

This is another chapter in a series from Frederick W. Box's manuscript, "The 20th Century NYSGA".
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NYSGA History: Chapter 5

The 1940's

Ray Billows dominated this decade with five titles and two runners-up. He started the run at Onondaga CC in Syracuse in 1940 with probably his most satisfying victory over former U.S. Amateur winner Willie Turnesa of Elmsford by a lopsided 8 and 6.

The Poughkeepsie printing salesman came into the tournament after being the runner-up in the 1939 U.S. Amateur where he lost to Marvin Ward 7 and 5 at North Shore, Ill.

Turnesa led the 129 in the field with a three under par 69 to win the medal at the 6,531 yard, par 72 course with a 77 needed to make the championship flight. Billows and Larry Pevik of the host club had 71's and Tommy Goodwin was in the middle of the field with a 76.

In sweltering heat, Billows and Turnesa won their way into the finals which was watched by a gallery reaching 2,500 at times. Billows' record was: defeated Jack Hendry of Syracuse, 6 and 5; James Quinn, Albany, 6 and 5; Arnold Zimmerman, Hornell and Princeton, the Eastern Interscholastic Champion, 1up; Alex Banazek, Syracuse, 1up and Turnesa, 8 and 6. Willie gained the final over Fred Allen of Rochester 3 and 2.

The "Cinderella Man", a name given Billows after his first victory in 1935, played what one writer called "sensational golf, one of the greatest exhibitions of perfect play" in shooting nine under par for the 30 holes.

The Poughkeepsie player took the lead at the third hole, was 2up at the time, 3up at 18 and 6up at 27 and was two under par for the last three holes. Turnesa won only two holes in the morning 18, both with birdies, and only one hole while losing four in the afternoon nine. Only his putting kept Willie from further humiliation, having 27 in the morning to 30 by Billows.

This tournament initiated the Senior Men's Championship that was played along with the Amateur for 50-year-olds and up. Leroy C. Crim of Vestal Hills CC, Binghamton, defeated Russ Christian of Onondaga 2 and 1 for the title.

Billows claimed his fourth championship on July 24, 1941, at the Troy CC in a field cut by pre-war gasoline rationing. He had to come from behind to edge Tommy Pierce of Troy, 22 and four times Vermont champion and former Eastern Interscholastic titlist.

Arthur Atkinson Jr. of Winged Foot, the 1939 runner-up, was medalist with a 70, followed by Neil White of Port Chester, 72; Joe Ruszas of Albany and Doug Ford of Green Valley at 73 and always-present Tommy Goodwin at 77. It took a 79 to enter the championship.

Billows advanced: over Charles Martin, Troy, 5-4; Jack Creavy, Tuckahoe, 3-1; T Colwell

Thomas, Troy, 1up; Goodwin, 1up and Pierce, 1up.

Bill Stark of Syracuse knocked out Ford, twice state junior victor and future pro great, 2 and 1. Pierce gained the final by defeating Mid O'Hare of Syracuse 2 and 1. Billows had another struggle with Goodwin with both shooting 35 on the front nine, each winning two holes. Ray regained the lead at 16, lost 17 to a birdie and won when Tommy took a six on the home hole.

Both finalists shot 35 on the morning nine but Pierce took the lead at 18 and led through 27 where he was three up. He faded on the fourth nine losing three of the next seven holes for the tie. Billows won 34 with a great recovery shot from the rough and a par. They halved the last two holes. Pierce had 73 in the morning to 74 for Billows, who recorded a 75 to 77 in the afternoon.

The 1942 championship turned out to be another Cinderella story with Billows the victim this time. Alex Stevenson, a Niagara Falls chemical plant clerk, called a 5 to 1 shot, won his bout with Billows in the finals 5 and 4.

The four-time champion set a course record with a 67, medal, three under par, for the rebuilt Niagara Falls CC, 6,500 yard, par 70 layout. Walter Andzel of Buffalo followed with 71, Doug Ford of Harrison and Pierce Russell of Troy at 73. Stevenson had a 74.

The eventual victor advanced over H.C. Smith, Niagara Falls, 7 and 6; Ed Janiak, Syracuse, 3 and 1; had to come from behind to edge Andzel in 20 after being four down at 7; and Russell 2 and 1 from two down at the turn.

Meanwhile Billows ousted Joe Biasone, Syracuse, 7-5; Vincent Murianyi, Niagara Falls, 4-3 and had four birdies against Ford, 20, 7 and 5.

Stevenson completed his upset victory by leading from the start and was 1up at 18 despite Billows' 34 coming home. Alex moved to 2up at 27 and roared home with three consecutive birdies, a 2 at 30, a 3 at 31 and a conceded bird at 32 when Billows' tee shot went out of bounds.

The World War II years cancelled USGA tournaments but NYSGA continued play by holding both men's and women's amateurs during the same week at the Lake Placid Club with the Men's Seniors again as part of the Amateur.

Billows came out on top again and reached the finals for the seventh time in nine years, winning five times.

Mal Galletta of St. Albans and Peter Ladislav of Bayside tied for the medal with 71's, one under par. Billows had a 74, while Stevenson, now an Air Force private, shot 79 in his defending try. The Bayside golfer claimed the

medal in a playoff.

The four-time champion, playing superbly, had an easy time in reaching the finals: 7-5 over Stan Mack, Syracuse; 3-2 over Joe Biasone, Syracuse; 6-5 over James T. Smith, Baldwin, LI; and 6-5 over William Szustak, a Buffalo policeman. An example of his dominance, against Szustak he was out in 34 and was five under at 13.

Joe Ruszas, 25, an Albany machinist, was the victim in the finals, losing a respectable 2 and 1. Billows was 1up at nine when both shot 37's but Joe tied it at 18, shooting 35 to 36 for Billows, who took a 1up lead at 27. Ruszas evened the score at 31 but Ray birdied 33 and 35 for the win.

Despite the war-time restrictions, 96 made it to Lake Placid in 1944 where Joe Ruszas proved his 1943 showing was no exception. He proceeded to set the record for margin of victory.

Galletta and Ladislav repeated as medalists, each shooting par 72's.

On his way to the title Ruszas defeated: Vin Murianyi, Buffalo, 4-3; J.A. Nicholson, Plandome, 20 holes; Stan Podalak, Syracuse, 4-2; Ralph Strafacci, Plandome, 1up and Steve Doctor, Buffalo, 13 and 11.

The lanky Albany golfer had an 8up lead at 18 when he shot 36-36=72 to 79 for Doctor and then ended it quickly in the afternoon with five wins in seven holes.

With the war in Europe at a close, 132 players were attracted to Oak Hill CC, Rochester, in 1945. Billows resumed play, coming over on leave from his Army assignment near Utica, to claim his sixth title.

Peter Ladislav of Bayside, LI won the medal for the third straight year, this time with a 73. Dan Gormley, Schenectady, a former Junior champ, and Billows had 74's. Ruszas had a lackluster 79.

Billows took this route to the title: def. Ted Sepanski, Utica, 4-3; Bill Chapin, Rochester, 1up and Harry Bill of Rochester, 4-2.

Officials called the weather conditions the worst for a final to date and the final nine was played in a torrential downpour. Despite the rain, Billows shot a par 72 to Bill's 75 in the morning to go 4up. The Cornell and Finger Lakes Champion made a comeback in the afternoon, winning three holes by 27. After Ray surged back to win three of the next four holes, play was halted for an hour when the players putted with 4 and 5 irons on the puddled greens.

After the greens were cleared during the delay, Billows parred the next three holes to claim the victory.

