

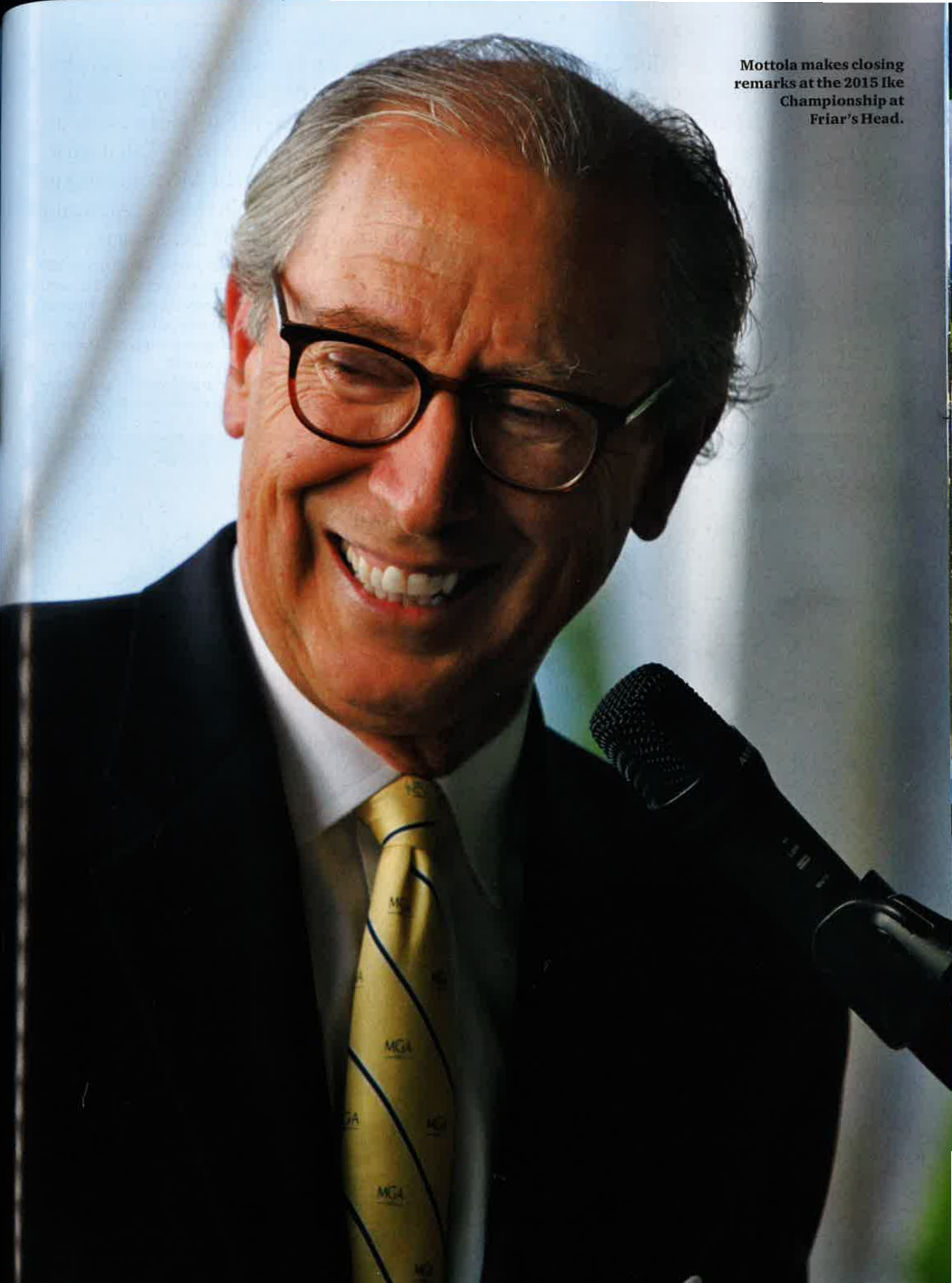
FEATURE

Jay Mottola attributes much of his success to good fortune, but it's the MGA and its clubs and golfers who were the lucky ones.

BY JOHN FEINSTEIN

# LUCKY for US

Mottola makes closing remarks at the 2015 Ike Championship at Friar's Head.





**T**o hear Jay Mottola tell it, he has been a very lucky man. He was lucky that he was a good enough high school athlete to be recruited by a high-quality school like Lafayette; that his childhood friend David Fay hooked him up with a summer job at the Metropolitan Golf Association in 1977 that led to a full-time job in 1980; that he was asked to take over the MGA in 1982 at the relatively tender age of 31; and especially so to live in the Met Area and work with great volunteer leaders and a loyal staff for the last 36 years.

