

Former Dentist Takes The Reins At WSGA

By Lori Ward Bocher

After writing my 10th anniversary column in the last issue, it's fresh on my mind that Gene Haas, former executive director of the Wisconsin State Golf Association, was the second person I interviewed for this column. Now, 10 years later, I'm interviewing his replacement, Tom Schmidt.

This former dentist has been executive director since November 1, 1999. A native of Wisconsin, he was born in Mukwonago and lived there through high school. He graduated from Ripon College in 1966 and Marquette Dental School in 1970. He was a dentist for almost 25 years in Waukesha, where he's also been an active member of Merrill Hills Country Club for many years.

Let's join the interview.

Why did you leave the dentistry profession?

I had an elbow problem, degenerative arthritis in my right elbow. It got too painful to work. The arthritis is sports related. I injured it playing football in high school and basketball in high school and college. It slowly degenerated on me.

So how did you end up with the WSGA?

I had been on the board of directors since about 1973 - right up to the point in 1997 when they were looking to fill a new position, tournament director. They asked me if I'd be interested, and I accepted. I was tournament director for three years.

What were your duties when you were hired as WSGA tournament director?

I ran the 25 to 30 tournaments we put on each summer. I was in charge of finding the sites and running the tournaments on site. We'd try to spread them around the state. For



the most part, courses were pretty willing to host them.

When did you start as executive director?

On November 1, 1999. It was a pretty smooth transition since I had already worked here three years and had been a part of the organization

before that. And Gene (Haas) still works here part time.

Are his shoes pretty big to fill?

Absolutely. He was certainly one of the best.

Are you an artist like he is?

No, I am not an artist.

No more caricatures from the head office then?

No, not from me. But Gene still draws them. He still likes to work on those.

In your first year as executive director, what has surprised you? What have you learned?

Since I've been around the WSGA for so long, there really haven't been any big surprises. But one of the things we've learned is that we need to improve our communications with our clubs, especially some of the clubs that are outlying. We have not been as good in the past at getting our people out to visit some of the courses that are farther away

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from our office in Brookfield. We've hired a person to do that.

(Tom explained that there are seven full-time people on staff at the WSGA. In addition to Tom there's a director of rules and competitions, a director of handicapping and member services, a director of rating, and a director of communications. There's also a secretary/receptionist and a book-keeper. In addition to doing administrative work for the WGCSA, they also work with the Wisconsin Women's State Golf Association and the Wisconsin Women's Public Links Golf Association.)

What are some of the goals you have? You've already mentioned that you'd like to improve communications with outlying courses.

Right. And I think the next thing we want to do is to try to get more handicapped competitions for peo-

ple who aren't such accomplished golfers. Right now we have only one series of tournaments that is for handicapped players. Otherwise, most of our other tournaments are championship matches for very proficient golfers. So we'll try to create more tournaments for our handicapped players who represent a large segment of our membership.

What does someone like Tiger Woods do for the game of golf? I'm not a golfer, but I find myself paying attention to it because of him.

He brings the interest in golf way up. People like you, who normally would not watch golf, follow it. Certainly some of those people will end up trying it and getting hooked on golf like most people who play it do. And I'm sure he's a role model for young people, just like Jordan was for basketball.

How does Wisconsin fare in the big picture of golf, in terms of

the courses, the tournaments?

We're right up there with the elite. We're as good as any state. We certainly run a number of competitions. And our golf courses are as good as they are anywhere.

Do you think that's well known across the country?

I think it's getting better known. Anybody who has ever been here knows it. Wisconsin hosted the U.S. Women's Open at Blackwolf Run in 1998. In 2004 the Men's PGA Championship will be at Whistling Straights. And the American Juniors Golf Association has had numerous tournaments in the Lake Geneva area. I think Wisconsin is reasonably well known.

As a golfer and executive director of WSGA, how much do you know about the role superintendents play?

I understand very well what they do, how important a link they are.

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What about the average golfer?

I'm sure that average golfers are probably not as aware as they should be.

Do you see that as a role of your association - to help them become more aware?

We do have in our *Wisconsin Golfer* magazine a column that

Monroe Miller writes for every issue (The Greenside). We're trying to use that as a vehicle to put more light on the golf course superintendents.

A lot of superintendents tell me that when golfers watch the big tournaments on TV, they end up wanting their own courses to

look as good. Do you see that happening?

Of course. But what those golfers fail to realize is how much money goes into making those courses look like they do - money for agricultural inputs and for personnel. And, I'll tell you, we've got a lot of courses that don't take a back seat to anything you see on TV.

Any messages that you'd like to convey to the golf course superintendents?

I hope they're well aware that the WSGA door is open to help them in any way we can. Anything that's going to promote golf, we want to be a part of it.

What are some of your outside interests and activities?

Most of my activities revolve around golf. I've been golfing since I was 12. Now I golf mostly on weekends. And when I'm on vacation I usually get around to golfing somewhere. Over the years I've probably played in 30 some states. I also run a little bit. And I do some reading.

What is it that you like about the game of golf?

I think golf is a tremendous challenge. It's a game that is a challenge at any level. You can set your own standards. You can play with anyone. Players with different skill levels can play together and have a great time; you don't see that in many other games. I just think it's a terrific game. Plus, you get to be outside.

Do you have a family?

Yes. My wife of 29 years, Linda, works at Schwartz Book Store in Brookfield. We have a daughter, Alison, who is 26; and another daughter, Amy, who is 23.

Has the transition from dentistry to the WSGA been a good one for you?

Yes, it's been good. I enjoyed dentistry, and I'm enjoying this. I'm fortunate that I've been able to do two things that I like. ♣



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