



President Roger Stewart CGCS, An Unpretentious Professional

By Dave Kazmierczak CGCS cover shot by Seefeldt Photo

“Hi Dave come on in and sit down, I’ll be with you in a second,” Roger Stewart, CGCS said to me, focusing on his computer in his immaculately kept office recently, as I had dropped by for a chat.

“No Problem Rog,” I replied,

shedding my winter apparel. “What are you up to on this (frigid) day?”

“Oh just finishing the weekly report,” he stated without so much as a look up.

“I sure am glad I don’t have that to do all the time,” I said back,



ional

envisioning a constant stream of paperwork and red tape that I associate with working for a management company as Stewart has done for decades. The response I got back was not exactly what I expected.

“Nah,” he said in the most re-

laxed and nonchalant way. “You get used to it.”

Now given the opportunity presented, it wouldn't be far-fetched to imagine that at least 80% of all superintendents asked the same question would have gone into a dissertation about their loathing of paperwork and red tape already mentioned, but for the current MGCSA President it was just part of the job, part of the tapestry of what has been a long and remarkable career—which isn't surprising if you have ever been fortunate enough to talk with him.

It is hard to encapsulate what it is like to talk to Stewart without actually experiencing it. With close to a half-century of time spent in the golf course industry, numerous tournaments managed, four Presidencies of local GCS chapters and experience at TPC clubs in both the Northern and Transition Zones you might expect a sense of entitlement or even arrogance. That thought leaves you instantly the second you meet him. What does enter your mind is that he is as easy going and approachable as

anybody, and then you realize he is like E.F Hutton- the now defunct financial provider who's commercials became famous for the catch phrase: "When E.F. Hutton talks- people listen."

When Roger Stewart, CGCS talks- people listen.

...And for good reason. Stewart started out graduating from high school in his home town of Kankakee, Illinois. From there he enrolled in tiny Doane Collage in Crete, Nebraska trying to figure out what he wanted to do in life. After a couple years at Doane he came to the realization that he kind of liked his summer jobs spent in Illinois working at the golf course and decided to pursue a career in the field at the

University of Nebraska where he received a degree in Agronomy, Crop and Soil Science in 1973.

"By the time you get to the middle of your sophomore year, you are kind of feeling pressure to decide what to do. I said what the (heck), I kind of like working on the golf course " Stewart said.

From there it was back to Illinois. Stewart was hired by Bob Williams, a renowned area Superintendent and Past President of GC-SAA, as an assistant-in-training and with Williams' help, landed his first Superintendent job at Midlane CC in Waukegan, Illinois in 1975. From there he moved to Riverside Golf Club in North Riverside, Illinois where he worked for 10 years from





1978-1988.

“That was a real good job. It was a middle-of-the-road private club and the members really took good care of me. Moved my salary up every year, but I knew I was getting to the max of what they could pay so I started poking around, looking around a bit,” he said.

Despite the comfort of working at Riverside Stewart realized it may be time to move on to bigger and better things, so in 1988 he pursued and landed a grow-in job at Stonebridge CC that was a Tom Fazio design surrounded by a housing development. It was at Stonebridge that Stewart got his first taste of preparing for a big-time golf tournament,

hosting several Ameritech Senior Open events from 1990-1994.

In 1995, Stewart came to find out that Stonebridge was going to be sold to the membership, and while he had a good relationship with the members, he had always worked for the development company, and was the highest paid employee at the club. This was a recipe for unsteadiness in his mind. He remembered an old adage he had heard about the business that for many, stands true today.

“You know, there is a lot of talk in this business about that if you stay in a place longer than seven or eight years, it’s probably not in your best interest,” Stewart said.

Once again, Stewart decided to be ahead of the curve, and was hired by Cal Roth and the PGA Tour TPC management team to grow in the new TPC Jasna Polana club in New Jersey in 1996. The course opened in 1998 and hosted one of the last Shell's Wonderful World of Golf matches between Hale Irwin and



Tom Watson. It then hosted the In-tstinet Classic until the fateful day of 9/11 occurred and all that went away. Even in South New Jersey, the tragedy was tangible.

“You could smell it, even where we were. It smelled like an electrical fire,” he said.

Stewart continued to manage Jasna Palona through the middle of the decade with several General Managers and Head Golf Professionals. That, coupled with close to a dozen years away from the Midwest got him thinking about a change. He knew he wanted to retire back in Chicago but the closest TPC course was in Moline, Illinois, followed by either Cincinnati or the Twin Cities. A phone call inquiring about his assistant's interest in the vacant job at TPC Twin Cities led Stewart to call back the inquirer and report that his assistant wasn't interested but guess what? Maybe he was. With the previous twelve years at Jasna Polana, and the seven year rule once again in the back of his mind, it was time for another change.

