



Duncan Elliott for The New York Times

These Left-Handed Golfers Are Content to Go Their Own Way

Outnumbered on courses and ill-served by pro shops, a society of British players happily defends their turf, and their cause, from the other side of the tee box.

ROTHERHAM, England — If anyone questions Alan Haines’s left-handed golf swing, he jokingly reminds them that he happens to be the one standing on the *right* side of the ball.

Haines, 73, was sitting in a clubhouse here recently, waiting for a fellow lefty to tee off on the first hole on what was a rather overcast day. After that player had driven on the downhill par 4, another golfer with a left-handed swing followed. Then another. And another — until, eventually, 36 consecutive players had teed off with their right shoulder toward the target.

“When you get a lot of us together,” said Chris Birch, 60, “people do notice.” Birch said his grandfather, father, son and grandson were (or are), like him, left-handed.

Another player, Frank McCabe, 84, concurred. “We’ve been playing and someone has said, ‘Crikey! I’ve just seen four left-handers playing together,’” McCabe said. “I’ve had to say, ‘Well, no; there’s actually 30 of us.’”

Haines, McCabe and Birch help run a solidaric group known as the [British Left Handed Golfers Association](#), or B.L.H.G.A., a decades-old society that aims to promote left-handedness in a sport whose sinistral figures don't necessarily reflect those of everyday society.



Alan Haines, right, has been a member of the British Left Handed Golfers Association for more than 40 years, and its secretary for nearly 30. Duncan Elliott for The New York Times

While around 10 percent of the world's population are believed to be left-handed, their presence on golf courses is far more rare. The P.G.A. of America [estimated](#) that only about five percent of PGA Tour members play left-handed, and since 1860, only four — Bob Charles, Mike Weir, Phil Mickelson and Bubba Watson — have won a major. Only one woman, [Bonnie Bryant in 1974](#), has ever won an L.P.G.A. event while playing left-handed.

Many left-handed players put such figures down to two main obstacles from years gone by: access to equipment and the availability of left-handed coaching.

“Going back 50, 60 years, you could never find a set of left-handed golf clubs in a pro shop,” Charles, who became the first left-handed major champion when he won the 1963 British Open, said in a telephone interview. “The clubs were not readily available.”

McCabe, the chairman of the B.L.H.G.A., described how, when he was taking up the sport in the 1960s, his local golf club required new players to submit to lessons with the club pro before playing a practice round with them. “He only made it through two holes,” McCabe said of the latter requirement, “and then we stopped because he wanted to try out my putter, which, to him, was the other way around.”

As a result of this environment, many lefties opted — and some still opt — to play right-handed, while a select few continued fighting the good fight for their preferred side of the ball.

Events celebrating left-handed golfers are hardly new; some of the earliest examples date to the 1920s, when lefty tournaments were reportedly held in New England and Washington state. The [National Association of Left-Handed Golfers](#) (N.A.L.G.) was established in 1936, resulting in an organization that today has around 270 individuals on its mailing list and local affiliates in 12 American states, according to Sid Miner, the chairman of the N.A.L.G.



Clockwise from top left: Chris Birch, Alan Lines, Alan Haines and Frank McCabe. Duncan Elliott for The New York Times

In Britain, a trophy for left-handed golfers known as the Mees Cup was first contested in the 1930s, before a newspaper notice attracted a number of lefties to meet on courses in and around London in the 1950s. These gatherings resulted in the founding of the B.L.H.G.A. in 1959.

Today, members pay an annual fee of £20 (about \$23) for the privilege of being part of a society that prioritizes camaraderie over competitiveness. The group plays on eight courses a year, each handpicked to even out travel for members, around half of whom are retired, and to make sure as many as possible can attend events.

“The thing I enjoy most is that the only qualification is to be left-handed,” said Alan Lines, 78, who was selected as the group’s captain for 2022. He had joined 12 years earlier, after learning of its existence through word-of-mouth.

Lines said he hoped to one day play in the world championship for those with his unique swing, a multiday event that is overseen by the [World Association of Left Handed Golfers](#) (W.A.L.G.). That organization was formed in 1979, after the first global competition was held in Sydney, Australia.

The W.A.L.G. website contains contact details for 21 national organizations, each with similar grass-roots backgrounds to that of the B.L.H.G.A. An association in the Republic of Ireland, for example, emerged in the 1980s after fliers were sent to clubs recruiting any left-handers who were willing to respond. An organization in Japan reported membership numbers of more than 1,000 in the 1990s. National groups also sprung up in countries as far-flung as Sri Lanka, France, Taiwan, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Sweden.



B.L.G.H.A. trophies. Don't even think about it, right-handers. Duncan Elliott for The New York Times

But while such societies rose from circumstances of the past, some have more recently expressed concerns about declining attendance numbers, and the future of their events. The players who turned up in Rotherham voiced similar worries.

“I think it’s easier now” for left-handers, said Terry Sims, a pro who runs a shop out of Silvermere Golf Complex in Surrey, southwest of London, that is dedicated to selling only left-handed equipment.

“There’s a lot more package sets made left-handed. It’s also not taboo now to learn left-handed.”

Sims, whose left-handed brother was initially forced to take up the game right-handed in the 1980s, said that since he opened his store in 2004, most major manufacturers have started making their right-handed models available to left-handers, with the exception of the odd putter and some hybrid clubs. Online ordering has helped, too, he said, making the sort of clubs that local pro shops might not stock available at the click of a button. Yet even in the internet age, [secondhand options are still difficult to come by.](#)

Organizers at some societies have blamed their declining numbers at events on factors seen elsewhere in golf: a lack of interest in joining societal groups from younger players; cost; and the ripple effects of the coronavirus on travel.

Haines sees it as even more straightforward than that: The growth of society golf, he said, had its heyday in the '80s and '90s, and many of those players are aging out.



Clubs are no longer so hard to find for left-handed

Haines has been secretary of the B.L.H.G.A. since 1995 and a member for more than 40 years. In the group's heyday, he said, it counted around 300 members. Over the past few years, that figure has ebbed at around 150. But those that remain play on.

After their afternoon round at Rotherham Golf Club, the group of British lefties regrouped for their annual general meeting, which would involve dinner and a discussion of the agenda for the year ahead. While other courses may rotate on the group's calendar, Rotherham — with its Neo-gothic clubhouse and its status as the home course of the former Masters champion [Danny Willett](#) — has been a constant for more than 50 years. That regularity, Haines admitted, removes one amusing element of confusion that the group has previously seen when new courses have been added to their rotation.

“Sometimes, we go to golf courses where they put the knife and the fork the other way around at the table,” he said. “That always brings a smile to our faces.”



The clubhouse at Rotherham Golf Club, home to an annual left-handed championship and a Masters champion not eligible to play in it. Duncan Elliott for The New York Times

By Jack Williams

Sept. 16, 2022