

Local Boy MAKES GOOD

This year's MGA Distinguished Service Award honoree, David Fay, has made his name running the world's leading golf association, but it all started here in the Met Area

BY JAMES A. FRANK

PHOTOGRAPH BY
LEONARD KAMSLER



David Fay is a rabid fan of the Yankees, Giants, and most other New York teams, so when asked how he feels about being honored with the MGA's Distinguished Service Award for 2009, he uses a sports cliché to express his emotions: "I think they missed the call. Is there instant replay available?"

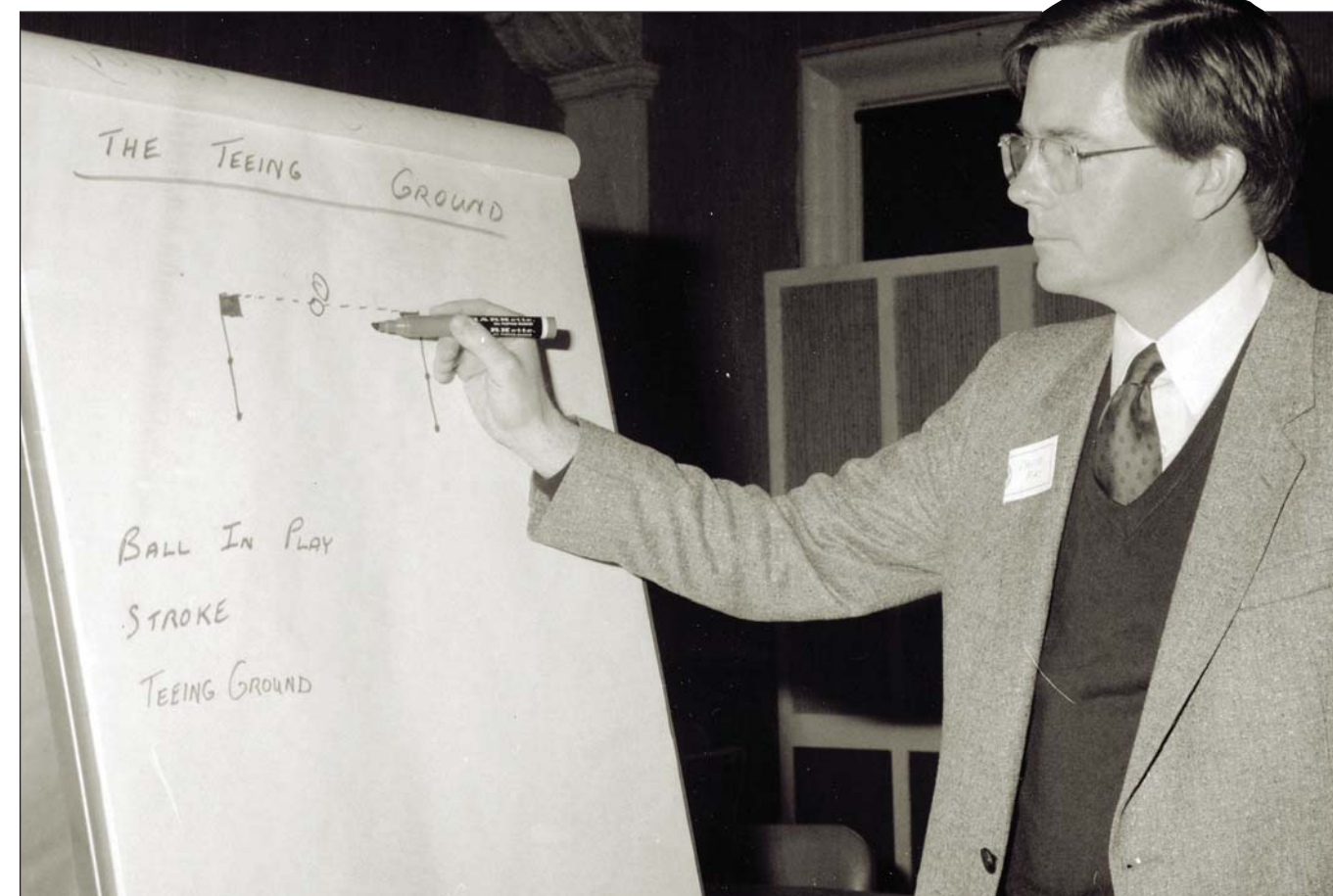
To the listener, that's self-deprecating humor; to Fay, it's honesty. When talking to the executive director of the USGA — who got his start in golf at the MGA more than 30 years ago — expect both. Fay doesn't relish talking about his accomplishments, and when he does, he makes comments like "there were other people involved" and "I was just a foot soldier." But whether or not he admits it, Fay has gone above and beyond his duties as chief executive, all with an eye toward preserving and protecting the game. He was — and continues to be — instrumental in countless decisions, programs, and policies that have made the game more responsive,

receptive, and rewarding to golfers in the United States and around the world.

