



# Golf Has Shaped His Life Since the Beginning

By Lori Ward Bocher

It's a perfect golf story. Grandfather introduces boy to golf when boy is only 5 or 6 years old. Boy likes golf. At the age of 12, boy rides his bike 30 minutes one way to caddy at the Milwaukee Country Club. Boy caddies for seven more years and starts playing golf competitively. After college, he labors at odd jobs so he can work at fulfilling his life-long dream of being a professional golfer. And then what? He becomes a banker.

Not the way you thought the story would end, is it? Well, you're right. After three years as a banker, this young man finds his way back to the world of golf where he's been for 14 years. And he plans to stay.

This boy-to-man story is about Bill Linneman, Director of Rules and Competitions (or tournament director) for the Wisconsin State Golf Association. Golf has been a part of his life for as long as he can remember and it has shaped who he is today.

Born and raised in Whitefish Bay back in the 1960s and 1970s, Bill has been golfing since his grandparents took him to Oshkosh Country Club when he was only 5 or 6 years old. "My parents golfed, too," Bill points out. "But it was my grandfather who really got me involved with golf."

## **First job in golf...**

When he was 12 years old, Bill started working as a caddy at the Milwaukee Country Club. "I think I had the best situation possible," Bill relates. "At the time, Manuel de la Torre was the golf professional there. He had a number of great assistants, and all of them taught me the traditions of the game, respect for the members,



respect for the course, and respect for the rules of the game. It truly was a wonderful experience. Without it, I know I wouldn't be where I am today."

Bill worked as a caddy through his freshman year in college. "I actually thought about working on the grounds crew one year until I found out just how much work it would be and that it basically would have eliminated my opportunity of playing competitive golf," he admits. "I knew Danny Quast was one of the better superintendents in the state. The course was always in immaculate condition."

So Bill continued to caddy and play competitive golf. "Golf has always intrigued me," he says. "I was an athlete; I competed in all sports. But golf is this unusual challenge that no one can ever quite perfect; it was an enigma that attracted me."

When he graduated from Whitefish Bay High School in 1980, golf even shaped Bill's choice of majors (business and finance) at the UW-Madison. "The financial world had always interested me. And, growing up as a caddy at

Milwaukee Country Club, it seemed to me that a lot of business was done on the golf course. Since I had always been a golfer, I thought the two would be a good mix some day."

Bill played on the UW golf team while in college. And when he graduated in 1985 he decided to take more time for golf. "I spent the next two years playing competitive golf, bartending, and having the fun life," he remembers. "Back then I had the dream of becoming a professional golfer. Back then my life's focus was geared toward having a lot of fun and playing a lot of golf. I did both."

But when the dream of becoming a professional golfer didn't pan out, Bill turned to his business degree and went to work for M&I Bank. "I worked as a teller, a teller supervisor, and an assistant manager of one of the satellite branches," he points out, adding that he worked in Whitefish Bay and Glendale from June of 1987 to December of 1990. "I was hoping to climb that long corporate ladder within the M&I corporation."

## **Finds his way back...**

But this was not meant to be. Paul Becker, Director of Course Rating for the WSGA at the time, told Bill that he would be leaving the job. "Paul told me I'd be perfect for the job, so I called up Gene Haas who was the executive director then," Bill explains. "Gene knew me from my playing days. I really wanted to get this job because I was still a golfer at heart."

And get it he did. Bill worked as Director of Course Rating from

early 1991 to the end of 1999. "I really got to know a lot of superintendents during this time," Bill relates. "That job entailed traveling around the state, measuring all the golf courses that were new or that had changed some holes. This was at a time when the most golf course construction in the history of the state was taking place. Golf was really booming. There were 20 to 30 new course openings a year.

"The superintendents were a terrific group of guys," he continues. "My first year on the job so many offered all the help they could. I remember many a time calling Rod Johnson or Wayne Otto who would give me advice or answer questions. I also got to know some golf course architects like Bob Lohmann and Rick Jacobsen."

Bill had to adhere to the strict USGA course rating system when measuring yardage or assessing course difficulty. "We were trained by the USGA and I went to a calibration seminar every two to four years," he recalls. "We'd meet with other raters from around the country and go over rating issues. And we were tested by having to rate a course and be within a certain error percentage of how the expert raters rated the course. The training process made sure everyone was seeing things the same way."

#### **His new job...**

At the end of 1999, Bill was named Director of Rules and Competitions for the WSGA beginning in the 2000 season. "After nine years of measuring and rating golf courses, I got to know all the courses in the state. There was hardly any course that I hadn't been on either as a player or as a rater," Bill recalls. "So when the opportunity to become the tournament director came along, I wanted to do that."

As the Director of Rules and Competitions, Bill is responsible for: setting up the golf course (position of tees and holes); working with the superintendent on how the course is groomed; marking the course; and writing the rules for the event. "There generally are situations on every

course where you need specific rules for the tournament so players know how to proceed properly if they should happen to hit their ball in certain places," Bill explains.

"As tournament director I'm also working with the golf professional to make sure the players'



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needs are being met and to make sure he knows what's expected of him and his staff," he continues. "And I also work closely with the club manager in regards to food, beverage and locker room needs for the players."

