

THE BUFFALO NEWS



While others see a cold day as a chance to stay inside, members of the “12 Month Club” see a chance to play a round. Steve Prunella, self-appointed “president” of the group, has a small snow shovel in his golf bag as he plays a round April 16 at the Glen Oak Golf Course in Amherst. (Mark Mulville/Buffalo News)

Golf in any weather? '12 Month Club' goes on an incredible run

By Jay Skurski (https://buffaloneews.com/author/jay_skurski/) | Published May 1, 2019 | Updated May 1, 2019

Long before the USGA changed its rules to allow it, a group of local golfers kept the pin in on the putting green.

They didn't have a choice. Not when it's frozen inside the cup.

Let us explain.

Any serious golfer in our area knows that the fall and spring months can present some less-than-ideal playing conditions. It's Buffalo, after all.

But for a select few, the season never stops. As you might imagine, playing year-round golf in Western New York isn't easy. But for members of the "12 Month Club," that's what they did for an incredible 59 months in a row. Their run ended in February when a few mild days weren't enough to reduce the snow pack and allow for a round of golf.

The "club" isn't actually a club at all, but rather a group of die-hard golf enthusiasts who cooked up a plan to play at least one round a month all year. Steve Prunella, a 68-year-old from Williamsville, is the self-appointed "president."

"We kind of just fell into it, because we had those mild winters," Prunella said. "Once it got going, we said 'Let's try to keep this up,' and we got a little carried away."

Like the time he almost drowned.

Again, let us explain.

During a November round a few years ago at Holiday Valley, Prunella decided to help one of the members of his group, who had hit a wayward tee shot on the par-4 11th hole.

"I knew where it went, so I went up the hill to go get it," he said. "I pick his ball up, and I'm going to take a shortcut across the trench coming back. I stepped on a rotted log, and I started going down. I figured, 'OK, I'll just reach for

the side. But I went down, down, down right under the water. Everything went dark. I hit my head on a rock. I came up with a mouthful of this God-awful water.”

Prunella managed to resurface and climb out of the water. His playing partners had no idea what had happened.

“These guys can't see me because they're down the hill. So I come stumbling down, my head's bleeding, and I'm covered with mud from head to toe,” he said. “I had a change of clothes in the car, so I go down, I towel myself off and come back out. My ball's in the middle of the fairway. I hit it on the green, two-putted for a par and continued the round!”

After the hole, he asked his playing partners, “how were you going to explain to my wife you let me drown playing golf?”

“Easy,” answered Tom Koczaja. “You went for a ball and we never saw you again.”



(<https://s3.amazonaws.com/bncore/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/1012702822-Golf-Preview-M7.jpg>)

Members of the "12 Month Club" include, from left, Tom Koczaja, Steve Prunella and John Guyett. The coldest round of golf the group can recall was playing in 28-degree temperatures. "We couldn't even get the tee in the ground," Koczaja said. (Mark Mulville/Buffalo News)

Prunella and Koczaja, a 69-year-old from Lancaster, are the two members of the club who made it 59 months in a row, just one shy of five straight years. Two other members, Claudiu Mihai and John Guyett, had monthly runs of at least three years.

“If it's 40 degrees, sunny and no wind, it's really a great day to golf,” Koczaja said in his most convincing tone. “Going out in the summer when it's 80 or 85, it's taxing on you. It sucks the life out of you. Always, the determining factor is the wind.”

The coldest round the group can remember playing was in 28-degree temperatures.

“We couldn't even get the tee in the ground,” Koczaja said. “You'd hit the green on a par three and the ball would bounce another 20 or 30 yards. So then you start playing short.”

Then there was the time simply walking down the fairway was nearly impossible. The cores from a fall aeration had frozen, leading Koczaja to say it “was like walking on marbles. It was brutal.”

Conditions aside, the biggest challenge the “12 Month Club” faced was finding a course that would accommodate them. The overwhelming majority of the time, that was Batavia's 27-hole public course Terry Hills, the unofficial capital of winter golf in Western New York.



(<https://s3.amazonaws.com/bncore/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/1012702822-Golf-Preview-14.jpg>)

Steve Prunella's golf bag includes a small snow shovel because you never know when it might come in handy during a winter round.
(Mark Mulville/Buffalo News)

“That is true,” said Casey Brown, Terry Hills’ head golf professional. “We have embraced it. We’ve got that reputation. In some of the winter months, when all the other courses are closed, we’re kind of the go-to place. It’s nice to be known for that.”

Terry Hills is a family-run business, and outside of a couple winter weeks spent in Florida, Brown is at the course every day.

“I figure, as long as I’m here, might as well let people play as long as it’s doable,” Brown said. “We have pretty much the best drainage in Western New York, so when other courses are swamped, we’re able to let people out. Sometimes, we have almost a monopoly. Not that we jack up the prices or anything, but just because we’re the only ones open.

“It’s nice to have some business in the winter months.”

From May through September, Brown said business at the course is “usually pretty steady” in terms of rounds played with leagues, tournaments and daily play.

“It's from the fall through the winter and spring that really makes or breaks our year. If we can get some good weather, then we'll have a good year,” he said. “If it's pretty shaky weather, then we might have a bad year. It makes a big difference.”

In a notebook he keeps at the front desk, Brown writes down the daily temperature, and how many rounds were played. The entry for Jan. 5 of this year showed 71 rounds of 18 holes. The high temperature that day – 40 degrees.