"Good of the Game" initiatives; golf in the Olympics; working against restrictive membership policies at private clubs. Fay, a self-described "raving liberal," has been involved with them all since joining the USGA in 1978. In telling the stories behind the stories, he delights in pulling back the curtain, bringing a healthy dose of realism to a game that is well-populated with dreamers.

Take The First Tee: "My view was, and remains, that it should be the first step in assimilating people into the game, and perhaps that is not being emphasized enough."

Opposite: Fay at Golf House, October 30, 2009.
Below: Leading an MGA Rules seminar in 1977.



Right: Good for a quote, Fay speaks to a group of reporters at the 2006 U.S. Open at Winged Foot.



Or the “Good of the Game”: “The executive committee wanted to take a more active role in development, and that’s really what the ‘Good of the Game’ efforts were, to expose the game to kids, people with disabilities, and other segments of the public who otherwise might not have the opportunity to play. But it’s not in the USGA’s by-laws to, quote, grow the game, unquote.”

Or bringing USGA events to true public courses: “Actually we were looking at Bethpage for an Amateur Public Links, but the talks broke down.”

Uncomfortable with awards and honors, Fay’s first response when someone seeks evidence of his merit is deflection or a sardonic quip. But push him a bit, and the true depth of his commitment to the game shines through. Back to Bethpage:

“That is something I felt strongly about,” he admits. “There seemed to me no reason not to have the leading events at public courses. Being a product of the New York area, I was familiar with Bethpage, and just about the time I would have been in a position to have some influence, the MGA took the Met Open there [in 1989].” The course got such rave reviews from players and the MGA that the

seed was sown for Bethpage to host something much bigger than an Amateur Public Links.

New York and the MGA figure prominently in Fay’s life and career. Born in the Orange County, N.Y., village of Tuxedo Park, he cad-died at the Tuxedo Club, playing there on Mondays and other days at Central Valley Golf Club, a public course. One of his closest childhood friends was Jay Mottola, a fellow Tuxedo caddie and now MGA executive director; their caddie experiences help fuel Fay’s commitment to programs for juniors. “If you get the bug,” he says, “you’ll do whatever you have to to satisfy the need, like working at the course so you can play in the afternoon.”

After Colgate University, where he played on the golf team, he moved to Manhattan, working at various jobs until becoming the MGA’s communications director in 1976. It was a job previously held by Fay’s roommate, George Peper, who left the MGA to begin his long editorial career at *Golf Magazine* and suggested that his friend take his place.

“Before walking in the door of the MGA, I didn’t know anything about organized golf,” Fay states. “The first person who helped me was then-MGA tournament director Peter Bisconti. From him I began learning about the

“David continues to be one of the greatest assets of the USGA in serving the game of golf. His knowledge of the Rules is unsurpassed, and few can match his appreciation of the game’s core values. His eyes always are focused on what is best for the game and the people who play it.”

—USGA President Jim Vernon

nuances of golf courses and about the Rules. I was able to feed off people like Peter and executive director Jim McLoughlin, who hired me. Then Joe Dey, P.J. Boatwright, Frank Hannigan, and John Laupheimer at the USGA.

“But I can’t overstate how important the MGA was to me. Without the start at the MGA, God knows what I’d be doing.”

During his two years at the MGA, Fay did a little of everything, from create the association’s first newsletter to work tournaments, deal with the press, and even act as recording secretary for the U.S. Seniors Golf Association. He created the MGA Player of the Year award, borrowing that notion from the Minnesota and Massachusetts golf associations. He left the MGA for the USGA in 1978 to become Tournament Relations Director, the liaison between the organization and the clubs hosting championships.

“Those years at the MGA provided me with the building blocks for a career in golf admin-



istration,” he explains. “Because when you get right down to it, the USGA is the MGA except we have the cash cow, the U.S. Open. It’s the same structure at a lot of state and regional associations, especially the role of the volunteers: They do a lot of the heavy lifting.

The Fay family (from left, David, daughters Molly and Katie, and wife Joan) takes in the 1998 World Series.

The Fay File: Ten Questions



What’s the coolest artifact in the USGA’s archives?

