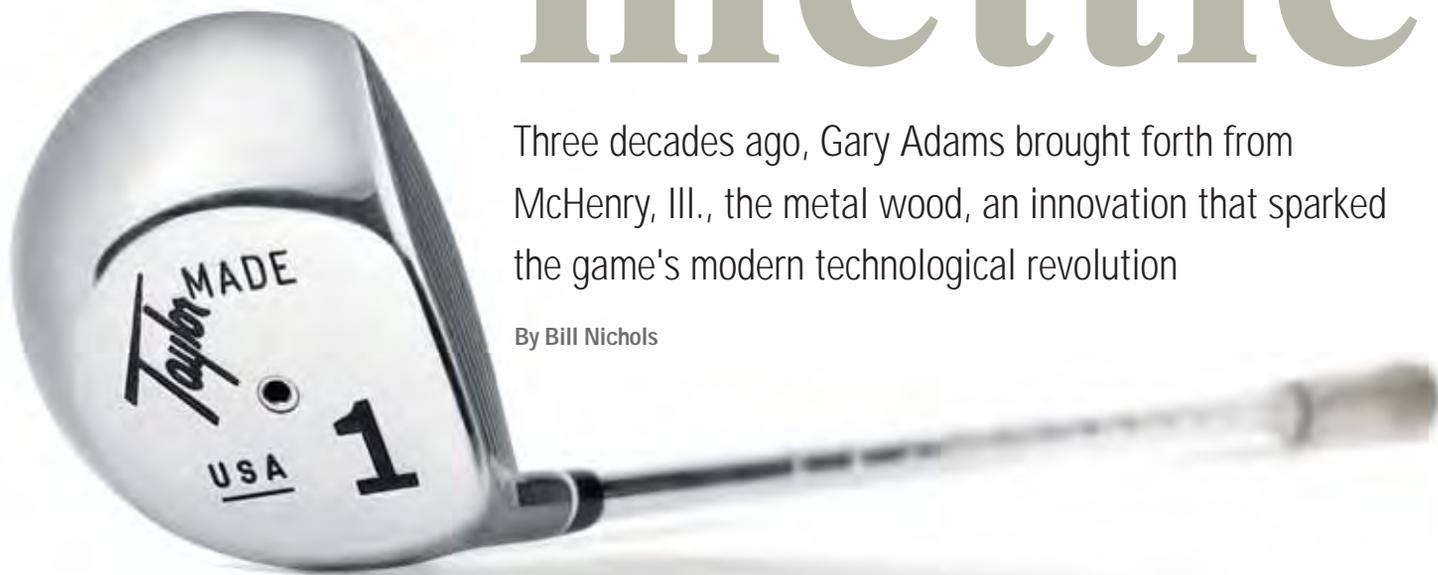


HEAVY mettle



Three decades ago, Gary Adams brought forth from McHenry, Ill., the metal wood, an innovation that sparked the game's modern technological revolution

By Bill Nichols

Starting his third year on the PGA Tour, Ron Streck was hitting practice balls in preparation for the 1979 MONY Tournament of Champions when a man walked across the range carrying four homemade golf clubs. Streck soon realized these were the metal woods that young inventor Gary Adams had told him about a few months before.

What the 24-year-old Streck didn't know was that the man was holding something of historical significance. That realization came about 30 seconds later, when Streck made contact with the odd-looking driver. The ball soared, almost clearing the fence about 260 yards away.

"I remember looking around to see if anybody saw it," Streck recalled recently. "I almost felt guilty. I thought, my goodness, this thing is long."

Golf has come a long way since. Thirty years after its advent, the metal wood—golf's most obvious oxymoron—created by Adams, along with plastic spikes, constitute what likely are the two most profound changes in golf equipment usage over the last quarter of a century. The club Adams began selling from the trunk of his car transformed the equipment industry, ushering in an era of specialization.

The metal wood changed how golf is played and redirected the evolution of technology. Wherever the game is played, from scraggly practice ranges to the grandeur of major championships, golfers have embraced the onslaught of custom equipment brought on by the metal wood. Anyone who has found the sweet spot with a 460cc titanium-faced driver can tip their cap to Adams, the "father of the metal wood."

Adams, the son of a club professional from McHenry, Ill., toiled for years to get his creation off the drawing board and onto retail shelves. He pioneered three companies—TaylorMade, Founders Club and McHenry Metals—before he died of cancer in 2000 at age 56. But he made a lasting imprint.



Gary Adams

In 1979, Adams took out a \$24,000 loan on his house to found TaylorMade, leasing a 6,000-square-foot building in McHenry. The company had three employees and one product: a 12-degree driver cast of stainless steel. Adams maintained a strong belief in that item and it paid off, from \$47,000 in sales in 1979 to \$1 billion in 2006.

He altered the mindset of golfers. Players who kept the same persimmon driver in their bag for a

decade were persuaded to change, first through word of mouth, then by results. Streck was the first PGA Tour player to use the TaylorMade 1-wood in competition at that 1979 Tournament of Champions event. Jim Simons also began using one that season.

