

Playing Through

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

Let me tell you about a singular, unforgettable evening of golf in Wisconsin. Words will not do justice to what was, for everyone there I would guess, one of those "once in a lifetime" events. On July 10, 2001 the Wisconsin State Golf Association celebrated its founding 100 years ago.

The Centennial celebration reflected what most of think about when we think of the WSGA. It was professionally planned by WSGA staff and by Karen Morghan. Karen, wife of USGA agronomist Tim, is also involved with the GCSAA 75th anniversary celebration scheduled for mid-September. It was done with tradition and class and elegance.

The site was one golf course superintendents have enjoyed over the years as a site of some of our events – The Country Inn in Pewaukee. As you entered the doors to the convention facility on the east end of the building, bagpipers welcomed you with the traditional Scottish tartan attire and traditional bagpipe music. We knew then something special awaited us.

The entrance hallway was a great spot for conversation and hors d'oeuvres before the grand ballroom was available for dinner and the program. So many familiar faces to Wisconsin golf were there, and I was actually surprised at how many people I knew.

I was sidetracked during the cocktail hour by the new book *Playing Through* by Gene Haas. His history of the Wisconsin State Golf Association led me to a sofa and some reading in the midst of all the excitement. What a book! I own a lot of golf books, but none have a better combination of graphics, photography, organization and writing than this one. I cannot imagine how Gene must feel with this accomplishment. And he gives credit due others, especially his son who worked on design and layout. Honestly, everyone should have a copy of *Playing Through*; the Grass Roots staff has made it easy for you to order one by issuing an order form. The WSGA is encouraging its distribution by accommodating different methods of payment. If you call the WSGA office, I

am certain Gene will autograph a copy for you.

The bagpipes called us to dinner in the ballroom. I am only guessing, but there had to be tables for 400 – 500 people. The setting was not unlike the annual GCSAA conference dinner and show, but it was better. Cheryl and I were with Harriet and Chuck Stoll, Diane and Tom Huset, and Sue and John Altschwager from our Club, and Bill McDonough from Bishops Bay. Good company and good conversation make a great evening even better.

Ken Burke, president of the WSGA, gave some opening remarks and introduced a video greeting. That was followed by one of the many highlights of the night – the introduction of the Master of Ceremonies, television golf commentator Steve Melnyk.

Melnik's voice is familiar to everyone interested in golf. He is a superb observer of the game and was a pretty fair player, too. He won the 1969 U.S. Amateur and



Traditional Scottish pipers welcome guests to the WSGA Centennial celebration.



Master of ceremonies Steve Melnyk.



Dr. Trey Holland, USGA president, presents WSGA president Ken Burke recognition from Golf House.



Steve Melnyk with native sons on the PGA Tour: L-R, Steve Stricker, Jerry Kelly, J.P. Hayes and Skip Kendall.

the 1971 British Amateur. Steve also was on the U.S. Walker Cup team in the same years. The PGA Tour was his home for a decade, and he distinguished himself there as well. It would be tough to find a better person to serve as a host for the evening.

The WSGA planners put a lot of emphasis on the founding clubs, just as they should have. Those clubs were Janesville CC, Kenosha CC, LaCrosse CC, Maple Bluff CC, Milwaukee CC, Oshkosh (Algoma) Golf Club, Racine CC, Riverside (Appleton) and Tuscumbia (Green Lake) Golf Club. The clubs were all represented at the centennial and photos of them were taken.

An excellent video about the history of the WSGA was played, and we all received a copy of it. Dinner was served and it was anything but typical hotel fare. The wait staff provided great service to complement the great meal.

Dr. David Cookson continued the program with Hall of Fame activities. Two new people were inducted – Bernice Wall and George Hansen. Ms. Wall was an outstanding amateur player in the 1920s and 1930s. She is deceased

and no living relatives have been located.

George Hansen is an intriguing selection, especially from a golf course superintendent's point of view. For many people he is considered the "Father of Public Links Golf Courses in America." He was hired by the Milwaukee County Parks Commission in 1919 to complete the construction of Grant Park Golf Course. George designed and built the Greenfield Park golf course and in 1926 was appointed superintendent of Milwaukee County Parks. Also to his credit are Currie Park GC, Brown Deer Park GC and Whitnall Park GC.

Mr. Hansen was known for his ability to organize a substantial system like the Milwaukee County Parks with outstanding results. He passed away in 1950 at the age of 61. Gene Haas has since visited with his youngest son, a Milwaukee county resident, and his grandson who lives in Columbus.

Many of the surviving members of the WSGA Hall of Fame were in attendance. After their introduction, a group photo was taken.

The program continued with a video that presented players and their views of the WSGA. That

included two-time US Open winner Andy North who was away at a senior event. High praise and well deserved compliments were the theme of the tape.

Dr. Trey Holland, president of the USGA, brought congratulations and greetings from that organization. He echoed some of the flattering remarks Steve Melnyk made about the enthusiasm for golf in Wisconsin. I had not heard Dr. Holland speak before and was a little surprised by his youth.

Really, one of the best spots of the evening came next. The celebration was clearly planned to coincide with the GMO, so native sons in the PGA (and, indeed, Melnyk himself) could attend. Five comfortable living room chairs, complete with lamps and end tables, were on the stage. Steve led a golf discussion with Steve Stricker, Jerry Kelly, J.P. Hayes and Skip Kendall. What fun and how interesting to hear these young guys talk about playing on the PGA Tour after growing up on Wisconsin golf courses and playing in WSGA events. I admit prejudice when I tell of my delight in hearing Steve Stricker talk about his fondest memory from a WSGA event – the



Hall of Fame Members present at the Centennial celebration: (back row) Dennis Tiziani, Dick Sucher, Don Iverson, Steve Bull, Archie Dadian, Joyce Malison, Manuel de la Torre. (Middle row) Gene Haas, Mary Fossum, Mark Bemowski, Katy Falk, Jeff Radder, Mary Beth Nienhaus, John Pallin, Tom Veech, Burleigh Jacobs. (Front row) Goldie Bateson.

long drive contest after the WSGA junior tourney at Blackhawk. He remembers driving one "down the pipe" for over 200 yards from our 10th tee, high on the hill overlooking Lake Mendota. I was there (but don't remember!).

After the "native son's" conversation, Steve Melnyk offered concluding comments about golf and history and the Wisconsin State Golf Association. He assured everyone that Wisconsin's outstanding reputation among amateur golf associations was well deserved and not exaggerated. Of course, we knew that.

To the WSGA: may your next 100 years be as terrific as the past 100. No doubt they will be. And thanks for the memory. 🌿



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