The golf club that Alan Shepard snuck on board Apollo 14. Nothing even comes close. It’s the only evidence of a sport ever being played somewhere other than on the earth.

Where will golf be played when the Olympics go to Rio?

I love how people say there are no acceptable courses in Rio. The reality is that from the time JFK said he was going to put a man on the moon until the time Armstrong walked on the moon’s surface was [about the same] time as the vote to get golf in the Olympics and when it’s going to be played in 2016. I mean, it’s one course. Give me a break. This is not, pun not intended, rocket science.



Who is your personal golf hero?
[long sigh] Arnold Palmer.

What would you be doing if you weren’t executive director of the USGA?

I’d be in another sport. Any sport, although I wouldn’t want wrestling.

What are your favorite teams?

Yankees, but I root for the Mets, too. Giants, but I root for the Jets. Rangers. I can’t root for the Knicks now.

What are your weekend sports-viewing habits?

I don’t watch much golf, but I watch a lot of ESPN, almost any sport. I don’t watch car racing because I can’t figure it out. I

wouldn’t watch cricket if it were on and I have difficulty watching soccer.

You moved from New Jersey, near USGA headquarters, back to New York City. What’s that like?

Terrific. I was born in New York and spent a good deal of my early adult years here. But I think I enjoy it more now than I ever did. We sold our house in April 2006; it wasn’t great judgment, just dumb luck. I told my wife Joan that I was all for coming back to the city but there were no ifs, ands, or buts, we had to come to the Upper West Side. I used to live on the East Side, and that’s what drove us to New Jersey, not the idea of family and all that — I couldn’t deal with [the traffic] coming across town every day.

How long is the commute?

In the morning it’s a nice tight range, anywhere from 44 to 48 minutes. I hop on the West Side Highway and go across the George Washington Bridge, which is a great treat. It doesn’t matter what time of year, even when it’s pitch dark in the middle of winter, to be able to go across one of the great suspension bridges on the planet and look back on the greatest city in the world is a great way to start the day.



What is the single biggest obstacle to the growth of golf?

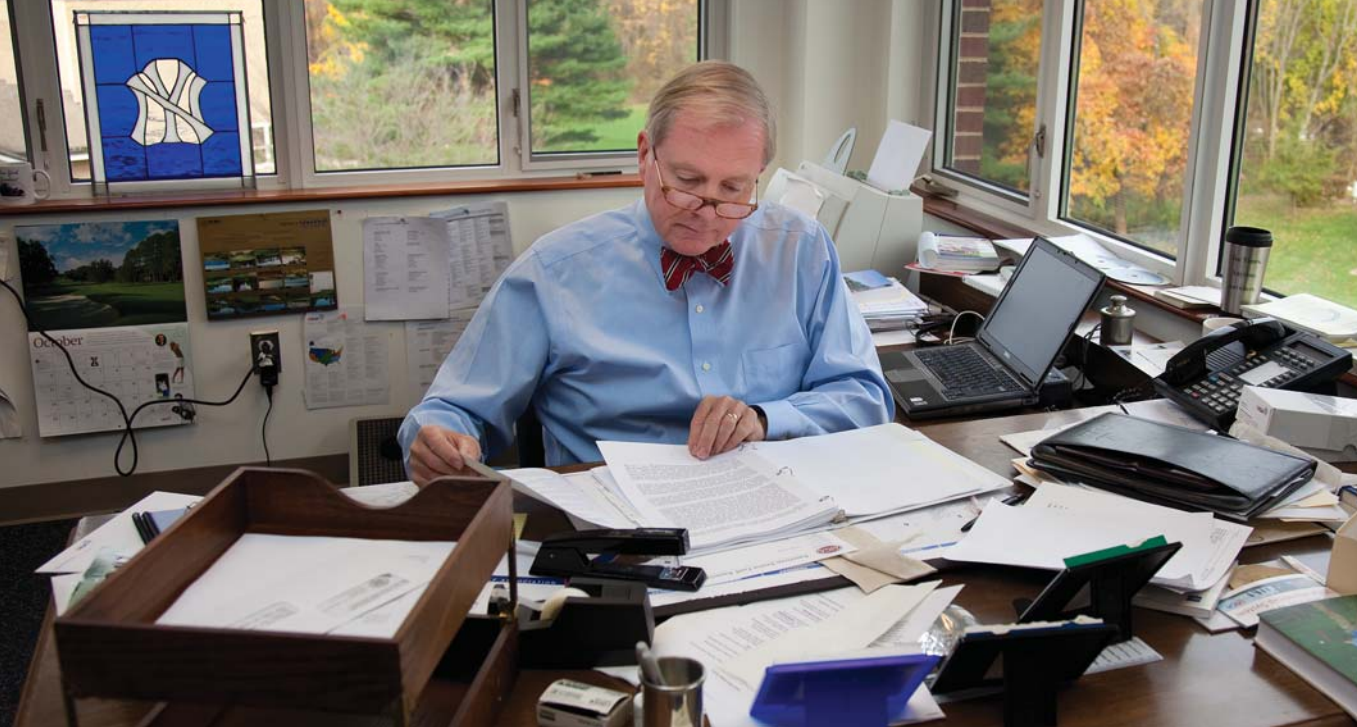
The same things that have been part of the game for close to a hundred years — difficulty, time, cost, and access. Maybe not access anymore.