“As soon as the weather gets to about 40, we start getting tons of phone calls. 'You guys open?' It's hard to tell people no,” Brown said. “I'm definitely thinking in my head, ‘I wouldn't play in it,’ but they want to play. It makes them happy. Some people come in and thank us for being open. They're out there taking pictures, just to show they played in January.

“We've got some diehards around here. They're Buffalonians. They can handle some cold.”

For a long time, Terry Hills was the only option for winter golf. Increasingly, though, more courses are stretching the season to unprecedented lengths. Buffalo Tournament Club in Lancaster, Willowbrook in Lockport and Ivy Ridge in Akron are a few of the courses that allow play on a mild winter day. Course operators decide on a daily basis when conditions will allow for golf.

“As long as it's frozen or thawed, it's fine,” said Jim Furlong, Willowbrook's general manager. “On the days when there is frost, then we are super-careful. Once it's frozen or it's thawed, playing on it, you can't really hurt it. It's bulletproof. With frost, at that point, you can do damage to the plant.”

Furlong came to Willowbrook eight years ago. Prior to his arrival, the course would shut down at Thanksgiving time and not reopen until April.

“We looked at it and said we have a lot of members and a lot of people up here in Niagara County who don't want to drive to Terry Hills,” he said. “We just decided we were going to keep it open for as long as it wasn't going to do any physical damage to the course. We've told all our regular players up here that we're open if there is no snow cover, and they should just check with us to see what the frost factor is.”

Furlong is usually the only staff member at the course in the winter, so there is not an added expense for opening the facility. Allowing winter golf hasn't made a huge difference to the course's bottom line, he said, but serves a different purpose.

“Even if we open up with the carts, we're only charging at that point like \$25 to play,” he said. “If you can be jam-packed with 100 guys with the lack of daylight, you're going to bring in maybe \$2,500.

“More so, the reason we're doing it is we want to keep Willowbrook on the top of everybody's mind, If we're in the middle of winter and it's 50 and sunny, that's a really nice day, and people think ‘Willowbrook's open.’ ”

Like Brown, Furlong can only laugh when he sees a group of golfers show up in more extreme conditions.

“I always say there's two people: There are actual golfers, and then there are people who play golf,” he said. “The actual golfers will play golf in anything – almost. As long as the course is not in a position where it could get damaged, we're good with letting them play. It keeps them coming here.”



(<https://s3.amazonaws.com/bncore/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/1012702822-Golf-Preview-M4.jpg>)

Steve Prunella hits his tee shot on the first hole at Glen Oak Golf Course. “We kind of just fell into it, because we had those mild winters,” Prunella said of the 12-Month Club. “Once it got going, we said ‘Let’s try to keep this up,’ and we got a little carried away.” (Mark Mulville/Buffalo News)

Prunella, Guyett and Koczaja are used to those sideways looks.

“My wife always thought we were crazy. She would say, ‘You guys are nuts going out there, it’s 35 degrees,’ ” Koczaja said. “I would make a tee time, and I would text them, and then I’d say, ‘Yeah, Steve called me to golf,’ even though he didn’t – I made the tee time.”

“I was afraid to meet his wife – I thought she was going to slap me,” Prunella joked.

When they finally did meet, Prunella said, “Let me tell you right now, I don’t make all the tee times.” She replied, “I figured as much.”

Prunella and Guyett, 69, were classmates at Maryvale High School. They lost touch for several years after graduation, then had families and careers. Golf became an afterthought. After retirement, however, they reconnected through golf, and a network of friends, including other Maryvale

graduates, formed an email chain. On Tuesdays during the summer months, the group books two or three tee times at a different course for anybody who can show up.

It was from that group that the “12 Month Club” was born.

“It just pulls people in,” Guyett said of the camaraderie formed in the game.

At least once a month, club members meet for lunch. On Mondays during the winter, they book the simulators inside Sportszone at the Tonawanda golf dome. Nothing beats the real thing, though.

“One good shot,” Guyett said of what keeps him coming back. “Even in that kind of weather, you put a good drive out there, or it hits the green, it's 'There it is, I got it.' ”

Prunella’s average score is in the upper 70s, while Guyett and Koczaja consider themselves “mid 80s” players.

“We’re decent golfers as the world goes,” Guyett said.

It’s less about the scores carded during those winter rounds, though, and more about the experience. Even Koczaja’s wife came around.

“When it got to all these months in a row, she would say, 'You know, it's sort of going to be nice in a couple days, maybe you guys want to go get your round in,' ” he said.

“It's a sense of accomplishment,” Prunella said. “All our friends in our other groups know what we're doing, too. They said this spring, 'Did you get your round in?' And we had to say, ‘No, February killed us.'”

Of course, that means a new streak has begun. Prunella estimated the group has gotten in “five or six” rounds already this season. Can they make it to 60 months this time?

“That's going to be tough at our age and with our weather,” Prunella said. “You just don't know. We've had guys in our group who aren't alive anymore. We're getting up there. But, you know, it keeps us in good shape. It keeps us feeling young, and we love it.”

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– Jay Skurski was named one of the 10 best beat writers in the country in 2017 by the Associated Press Sports Editors for his coverage of the Bills. A Lewiston native and St. Francis High School graduate, he's got a passion for golf and strives to be a single-digit handicap.

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