. It was the players' second home and all the Buick people would be there too. The players went out in groups but today, if you see anyone out, they're by themselves or with their families. They want private dining; they don't want to be bothered. But in those days, they were just regular people.

**Michigan Golfer:** Are you sorry to see those days go?

**Berklich:** Yes and no. Nowadays the public is so demanding, not only in golf but other sports too and they need their quiet time. I think today's golfers are much better athletes than they used to be. They really work at it. They're in that fitness trailer, they have sound eating habits, no cigarettes or alcohol. They are trained athletes and they have to perform that way or they won't be out there that long. The difference between making the cut, making money and winning

isn't that far apart. The scores have gone down.

We've seen what's happened here. The course hasn't changed that much, maybe two shots. But I remember several times having a chance to make the cut myself back in the 60s if I broke 150. Now if you aren't under par, (144) you don't make the cut. That's what the quality of the field has gone to.

**Michigan Golfer:** Your thoughts on some players — Sam Snead, Tony Lema, Greg Norman, Fred Couples, Tiger Woods, David Duval, Justin Leonard, John Daly.

**Berklich:** Sam was always special to us here at Warwick. He is very good friends with one of the founders of our club, Chuck Kelly, and came here other than playing in the tournament, just to play with Mr. Kelly. You hear all these stories about being tight but Sam is very good to the club professionals and the tour players. He came here back in the 60s and a fellow who used to caddie for him in the North & South tournament at Pinehurst wired him here and said he had fallen on hard times, that he'd broken a leg, couldn't and wondered if Sam might be able to help him.

Sam came into the pro shop and said "Do you have anyone going down to Western Union. I have to wire some money." I took it down. It was \$250. And back in the 60s, \$250 was like \$1,000 today.

Another time his nephew, J.C. was on the putting green here before the Buick, complaining about his game. This was in the





Tiger and his 50th win.

60s and he'd just come out on Tour and wasn't doing good. He was barely making cuts and wasn't making enough to support his family. He was really down on himself. Sam said "C'mon, you have to keep playing and playing and playing. You're a good player, you're going to make it out here." And Sam reached in his pocket and pulled out a whole wad of money, gave it to J.C. and said "Keep playing."

A couple years ago Greg

Norman was here and was signing autographs as he walked from the range to the putting green. He'd take a hat, sign it and hand it behind him as he kept walking. A man brought his grandson to the tournament and bought one of those Greg Norman hats. The grandson handed it to Norman but when Norman signed and handed it behind him, someone else grabbed it. The grandfather came in after the tournament and asked if we could do anything, that it wasn't the price of the hat as much as his

grandson wanted the memento. So I telephoned Greg's office in Florida and explained it to the woman who answered. She said to write a letter, that Greg liked to take care of that himself. I did and I didn't think anything of it after that and then one blustery fall day, this man came into the golf shop and introduced himself, introduced me his grandson and said Greg had written the nicest letter to him, sent him an autographed hat and said he'd see him at next year's Buick Open. All these players are like

that. They're very dedicated to golf and what the PGA Tour stands for.

Tony Lema (two-time winner) was a Damon Runyon character. He had the game to win many, many major tournaments and it was just tragic that he was killed. Everyone liked him.

Tiger Woods has probably done to the game what Bobby Jones said Nicklaus did — played a game with which he was not familiar. I've never seen anyone generate so much power in the golf swing. Will it hold up over time? I don't know. I've also watched David Duval, another of the Young Lions, and I'm very impressed with him. He gets the job done and he is sneaky long. And he has a little arc compared to Woods, a lot of rhythm and balance.

Justin Leonard has the heart of a lion — he's one guy you sure wouldn't want to get cornered by. More nerve than Willie Sutton — he could rob the bank. It's unfortunate that Steve Elkington has had so many physical ailments. There isn't much difference in the top players. It's who wants it more that week and it all boils down to putting.

John Daly played here and missed the cut the week before he won the PGA Championship in Indianapolis but he didn't leave without making a big impression. One of our members, Harvey Shaprow, came in the pro shop on Thursday or Friday and he says "Nick! You've got to see this! You won't believe it, He hit a driver and 5-iron to the seventh hole (par 5, 584 yards). He almost drove the



Photo by Carter Sherline / Frog Prince Studios

**Justin Leonard**

ball on the ninth green (413 yards)! C'mon, you gotta see it!"

So I got a cart and we went to the 13th hole (par 5, 548 yards). He hit the ball 40 or 50 yards by the tree and hit a 7-iron to the green. The next hole (322 yards) he takes out a driver and drives it

over the green and almost into the halfway house. I said I'm going in Harvey, I've seen enough.

**Michigan Golfer:** Nick, you've seen it all.

*Jack Berry has been covering the Buick Open since 1958. MG*