One thing about you that most people don’t know?

I’m an absolute nut about music, all types. Nothing is off the charts for me, even rap. My iPod has everything from classical to country.

TOP: USGA/STEVE GIBBONS; OPPOSITE PAGE: COURTESY OF DAVID FAY



Above: Just about every initiative to grow the game of golf passes across Fay's desk at USGA headquarters. Below: In April, Fay paid a visit to Mottola at the MGA Tournament Officials Seminar.

"Clearly, the USGA couldn't do almost all of what we do without those associations. They are our delivery system. What we do nationally — running championships, interpreting the Rules, determining amateur status, and of course the handicap system — the state and regional associations do locally." Two of those cornerstone programs, the GHIN handicap calculation service and the Slope system of rating golf courses, were put in place during Fay's early years at the USGA.

While still working the championships, and with lead responsibility for most business aspects of the U.S. Open, Fay, at age 38, was named executive director of the USGA in 1989. One year later, golf was rocked by the

disclosure that Shoal Creek Country Club in Birmingham, Alabama, site of the 1990 PGA Championship, practiced membership discrimination. Twenty years later, Fay says Shoal Creek was "terrific, because it was a wake-up call. Before that, it wasn't stated but it was understood that clubs had restrictions. This blew it all open and the USGA took the position that you had to have an open membership, both in practice and policy, to host a championship."

During Judy Bell's USGA presidency (1996-'97), she and Fay decided golf should reach out to minorities and other unrepresented communities. They introduced grants and fellowship programs, and revived the USGA Foundation that had been founded in 1965 after Gary Player donated half of his first-place check from that year's U.S. Open to promote junior golf. "We'd created the foundation, it died out, then we dedicated funds to reactivate it in the '90s," Fay explains. "I believe it was a delayed reaction and commitment to following through on what we did after Shoal Creek, which was to open up the game."

The resurgence of the USGA Foundation speaks to the strong relationships between the USGA and state and regional associations like the MGA. As a longtime friend, Mottola says, "It's hard to overstate the positive impact the USGA grants program has had on the MGA and our charitable Foundation. Our GOLF-WORKS intern program and local First Tee chapter would not be flourishing like they are



LEONARD KAMISLER (2)

today without the support of the USGA. These initiatives were started, and most importantly, funded, under David's leadership."

A more recent success has been golf's acceptance into the Olympics. In fact, Fay had been fanning that flame since 1990. He thought they were close before the 1996 games in Atlanta, but there were concerns about playing at Augusta National. Ironically, it was a meeting that Fay called of the world's leading golf organizations in 2008 — at Augusta National — that helped turn the tide.

"It was basically either we're going to do it or we're not," he remembers. "Other countries had been saying for years that they needed golf to be an Olympic sport if they were going to develop the game. Now we can go back to all those countries and their federations and say, 'you got what you asked for.'"

"I've been pleasantly surprised at the generally positive reaction to golf in the Olympics. But the format debate kills me. People complain it's just like a regular PGA Tour event, but there's one huge difference: There is no individual golf competition in the world where the individual is playing for his country. None."

Like the rest of us, Fay won't know for seven years how Olympic golf will fare. But he's pretty confident how the USGA will be doing then — and beyond.

"I think 20 years from now, even 100 years, the USGA's core programs will be the same. Any healthy sport needs standards. If you don't have rules and regulations, you have chaos, and you need a body to set those rules. It's not going to be perfect, but hopefully you have some objectivity and it won't be driven by the dollar so there will be some judgment based on what is — and I hate to use this expression because it's so self-serving — good for the game."

David Fay will cringe at the use of that expression one more time, but this year's Distinguished Service Award honoree has been good for the game, too. ■

James A. Frank writes from New York City and blogs at overthegreen.tumblr.com.

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