



SERVE IT UP:
TOM FORKNER, WAFFLE
HOUSE CO-FOUNDER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ED THOMPSON

Grits & Golf

It wouldn't be a stretch to call Waffle House co-founder Tom Forkner a hall-of-fame businessman. It would be the absolute truth to call him a hall-of-fame golfer.

BY PATRICK JONES

Waffle House co-founder Tom Forkner, an accomplished senior golfer, provides expert advice on blasting out of a fried-egg lie: "That is not any problem," he says. "Just pick a grain of sand about two inches behind that golf ball – forget the golf ball altogether – and swing down hard at that grain of sand and the ball is coming out."

Forkner's advice is sound while his golf accomplishments are considerable. He was the International Senior Champion twice, Georgia Senior Champion four times and Georgia Seniors Four-Ball Champion on two occasions. Most recently, he was the Age 80 and Over Division World Super Seniors Champion in 2003 and 2004. Forkner, 88, was inducted into the Georgia Golf Hall of Fame earlier this year for his playing achievements.

He is confident and skilled on blasting out of testy

lies in the bunker. But when it comes to the kind of fried eggs that emanate from a skillet, Forkner is not so self-assured.

That morsel may come as a surprise. After all, the Waffle House has served a hen-frightening 1.5 billion eggs since Forkner and Joe Rogers Sr. dreamed up the idea and opened their first restaurant in the Atlanta suburbs in 1955. More than half a century later, and with more than 1,500 Waffle House eateries in 25 states, Forkner says that he has never put on the short-order cook's apron and paper hat to fry, scramble or "over-easy" a single yolk.

"Never the first time," he says. "Cooking has never been part of my deal. Joe Sr. handled the food operations. If I ever got behind the counter and tried to serve someone, it would be the most messed up deal you would ever see. It's best for me to stay away from there."

Prior to the Waffle House, in the midst of the Eisenhower administration, Forkner was running the realty company that his father had founded in 1923. Rogers, meanwhile, was already working in the food industry with Toddle I House, but the pair had not met. Then Rogers was transferred to the Atlanta area. "Joe was looking for a house when I ran into him," says Forkner. Rogers bought a home two doors down the street from Forkner. "We got to be good buddies and we knocked around on the weekends," says Forkner.

The genesis of an American food legend launched on their friendship – and Forkner's hunger pangs.

"One day I tried to talk Joe into building a Toddle House in our neighborhood," says Forkner. "And Joe says, 'That is not a Toddle House kind of location.' And I said, 'We need some food.' And he said, 'That's not what I said. What I said is if you build a restaurant, then I will show you how to run it.' By the next time he got back into town, I had the land and a builder and I said, 'Now where are the plans for that restaurant?'"

Unit No. 1 opened on Labor Day 1955 in Avondale Estates, Georgia, with a sign that featured uppercase block letters – WAFFLE HOUSE – on a bright yellow background. The vivid color was chosen, soundly enough, because it grabbed attention. The prominent signage continues to beckon famished early risers, night owls, interstate travelers, inner-city street walkers, wealthy glitterati and homeless transients in need of rib-sticking nourishment.

The Waffle House never closes. It is renowned for its Southern fare – it spoons out the equivalent of 86 semi-trucks of grits per year – no-frills cuisine and minimalist decor. The staff greets everyone who walks in the door. Customers can drop in a few quarters in the diners' universal jukeboxes. The music selections are heavy on country, Elvis Presley oldies, releases by the most recent American Idols and a self-styled Waffle House genre of company ditties. The food tastes better eating along with the melodies of "Make Mine with Cheese," "There are Raisins in My Toast" and "It's a Waffle House Great Day."

According to its corporate Web site, the Waffle House is the world's leading server of at least a dozen food items, including waffles, omelets, grits, T-bone steaks, raisin toast and hash browns. The latter can be served scattered, smothered (onions), covered (cheese), chunked (ham), diced (tomatoes), peppered, capped (mushrooms), topped (mushrooms) or all the way.

The Waffle House's hash brown treatments have become substance – and sustenance – of lore. Rock group Hootie and the Blowfish released an album in 2000 titled "Scattered, Covered and Smothered."

Here's another Waffle House company-provided wow fact to whet your appetite: The sausage patties served every day by the Waffle House would stack as high as the Empire State Building. That is an appropriate visualization and reference point – Forkner and Rogers have created an empire of their own.

Golf became an integral part of Forkner's life, in part, because of the Waffle House's success. He admits to working himself too hard in the food chain's early years. He also continued to run his realty business while the Waffle House was experiencing growing pains.

"First thing you know, I was in the hospital with ulcers and high blood pressure," says Forkner. "I had everything there is going wrong with me. The doctor told me I had better change my ways or I was going to be dead in five years. I gave up half the stuff, turned the key to the real estate business over to my brother and gave him the company. I asked Joe to run the Waffle House while I tried to get my health back.

"I got to playing golf heavy and nobody objected to it," says Forkner. "I would take golf trips and everything would be in good shape when I got back.

