

ON PAR

Bettering His Age, Routinely

By CRAIG DOLCH

BOYNTON BEACH, Fla. — Most golfers can only dream of shooting their age.

Not 84-year-old Bob Harris. He expects to shoot his age, or below, every time he tees it up. So far, he has done it 893 times.

Harris actually gets upset when he fails to shoot his age. That may sound cocky, but just do the math.

"My handicap is a 4, so I better darn well hit it every time I play," said Harris, whose average score, by that calculation, should be 76. "I was excited the first time I shot my age, but I'm used to it by now; I expect to. I'm more interested in lowering my handicap."

Harris, a former dentist from Minnesota, showed last month he was not slowing down when he became the oldest player to qualify for the Florida Senior Amateur Championship, no small feat in that golf-crazy state.

Florida State Golf Association officials, borrowing a page from their United States Golf Association brethren with unique United States Open pairings, put Harris in the same group with Ed Garver of Land O'Lakes and Ed Craig of Orlando, the next-oldest players in the field, at 72 and 70. Neither whippersnapper made the cut, but Harris added to his age-defying total with rounds of 84 and 79 at his home course, Quail Ridge Country Club in Boynton Beach.

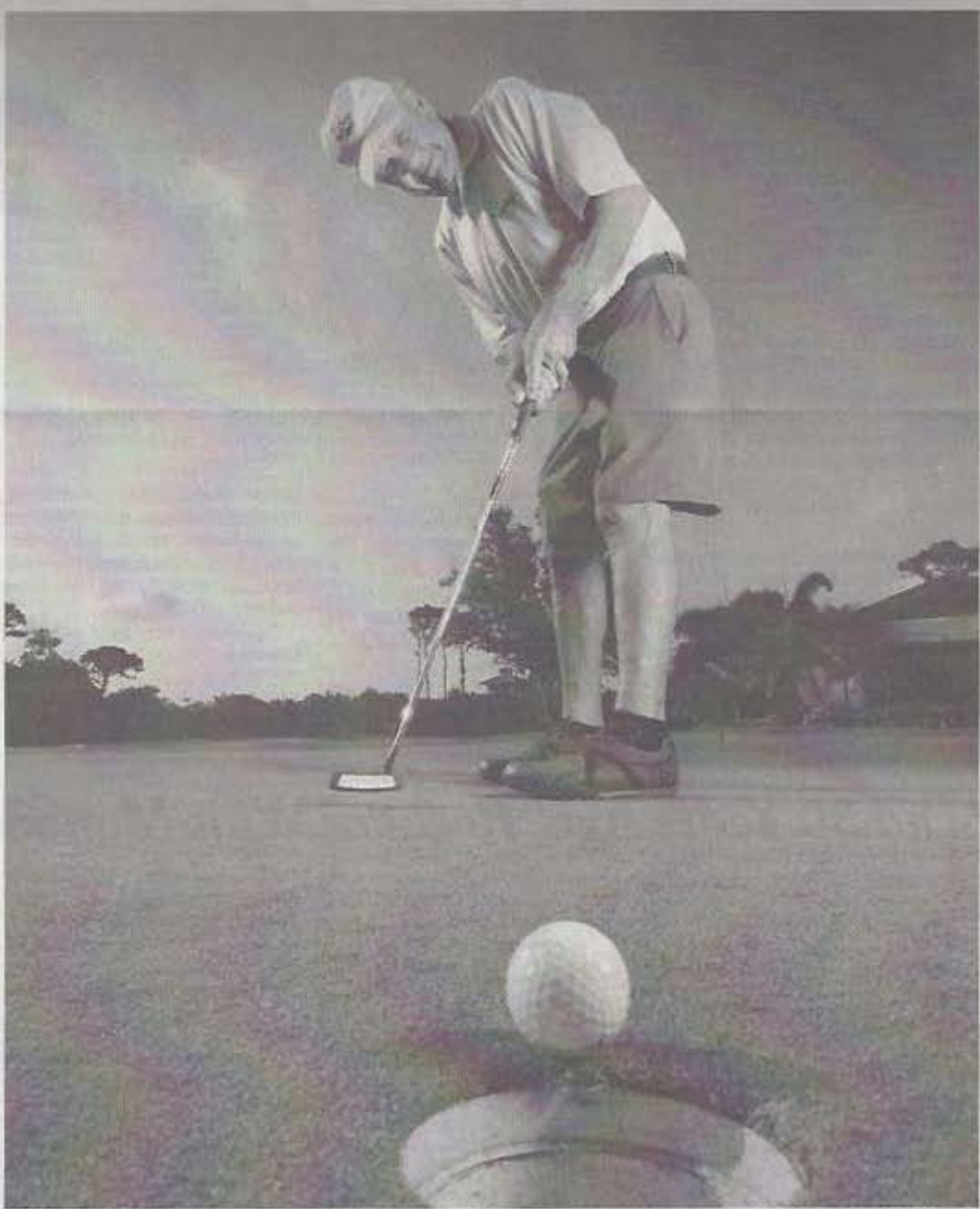
"He was outdriving me by plenty on almost every hole," Garver said. "Did it bother me to get out-driven by an 84-year-old? Not at all. What amazed me was his flexibility and that most of his drives were in the fairway. At our age, that's the key to playing good golf."