“I said to my wife you know, I think I have cheated the devil once when I got this job working for the tour, and I think I'm going to have to cheat him again,” Stewart said. “She looked at me like (I was crazy), and I said well hear me out- two of our kids are out of school and living in the Chicago area, that gets me that much closer to Chicago, and it's a hell of a lot easier to visit Chicago

from Minneapolis than from Philadelphia.”

That turned out to be Minnesota’s gain, New Jersey’s loss. Stewart started in 2008 and has hosted the 3M Championship as well as keeping the course perfect for TPC Twin Cities members ever since.

But with Stewart, taking care of his courses and running a tight ship only scratches the surface of what he is all about and what he has accomplished in the industry. He first started getting involved with the Midwest AGCS in the late 1970’s. Before long, he had worked his way up to President in 1984. That was also about the time he teamed up with Bruce Williams, CGCS, another Chicago area Superintendent at the time, and began teaching a seminar at the GCSAA National Show on organization and motivation of crews, geared for assistants. It is a class they still teach today some thirty plus years later, though it has been condensed from a two-day class to four hours.

“Early on I just tried to get involved in anything I could,” Stewart said. “Honestly, the seminar, the teaching has made me a better superintendent. You (think back) to

what you were teaching and it reminds you of what you need to get accomplished.”

Stewart followed up his Midwest service with the Presidency at the Chicagoland GCSA, a smaller, more intimate association than MAGCS 1990-91. Stewart said he really liked the Chicagoland group, based strictly on education and formal dinner meetings.

Naturally once he moved to New Jersey, the call to service would be right away and he served on their board until elected President in 2006. The same would hold true for the MGCSA, as Stewart joined the board in 2009, and was elected President for 2014.

When asked to give highlights and what he felt was his greatest accomplishments while serving and presiding on the various boards and committees Stewart was not quick with a list of great things. He generally stated that he was proud to be involved with all the boards and board members and felt each one accomplished a great many things. There was one curious answer he did relate however.

“You know while I was on the board of the Midwest, New Jersey

and Minnesota they all made major changes to the Executive Directorship, and all for the better,” he said. Modesty aside, there has been quite a few things he has helped accomplish for the MGCSA. Stewart was

at pursuing a BMP Certification for Minnesota Clubs. He also had major influence on the MGCSA’s Outreach program and Wee One support. The impact of his wisdom and leadership will be felt for years to come.



instrumental as Chairman of the Research Committee in driving the MGCSA member supported research at the University of Minnesota. He was also instrumental along with Scottie Hines, CGCS and Paul Diegnau, CGCS in the formation of the Environmental Stewardship Committee that is still working hard

Despite all that he has accomplished, and all the time spent at the course and in the board rooms, Stewart is at heart, a family man. He married Susan, his wife of 43 years in 1971. Being a native of the Chicago area, she helped lead Stewart back to Chicago where he started his Superintendent journey. His

daughter Lauren, resides with her husband Josh in Chicago, and has given Roger and Susan three granddaughters to visit and spoil. His second daughter Anne is engaged and also resides in Chicago while their son Roger III resides where he grew up in the greater Philadelphia area. When asked about the demands on family life the job imposes, Stewart conceded that it was not always easy finding the balance, but in the end his family understood the demands on him, and the benefits of the job.

“It has been a good (career) for

and my family and me in that it has provided a good livelihood for us. We put three kids through college at about 80 percent or so. (The kids) really never were wanting for anything. I remember my one daughter complaining once that we never had a summer vacation, and I said (to her) well, that’s not so bad,” Stewart said. “What you have to realize is that they have wants and needs too. You may have to work on a Saturday, but you don’t always have to work on the Sunday too. There are times you have to be (at the course), but you have to take advantage of


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the days that are not high stress times (and be with the family then). In the end, all my kids have done very well and are successful in their own right and you can't ask for more than that."

So what has been the key for Stewart's longevity? When asked, he really didn't have a definite answer. Certainly working within the TPC Network management system has presented a steady structure on how to accomplish goals. Stewart related he thought he was working for one of the best companies out there. He cautioned that working for a management company is not for everyone. It takes a certain skill set to handle the structure and requirements, but he seems to have adapted well to the business model. As for the job of Superintendent itself? "Don't let the job consume you," he

said.

When we were done with our chat I donned my coat and hat, bracing for the mid-afternoon chill as Roger escorted me to the door. I glanced across the room and noticed a very elegant trophy of marble and gold lettering. The GCSAA lettering stood out first followed by 2013 Environmental Stewardship Award.

"Oh wow," I said. "I completely forgot about your national award last year."

"Huh? Oh yea, that was quite a surprise," Stewart said in his unassuming way.

Like Stewart, the trophy and the honor, to be admired and respected but never to be thrust to the forefront or trumpeted in any way. That pretty much sums up the 2014 MGCSA President.

*Thank You
Roger Stewart CGCS
for your outstanding support as
President of the MGCSA*