Joe Sr. was always the Waffle House operator, so that was never a problem. It just all worked out."

Forkner was born in Hawkinsville, Georgia, but his family moved to Avondale when he was a year old. He grew up next to a nine-hole golf course but paid little attention to the sport.

"I watched them play sometimes, but I didn't even have a set of clubs," he says.

Instead, Forkner played basketball and track at Avondale High School and at Young Harris (Georgia) College. He then earned a law degree and briefly practiced as an attorney before World War II

swept him into the military for nearly five years.

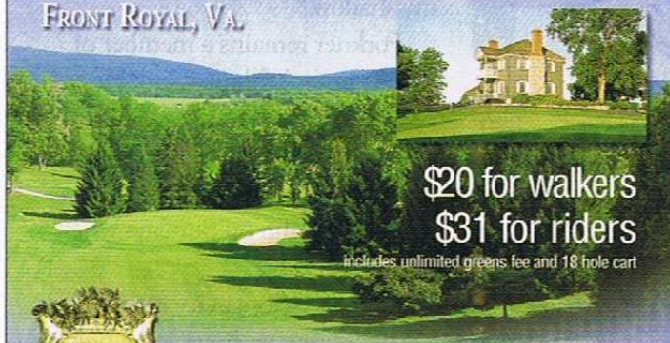
Upon his discharge, Forkner joined his father's real estate business. He also purchased his first set of clubs and played sporadically for the next 20 years.

Forkner's passion for golf ignited when the 1963 Ryder Cup was staged at Atlanta's East Lake Country Club. Watching playing captain Arnold Palmer and teammates including Billy Casper, Gene Littler and Julius Boros inspired Forkner and Rogers to join the club that once spawned the game of Robert Tyre "Bobby" Jones.

"We would leave the office at lunchtime, play at

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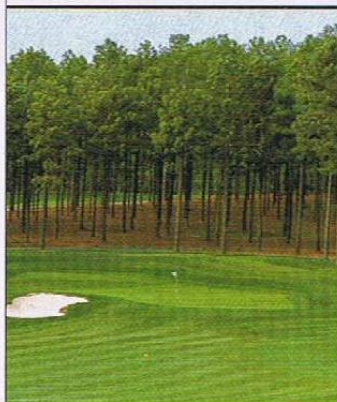


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East Lake, come back to the office around 5:30 and work until the evening to make up the lost time," says Forkner. "After a while, Joe became a little less interested in golf and I became more interested. We played in a tournament out there.

He said he didn't care for that. It put too much stress on him. And I did like the competition. So I got serious about it."

At an age when most men are winding down their athletic careers, Forkner was heating up the 95 million cups of coffee that the Waffle House serves each year.

He joined the Georgia Seniors Golf Association, the American Seniors, the Southern Seniors and other groups that dished out all the competition he could digest.

"I worked at it pretty hard. Fortunately, I had the time to put into it," says Forkner. "When I joined the senior groups, the competition really started. I played a lot of courses all over the world." He said he has played St. Andrews "many times" and estimates 15 trips around Augusta National, a course Forkner

THE WAFFLE HOUSE MAN

IN THE BAG: Callaway woods and irons

HANDICAP: 14, as low as scratch

LOWEST SCORE: 63 at Waynesville (N.C.)

CC HOLES-IN-ONE: 3

CLUB MEMBERSHIP: Atlanta Athletic Club

FAVORITE PRO-AM PARTNER: Billy Casper

MOST LIKELY WAFFLE HOUSE

BREAKFAST ORDER: Scrambled eggs and sausage

called "a real, real privilege" to play.

As he approaches his 90th birthday next year, the still energetic Forkner plays to a 14 handicap. In his heyday, he was a scratch golfer. Forkner succeeded with his short game, flashing the same deft touch as a veteran Waffle House waitress juggling five packed booths during a Sunday breakfast rush.

"My strong points were always chipping and putting," says Forkner. "I didn't hit it that far compared to my competitors. I could hit it out there about 250 to 255 (yards). I had to count on my short game because I couldn't hit the ball out of my shadow."

Forkner remains a member of the Atlanta Athletic Club. He

plays several times a week and still takes lessons to keep his swing sharp. His lifelong partner for more than 60 years, wife Martha, plays with him on Sundays when the weather is agreeable.

One of his keys to longevity is a long morning walk – up to an hour and a half – six days a week. And he still remains actively involved in the company that he and his one-time neighbor launched on a whim and a shoestring and the need for some nearby food.

"Joe and I started off 51 years ago," says Forkner when asked about his proudest achievement with the Waffle House. "We were good friends then. Right this minute, as I sit here, his office is right next to mine. We have a common secretary and get along fine. We have done that for more than half a century. I don't know many people that can say that they have been partners for that long and still say they have offices side by side. It just doesn't happen much."

What does happen every second of the day is that the Waffle House serves an average of five eggs. That extrapolates to 347 eggs per minute, 20,833 eggs every hour, 500,000 eggs every day and 185 million eggs per year.

Just don't expect Tom Forkner to cook one of those up for you. •