

# ALL ROADS lead to: Sartell

**Editor's note:**  
Throughout June, July and August, the Sauk Rapids Herald will feature interesting people and places from our neighboring cities.

## Lifelong golfer cherishes every shot, round

BY TOM FENTON | STAFF WRITER

Shooting one's age is an improbable dream for most golfers.

John Stafney, who turned 79 June 1, is not one of them.

The lifelong lover of a game that can be equally satisfying and frustrating defies those odds on a nearly daily basis when he tees up his ball at Blackberry Ridge Golf Course in Sartell. But that is not why he returns day after day after day.

"I do it because it's fun and it's something different every single day," Stafney said. "The beauty of the game is you never see the same shot twice."

Since settling in Sartell in 2006 after a long career as a math teacher in Upsala, Stafney is a daily fixture at Blackberry, which opened during the new course construction boom in 2001 and has flourished after surviving tough economic times in the late 2000s. Stafney picked up the game at the invitation of his parents at age 11 in Mohall, North Dakota, and has loved it since.

In a typical year, Stafney plays about 150 to 175 rounds, though a few years ago that number reached 210. He walks every one of them, though he admits to occasionally hopping on a playing partner's cart for the difficult uphill walk on Blackberry's 18th hole.

When Stafney finishes his round, he quickly heads home to his wife of 54 years, Darlene, who always has lunch waiting. This happens nearly daily during the seventh-month golf season, and he never ceases reminding himself of his good fortune.

His natural talent is obvious. One year short of his 80th birthday, Stafney routinely hits drives of 250 yards while displaying softer-than-pillow touch around the greens. He is a six-time senior division club champion at Blackberry.

Stafney said he does not think about shooting his age on the first tee but admits to being prideful when it happens. In 2021, he shot – or beat – his age 60% of the time.

"I play to have fun," Stafney said. "Sometimes it doesn't sound like I'm having fun, but if you just hit your shots, the scores will take care of itself."

Stafney said his talent came from both parents, Custer and Ruth. Custer was a natural at whatever he did, Stafney said. His father was a top-level amateur baseball player while compiling more than 70 tournament titles on the golf course.

When Custer arrived home after work, Stafney often asked if they could golf.

"My dad said, 'Yes,' and my mom would shut the stove off and come with us," he said. "We'd stay out there until 9 o'clock most nights. I was a copycat when it came to learning the swing. I watched my mom because her swing was prettier than Dad's, but he knew how to put the club on the ball and put the ball in the hole. My dad could do anything he wanted to do."

Stafney never has had a lesson. He credits much of his swing knowledge to reading Ben Hogan's "Power Golf" and "The Arnold Palmer Method" numerous times.

Though there was rarely talk of swing mechanics or lessons when he golfed with his parents, Custer focused on giving advice on the mental aspect of the game, such as ignoring big talkers while staying quiet and concentrating on the next shot.

"He said to keep my mouth shut, put the ball in the hole and that will take care of things," Stafney said.

His motivation to get better started by trying to defeat his mom. Once that box was checked, attention shifted to scoring better than his dad.

That took some time. A lot of time.

"When I was 40, we went up to visit him, and I beat him three times in a row," Stafney said. "The next week he sent me a letter that said, 'The torch has been passed.'"



PHOTOS BY TOM FENTON

John Stafney, 79, follows through on his approach shot during a round of golf May 27 at Blackberry Ridge Golf Course in Sartell. The retired teacher plays 150-175 rounds of golf every year.

### Blackberry owner is league partner

Wes Fenlason grew up on the family farmland that now is the golf course. He is the course superintendent and co-owner along with his mother, Kitty, who can regularly be seen manicuring the flower beds surrounding the expansive clubhouse that also serves as an event and wedding center.

Fenlason has been Stafney's partner in the Tuesday league at Blackberry for about 15 years and routinely marvels at his ability.

"We got paired together in league as a fluke when my partner said he couldn't play a couple weeks before it started," Fenlason said. "I pull up to the first tee

in my cart, and there's this guy carrying his bag. I thought everybody rode carts. I hit my first shot and he takes off Mach 2 walking down the fairway. I could barely keep up with this old guy and I was riding a cart. I was so embarrassed. That's when I started to walk."

Not knowing if playing with an "old guy" would be a fit, Fenlason quickly told Stafney that if they were going to play together, there were two ground rules.

"I told him, 'I like to drink beer, and I swear too much,'" Fenlason said. "He told me he was in the Marines, so I figured that wouldn't be a problem. We've gotten along like peaches and cream ever since."



John Stafney, of Sartell, surveys the situation during a round of golf May 27 at Blackberry Ridge Golf Course in Sartell. Stafney is a six-time club champion in the senior division at the course.

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## Janell Westerman

**Hometown:** Long Prairie

**What is your role at Star Publications:** Production

**Tell us about your family.** My husband, Scott, and I have been married for 37 years. We have two daughters, Grace and Anna, who are farming with us. Grace is home full time, and Anna works part time at Kennedy Animal Clinic in Grey Eagle.

**What are your hobbies?** Traveling, cooking and crafting.

**What superpower would you want?** To make people more compassionate. The world has become cold and uncaring, and people don't take the time to tell someone they are appreciated or show them love and concern, especially our older generation.

