

Childhood Dreams Do Come True – With Hard Work and Determination



By Lori Ward Bocher

Think back to your lemonade days, when summer afternoons were spent playing with buddies. Imagine neighborhood boys, 10 or 11 years old, playing golf in the school yard. Some days they go to a nearby 5-hole course along the Sheboygan River for a very good reason – it's free! They stand on the 5th tee, look to the east and say, "Sure wish they'd finish four more holes over the hill."

On rainy days these boys get together to draw up golf course plans, dreaming of different ways to lay out the holes. One of the boys – we'll call him Ed – says to himself or to anyone who will listen, "Some day I'm going to have a golf course of my own."

Fast forward 25 years and young Ed is now the golf course superintendent on the same land where he once played a 5-hole course with his buddies. You see, that land is now part of the River Course at Blackwolf Run – the first two holes and the third tee, to be exact. Fast forward another five years, and young Ed's childhood dream has come true; he owns a golf course.

If you haven't figured it out yet, Ed is Ed Kirchenwitz, owner and operator of Sunset Hills Golf Course and Driving Range near Sheboygan Falls. Before taking the plunge to start his own business, he worked at numerous jobs for the Kohler Company; at one time or another he was superintendent of three of the company's four golf courses.

But before we get too far in this story, let's go back to the lemonade days to see what an important role golf has played in Ed's life and to find out how a childhood dream became a reality.

Stayed close to home...

Ed was born in 1960 in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. "I've lived here my entire life," he says. "I've always worked locally. My first job was at Pine Hills Country Club when I was in high school."

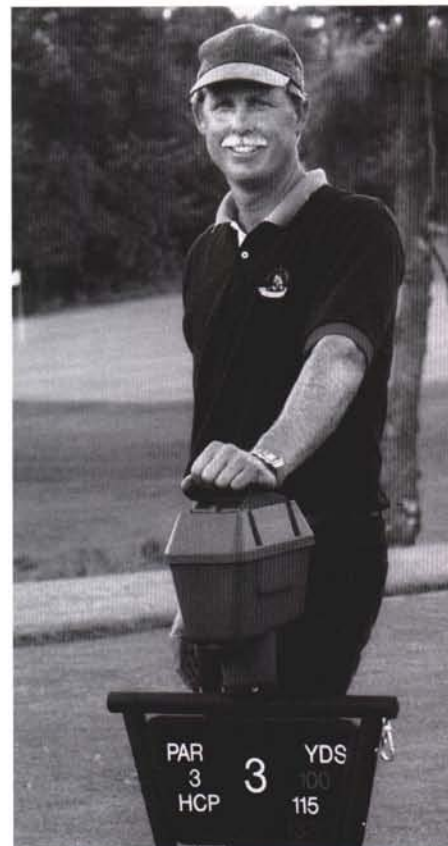
Ever since he can remember, Ed has enjoyed golf. "I grew up about four or five blocks from Pine Hills," he recalls. "All of us neighbor kids golfed at the local school yard. One of my friends had a brother who was the superintendent at Pine Hills. That's how I got my first job at a golf course. Pretty much our whole neighborhood worked there," he adds with a laugh.

After graduating from high school in 1979, Ed continued to work at Pine Hills. In 1985, he went to work for the Kohler Company – just about the same time they announced they would be building a golf course. "I ended up working for their landscape division for two years," he explains. "We took care of all the Kohler Hospitality properties. But whenever we had extra time, we went out to the (soon-to-be) golf course to clear trees, things like that. It didn't seem like a big thing at the time because nobody really knew how fancy of a golf course it was going to be until they started construction."

Ed continued to work for the landscape division while the first course at Blackwolf Run was being built. "Our landscape crew worked as the finishing crew for the prep work on the golf course," he relates. "We put in a lot of long hours. It was a great learning experience, there's no doubt about that."

He'd been there before...

Working on the course brought



Architect, owner and golf course superintendent Ed Kirchenwitz, Sunset Hills Golf Course. Photo by Jeff Machtig of the Sheboygan Press.

back childhood memories for Ed. "When I was a kid, we used to go golfing where the first three holes of the River Course are now," he remembers. "It was a 5-hole course that the Kohler Company owned for its employees and the Village of Kohler residents. My father worked for Kohler for more than 30 years.

"We could golf there for free, so obviously we went there a lot," he continues. "It was a nice little course to learn on. Nothing fancy. Not too many people know that it was there. The funny thing is, we used to stand on what was the 5th tee, look to the

east and say, 'Boy, wish they'd just finish four more holes over the hill.' Little did we know that that was going to happen!"

