



# An Uncommon Man

By **Monroe S. Miller**, Golf Course Superintendent, Blackhawk Country Club

It was perfect. Gene Haas was presented the WGCSA's highest honor - the Distinguished Service Award - at our last regular meeting of the century. It was a beautiful fall day in Wisconsin (our best season), he played golf with his extended family of golf course superintendents, and his lovely wife Diane was with him to share the evening. It couldn't have been scripted any better.

Who is (or ever has been) more qualified than Gene Haas to receive our highest honor? I cannot think of anyone. In his 23 years as executive director of the Wisconsin State Golf Association, Gene has conducted nearly 500 tournaments. Add in qualifiers he has been responsible for and it becomes clear that most of us have dealt with him on our course for an event at one time or another. In my case, I think that we have hosted almost all of the WSGA events in my time as course manager at Blackhawk, so I know of what I write.

Regardless of the event, Haas wanted a course set up so that the best competition was available to players. He arrived early, usually played the course, took charge and communicated what was to be done. I cannot imagine that any state has offered, year in and year out, a better run tournament schedule that

the WSGA.

Time spent with Gene has given me a better understanding of golf and all that it is and should be. His perspective is complete and encompassing and he was never bashful to share it. He has a lot of strengths that came to each event. One of those was his thorough knowledge and understanding of the rules; that knowledge made him one of the country's premier rules officials, an area lots of us can always improve upon. He was always a real stickler on rulings, a fact players were well aware of.

Actually, Gene was more than just knowledgeable. He is a very bright guy with a memory like a steel trap. No details escaped him and his analytical mind sorted situations out and resolved problems quickly and with common sense.

An incident at our course during the State Amateur in 1993 demonstrated to me that Haas' understanding of the tough spot superintendents sometimes find themselves in. During that tournament a player complained to a State Journal reporter at the end of the first day that the golf course crew had cut a poor cup on the second green and as a result, he had lost his chance to compete. He was rude in his comments.

The paper came early in the

morning so I was able to go inspect the cup and see what was wrong. As I expected, it was perfect. Tough (Gene made the selection!), but perfectly cut. I was furious. Before play, I asked Gene if there were any other complaints about it. There weren't. Next, I asked one of the competitors from our Club who this person was, and he pointed him out to me.

That afternoon, I spotted the player near the eighth green. Haas was there, too. So I asked Gene if he would object if I spoke to the player about the incident in the paper that had embarrassed all of us on our crew. All he said to me was, "he needs a lesson in better sportsmanship. Go ahead."

I did. I took the guy about thirty yards away and administered a lecture about his conduct, about the golden rule and what golf was supposed to be all about, and a dozen other things. When I was done, he apologized to me. He apologized to Gene. And that evening he came by the shop with beer and soda and apologies for the crew.

Haas deserves credit for giving that person a better idea of conduct during an amateur tournament. I wouldn't have said a word if Gene had wanted me to 'not rock the boat.' That wouldn't have been Gene Haas!

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Gene Haas accepts a gift from Scott Schaller, president of the WGCSA. Diane Haas looked on, obviously very proud of her husband.



Scott Schaller received a hug from Gene's wonderful wife Diane. She has done championship work for Wisconsin's golf course superintendents.



Gene Haas, recipient of the WGCSA Distinguished Service Award.

Another event few know about merits publicity here. It really says a lot about how Gene views the whole world of golf, one that includes golf courses and turfgrass, not just the game. I had a notion that O.J. Noer should be in the Wisconsin Golf Hall of Fame. Before I wrote the nomination letter, I spoke to Gene about it. He was careful in his response, asking if I knew there were no non-golfers in the Hall. I did know that, but thought I could make the case for O.J. Gene encouraged me to do that, adding that "if there is a non-player who belongs, it would be O.J. Noer."

I wrote the letter, Gene dealt with it, and O.J. was the only person elected into the Wisconsin Golf Hall of Fame that year. I am grateful to Gene for his efforts on our behalf and O.J.'s behalf. Likely, O.J. Noer will always be the only non-player in the Hall of Fame.

We have been fortunate to have enjoyed the artwork only Gene is capable of producing in *The Grass Roots* - from caricatures of our members and speakers at the Symposium to art for the cover. He personalized our journal, making it more meaningful for all of us. Gene has shared his incredible and unique talent not only with us but with all of the Wisconsin golf community. And our volunteer authors can look forward, after toiling at no pay for a number of years, to a trip to Augusta and the Masters. Arrangements have been handled by Mr. Haas and the gratitude those who have attended feel is great.

Every time you receive a piece of correspondence from our chapter, it should serve as a reminder of our reliance on Gene and Diane and the wonderful staff at the WSGA. Much of that work is routine and mundane but critical to our success as a chap-

ter. For that, we owe a substantial debt of gratitude. And those involved with the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association will chime in with their thanks for all the WSGA office did during the WTA's formative years. Would the WTA be where it is today if Gene hadn't been receptive to our overtures? Not likely. And as a bonus, we got the help of the WTA's all-time best recruiter - Diane Haas.

It is breathtaking to think of all this man, this great man, has done for the golf course superintendents in Wisconsin. His retirement makes me melancholy. But it also has caused me to pause and reflect on how lucky I have been to have crossed his path. His uniqueness as Wisconsin's principal person in golf has served us well. I am pleased we were able to honor him and Diane, in our own and special way. He deserves all of the honors and accolades that have recently come his way. There will be more.

In the end, whatever is good for golf will be good for golf course superintendents. In the last quarter century, who has been better for golf than Gene Haas?

No one. Haven't we been lucky to have been associated with him? 🌿

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