Adams charged \$39 for the first drivers he sold. TaylorMade's R9 driver, released a couple of months ago, costs \$399.

TaylorMade CEO Mark King considers metal woods "the biggest advancement in the game, ever. Gary

"I remember that first shot like it just happened . . . It took off like a flyer. I said, 'Holy cow, what was that?' I immediately put it in my bag."

—Ron Streck

changed the consumer's buying habits because up until that time, people had always bought the full set—woods, irons and a putter. All of a sudden, it was OK to buy just that one club."

Adams left Milton (Wis.) College when he was 22 to sell driving range supplies for Wittek Golf Company. At the time, many driving ranges offered metal woods, but those aluminum-magnesium models were built for durability, not performance. Adams began tinkering with drivers after two-piece balls came into vogue. He discovered that two-piece balls struck by metal clubs traveled farther than those hit by persimmon clubs. So he designed his metal wood and then formed a company to manufacture and market the creation.

But the golf industry didn't share his enthusiasm about the "Pittsburgh Persimmon" metal woods at the PGA Merchandise Show in 1979. Buyers were skeptical of the strange club made by a start-up company. Sean Toulan, an

original employee of TaylorMade, said many of those in attendance "laughed at the club, even sneered. But they underestimated Gary, and they certainly underestimated the impact of his club."

Undeterred, Adams continued his quest to get his clubs in the hands of PGA Tour players, reasoning that consumers would base their buying decisions on the brands used by tour winners. He had befriended Streck a few weeks after his debut victory at the 1978 Texas Open.

"Gary had three metal woods with him and he was asking players how much Titleist was paying them to carry their bag," Streck said. "I looked at him like he was crazy. I said, 'They're not paying me a thing.'

"He goes, 'If I match that, will you carry my bag?' He said, 'I've got these clubs and I just wanted to see if players would try them.' So he handed me one of the clubs. It looked really ugly, like an aluminum driving range club."

A few months later, Streck was on the range at the Tournament of Champions when a friend of Adams arrived with the metal woods.

"I remember that first shot like it just happened," Streck said. "I put the ball down in a shallow divot just to see if I could get it up in the air, and it took off like a flyer. I said, 'Holy cow, what was that?' I immediately put it in my bag."

Word quickly spread on tour, but the public was slow to convert. When Streck won the 1981 Houston Open, reduced to 54 holes because of rain, none of his drives were shown on TV. The next year, Simons beat Craig Stadler down the stretch to win the Bing Crosby Pro-Am at Pebble Beach, and sales took off, topping \$12 million in 1982. The following year, more tour professionals played a TaylorMade driver than any other brand, averaging 60 players per week. The company was acquired by Salomon S.A., the



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French ski equipment manufacturer, in 1984.

Soon enough, the revolution was in full swing. Other companies followed suit, spitting out their metal versions. Consumers were eager to pay good money for an extra 20 yards off the tee.

In 1991, Adams started Founders Club, so named since he became known as “the founder of the metal wood.” The company landed top players such as Tom Watson, Curtis Strange, Lanny Wadkins, Lee Janzen and Hale Irwin. Wadkins was using a persimmon in 1992 when he experimented with a Founders Club metal driver on the practice range at the Greater Hartford Open. He shot 65 in the pro-am, went on to win the tournament and kissed his persimmons goodbye.

“I didn’t even want to try the metal woods, but somebody convinced me to,” Wadkins said, laughing at the memory. “I said, ‘You’ve got to be kidding me.’ It looked really ugly, but

it was longer and it went straight, and I could move it both ways. I was kind of blown away. It was probably the best driving performance of my career.”

Adams sold his interest in Founders Club in 1996 and then started McHenry Metals Golf Company in 1997. The name paid tribute to his hometown. His father, Vale, was the head professional at McHenry Country Club. With Adams’s reputation and the technology behind the McHenry Metals TourPure driver, the company quickly rose to No. 1 on the Champions Tour.

As an innovator, Adams received plenty of accolades. The National Golf Foundation selected him as its man of the year in 1984. He also was presented the PGA of America’s highest honor, the Ernie Sabayrac Award, for his lifelong contribution to the golf industry, in 1995.

“Gary didn’t care about money,”

Streck said. “All he cared about was creating something players would use. I remember that first year in Milwaukee, after guys started using his metal woods, he filled up a golf bag with 100 of them and started selling them on the driving range. When I finished the front nine, I looked over and the bag was empty.”

On the 30th anniversary of the metal wood, TaylorMade launched the Gary Adams Award to honor a PGA of America professional for conducting programs that enhance character development through golf. The inaugural award went to Doug Doxsie, head professional at Seattle Golf Club. And in May, the inaugural Gary Adams Memorial Golf Tournament was staged at McHenry Country Club.

Fittingly, the event honoring “the father of metal woods” featured product demos. 🍏

Bill Nichols covers golf for the Dallas Morning News.



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