



Golfing Statesboro's Greats!

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Photography by Geoff L Johnson

With golf such a part of the Southern culture, the conversation always comes around to 'Who are some of the best players from this area who've ever played?' Although several names will be tossed about, invariably it comes down to at least these three: Thomas 'Dude' Renfrow, Lewis 'Bo' Hook, and Charles 'Bo' Fennell. The only similarity of the three is that none of them are generally known by their given first names.

Renfrow, now 84, fell in love with the game of golf as a caddy when he was a youngster growing up in his native Charlotte, North Carolina. "I've always loved the game of golf. It was just one of those things that kind of came natural for me," he recalls.

Renfrow played at Wingate College for a couple of years and soon became one of the top amateurs in the country. His biggest thrill came in 1953 when he was the Southeast's lowest qualifier for the U. S. Open. Three hundred players vied for seven spots, and he remembers the next morning's headline saying "Cool Dude Cools Billy Joe," meaning Billy Joe Patton, a fellow North Carolinian, who had led the Masters as an amateur in the 3rd round just the year before. During that 1953 U.S. Open at Pittsburgh's Oakmont Country Club, Dude played in a foursome behind Ben Hogan. "That was quite a thrill – watching one of the legends of this game and being able to play the same course right behind him."

In that same year, Renfrow, who owned a cotton company and was part owner of Sunny South Pecan Company, moved to Statesboro. He won the Mary Caulder Open in Savannah, and over the ensuing years, he would win the Forest Heights Club Championship nine times!

He feels the game has changed very little since he began playing many years ago. "The only difference is in the equipment," Dude says. "Today's clubs are so much better than they used to be, although I used the same set of Wilson clubs for 30 years until I quit playing about three years ago. I didn't see the need to change." Renfrow's lowest rounds ever were a pair of 59s. Once in Metter and the other time at his home course at Forest Heights in Statesboro.

Hook, now 81, actually started playing the game later than most top-flight golfers do. "I started playing when I was 35," said Hook. "I had always been an athlete, so it came naturally for me." Bo had been a star football player at Georgia Tech and understood it would take practicing for long hours to get his game to the point he wanted it to be. In just three years of playing the game, he became a par golfer.

Ironically, his lowest round ever is a 67, which may be a surprise to many, but his game has been so consistent. Local golfing lore tells of Hook shooting a 68 at age 68 on the Forest Heights course, and he's shot his age each year since then. "I'm 81 now," Hook says, "and I'm going to have to work hard to shoot an 81 this year."

Hook, who owned Robbins Packing Company, has had some memorable golf highlights. He won the Southeastern Amateur Invitational on two occasions and played in the 1962 U. S. Open and the British Open from 1960–62. He proudly mentions that he's "played two of Scotland's most historic courses, St Andrews and Carnoustie."

Does he have a secret to success? No. Just "practice...practice...and hard work...if you want to improve your game," Hook observes.

Fennell, the only one of the big three to turn professional, was an outstanding golfer from the time he began playing the game as a youngster. He played on Georgia Southern's golf team from 1987–1991, where he was an All-American in 1990. At one point in the 1991 NCCA's, he led the field.

"It's not quite as glamorous as you might think, out there on the tour," said Fennell. "Sometimes you don't win enough to pay your expenses for that week, and, of course, there is the fact that you miss your family. The tour was a good experience for me, though, and I got to know some great golfers."

Fennell, currently the CFO at First Southern National Bank, is the new chairman of the Schenkel E-Z-GO Collegiate Invitational, which will be held at Forest Heights Country Club March 17–19. Bo says his favorite golf experience was playing at the Augusta National Golf Club, a course revered by golfers everywhere. "There is no feeling for a golfer like standing on the first tee at Augusta National. It's quite a sight to behold," he said. Fennell has played four rounds of golf at this beloved home of The Masters. "I shot 73–74–75–76 – I'm proud of that." Fennell concluded.

Though this area's big three, "Dude" Renfrow, "Bo" Hook, and "Bo" Fennell, have little in common in their style of play or where the game has taken them through the years, the trio does express one similar belief. Their love of the game has brought them tremendous enjoyment through the years. We can almost hear them laugh with familiarity upon hearing golfing great Sam Snead's comment: "If I had cleared the trees and drove the green, it would've been a great shot."

Bo Hook, Thomas "Dude" Renfrow, and Charles "Bo" Fennell

