

The Legend of Westmount

Exploring the incredible golf career
of Kitchener's Gary Cowan

BY BRIAN WILLIAMS
PHOTOGRAPHY • ALISHA TOWNSEND

A golf fan could spend a long time watching Gary Cowan on the practice range at Westmount Golf and Country Club.

It's special when you get a chance to see a master in his element.

On this occasion, despite a strong wind putting a chill into an otherwise beautiful day, most of the well-struck balls come to rest in a small area that would make them easy to retrieve.

One stray goes left of target. "That one will get me in trouble," Cowan says.

And then one goes a little further than the bunch. "There's the best one."

No warm-up. No spikes. No problem.

Cowan is unfazed by the photographer who is capturing this session. He's playful with her, letting her know she has no reason to fear being slightly ahead and to the side of him.

"You can stand right here if you like," he says, pointing to a spot a couple of feet away from him. "The ball is going there," he says, indicating a straight line.

When you're dealing with Canada's best amateur golfer of the 20th century, there is

no reason to doubt he knows where the ball is going.

The master is in his element.

The swing may have shortened up a bit over the years and the balls may not fly quite as far as they once did, but this 78-year-old's swing is fluid and athletic.

You have no reason to suspect he suffered a stroke in 1997 that affected the right side of his body.

Cowan had shared earlier that he used golf as a measuring stick during his recovery.

"One of the doctors didn't know that I played golf, and he said probably the best thing you could do is get out on the golf course and walk around."

That was when Cowan knew the game he loved could help him get better.

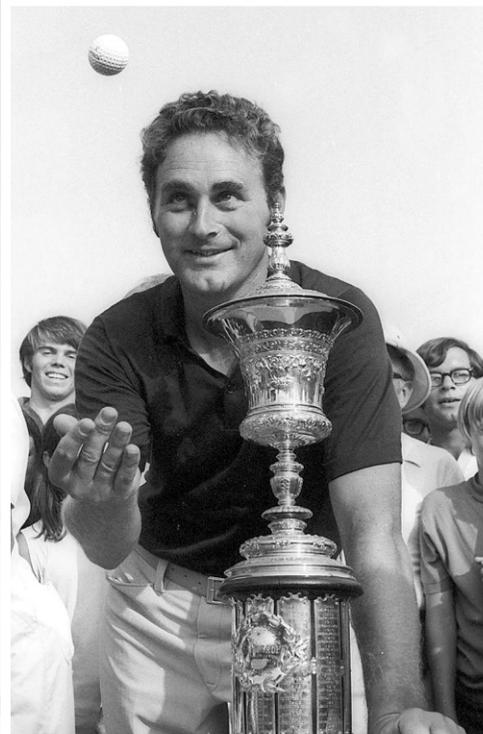
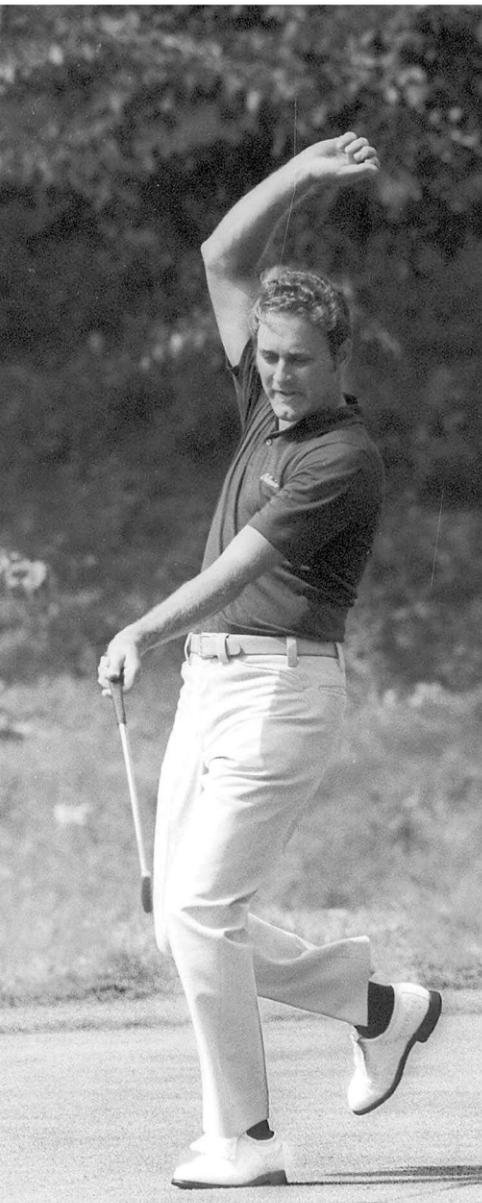
He couldn't hit the ball 30 yards when he tried four days after the stroke. And he says he couldn't hit a low shot or get out of a bunker for a long time.

