



## A SENTIMENTAL STORY

By Rob Schultz

My buddy, Gus, stands 5-foot-6 or so, but he seemed 12 feet tall when I was a kid.

Gus lived three houses away from me when I was growing up in Oshkosh. Gus was a great athlete and he had two brothers who were equally as talented. Everything I learned about sports, I learned from Gus, his brothers and their endless supply of friends.

For some reason, even though I was always getting in the way, Gus and his friends took me under their wing. I was eight or nine years younger than most of them; a skinny, pigeon-toed kid with buck teeth who yearned to learn everything I could from them. I never tired of watching them play basketball, baseball and touch football, run track or lift weights. As soon as I could rub the sand out of my eyes in the morning, I'd run over to their house to find out what they were doing.

Gus and his friends played every conceivable sport in their backyard. In the winter, their backyard turned into a hockey rink. They played basketball in the attic of a neighbor's garage. They called it dunkball, since they used a rubber kickball and shot at a basket about 7 feet off the floor. The greatest collegiate athletes from the state all came to play there. Ron Hayek, Myles Strasser, Greg Seibold, Randy Wade. Some intense basketball was played there; years later the floor sagged from the pounding it took over all those winters.

During the summers, pole vaulting was the main sport. Gus used his parents' driveway as a runway and built an incredible pit out of old mattresses and foam rubber. Incredibly, they'd jump 14½ feet in their backyard. That was quite a feat 20 years ago. Gus set the state record in pole vault as a senior in high school. A few years later, his brother, Bill, broke his record and went on to represent the state, along with Stu Voight and Mark Winzenreid, at some national high school track meets.

Nothing, it seemed, fazed these guys. Nothing, it seemed, could scare them. Except, that is, for a certain golf course located about 35 miles away from Oshkosh. I listened to them talk about it while laying in the pole vault pit one summer day. They spoke of it in awe, as if it was Augusta National, Pebble Beach and Pine Valley all rolled into one.

"Lawsonia Links," Gus told me, "is where God lives."

Now I couldn't believe that such a miraculous place could be located so close to home. I begged Gus to take me there so I could see it. I was 10 years old and golf was a mystery to me. But I had to see this place that my heroes worshipped.

One day Gus obliged and I'll never forget the experience of seeing Lawsonia for the first time.

We drove past the brick walls and wrought iron gates that welcome visitors there and I gasped. With my nose pressed against the window of the car, I could see, in the distance, the hills that accompany the Wisconsin River down its southward trek through the state. From the other direction, I could see Green Lake and all the sailboats that call such a beautiful body of water home.

Then I looked at the golf course. I couldn't believe that a golf course could be such a gorgeous sight. Excuse me for that feeling, I was young. I'd never seen such well-manicured fairways, yawning bunkers, huge greens. I was in awe, even though I hadn't yet seen the great par-3 seventh hole, or the laborious climb up "Cardiac Hill" from the 11th tee to the 11th fairway, or the tremendously long par-5 13th.

My heart started pounding, I began to sweat and couldn't wait to get out of the car. I was in love for the first time. With a golf course. I haven't been the same since.

When I was young, my parents always took the family to Pennsylvania

for a few weeks each summer to visit relatives. Each trip always included a venture to Valley Forge, where my mother spent much of her time as a youngster. At Lawsonia, as Gus and I were walking along in solitude and the only sounds reaching our ears were from birds and the chiming of a nearby carillon, I couldn't help thinking that I was back at Valley Forge. The two places seemed so much alike; so quiet, so breathtaking.

Gus grabbed my shoulder and told me, "You have to be a real good golfer to play here. Maybe some day we can come back and you can play. But you'll have to learn how to play and you'll have to practice real hard."

That was enough incentive for me. My parents bought me a set of clubs and I played and practiced every day. I didn't spend as much time with Gus and his friends down the street anymore, partly because most of them had graduated from college and were off on their own. But I also wasn't around much because I was always on my bike, with clubs in tow, riding the long trip to the local municipal golf course and back. I struggled for a year trying to break 100. But I kept working at my game, praying I'd improve to the point where Gus would take me back to Lawsonia.

The big moment came when I was 14. I remember shivering with fright on the first tee, staring at the big dogleg to the right, to the green with the incredible "cliff" off the left side. "If you go down there," Gus said, "and get up and down in three shots, I'll give you 20 bucks."

