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FOR STANLEY

The USGA used to run commercials touting the fact that it was all about people who “really, really loved golf.”

It’s a fitting epitaph, then, for Mr. Stanley J. Zontek because no one I know really, really loved golf more than Stan.

In hindsight, it occurs to me that I never played a round with Stan, but I doubt he was one of those rabid golfers who obsessed about putters or remembered every hole he’d played. I don’t think he “loved” golf that way. I know even though he could have had playing privileges at pretty much any Top 100 courses he wished, he joined a relatively modest little club near his home just to have a place to get away and enjoy a quiet nine.

The Stan I knew for 25 years truly loved The Game of Golf. He lived for the concept of fairness in the sport. He adored being part of every aspect of the process of preparing courses for play. He worshipped what the USGA is supposed to stand for even if he quietly shrugged his shoulders and sighed about the political crap that occasionally took place in Far Hills. His idols were people like Old Tom Morris and Alexander Radko and Fred Grau and Burt Musser. If you don’t know who those people are, shame on you.

He genuinely loved turfheads and appreciated the character and skill of good superintendents as much as anyone I’ve ever met. Science – real, practical, legitimate science – was his bedrock. You had to prove things to Stan. He abhorred snake oil and, although the USGA frowns on agronomists talking about specific products, he always made it clear with a frown or a shake of his big Polish head when he thought something was bogus. He had a finely honed B.S. detector.

Stan was, famously, the longest-tenured USGA staff member. I bugged him about his impending retirement constantly. He kept finding reasons not to give up the grinding life of a traveling agronomic wizard, even though he could have taken his pension, left the sometimes maddening Blue Blazer bureaucracy behind and made way more money as a consultant. That was simply not his style. The Green Section was his life – a “calling”

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in the old sense of the word – and I’m not sure he could bring himself to visualize what it would be like to wake up and not put on that damned sport-coat and those beat up old black turf shoes and go try to solve a problem on a course for The Good of the Game.

He was an awesome storyteller. On too many occasions back in the day, we’d end up someplace cozy and boozy with a small group of hardcore turfies swapping war stories. One night at least a decade ago, a bunch of us sat in those great old white rocking chairs on the porch of Pinehurst’s Carolina Hotel smoking cigars and drinking warm brown liquor until the wee hours. Stan was...a bit overserved, as they say...and he was really digging into his memory banks and producing astounding stories about U.S. Open sites, Tour players, the White House putting green and personalities from around the business. Every 20 minutes or so, he’d glance over at me – Mr. Media – and ask, “You’re not writing any of this down, are you Pat?” I’d jokingly reply, “Everything’s on the record, pal.” We finally all got to bed

around 4 a.m. as I recall. At 5:30 a.m. my room phone starting ringing like hell and I answered to hear a panicked Stan: “You REALLY didn’t write any of that down, did you?!?!”

Stan, I promised you that morning I wouldn’t rat you out and I’ll take that to my grave.

We did a book deal of sorts, he and I. We had a handshake understanding that when he finally did turn in his official red-and-blue rep tie and his staff money clip, we’d lock ourselves up someplace and write The Book, which I would ghostwrite for him. The man had seen so much, done so much and met so many people that it was only natural that he’d finally share these stories for posterity. It was not going to be an expose or a tell-all – he’d never publicly say a bad word about the USGA. Instead, it would have been a celebration of all the joy he derived from The Game and the overwhelming gratitude he felt for being allowed to be a part of it for his entire adult life.

Gratitude. That’s what Stan always talked about when we’d get to spend time together at a USGA regional event or GIS or a Musser Foundation meeting. He felt so lucky...so blessed...to have made a career out of something that brought him joy. He helped people bring golf courses to life. These beautiful, amazing, unique playing fields designed to provide happiness, recreation and competition to millions of people. He shook his head in amazement every time he talked about how thankful he was.

So, I can think of no better tribute to Stan that I – or I think anyone – can offer, than to express our gratitude for the time we had with him, for the lives he touched and for everything he did for The Love of the Game. We’ll really, really miss you, Stan. **GCI**