But a therapist in London had explained to him how the body will recover over time so he carried on.

"I could see changes almost daily," Cowan says.

But there is one ability that has not returned.

"To this day I can't whistle," he says.



PHOTOGRAPHY • ASSOCIATED PRESS

Highlights from The Legend's Golfing Resume

In 2000, Gary Cowan was named Canada's 'Top Male Amateur Golfer of the Century' in a poll conducted by the Royal Canadian Golf Association.

Canadian Amateur
Champion (1961)
Runner-up (1959-60, 1964, 1968, 1974)

Ontario Amateur
Champion (1964, 1968, 1971, 1974-75, 1977-78, 1981, 1984)
Runner-up (1959-60, 1967, 1969, 1973, 1983, 1990)

United States Amateur
Champion (1966, 1971)

Other significant victories
Ontario Juvenile Champion (1954)
Ontario Junior Champion (1956)
Canadian Junior Champion (1956)
Low Amateur, Canadian Open (1960)
Medallist, World Amateur Team Championships (1962)
Low Amateur, Masters Tournament (1964)
Ontario Open Champion (1968)

Honours
Inducted into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame (1967)
Inducted into Canadian Golf Hall of Fame (1972)

Source: Golf Ontario website

"I used to whistle all the time. I used to whistle to the birds when I practised."

Two United States Amateur titles. One Canadian and nine Ontario amateur victories. Eight appearances at the Masters Tournament, including finishing as the low amateur in 1964. The list goes on . . . and on . . .

There's plenty of material for a memoir, which he says people have been nudging him to produce, but speaking into a voice recorder about his experiences when he's by himself just doesn't feel right to him.

Prompt him, however, and time flies by as he settles in at a table near a window in Westmount's lounge area that bears his name.

The tabletop often becomes a putting surface as he uses his fingers to indicate the position of a flag and each player's ball, as well as the progression of their putts in key situations.

For the person lucky enough to be receiving the history lesson, it brings the achievements on his resume to life.

At times playful, at times a little devilish with a sparkle in his eye when a particular story is amusing, he recalls in vivid detail moments such as the 1971 U.S. Amateur championship.

After a poor drive on the par-four 18th hole, a bogey five was definitely a possibility and would have landed Cowan in a playoff the next day. Eddie Pearce, the player wishing for the playoff, was done for the day and standing among the spectators beside the green, not far from the flag, watching it all unfold. From deep in the rough, Cowan struck his second shot. Not only did it make the green, it rolled into the cup.

Also hoping for a different outcome, Cowan is convinced, was the United States Golf Association official who had been shadowing him. The congratulatory handshake from that person gave Cowan a good laugh.

But his fun wasn't done.

Five years earlier, when he won the U.S. Amateur for the first time, there had been an article written from the angle of how



popular American player Deane Beman had lost the championship, as opposed to how Cowan had won.

With the media gathered in 1971, Cowan set things straight.

"Someone in charge says, 'Who's going to ask the first question?'"

"And I piped up, 'I am.'"

"And I said, 'Is there anyone here from Sports Illustrated?'"

"A guy sheepishly right in front says . . . 'I am and I'm going to do a much better job than' whatever, whatever, whatever.'"

Cowan's point had been made. The final line of that year's story read: "Without question, the 1971 Amateur would be remembered as the one Gary Cowan won."

Rob Strahan, Westmount's head golf professional since 1990, has known Cowan for 37 years – and known of him even longer.

Strahan said when he arrived at

ABOVE:

Gary Cowan poses near the third hole at Westmount Golf and Country Club. Westmount is his home away from home.

FACING PAGE:

