

GOLF'S HIS BAG



Max Bechler / Staff

Foothills-area resident Barry Mates started his golf-equipment collection, which includes some 50,000 balls, after he played pool against Jackie Gleason at 11 years old.

Foothills resident steers course all his own in pursuit of memorabilia

By Mark Stewart

He has 450 putters and 50,000 golf balls, give or take a few thousand. His barbecue tools have golf grips. He lives in a 3,000-square-foot house, not counting the garage, in the Catalina Foothills. Counting the garage, his collection fills 1,000 square feet, occupying part or most of three rooms and two full walls of the two-car garage. The balls are neatly arranged, alphabetically, in racks, most of which

he has made. He has a section of professional players' signature balls. He has 72 Jack Nicklaus, 69 Arnold Palmer, all different models, all in chronological order. He has an "Ernie Ball," a range ball, named for a longtime teaching pro whose stops included Tucson. Looking for a Ted Kroll from the 1950s? A Johnny Revolta from the '40s. A Gene Sarazen or a Walter Hagen from even earlier? He's got 'em all. And "Golf ball" Barry Mates is al-

ways on the lookout for more. He has a Web page—www.golfballbarry.com50—and he's in constant e-mail contact with hundreds of collectors worldwide. "The postage often costs more than the balls are worth," Mates laments. Last week, the 69-year-old Tucson retiree was eagerly awaiting a shipment of 800 balls from an Irish diver who scours the Emerald Isle's water hazards for errant shots. Jim Murray at Play It Again Sports notifies Mates whenever he buys a set

of clubs in a bag that has balls inside. Canine masters are another source. Thanks to one at Desert Highlands, he has personal professional balls from PGA Tour stars, including Tiger Woods. Andrew Mutch, who is in charge of the United States Golf Association's museum in Far Hills, N.J., has never heard of an individual golf ball collection as large as Mates'. Jim Murray at Play It Again Sports notifies Mates whenever he buys a set

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"You'd need a house to contain 50,000 balls," said Mutch, very accurately. "We used to collect logo balls, but we gave up after a few thousand. We found it pointless. You could collect a billion. We stick to older balls here, gutta percha and feathery, or balls with some history. We only have a few thousand on display." Mates is a 10-handicapper at Skyline Country Club. In his younger days, he won three club championships. Skyline members keep an eye out for memorabilia and pick it up for him on their vacations.

Logo and personalized balls are a specialty. His collection includes the logos of 17,000 golf courses and clubs worldwide, including from Russia, Bali, China and South Korea. He even has one from Uzbekistan, "a course built by Korean investors," he points out with a note of bemusement.

He has presidential balls that started with Franklin D. Roosevelt and cover every administration since, except for the current one. He even has a Titleist Professional 100 stamped "Juice," which once belonged to O.J. Simpson. His bar displays logo balls from seemingly every brewer and distiller in the world. Some of them contain liquor.

Then there's the other stuff. The doorknobs in his den are baseball-size golf balls. He has a ball, still in the package, that supposedly screams when it's hit. He has a gag putter that includes a level and, if the group ahead is playing too slowly, a horn. He has tees that date back to the 1920s, including ones with plastic backs that prevent slices and hooks. By hitting the plastic before the ball, the spin is reduced and the tee shot flies straight. That one is not sanctioned by the USGA.

There are wooden practice balls from the '20s and a 1890 "Callanthy Jane" model putter that Spalding manufactured to commemorate Bobby Jones' Grand Slam.

Some stuff is pre-war — pre Civil War. There's a gutta percha ball circa 1860, so old that the ball it replaced for 19th-century golfers was stuffed with feathers and known as a "feathery." The gutta percha and a newer model, from 1880, with dimples that protrude, reside amid a substantial number of hickory-shafted clubs.

Mates got his collecting start in show business. His father, a jeweler who dealt with celebrities in New York, had bragged to Jackie



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Golf explosion: Barry Mates has many old golf balls, two of which he is holding. From left to right, he has the hard core of an early ball that exploded, the soft, rubber core of a modern ball that exploded, a modern exploded ball and an early square-pattered ball which was filled with rubber bands.

Gleason about his then-11-year-old son's pool prowess. Gleason invited the Mateses to his famed roundhouse at Croton-on-Hudson in New York. Gleason, whom Mates recalled as a terrific pool player — "he did his own shots in 'The Hustler' — easily won the pool game, then presented the boy with one of his custom golf balls, a PGA, which he autographed.

"That sort of got me started," said Mates. Eighteen years later, Mates took up golf. On his first outing, he found a Worthington "Wonder Ball."

"That's interesting," he thought. He took it home and put it in a box. That was in 1969, and things have mushroomed from there.

Peter Booth, who works for Callaway Golf, became intrigued upon hearing of Mates' collection. When Annika Sorenstam shot a 59 at Moon Valley Country Club in Phoenix earlier this year, Callaway made up a limited number of Annika Sorenstam 59 balls, which included the scorecard on them. Booth sent five to Mates.

Mates also parts with balls — reluctantly. He has a vast number of balls displaying the Zippo lighter logo. A Japanese collector e-mailed him, in Japanese, inquiring as to what Mates had in the Zippo line. Mates had the e-mail translated, then e-mailed back, in English, what he had.

The Japanese man e-mailed back, this time in English, "I buy." Mates, who didn't really want to part with the

Zippos, hoped to discourage the collector with this succinct e-mail: "\$5 each."

The reply from Tokyo: "I send check." Mates devotes two to three hours a day to his collection, cataloging, sorting, corresponding. He can't pass a garage sale without stopping to see if any golf equipment is involved. And whenever he and his wife, Sharon Chalmson, are on vacation, no matter where, he'll spend one day in pursuit of additions to his collection.

Things could be much worse, says Chalmson, a real estate agent who jokes that "my greatest fear is that he'll die first. Then what will I do with all this stuff?"

"A lot of women who work and have a husband who's retired worry about what he's doing all day. I know where Barry is. He is at a yard sale, the Salvation Army, Play It Again Sports or on the Internet with other collectors."

"Sure, it's a little much. He's a pack rat. This was supposed to be a golf ball collection. Do you see anything else? Sure you do. I never know what new 'treasure' will have arrived at home when I'm at work. But he's not doing anybody any harm."

And Mates isn't as extreme as some collectors. "One, who is called Doc, took a laptop on his honeymoon," said Chalmson.

"When his wife was asleep, he was bidding for golf stuff on e-Bay."