



“Golf Is Life” For Executive Director of Wisconsin State Golf Association

By Lori Ward Bocher

For someone who wasn't even remotely interested in golf until after college and service in the Korean War, Eugene Haas has since made the game his vocation, avocation and main interest in life.

“Golf is Life,” says Haas, executive director of the Wisconsin State Golf Association (WSGA) since 1977. “The game challenges you as life challenges you. I've been involved in all sports and many businesses, and I've seen nothing, to me, that's greater than the game of golf.”

Born in Spring Green, Wis., Gene's family moved to Milwaukee during World War II when he was 12 years old. His father, who had immigrated to the U.S. from Germany in 1920, wanted a job in the defense industry so that he wouldn't be drafted. “He had strong feelings about being drafted and having to fight against kinfolk in Germany,” Gene recalls.

Reflecting on his German heritage, he mentions a 1983 PBS documentary on German immigration that traced the families of immigrants from the time of immigration to the present. His family was one of those represented — mainly because Gene's younger brother, Richard, who is a famous artist in New York, happened to be in contact with the producers of the documentary. But all family members were interviewed for the film, including Gene.

“I think the film crew enjoyed doing my segment more than the others because I was running a golf tournament in Oconomowoc at the time,” Gene remembers. “They didn't want to leave.” The film was shown on PBS stations across the nation. “I got calls from people all over the country who said they saw the documentary and enjoyed it.”

During his high school years at Pius XI High School in Milwaukee, an athletic Gene was active in all sports — except golf. He then attended the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. And he had a chance to sign with a major league baseball team. But then he was drafted into the armed services and



Wisconsin State Golf Association Executive Director Gene Haas.

sent to Korea.

After a service injury, Gene spent lots of time in military hospitals. Being told that his body may not be what it used to be, one doctor strongly suggested that he take up a less strenuous sport — golf. That didn't look too exciting to Gene at the time.

Back home in the Milwaukee area, Haas enjoyed the sport of billiards and became quite good at it, winning a city championship one year. “Some of the billiards players were good golfers, too, and they challenged me to golf,” Gene recalls. “The first time I played, they were shooting 75 and I shot a 110. By the end of my first year of golf I could shoot under 80. And I was self-taught.” He credits the hand-eye coordination he developed with billiards for one reason he became successful at golf.

Instantly enamored with the game of golf, the organization-minded Haas quickly became involved in more than

playing. He immediately joined a golf club, the Whitnall Park Men's Golf Club, and within a year (1961) he was elected president. “I saw some things that needed to be done, so I volunteered,” he recalls.

Being president of the Whitnall Park Club made him a representative of the Milwaukee County Public Links Association. And by 1962 he was president of that organization. The same year he was elected vice president of the Wisconsin Public Links Association.

“At that time, there weren't a lot of competitive opportunities for public players,” Gene points out, adding that he could recall only four competitive tournaments a year. So in 1962 he helped start a tournament for Milwaukee County public players.

The WSGA, which sponsored many tournaments, was for private clubs only — not public courses like those with which Gene was involved. Likewise, the WSGA state tournament was for private players only, except for 12 spots reserved for club players.

“That bothered me,” he remembers. “From Day 1, I said, ‘If there's anything that I can do to change this, that's going to be one of the goals of my life.’”

In the meantime, he worked toward gaining more tournaments and recognition for public players. In 1964 he started lobbying the USGA to bring the National Public Links Tournament to Wisconsin. That became a reality in 1966 when the tournament was held at Brown Deer Park — the same site as the 1951 tournament.

“That was a highlight of my life in golf at that time,” Gene says. “Then, suddenly it was over.” So he looked for another cause. That turned out to be an amateur state tournament, open to all players, with a 72-hole stroke play format; at that time, the WSGA state tournament, in existence since 1901 for private players, was a match play format.

In 1967, the Wisconsin 72-Hole State Amateur Championship was run for the
(Continued on page 29)

(Continued from page 27)

first year. Today it's named after Ray Fischer, a WPLA rules official for many years.