I did go off the cliff, but Gus' money was safe.

My memories of that first round at Lawsonia still remain vivid, mainly because I've rarely gone a year without playing there. Talk to anyone about their favorite days of the year and most will bring up a holiday like Christmas, Easter or the Fourth of July. My favorite day is whenever I play Lawsonia.

I remember playing that dastardly par-3 seventh hole for the first time. It's one of the most beautiful holes in the state. From the elevated tee, a golfer looks down at an elevated green with deep woods as a backdrop. In between is Hell's Kitchen. Miss the green here, Bub, and you can pencil in a bogey or double bogey on the scorecard.

That first day at the seventh, Ron Hayek, who was playing with Gus and

me, nearly got a hole-in-one. His ball hit the pin and bounced out by about one inch. I tell the story of Hayek's near-ace every time I walk to the seventh tee there. I saw Hayek for the first time in about 14 years last summer when he was playing in the State Amateur at Maple Bluff and I asked him if he still remembered the near ace. He said he had forgotten about it. That's too bad. But I told him not to worry because I was keeping the story fresh.

My other great story from that first round occurred on the 240-yard, par-3 10th hole. I was amazed that such a long hole could be a par-3. As we stood on the tee, a herd of deer walked out of the woods and began to graze in front of the 10th green. There must have been 30 or 40 deer there. It was the first time I had seen deer out in the wild. We waited 20 minutes for them to leave. Then Gus, all 5'6" of him, up his three-wood and smacked the ball to within one foot of the pin. Easy birdie on one tough par-3. I always tell that story, too, when I walk to the 10th tee every year.

Lawsonia, like most golf courses,

has changed over the years. There is a new 9 there, which I don't like as much as the other 18 because it's so much different. They put in a water reservoir between the 13th and 15th holes many years ago. And the "little" trees they planted on the right side of the 9th hole have now grown up to be "big" trees. I gauge how old I'm getting by those trees. Each year, I look at those trees in disbelief. Then I pull my hair back and look at my hairline in disbelief.

But despite all the changes, Lawsonia's abience remains the same. You can still hear the carillon chiming, the birds singing. You can still see the deer grazing. I even once saw a fox ambling across the second tee into a nearby woods.

The rest of the area where Lawsonia is located—Green Lake Center—has remained basically unchanged. You can't play golf there without taking a tour of hugh Green Lake Center. Lawsonia, you see, takes up only a small portion of it.

I love driving my car on the skinny roads with stone fences that wind their way throughout the grounds. I wave to

the bikers who abound everywhere on these roads. The roads travel to beautiful prairies and thick woods. There are tiny chapels and cottages and beaches everywhere.

Now that the snow has melted and the grass is green, I've circled some dates on my calendar for my return to Lawsonia. That has excited me because Lawsonia is my favorite place in the world. I owe it a great deal. Without seeing it, I might never have taken up golf. And if I hadn't taken up golf, I never would have had the extreme pleasure of writing about it.

I'll practice hard during the few days leading up to my return to Lawsonia; I never like to play badly there. It's like Gus once said, "You have to be a real good golfer to play there."

And when I'm walking down the fairways at Lawsonia this summer, I'll think back to the wonderful times I spent with Gus and his friends. I'll remember the pole vault pit and the neighbor's garage and the first time he took me to Lawsonia.

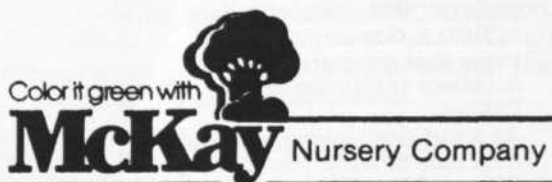
Quietly, I'll say, "Thanks, Gus."



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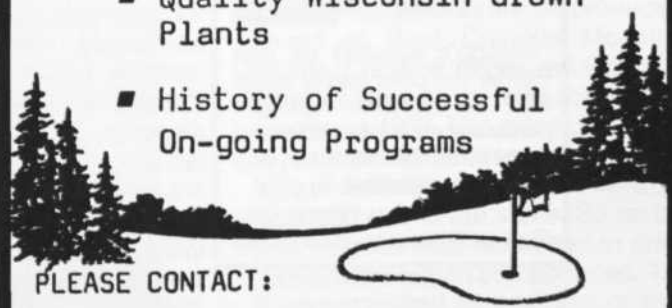


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