But what is the key to keeping a body fit enough to hit a ball 250 yards at an age when walking can be difficult? Harris credits his golfing longevity to a daily workout routine that uses skiing poles called picas to promote strength through range-of-motion exercises.

"I don't know of anybody my age who works out like I do," he said. "I have full flexibility and a full range of motion. That's my secret, if there needs to be a secret."

Harris has had a stout game for a long time. When he was 63, he finished runner-up in the 1992 United States Senior Amateur. (The next year, one of Harris's four sons, John, won the United States Amateur.) Bob Harris won the Minnesota Father-Son Tournament a dozen times: five with John, three with Rob, three with Scott and once with Mark. Bob and John also won the 1974 National Father-Son Tournament.

The elder Harris has been an athlete throughout his life, play-



JASON ARNOLD FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Bob Harris, 84, on his home course, Quail Ridge Country Club in Boynton Beach, Fla.

ing hockey and golf in Minnesota. He was the captain of the 1950 University of Minnesota hockey team, and he refereed hockey games into his mid-50s.

Harris's athletic DNA flowed through his five children. After winning the United States Amateur, John turned pro and played on the Champions Tour, winning once. Rob was a member of Minnesota's 1974 N.C.A.A. championship hockey team and the '76 United States Olympic hockey team. Scott was a two-time Minnesota State players champion. Nancy, who is married to the son of the former Yankees catcher John Blanchard, is a six-time Minnesota State amateur champion.

Harris has always had a little Jack LaLanne in him. When he was young, he would jump rope 1,000 times in five minutes. Push-ups and chin-ups, in the hundreds, were daily fixtures.

Harris didn't work out so fanatically because he was looking to become golf's Satchel Paige. He did the exercises because he spent 40 years bending over patients as a dentist.

"My father has been doing these kinds of exercises forever, because dentists notoriously have bad backs from spending all day

leaning over their patients," said Nancy Blanchard, a physical therapist. "We had to change his routine as he got older so his body would do more rotating, which is the key to a good golf swing."

Harris does more to prepare for his round than spending time on Quail Ridge's range or putting green. Every morning, he puts himself through a rigorous workout routine that would make Tiger Woods proud. Or sore.

Armed with a pair of 8-pound weights and the picas, Harris lies on the carpet of a room in his condominium and does a series of exercises designed to keep him strong and flexible. The 30-minute workout, which is cut into half on the three days a week he plays, leaves him exhausted.

"Everybody wants to win when they get to the first tee," John Harris said. "The reason my dad is so competitive is his preparation before he gets to the first tee. He just hates to lose."

Bob Harris admits that being too competitive is one of his faults. He would rather seriously prepare for a tournament than play a hit-and-giggle practice round. "He has mellowed some," said Phyllis, his wife of 61 years. "But when he goes for something, he goes at it 100 percent."

Maybe that explains why Harris was still inline skating into his late 70s before his family finally persuaded him to stop that activity after he took a spill. He will do just about anything — even recently becoming a vegan — to stay healthy so he can keep adding to his age-defying rounds.

What makes Harris's golf career more impressive is he spent most of his life living in a region with a four-month golf season. He went from one extreme to another when he and Phyllis moved to South Florida in 1998. Quail Ridge has more than 100 members with single-digit handicaps, most of them 60 or older. One of the club's members, Bill Ely, a retired Army lieutenant general, shot his age more than 2,000 times.

"Quail Ridge is like a fountain of youth in that you are playing against people who have defied Father Time for a long time," said Harris's close friend Ronnie Grove, a five-time United States Father-Son champion. "We push each other to keep playing great golf, no matter how old we are."

Harris has no doubt he will keep shooting his age for a long time. "Everybody laughs when I say this," he said, "but it's true: It gets easier every year."