The WSGA runs 37 tournaments on 37 different courses in 88 days each year, from one-day qualifying events to multiple-day tournaments. "We run a real variety of tournaments for many different segments of the golfing population - younger, older, partners, men, women," Bill points out. "We run qualifiers for some of those events and qualifiers for six of the USGA's national championships. From the middle of May to the middle of September, it's pretty much a seven-day-a-week job. There's a lot of stress in those four months."

But the work doesn't end the rest of the year. "For each tournament it's necessary to make two or three course visits to work with the superintendent and golf professional," Bill explains. "Most tournament courses are picked two years in advance. The majority are held near the major metro areas of Madison, Milwaukee and Green Bay. But we do take our tournaments throughout the state as often as possible to make sure everyone has the opportunity to host an event."

The State Amateur is Bill's favorite tournament. "That's the most prestigious and highest exposure event that we run," he points out, adding that the sites for this event are already picked through 2009. "It's the ultimate challenge of trying to put on what we consider our major championship. I've tried to make it as much like a professional tournament for the players as possible. We do live scoring and have caddy bibs. For the 3rd and 4th rounds we have standard bearers. We've tried to get tournament sponsors."

### *A few questions for Bill...*

Since he's had the opportunity to work and play on almost every golf course in the state, I ask Bill a few questions about those courses.

#### **What's your favorite course?**

"Not just because it's the Number 1 ranked course in the state, but the Milwaukee Country Club will always be near and dear to my heart because of the relationships I've formed over the years," he answers. "There are people there who went out of their way to help me. For that I'll be forever grateful. People like Manuel de la Torre and Rich Tock and George Saites, the club manager. Those people will always be very special to me."

"The current golf professional there, Skip Simonds, he and I started caddying at Milwaukee Country Club on the very same day," Bill continues. "We talk about it all the time. Here are two kids that showed up to caddy back in 1970 something, and 30 years later he's the head golf professional there and I'm the tournament director for the state of Wisconsin. We get a chuckle out of that when-

ever we run into each other."

**What's the most difficult course in the state?** "For sure, the Straits course at Whistling Straits," Bill answers. "That and The Bull at Pinehurst Farms are probably the two most challenging courses as far as yardage and obstacles."

**What's the most scenic course in the state?** "One of my first years with the WSGA I was measuring a course called Apostle Highlands up in Bayfield," he remembers. "There are a couple of holes where you have an elevated tee playing downhill, and it overlooks Lake Superior. You can see Madeline Island. It's just breathtaking, standing on those tees and overlooking such beautiful scenery."

"Another favorite is another one of the first courses I worked on - the River Course at Blackwolf Run," Bill continues. "The newest nine holes, 5 through 13, are just spectacular when you stand on each tee, look at the hole, and think about how challenging it is."

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**the years since you were a caddy in the 1970s?** "It's really grown in terms of participation and the availability of courses," he states. "Back when I first started with the WSGA there were 220 or 240 courses. Now we have almost 400, and that growth has come in just 14 years. It's just incredible how many courses - and I mean quality courses - that there are in this state.

"We are also fortunate that we have so many different types of golf courses in Wisconsin," he continues. "There are 9-hole courses which are real popular in their communities all the way up to high-priced courses like Whistling Straits. There's a golf course for everyone somewhere in this state. Players have more choices because there are more courses, and there are also more PGA golf professionals employed than ever before.

"Another thing I've noticed over the years," Bill continues, "is how much more cooperative things have become. People are now networking together. Course owners are marketing their courses as groups rather than single destinations. Superintendents are sharing ideas and equipment. There is more and certainly better research for the superintendents with the OJ Noer Research Facility. The research going on there will help their kids and our kids."

#### ***His hobby, too...***

With golf consuming his work days, what does Bill do with his free time? Golf. "A lot of people think all we do is play golf. I play the least amount of golf I've ever played in my life since I became tournament director," Bill points out. "It's a six- to seven-day-a-week job from the middle of May to the middle of September; these are also the primary months for playing golf in Wisconsin.

"But I do play spring and fall golf," he continues. "I'm a member of the Brown Deer Park Men's Club

and I play in a lot of their spring and fall events." He also takes winter vacations to golf destinations. "Last winter I went to Orlando with a couple of guys and we played golf for nine days, 36 holes a day. I generally do that once a winter.

"Until this year, I've always had a handicap of 0 or plus 1," Bill points out. "But I got married on October 1, and now my handicap is up to 2. People have been teasing me that my game's going to go south now that I've gotten married."

Bill's new wife, Aimee, also works for the WSGA. "A lot of the superintendents know her, too," Bill says. "She runs all the women's tournaments and she is our communications director, meaning she's in charge of our web site and our magazine. She started working here at the beginning of 1999. About two years later we started dating, and this fall we were married."

Bill has two plans of action for his future. "I would like to think that I'll have the winning lottery ticket some day when it's at about \$200 million," he says. "I always tell people I'm going to hire Pete Dye, Tom Fazio, Rees Jones, Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer and somebody else to each design three holes on my fantasy golf course. And then I'm going to hire a superintendent to take care of it and play golf happily ever after.

"In reality, what will I do? My dream job is to work as a rules and competitions official out on the PGA tour," Bill continues. "That would be my dream job. And if I can't do that, I'd like to be in charge of the course set-ups for the U.S. Open, U.S. Amateur and U.S. Senior Open. That would be my other ultimate dream job."

Will the boy who started golfing at 5 or 6 and caddying at 12 ever land one of his new dream jobs? We'll just have to wait and see. ♣

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