In 1971, the WSGA changed its state tournament format from match play to stroke play. "It bothered the heck out of me," Gene says. "There already was a stroke championship in the state."

Also in 1971, Gene started the Billy Sixty Bestball Championship, which remains one of the state's most popular amateur tournaments.

Until 1977, all of Gene's involvement with golf was on a voluntary basis. "Everything I did in golf was totally volunteer, out of the back seat of my car or basement," he points out. "I spent all my off hours in golf."

For 17 years, his working hours were spent with a chemical company, O'Neil Duro, which no longer is in business. He enhanced this job with an associate engineering degree from the United Technical Institute. Haas worked as a purchasing agent, plant manager, and as a sales representative.

In 1975 he made his move into the golf industry when he took a job with Chesal Industries. "The company was growing because golf was growing, and there weren't that many golf accessory suppliers in the country," Gene points out.

"So I entered the golf sporting world and fell in love with it. I was in a clean industry," he says, adding that he became vice president of the company.

Then, in 1977, the WSGA was looking for a new executive director. "I had the right background, so they sought me out," Gene recalls, adding that he turned down the job three times before finally accepting. "Here I had the opportunity to do what I had always done as a volunteer. So I said 'Yes,' and away we went!"

True to a goal set earlier in life, one

of his first campaigns as executive director was to get public links clubs into the WSGA. "The WSGA should be the leader of golf in Wisconsin. If it can't serve all the golfers, it can't be the leader," he maintained at the time.

In 1981, the association board changed the rules to allow public players into the association. "We in Wisconsin were one of the first in the country to make that change," Gene points out.

But the public players didn't come running to join the association. It took a few years of lobbying by Haas to convince more and more public clubs to join.

Their presence has helped the association grow. When Gene started at WSGA, membership included 20,000 golfers from 92 clubs. Now there are 60,000 golfers from 300 clubs. There are about 325 golf courses in Wisconsin.

More members means more income for the association. But the WSGA has one of the lowest membership fees in the country; tournament charges are low, too, according to Gene. "We're efficient. And we don't try to make any money on anything we do. We feel that golfers support us when they become members. Everything we do is to service the golfer, not to make money."

With the WSGA functioning as he wanted, Haas then looked toward the national level — more specifically at the various ways of rating course difficulty. "Everybody had a different method of determining how difficult a golf course was," he explains.

So he and others went to the USGA requesting that they come up with a standardized system to be used across the U.S. Gene himself proposed some ideas. "They developed a system that now has become the standard for rating golf courses in America. It will be the world standard in 1991. I am kind

of proud," Gene says.

The Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents Association is headquartered at the WSGA office. "We want to help them do their job," Gene says, adding that he has the utmost of respect for golf course superintendents and the jobs they perform.

He also believes that golf course superintendents need more professional recognition. "They're not just grass cutters," he says. "I've seen the importance that they have contributed to the game of golf."

"Superintendents sometimes are more necessary to the operation of a golf course than golf pros," he continues, adding that every club in Wisconsin has a greens superintendent but only about one-third have a pro. "The superintendent on the golf course is needed by everyone all the time. When our golf courses are in good shape, we're happy."

What will be the next goal for Gene Haas? He would like to see more people involved in the game of golf. "I would like to see golf introduced into the school system so that every student would have the opportunity to learn to play golf. It's the game of a lifetime," he says. He also envisions a public golf course being constructed in urban Milwaukee — another way to get more new people involved in the game.

Gene himself tries to find time to play golf about once a week during the 25-week golfing season in Wisconsin. And he attempts to play in four tournaments a year "because the competitive bug still is there."

He even plays in winter when there's no snow. "I enjoy the game. The weather has nothing to do with it," he says.

After all, weather shouldn't stop a man for whom "golf is life."

Don't miss the opportunity to hear and visit with TWO U.S. Open Golf Course Superintendents this fall.

Danny Quast — Medinah Country Club — will speak at Cedar Creek Golf Course on SEPTEMBER 10th.

Ted Woehrle — Oakland Hills Country Club — will speak at Tripoli Country Club on OCTOBER 1st.