



GOLF PRIDE'S DWIGHT MILES

## North Carolina Company has A Grip on the Game

By Patrick Jones

**T**he Carolinas have always maintained a firm grip on the world's golf consciousness. As prime examples, Pinehurst is one of the sport's foremost destinations while the Sandhills region of North Carolina has consistently hosted the game's premier amateur and professional championships. And, in South Carolina, Myrtle Beach is the self-proclaimed "Golf Capital of the World" with its smorgasbord of 125-plus courses.

Both states have hosted Ryder Cup matches, and the full list of accolades for each is long. The Carolinas, without question, play an inordinately significant role in the game's past, present and future.

What few fans may not realize, however, is that the Carolinas' influential grasp also reaches directly into their personal golf bags and

ultimately affects the quality of their play.

Golf Pride, the industry's leading manufacturer of golf grips, is headquartered in Laurinburg, North Carolina, a 30-mile drive south of Pinehurst. The company sold more than 50 million grips worldwide in its most recent fiscal year, according to a company spokesman. Golf Pride's corporate staff and sole American-based plant operate with limited exposure in the remote town of 16,000 residents – but with significant global impact.

Golf Pride is a division of publicly traded Eaton Corporation, a diverse \$11 billion manufacturing conglomerate whose products can be found in automobiles and the space shuttle as well as in the hands of golf's greatest players.

"The quality that goes into making parts for

those other industries goes into making Golf Pride grips," says Dwight Miles, Golf Pride's global director of sales and marketing. "We use the same processes and systems to make our products. (Eaton) won't have it any other way."

Miles called golf grips the "unsung hero" in a player's equipment arsenal. He stressed that it is a mental slip to deem them anything less than vital components in a sound golf game.

"It is the only part of the club that you actually touch," Miles says. "If you think about it, so much time is spent on clubheads and shafts.

Those are critically important, of course. But if you go to any instructor, the first thing they are going to start with is your grip and the placement of your hands. If your grip is not right, and the club slips in your hands, then you are not getting the most out of your game."

Golf Pride was the brainchild of Thomas L. Fawick of Cleveland, Ohio. He was the inventor of the pneumatic clutch and brake – and also a golf enthusiast. In the late 1940s, Fawick developed the rubber grip as a more secure and durable surface than the leather grips that were prevalent in that era.

The company was originally based in Akron, Ohio. The Laurinburg plant opened in 1968 and currently employs approximately 300. All Golf Pride functions were consolidated to the North Carolina location in 1978. Additional company manufacturing plants produce grips in Mexico, Taiwan and Thailand.

Golf Pride markets itself as the "The No. 1 Grip on Tour" and objective research authenticates the claim. Studies conducted by the independent Darrell Survey at the 2006 Players Championship confirmed that 1,655 of the 2,016

clubs used in the 144-man field were gripped with Golf Pride products. The saturation of the company's products on all professional tours hovers above the 80 percent mark – even while it provides no endorsement deals.

"We typically have 13 of the top 15 players in the world at the major championships using our grips," says Miles. "We cannot use their names because we don't pay anyone to use our products. We cannot claim any players, but, of course, we are very happy that they choose to use our grips."

Tommy Bolt was one of the few paid professional endorsers in Golf Pride's history. He gave the company a boost when he won the 1958 U.S. Open using its newly introduced slip-on rubber grips. The company has since relied primarily on player preference and word-of-mouth credibility, not financial inducements to top touring pros, to maintain its top spot in the industry.

The respect that Golf Pride earned for its products among the game's playing elite has transferred to the masses. Golf Pride is also the top choice among recreational players, according to Miles.

The company sports more than 50 models of grips, ranging from the Tour Velvet – favored among touring professionals – to the Whisper, Players Softie and Dual Durometer. Golf Pride features cord and non-cord grips. The company's product line includes almost a dozen grip choices designed just for putters. Golf Pride markets grips designed specifically for women and juniors. Its latest technology is the New Decade Multi-Compound grip. Miles called it the "hottest grip out there." The grip has cord on the upper hand and soft rubber on the bottom hand to provide the ultimate in control

and feel.

To assist golfers with choosing the best grips for their games, Golf Pride has developed an online, interactive Grip Selector tool that measures individual preferences in the areas of moisture management, responsiveness and surface texture. A database collects the information and then offers up recommended Golf Pride grips.

Though the company does not offer endorsement deals to players, it has partnered with David Leadbetter, considered one of the game's top teaching professionals. The David Leadbetter Training Grip is molded to reinforce the mechanics and feel of proper hand placement on the club.

Golf Pride keeps a relatively low profile from its North Carolina-based headquarters, but its positive impacts on the Laurinburg area are worthy of headlines, according to Jim Frank Henderson, president of the Laurinburg/Scotland County Area Chamber of Commerce.

"Not only does Eaton-Golf Pride provide jobs for Scotland County and the surrounding area, but they also are a tremendous corporate citizen," he says. "They are involved very heavily with Hospice of Scotland County and contribute to all of the civic organizations in our community. They are a great company and we are proud to have them as one of our corporate neighbors."

Miles says Golf Pride also prospers from its association with the Carolinas.

"There is a great deal of heritage here from a golf standpoint," he says. "The company has an association with this area that we have enjoyed for a number of years. And being right next to Pinehurst – well, it doesn't hurt with that location." ♦