



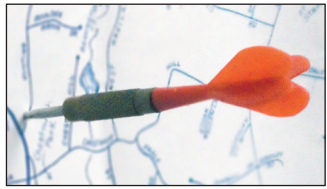
Jim Yaeger of Stamford plays in a quartet Tuesday at E. Gaynor Brennan Golf Course in Stamford. The youngest of the group, he's the only one who's not retired.

IN THE SWING

AT BRENNAN, FRIENDSHIPS ENDURE

Story by Staff Writer Magdalene Perez
 Photos by Staff Photographer Chris Prevolos

The dart



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EDITOR'S NOTE: The Dart is a Monday feature in which staff members toss a dart at a map and seek out a story near where it lands. This week, The Dart landed at the E. Gaynor Brennan Golf Course.

STAMFORD — Golf entered the life of Joe “Babe” Festa early and came back to it late.

He learned to play at 8, caddying at Woodway Country Club in Darien. Back then, when men were off fighting in Europe and the Pacific, they’d pay a boy 75 cents to collect a bucket of balls on the driving range. Babe would carry bags at \$1.75 apiece and sneak out to the grounds at night to practice swings of his own.

In middle age, Babe focused on coaching Little League and left golf behind. He led the Knights of Columbus seven years, winning the league championship seven years in a row.

“When I do something, I do it hard,” Babe said.

Still, golf made its way back into Babe’s life in his late 40s. A carpenter and union man, he joined the Hubbard Heights Men’s Club, a “blue collar” course, as his friends say, where the grounds are well kept and the mood is often light. For them, the E. Gaynor Brennan Golf Course is still “the Heights,” the same sanctuary that’s



Ken Zarrilli, Victor DeFelice and Yaeger plot their next golfing strategies.



DeFelice shows off the ball after earning a birdie.



Joe ‘Babe’ Festa, 72, has been golfing at Brennan more frequently since his retirement.

seen them through good times and bad, where friendships forged 30 years ago have ripened with age.

Babe, lean and mustachioed at 72, hits from the most difficult tee boxes, planting his feet firmly and shifting a bit in his brown trousers before sweeping his driver through the air.

“Oh, nice one!” a friend, Victor DeFelice, exclaimed, as Babe smacked a clean drive toward the 11th hole. “You’re putting the pressure on us, Babe.”

He followed through on the green, putting the ball a few inches from its target and scooping up the “gimmie” before taking a puff on his Marlboro Light.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” Babe’s partner, Jim Yaeger, said with a smile, as the two knocked knuckles in a high five.

At 52, Yaeger is the newbie, the only one in the group that cloudy Wednesday morning who wasn’t retired. The fourth in the quartet, Ken Zarrilli, goes way back. He was a schoolmate with DeFelice at Stamford High and met Babe years ago through Little League.

In retirement, the three started coming to the course more often, and these days Babe and his buddies can be spotted playing about three times a week. DeFelice even makes a few bucks at the course, working as a ranger part time.

“These guys are here all the time. If they’re not playing golf, they’re in there talking about golf,” the superintendent, Mike Sullivan, said, sticking his thumb in the direction of the clubhouse.

It was the fresh air and friendly faces that pulled Babe through when his wife, Joan, died four years ago, he said.

“That really kept me alive,” Babe said. “It kept me going to get out there and my mind free of all of the other things.”

That’s why Babe is thankful the city has kept prices at the municipal course low for seniors, offering a discount weekday pass. Along with others, he pushed to keep the price down when city officials debated raising it. And years ago he fought, and prevailed, against a plan to truncate the 18th hole in favor of widening a nearby road.

“The price means a lot to me because otherwise I wouldn’t be able to afford it,” Babe said. “It’s very expensive to live here in the first place.”

The green grass and sunshine still seem to work their magic. Last week, Babe laughed as he cruised from hole to hole, his left foot hanging out the side of the cart, his clubs swathed in patriotic red, white and blue.

He gave it his best, but this time DeFelice and Zarrilli got the better of him, shooting a perfect 3-3 on the 14th hole, and cleaning up on the 18th, evading a sand trap to win overall. The men parted ways, clapping each other on the back.

“It’s a nice group,” Yaeger said. “A friendly game.”

— Staff Writer Magdalene Perez can be reached at 964-2240 or magdalene.perez@sni.com.



Yaeger, left, and Festa bump fists on the green.