

The Jemsek empire grew from a Demshuk dream

By Vern Putney

In the fall of 1941, 28-year-old Chicagoan Joe Jemsek was working in a defense plant along with "other" jobs as owner-operator-head professional at West Chicago's St. Andrews Golf Club.

These two 18-hole courses and clubhouse were thriving. Jemsek, to whom a dime was a big deal during the Depression, had taken as his bride a year earlier Grace Hough, and had socked away \$22,000.

What more could a couple ask? Joe suddenly dropped a bombshell on Grace. "There's going to be a war," he declared. "Golf balls now being passed out like peanuts soon will be as scarce as hens' teeth. I have a chance to invest our nest egg in an unbelievable number of balls." "You do and there will be a divorce," Grace retorted. Joe did and she didn't, remaining a loving partner until her death in 1984.

World War II came a month later. The balls were put to good use as added playing round inducements.

Jemsek was on his way to prosperity, eventual recognition as "Mr. Public Golf" in the Chicago area and, Jan. 26 here, received with his family the 1991 Jack Nicklaus Family Golf Award pre-

sented by the National Golf Foundation.

This honor, capping a whirlwind 12 months of individual and family-connected laurels, pays tribute to



Joe Jemsek

families who have made substantial contributions to the game and exemplify the ideals of golf and family.

It also focuses on the role of families in introducing new players to the game. NGF research indicates that more than 80 percent of all golfers are introduced to the game by family or friends.

The Jemsek family empire, known as Jemsek Golf, embraces eight Chicago-area public golf courses, and has been supported by every family member.

"If it wasn't for my family and help, I'd be nothing," Jemsek said after the award presentation. He cited his family members and General Managers Ron Skubis at St. Andrews, Nick Mokolke at Cog Hill and Ted Soklos at Pine Meadow.

The "Jemsek Journey" into golf began about 70 years ago. Joe was the son of Russian Ukraine emigrant Gregory Demchuk, who ar-

rived in America in 1909, and Theodosia, who followed him in 1911 with daughter Mary, age 2.

Joe would hop a freight train to caddie at Larmie, Acadia, then Polaos golf courses. When about 12, he hitchhiked to the new Cog Hill course in Lemont, owned by Coghill brothers Bert, Jack and Marty.

In six years, Jemsek rose through the ranks from caddie to assistant professional to head professional in 1932. In 1951, he paid \$400,000 for the two 18-hole courses and clubhouse, added a third 18-hole course in 1963 and Dubsdread (Number Four) in 1964.

As a visionary, Jemsek had a far-seeing eye into the golf future. He also had a promotional flair to accompany a shrewd business sense.

"In 1934, during the World's Fair in Chicago, a platform had been built 630 feet up a tower nearest the lake to stage a long-driving contest," Jemsek recalls. "It was swaying, it was very windy, and I had a devil of a toothache. I was the last contestant, following some slugging Scotsmen who were in the U.S. to work. Their specialty was a slight hook for extra distance on hard, dry courses at home. They hit their three allotted balls into the teeth of the wind which was blowing from

left to right and, of course, killed distance.

"So I stood on the left side of the platform and hit high fades. The wind did the rest — an average of 501 yards each."

Jemsek quickly capitalized on his John Daly-like drives. His lesson rates shot up from \$2 a half-hour or six 30-minute sessions for \$10, to \$5 a half hour and six lessons for the full \$30. This was in a day when a \$5 minimum daily wage was inaugurated.

Golfers stood in line to learn his power secret. Overnight, he was famous.

For more than 40 years, Jemsek has been identified with charitable causes linked to golf. In 1952, he staged the first National Golf Day at Cog Hill GC, drawing 10,000 spectators. Featuring Bob Hope, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, it became an annual fund-raising arm of the PGA of America.

In 1977, Jemsek received the NGF's inaugural Herb Graffis Award.

He's especially proud of being a Class A member of the National PGA and, in 1988, being the first PGA member and first public course owner to be elected to the United States Golf Association's Executive Committee.

In 1980, Jemsek was elected to the inaugural Illinois PGA Hall of Fame, and received the Chicago District Golf Association's inaugural Distinguished Service Award.

Also in 1991, Jemsek was named Professional Golfer of the Year by the PGA of America; Illinois PGA Pro of the Year; was elected to the Chicago Sports Hall of Fame; was listed among the most powerful 36 persons in golf by *Golf Digest* magazine; and won that publication's Junior Golf Award for the Junior Golf Development Program co-sponsored by his courses and the Lamont Park District.

Dubsdread hosted the 1991 Centel Western Open to benefit the Evans Scholarship Foundation for caddies, and was listed 78th among America's best public courses.

Jemsek still relishes the daring of his \$22,500 plunge into the ball business that provided his big boost. He recalls famed woman golfer Patty Berg bursting into tears when presented a dozen precious balls upon joining the Jemsek golf staff as a teacher.

The female star in Jemsek's golf and family galaxy remains Grace. "Thanks be she suffered my seeming foolishness in that golf ball plunge, and made 44 years of marriage wonderful," said Joe.

USGA presents Bob Jones Award for sportsmanship to Gene Sarazen

PALM BEACH, Fla. — Gene Sarazen was presented the United States Golf Association's 1992 Bob Jones Award for distinguished sportsmanship in golf.

Sarazen accepted the award Feb. 1, shortly before his 90th birthday, at a dinner here, following the USGA annual meeting. The Bob Jones Award

is the highest honor given by the USGA. It has been presented annually since 1955 in commemoration of Jones' vast contributions to the cause of fair play both during and after his distinguished playing career.

The two men were contemporaries, born within three weeks of one another early in 1902, Sarazen on Feb. 27, Jones

on March 17. They won their first Open Championships within a year of one another — Sarazen, in 1922, Jones in 1923.



Gene Sarazen

Sarazen became a professional while Jones remained an amateur. Sarazen didn't win another Open while Jones was active, but he won the 1932 championship as well as the 1932 British Open after Jones had retired, following the 1930 season.

Further emphasizing the close ties between the two men, Jones

always liked to watch Sarazen play. He walked in Sarazen's gallery during the 1932 Open, when he played the last 28 holes in 100 strokes. Writing about Sarazen's play later, Jones said, "When he is in the right mood, he is probably the greatest scorer in the game, possibly that the game has ever known."

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