Ed wanted to switch from the landscape division to the golf course, but that didn't happen. So he left Kohler in the spring of 1988 when someone hired him to build a 9-hole public golf course near Howard's Grove – Heartland Hills Golf Course. "We did everything ourselves – the irrigation, the grassing – except for a little bit of bulldozer work," Ed says, adding that he was in charge and employed two other workers.

With some golf course construction under his belt, Ed was able to get a job at Blackwolf Run in 1989. Once there, he quickly worked his way up through the ranks. "I started out as a crew foreman in 1989," he explains. "In the spring of 1990 a couple of assistant superintendents

left, so I went from a foreman to an assistant superintendent. And then in 1992 I became the Meadow Valleys superintendent.

"I did that for two or three years, and then was named superintendent of the River Course," Ed continues. "After two years there I went out to Whistling Straits where I was the superintendent for two years. I've been on three of Kohler's four courses." (The fourth is the newest, Creeks Course, next to Whistling Straits.)

U.S. Open experience...

In 1997 Ed left Whistling Straits and returned to Blackwolf Run for the U.S. Women's Open which was held in July of 1998. "I was the construction superintendent," he explains. "We rebuilt four tees, making them bigger or changing their location a little bit. On the 18th hole we transformed a sand bunker into a pond – just for the tournament."

Much of the tournament preparation took place off the course. "We had to build a whole entranceway to the U.S. Open," Ed points out. "We basically took a big field and converted it into a park setting for all of the tents, a bus drop-off, things like that. We put in a gravel road. Brought in lots of trees and flowers and flag poles."

When the tournament ended in 1998, Ed became the River Course superintendent again for another year. At the same time, he put the wheels in motion to fulfill his childhood dream of becoming a golf course owner. No longer a child, Ed now had nearly 20 years of golf course experience under his belt – 10 of those years with Kohler.

Back to the dream...

But we're getting ahead of the story. How did Ed make the transition from golf course employee to golf course owner? As we mentioned

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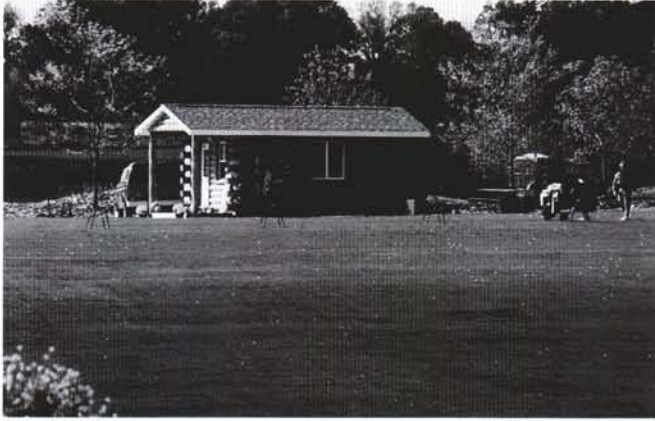
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Ed and his father built this modest and temporary clubhouse. The range tee, sown to low mow Kentucky bluegrasses is in the foreground.



Here is a look backwards at the fourth hole.

before, it started when he was a kid. "It was always a dream of mine to own a golf course," Ed admits. "When I was younger I used to sit around with a bunch of guys from the neighborhood and we'd draw up golf course plans. Most of them we threw away. But I kept one set from when I was about 10 or 11. I still have it upstairs in a closet

somewhere." (One of the kids who drew plans with him, Steve Fischer, is now the golf pro at The Bog near Saukville.)

Right after the U.S. Open, Ed began looking for some land for his course. He remembered someone he met in his early days at Pine Hills, someone who did a bit of construction work at Pine Hills

and other courses. This man, Ron Krueger, owns Ron's Tree Farm and some land near Sheboygan Falls, with easy access to Highway 23. Ron is in the tree spade business, so he has bulldozers, payloaders and other equipment needed to build a golf course – reasons that made him a good potential partner.

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"I approached Ron and asked him if he'd be interested in going in on a golf course project with me," Ed relates. "He told me to put together a business plan and come back. When he saw the business plan, he said, 'Let's start the process.' He became my partner."

From 1998 to 1999, while still working at the River Course, Ed did lots of preliminary work – attending town and county meetings, working with the DNR and other state agencies. "It took us a year before we had the go-ahead for Sunset Hills Golf Course and Driving Range," Ed recalls.

Breaking ground...

In 1999 they started the driving range, which was open for business in the summer of 2000. In the spring of 2000 they started work on the 9-hole, par-3 course; five holes were open for play in August of 2001. "We had hoped to have all nine holes open by then, but we had some stumbles with the DNR," Ed explains. "All nine holes will be open for play by mid-May of this year. We have three sets of tees for each hole, as short as 100 yards and as long as 220 yards."

