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Al Sillato, pictured left James P. McCoy/Buffalo News

Can you believe it? It has been 15 years since I took up golf. My objective that year was to break 100. My new goal is to do it when I'm 100.

Why not? My new hero, Al Sillato, will probably do it the next time he tees it up at the Lancaster Country Club, where he has been a member and an inspiration for 66 years.

I finally met Sillato in early April, a week after he turned 100. My coach, Marlene Davis, introduced us at the Paddock Golf Dome. Marlene has given me a lot of valuable advice in the last seven years, but the best lesson I ever got was spending time with Al.

"His presence is a lesson," Davis said.

The first thing you notice about Sillato is that he looks much younger. I had never interviewed a 100-year-old. I'm not sure I'd ever spoken to one, period. He was cheerful and eager to get back on the course after a brutal Buffalo winter.

"Actually, this is the first winter that I have not played outdoors," he said. "We used to have a group of 10 or 12 of us at Lancaster. If the weather permitted and we didn't have too much snow on the ground, we'd play through the winter. "I used to go to Florida in winter for couple of weeks and play with some of my buddies," he said. "Originally, it was my wife Marjorie. We never had a serious disagreement. She was my sweetheart."

So on the day we met, Al still hadn't played a round of golf at age 100. He has a far greater chance of shooting 99 than I did my first year. Shooting under his age is as natural as breathing for the Rochester native.

"It may sound a little bit crazy," he said, "but I've shot my age or beat my age up to 500 times."

Sillato might be guessing low. He said he has shot under his age at least 30 times a year since doing it for the first time at 77. At 97, he shot an 80 in Florida, and from the regulation tees.

That's right, he shot 17 under his age! I shot 17 over par once and was ready to call a press conference. Like any true golfer, Al remembered how his score could have been even lower.

"I had a birdie putt to finish with 79," he recalled. "It was a par-5. The putt just rimmed the cup. It was about 10, 12 feet."

Sillato said he played three times a week last season at Lancaster and helped monitor the club's special events on Mondays. He said he would be devastated if he couldn't play and credits the game with keeping him young.

"It's such a fascinating game," he said. "You can play it until the day you die. I know it's crazy to say, but if I have to go, I want to go on the golf course."

Sillato laughed, as if he intended to live forever. He is one of 53,364 centenarians in the United States. That number is expected to rise to about 600,000 by 2050, once the Baby Boom generation begins to hit the century mark.

I'm closing in on 60. In those frequent moments when things go awry on the course, I get discouraged by the thought that time is slipping away and I'll never get any better as a golfer.

But talking with Al gave me a new outlook. Like most people who reach a very old age, he sees every day of life as a new adventure, a chance to stay busy and learn and improve. In that way, golf is just like life. The thought of a new challenge is what sustains you. My wife, Melinda, feels the same way. She figures that life begins at 60 in golf. She got hooked on the game because it was a new challenge, an exhilarating pastime that got you outside into nature.

Sillato got hooked on golf when he caddied at Oak Hill in Rochester as a 10-year-old. He won the Locust Hill club championship in 1942, shortly before entering the Navy during World War II. He owned his own photography business for 45 years before retiring at age 70. He keeps busy. Marjorie died in 2001. He has two children, five grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. Al lives in the Brothers of Mercy senior apartments in Clarence. He volunteers at the rehabilitation center, taking patients to and from therapy, delivering meals, even helping with the mail on occasion.

"I still exercise," he said. "I still work the machines – the bicycle and resistance, the weights. I still work out, and I still do volunteer work. I keep active. I'm busy, six days a week. I advise everyone to keep moving."

Until a year ago, he still walked the course and carried his own bag, alternating his irons every round to lighten his load. He didn't play the senior tees until he was 96, when his drives were only in the 180- to 200-yard range.

That's generally an acceptable drive for me. Watching Al hit balls at the Paddock Dome, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Using an easy, rhythmic swing and strong follow-through, he drove his first two balls straight and true to the back wall.

Davis said Al has a way of renewing your zeal for golf. She works with the First Tee program and is teaching girls as young as 5. So she sees the joy the game brings to people from both ends of the spectrum.

"They all have the same look of glee on their face when they hit the same shot," she said.

Sillato has never taken a lesson. He learned the game by watching the club pros at Oak Hill when he was a kid. He has no mysterious secrets. Play golf for 90 years and you're bound to develop an equanimity and a repeating swing.

"My thoughts are to work with my arms reasonably close to my body," he said. "My backswing is about three quarters. Hit down through the ball and have a nice, high finish. That's good advice. That's all you need in a golf swing."

But what about tension? Al won club championships. He played against pros. How did he deal with pressure? He said everyone feels pressure, but he found that a good warmup got him into rhythm and carried him along.

"I never really thought of it," he said. "There's always tension, but you reduce it to a minimum once you get moving."

"He plays a sensory-based game," Davis said. "He doesn't think a lot. You don't think a lot, do you? Not over the ball."

"No, no. No," Sillato said. "I don't have any negative thoughts. Once you warm up, you fall into the rhythm of the swing. Your thoughts are on your partners as much as yourself."

So how long will you continue to play, I asked.

"As long as I can get up there and swing a club, I'm going to play," he said.

That sounds good to me. When I took up golf, I thought it would be a good sport to play when I got old. Meeting Al made the game seem new again. I'm a young golfer, and I have all the time in the world.