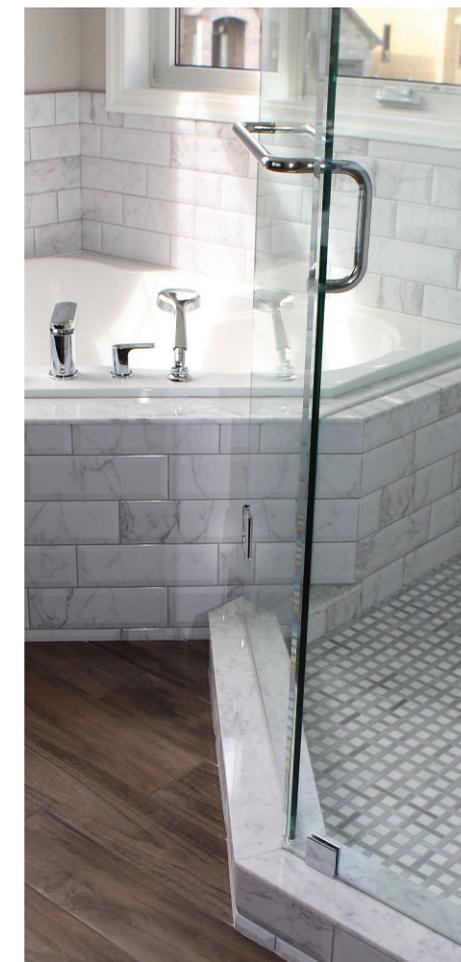
A trio of photos capturing moments from the fourth and final round of the 1971 U.S. Amateur golf championship, which Gary Cowan won in spectacular fashion at the Wilmington Country Club in Delaware.

ON THE LEFT, Cowan waves his arm as his putt drops into the cup on the fifth green for a birdie.

TOP RIGHT, Cowan raises his arms in the air, twirling his nine iron on the 18th hole. He had just used the club to knock his second shot from the rough into the hole 135 yards away to secure a three-shot victory.

BOTTOM RIGHT, Cowan poses with the championship trophy while tossing into the air the ball he had used on the final hole.

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Westmount in 1980, as assistant pro to Gus Maue, he got to know Cowan as an extremely talented player and a strong personality.

"Elite players like him . . . in all sports . . . they just have that self-confidence. Sometimes you can take it as arrogance but it's not that. To be that level you just have to have that inner confidence in yourself."

Strahan says people will often judge a golfer based on their great shots, but he sees it the other way. He likes to watch how a player handles a mistake because in golf you can't rely on your goalie or a defence-man to bail you out.

Strahan says Cowan has that ability to get himself out of trouble.

"Probably that's his strongest suit whenever I've watched or played with him. How he makes birdies when he's in the middle of the woods or something."

Sounds a lot like what the crowd at Wilmington Country Club in Delaware witnessed in 1971.



The City of Kitchener ring on Cowan's left hand was part of a gift from the municipality in recognition of his 1961 Canadian Amateur championship.

Strahan says the Westmount community has a lot of respect for Cowan. Special status, however, is not something Cowan demands.

He just goes about his business, Strahan says. He'll play with anybody and mixes well with the newer, younger members.

"Right now I play with a lot of the younger guys," says Cowan, who plays to about a five handicap. "I call them younger, they're 25, 30, 35, but they're guys that I like to play with because I can help them if they want. And if they don't want any help, I don't give them any help.

"They all have their nicknames for me. Mr. G and this and that and the other thing. Coach."

And let's not forget The Legend.

"Everybody calls me that," Cowan says, but it doesn't bother him.

"It's nice to see," Strahan says of Cowan's coaching. "Instead of just keeping his own great love for the game just to himself he spreads that around to fellow members."

If a Cowan memoir does come together,

it should be required reading for all those younger players.

Until then, they might want to opt for the Coles Notes version in the clubhouse before taking Cowan on in a match. In the lounge a wall plaque lists his biggest victories.

Beside it is a trophy cabinet that does wonders to protect his legacy.

"If that wasn't there, how many people would know about that?" Cowan asks. "Not very many, because time goes on, eh."

There were a lot of voices telling Cowan to turn pro during his heyday.

The reality at that time was that there was only enough money for a few players to make a good living.

Arnold Palmer made all the money in the late 1950s and '60s, Cowan says.

"Unless you were the top three or four, you weren't making that much money," he says. "But the other thing I wanted to do, because I didn't have schooling, was I wanted to see if I could make a living in the

insurance business."

Cowan worked for Mutual Life. It was a career that allowed him to combine golf and work and then just work all winter.

It was a chance to have his cake and eat it too, he says.

With a growing family, there were mouths to feed. He and Elaine, his wife until they divorced in 1989, had four children between 1965 and '73.

Rob, the oldest, has come closest to following his dad's footsteps. A partner in Cowan Wilkin Financial Services, he is a 15-time club champion at Westmount and has also had on-course success further afield. He says he and his dad play together a couple of times a year but Rob is now the Cowan who has a busy tournament schedule.

His brothers, Todd and Jamie, have both worked in the golf business. Todd is one of the golf instructors at Max's Sports World in Waterloo and Jamie is an artist. Their sister, Sue, lives in California with her family.

Back when the house was filling up, Cowan stepped away from tournament golf in 1972 and '73 to make money.

