Golf world mourns death of Don Rossi

BY MARK LESLIE

One of the most "enthusiastic supporters" of the game of golf—Don A. Rossi—died March 11 after suffering a heart attack at his Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., home.

People from all segments of the golf industry hailed the 71-year-old Rossi, who led the National Golf Foundation for 13 years and, at the time of his death, was executive vice president of the Golf Course Builders of America and executive director of the National Golf Car Manufacturers Association.

Perry Dye, president of Dye Designs, Inc. and the GCBA, said, "To say you’re going to miss Don Rossi isn’t enough. We are going to feel it as an industry. He had an effect of cohesiveness amongst all groups. He was a great conduit to keep people who didn’t even like each other going in the right direction.

"There are some people who can help fill in the gaps, but nobody’s going to replace Don Rossi... He did a lot of great things. I really have to think that the National Golf Foundation’s here because he was leading it."

The National Golf Foundation (Japan, which Rossi helped found, named March 11 Don Rossi Day, created an annual Don Rossi Award to be given to a person who has made major contributions to golf, and donated $5,000 to the Rossi family.

Paul Fullmer, executive secretary of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, who knew Rossi for more than two decades, said: "He was one of the major forces in golf in the last 25 years, not only because of his position with the NGF, the builders and car manufacturers, but because of his tremendous enthusiasm and magnetism."

"His work in organizing the Allied Associations of Golf may well be the most important legacy he leaves behind."

Bill Bengryfield, who retired April 1 after serving eight years as national director of the United States Golf Association’s Green Section, said: "Don was a dear friend... He was one of those ‘doer’ guys, one of the ‘real’ people in the game. He had a marvelous attitude that affected everyone... He and Herb Graffius were the common golfer’s good friends."

"He did wonderful, marvelous things with the National Golf Foundation."

Business partner Jim McLoughlin of The McLoughlin Group said, "Don Rossi brought something to golf like no one else has—true friendship."

That sentiment was echoed by Bob Riecy, former president of the NGF and head of MacGregor Sports, who first hired Rossi as executive director of the NGF.

"He was irreplaceable as a human being. That’s my loss... If he was your friend you never had a better one. He’d do absolutely anything for you," Riecy said.

Riecy cited Rossi’s ability to bring people in the industry together to work for a common goal.

"Within a few years he was as well-known as any guy who had been in the industry for 30 years, because he was interested in everything in golf and he made himself available to help," he said.

Riecy said that after Rossi gained the industry leaders’ trust — "which he did in record time"— he brought them together.

"Here was a guy who had no ulterior motives or personal ego involved. His only interest was to do what’s going to help golf. Getting them together and getting them to trust and join hands was something that had never happened before in the history of the game the United States. And only because of that we have been able to make progress," Riecy added.

John Schilling, executive director of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, said: "Our staff is shocked and sad. The loss of Don’s death. Don was one of the industry’s true gentlemen and one of the game’s most enthusiastic supporters. He’ll be missed. He was a dependable and valuable resource for GCSAA and its members."

Rossi, who retired in 1985 after 13 years as executive director of the National Golf Foundation, had continued his career in the industry with the builders and golf car manufacturers associations and as president of Don A. Rossi and Associates, consultants in golf enterprises.

Raised in Detroit, the son of Italian immigrants, Rossi was commissioner of the National Industrial Basketball League, the forerunner of the American Basketball Association.

Moonlighting as a football official and winning appointment to the National Football League ranks, Rossi was named the first general manager of the Dallas Texans of the fledgling American Football League.

He was president of Riddell, a sports equipment company.

Rossi joined the NGF in 1970 and was instrumental in setting up the first annual worldwide golf development meeting of officials from eight countries in London. He led the National Golf Foundation of Japan and the Canadian Golf Foundation.

Under his leadership, the NGF sponsored yearly courses for golf course owners, operators and employees, created the Joe Graffius Award for achievement in golf education and expanded its clinics for golfers and teachers.

The NGF started a club exchange program so that golfers can donate old clubs to juniors, and developed a Research and Statistics Division to track the growth of the game.

He was a member of many golf course superintendents as well as the Allied Associations of Golf.

He also restructured the organization to include on its board representatives of the PGA, PGA Tour, LPGA, American Society of Golf Course Architects and Golf Course Superintendents Association of America.

He is survived by his wife of 48 years, Ruth; a son, Michael J.; and three daughters, Gayle A. Lunden, Elizabeth N. Lum and Mary Donn Jordan.

Donations in his memory may be made to: Evans Scholar Foundation, Don A. Rossi Fund, Golf, Ill. 60029.