Ed chose to build a 9-hole, par-3 course based on his research. "Right now, all of the people who analyze the golf industry are saying that too many Blackwolf Runs are being built and nobody is building for the family golfer or the person who golfs only two or three times in a summer," he explains. "There's a void there."

"People can golf our course in two hours, which is all the time some people have," Ed continues. "And we're a family oriented business. A lot of the bigger courses don't want young children running around. But we want them to come. We want our course to be geared for family entertainment. It's relatively inexpensive to play here — \$8. And for \$600 you can buy a family season pass and golf

as much as you want to or hit balls in the driving range, too."

Safety is another reason he chose a par-3 course. "With the land we have, maybe we could have put in a few par-4 holes," Ed explains. "But we kept safety in

mind. I kept it spread out and safe instead of trying to squeeze in one or two par-4 holes."

The land also dictates that Sunset Hills will remain a 9-hole course. "We don't have any land for expansion," Ed says. "We're

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bound by the Sheboygan River to the west and roads to the east and to the south. To the north, it just wouldn't work with the way the course is laid out."

Ed designed the course himself, working with the natural landscape. "There's a creek that runs through the property," he points out. "Five holes are bordered by the Sheboygan River. And there's some nice terrain change. I drew the course up about 20 different ways with topographical maps. We did some picking and choosing until we finally came up with the plan we wanted. We didn't move a lot of earth – just carved some greens and tees into the hillsides."

He is thankful for his parents, his wife's parents, and other family members who helped build the course. "When I needed stone pickers, I'd call them," he relates. He also thanks the many Wisconsin superintendents who helped him out with used equipment purchases.

Big differences...

What's the difference between working for a large corporation and working for yourself? "When you work for yourself, you worry about the finances every day," Ed admits. The hours differ, too. "When I was a superintendent I thought I put in a lot of hours. But that was nothing compared to what I work now that I own my place. I go to work when the sun comes up and go home when the sun goes down.

"If you want to own your own golf course you've really got to want it," he continues. "It's a big sacrifice. For the first couple of years you do a lot of work for nothing, it seems. Even once you're done you've really got to love the game and the customers or you'll drive yourself crazy because you're at the course constantly."

Up to now, Ed has done all of the course maintenance work himself. He plans to hire his first



Holes 5, 6 and 7 with the Sheboygan River and a man-made pond in the background.



Ed's children Ellis and Andrea enjoy Dad's practice range.

employee this summer. He's also working a second job during the winter – as a jack-of-all-trades for Morrelle Transfer and Warehouse in Sheboygan Falls. "I'll do anything from truck driving to plowing snow to building offices inside the warehouse," Ed explains, adding that eventually he expects the course to keep him employed full time. One thing Ed enjoys about Sunset Hills – something that was missing while he worked at Kohler – is "the one-on-one contact with the customers. I never knew the

names of the golfers when I worked at Kohler. I never saw the same person twice," Ed says. "Now, that's my main objective – trying to meet everyone who is golfing with me, learning their names."

Ed is pleased with the amount of business Sunset Hills experienced in its first two years when the course wasn't even complete (driving range only open in 2000; driving range plus five holes in 2001). "We haven't advertised much at all, but people know we're

here because of the driving range," he says. "We have a lot of families that come and use the driving range. The word has been spreading. Last year we had about 1 million balls hit on the range. I think that's a pretty good number for the second season.

"Last year we had 29 memberships just for the range, which was more than I expected," Ed adds. "I'm expecting about 50 memberships for the range this coming summer. I don't know what to expect for golf course membership now that all nine holes are open. A lot of people don't like to commit to just one course, especially a 9-hole, par-3 course. But I figure we'll go over 20,000 rounds easily."

Life off the course...

When he isn't consumed by his

new business, Ed enjoys deer hunting – both bow and gun seasons. And he plays softball in the summer. "My wife says I have to keep playing because I need to do something besides work," he admits.

Ed's wife, Amy, is an office manager for a dentist. They have three children: Becky, 18, a freshman at UW-Stevens Point; Andrea, 8; and Ellis, 5.

At the end of the interview, I ask Ed the \$64,000 question: "Is this a dream come true for you, or do you wonder if you've jumped off a cliff?"

He laughs and then answers, "A little of both. Some days I ask myself, 'What did I do this for?' Other days I realize I need to look at the long-term picture and not

the short-term picture I'm in now."

In the long term, Ed has fulfilled a dream of more than 30 years. And that has to be satisfying no matter how you look at it.

Author's Note: For those of you who like "Small World" stories, during the course of the interview I discovered that Ed is my husband's second cousin; his grandfather and my husband's grandmother were brother and sister. Somewhere along the line family ties were broken because neither Ed nor my husband knew the other existed. But my husband knew his grandmother's maiden name was Kirchenwitz, so we consulted a family genealogy book to discover that he and Ed are actually second cousins. ♡

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