That meant he didn't defend his U.S. Amateur title in 1972. And that made a lot of people unhappy.

"I had about nine letters from USGA people saying you should be doing this, you should be doing this, but that makes me say No, No, No."

There were other possible perks, too, but he wasn't swayed. He could have played in the U.S. Open that year and says he also had a phone call from Bing Crosby asking him to play in the tournament sponsored by the entertainer.

Cowan did eventually turn pro at the end of 1990, earning his place on the professional senior tour. He played in 29 tournaments in 1991 and 15 in 1992 before trailing off.

"He had some good tournaments but didn't experience the success he was used to," Strahan says. "I give him full marks for trying."

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The golf course has always offered Cowan a place to go, a place to belong. In the late 1940s, at age nine or 10, he didn't know what a golf ball was the first time he tagged along with friends to Rockway Golf Course to look for lost ones.

He found a ball near the eighth hole and his curiosity about what to do with it took hold.

It was around this time, when Cowan was in Grade 5, that his parents, Richard and Helen, separated.

Living at King and Ottawa streets with his mother and two sisters, he didn't have far to travel to Rockway.

His dad "wasn't around all that much, so that's why I sort of spent all my time at the golf course."

Found balls could be sold at the pro shop for 10 or 15 cents and he soon received his requested first golf club from his dad – a five iron with a hickory shaft.

Rockway's golf pro and superintendent,



The trophy case in the Westmount clubhouse offers a sampling of Gary Cowan's greatest hits. The plate in the middle highlights his eight Masters appearances.

There are many more trophies in storage and he wonders what will become of them.

Lloyd Tucker, gave Cowan a job collecting – "shagging" – balls for people who were taking lessons. He also raked bunkers and weeded greens and tees. In exchange, Tucker would let Cowan play 18 holes on Mondays using Tucker's clubs.

Eventually, Cowan got his own set of used Spalding clubs and joined Rockway at age 12 as a junior member. He'd later work in the pro shop.

He also played hockey in the winter – up to junior B – and baseball in the summer but decided at about age 13 to devote his non-winter months to golf.

"I said to myself golf will last forever, baseball won't, so then I went to golf."

He was fuelled, in part, by the success of another great Kitchener golfer, Gerry Kesselring.

Kesselring, who was 10 years older, won the national junior championship in 1946 and '47.

Cowan remembers reading about one of those victories in the newspaper. "And I

said to myself, Jeez, I'd like to do something like that."

Two Hollywood movies also influenced him – "Follow the Sun," a 1951 biography of Ben Hogan, and "The Caddy," a 1953 film starring Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis.

Cowan proved to be a quick study on the golf course. He played a lot of international golf on teams, beginning at age 14, and was the Ontario juvenile champion in 1954 and junior champ in '56.

The sly smile returns as he recalls the school exams held each June. He says there was a minimum time you had to stay in the exam room, as well as a maximum time you could be there.

"As soon as it hit the minimum time, I was gone," he says, whether he was done the exam or not.

Straight to the golf course he'd go. And then in the afternoon there'd be a second exam, so he'd return for the minimum requirement and then he was gone golfing again.

Exposure to another lifelong activity also

happened during those junior years at Rockway as members played cribbage in the clubhouse.

After that, Cowan learned to play gin, then bridge.

"Once you play bridge, everything else is second nature because all the time you've got to be thinking."

These days, the bridge games are at Westmount.

On the day of the interview for this story, his playing partners were waiting for him at noon. Cowan just had to switch tables and join in.

"I just love it here," Cowan says.

Cowan is a lifetime honorary member at about 18 clubs.

"When you're golfer of the century a lot of places will make you an honorary player because of your talent and skill and what you mean to that club," Strahan says.

But it's clear Westmount has become Cowan's home away from home, a year-round place to find friends.

"I don't need for a whole lot of things," says Cowan, who has separated from his second wife. "It's no fun living alone."

His relationship with Westmount goes back more than 50 years.

Westmount extended playing privileges to Cowan in 1962 after he recorded the lowest individual score at the World Amateur team championship in Japan. Then, in 1966, after winning his first U.S. Amateur, he was made an honorary lifetime member.

"My younger years were at Rockway and my older years were here. There's a lot of really good people here. And there's a lot that are gone, too," Cowan says.

And it's clear the people at Westmount have a soft spot for him. Each interaction seems warm, either with staff or a small group of ladies getting coffee when he walks into the lounge.

"He's got lots of friends and he's certainly not a wallflower of any sort," Strahan says. "He's a good guy."

The master is in his element. 

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