

GUEST COMMENTARY

A giver of good through game of golf

By Jeff Long

A few golf lessons, and I was hooked at age 10. The game consumed me, and the motivation to continually improve meant long sessions at the driving range.

One evening at Fox Bend Golf Course in Oswego, I had just a few range balls remaining, trying to tame a wicked slice — to no avail — as an orangeade sunset faded in the western sky.

That's when the cart drove up. I figured my practice time was done, that this smiling, bespectacled man would tell me the range is closed for the night.

"Keep the right elbow tucked in on your backswing," he said in the twilight. "You're looping at the top, and that's what's causing your slice."

While sharing his wisdom, he reached down in the cart and pulled up a bucket full of range balls.

"Here, finish these. Come see me in the pro shop tomorrow, and we'll work on that slice."

Meeting Leon McNair remains a vivid childhood memory. Getting to know him in the 40 years since that moment has been a privilege that I — and all those who knew him — most certainly cherish.

Leon moved on to the 19th hole of eternal life last week, dying of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease. He was 75.

Little did I realize during that chance encounter as a young golfer in 1974 that Leon would have a similar impact on thousands of youth players. Leon dedicated himself to growing the game of golf, and his passion for player development opened doors for those who may not otherwise have had the opportunities Leon made possible.

"We have a major problem with public golf. Affordable golf for youth does not exist in this country," Leon often said throughout the years.

He came to Fox Bend as head professional in 1967 and helped build what was then a nine-hole course with architect Brent Wadsworth. Oswego was a small, sleepy town back then, with cattle farms and cornfields — land that was eventually transformed into one of Chicagoland's top public golf courses.

To generate publicity for Fox Bend, Leon created the Fox Bend Fall Classic, which quickly became one of the region's premier tournaments. Leon put Fox Bend on the map, hosting the Illinois Open three times, and the golf course pro shop was recognized nine times as a top 100 facility in the nation.

But his passion for growing the game always kept his focus on youth golfers.

A co-founder of the Illinois PGA Foundation, Leon was instrumental in developing the First Tee of Aurora and Fox River Valley, which used golf as a vehicle to provide opportunities for underprivileged youths, including the Leon McNair Endowment Fund Scholarship.

Throughout his life, Leon was one of the game's greatest ambassadors. Golfer by golfer, smile by smile, handshake by handshake, Leon made the game of golf accessible and enjoyable.

Upon his retirement from Fox Bend in 2005 after 38 years, Leon became president of Wadsworth Golf Charities and devoted his "retirement" to full-time promotion of Links Across America — a short-course initiative launched in 2009.

"The mission was to develop feeder short courses — three-, six- or nine-hole courses — to provide affordable golf, especially for youth, families, adult beginners and individuals with injuries or disabilities," Leon said.

Through the 2015 season, 29 courses had been built in 16 states — equating to 300,000 rounds of golf — with the goal of making golf more accessible, fun, easy and less time-consuming.

"Leon was devoted to the mission," said Wadsworth, whose association with Leon spans more than 50 years. "He felt a loyalty to the game and a desire to do as much as he could for young people. He was just a wonderful person through and through."

Born in Cooperstown, N.Y., Leon was 4 years old when his dad first took him to the golf course. At age 11, his family at that time living in Illinois, Leon would ride his bike to Glen Oak Country Club in Glen Ellyn, where he worked as a caddy and dreamed of becoming a golf course architect.

More than conceptualizing 18-hole layouts and designing dog-leg par-4s, Leon became the architect of a movement.

“He was always looking out for the kids and wanted them to have every opportunity to succeed,” said longtime Aurora golfer Jim Tracey, a close friend of Leon’s for more than 30 years. “Such a personable guy and fun to be with, around the golf course and away from it.”

Last fall, to celebrate Leon’s induction into the Illinois Golf Hall of Fame, the Illinois Department of Transportation designated a section of Route 34 in Oswego as “Leon McNair Highway” — appropriately, the section running alongside Fox Bend.

It’s an everyday reminder of how Leon’s path through life had such a profound impact.

“So many people have said to me what an amazing mentor he has been to them,” said Carole Anne McNair, Leon’s wife of 50 years.

Leon remains a valuable mentor. He taught the lessons of life through golf, through kindness and encouragement. He was a model of upstanding integrity, a strong-willed man with a gentle spirit. He was a best friend to all of us. To know Leon was a great honor.

Jeff Long is the public affairs and communications manager for the Fox Valley Park District and a former sports writer for The Beacon News.



FOX VALLEY PARK DISTRICT

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