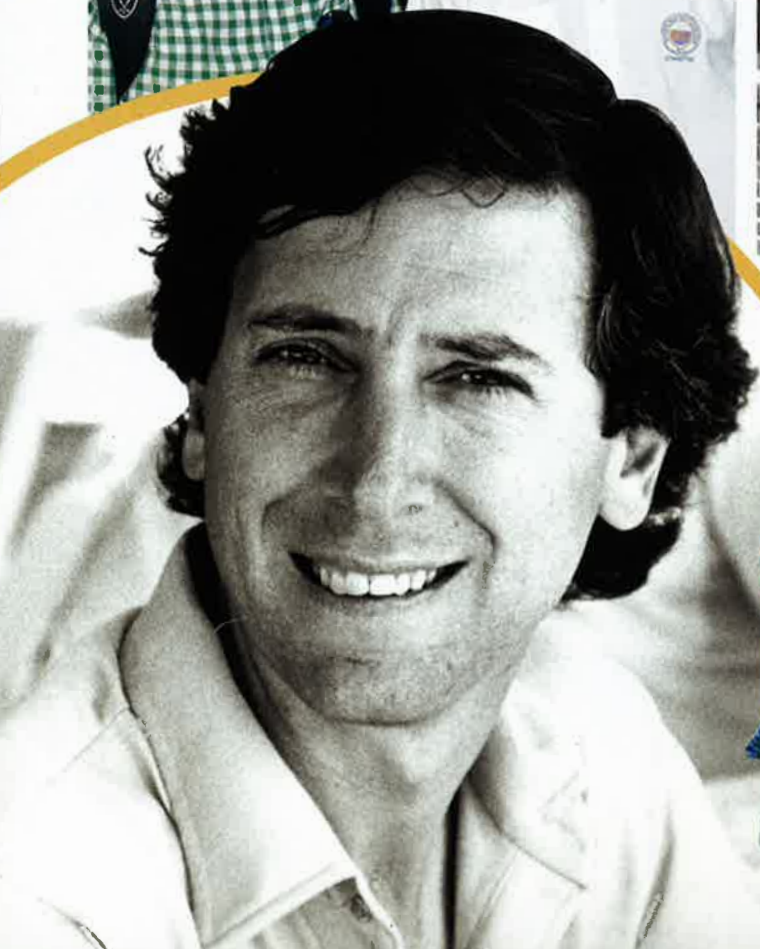
But those who know him, who have worked with him, seen his great and supportive family, and watched him make a life in a sport he loved since the first day he picked up a club as a boy in Tuxedo,

New York — they might beg to differ. They would say they were the lucky ones right from the start.

As Mottola turned the MGA executive director's office over to Brian Mahoney on February 1, the one thing everyone could agree on is this: Mr. Mahoney has some very big shoes to fill.

"Brian will do a great job," Mottola said. "I have no doubt he'll continue to build the MGA and

Clockwise from top left: With Bill Murray, a spectator at the 2001 Met Open at Bethpage Black; "The Big Three" of Mottola, McCooey and Westmoreland outside of the new Golf Central building in 1994; handing David Pilossoph the 2016 Senior Masters trophy at Tuxedo; caught on camera during the 1980s.







Clockwise from top left: Jay Mottola featured on the cover of *Suburban Golf* in April 2004; during his Lafayette days; working at a tournament with Westmoreland; in France at the French-American Challenge with then-MGA President Jeff Holzschuh in 2014; with MGA staff in the early 1980s.

make it better than it's ever been."

That may very well be so. But there's no doubt that Mahoney is also lucky – because the smooth operation he takes over was run so well for the last 34 years.

According to Fay, the former executive director of the United States Golf Association, Mottola has made things look easy almost his entire life. Fay and Mottola have known each other so long that Fay swears they played together in a playpen as infants. There are photos of the two of them as kindergartners at Tuxedo High School (K-12), which means they've known one another for at least 60 years.

"Jay was – by far – the best athlete I saw play up close as a kid and one of the best I've ever seen, period," said Fay, now the Rules expert for FOX's golf coverage. "As good as he was as a basketball player when we were kids, he was probably as good or better at golf. He was The Natural."

Fay and Mottola both caddied at The Tuxedo Club as kids, and later worked on the grounds staff

because that job afforded them access to the golf course in the late afternoon every day; as caddies they could only play the course on Mondays.

Mottola was recruited to play basketball by a number of solid Division I programs and seriously considered going to Army, which was then coached by Bob Knight. "I noticed that everyone else there wanted a career in the military," he says. "I didn't think I should take a spot from someone who actually wanted to go into the Army as opposed to someone like me who was not looking to make a career out of it." He also considered Princeton, but eventually chose Lafayette because "Lafayette wanted me more and I thought I'd play more right away."

His athletic career at Lafayette was the stuff of legend. He played on the golf team and made it to the NCAA Tournament twice as an individual – a rarity for a Lafayette golfer. It was on the basketball court, however, where he made a lasting impression.

Hall of Fame basketball coach Gary Williams was an assistant under Tom Davis at Lafayette





Clockwise from top left: Mottola with George Zahringer III during an MGA international match; with Westmoreland, McCooey and Ben Polland at the 100th Met Open at Winged Foot; at a tournament in 1986 with then-MGA President Jim Stotter; in front of the Met Open Scoreboard in 1985.

when Mottola was the starting point guard. “Our offense was pretty simple,” he recalls. “Jay would try to get into the lane, draw the defense to him, and find Tracy [Tripucka]. We scored a lot of points that way.”

A win over Seton Hall left its mark on the opposing coach. “We were down seven to Seton Hall with less than two minutes to play, and Jay scored eight straight points [including four free throws] on the same play – high ball screen, drive right and score,” Williams remembers. “We win by one. On his way to the locker room, Bill Raftery [then coaching Seton Hall, now a beloved TV analyst] has to go past an old Coke machine that had a glass front. He stops and slams his hand against it. The glass breaks and he’s covered in blood – he had to go to the hospital to get stitched up.”

In his senior year, Mottola’s team went 20-5 and made it to the National Invitation Tournament. The NCAAs only took 25 schools in those days, and no more than one per conference, so nationally-ranked teams were in the field, and all games were played at Madison Square Garden. The Leopards’ first-round game was against Virginia, which had reached the AP Top Ten earlier that season; a Mottola steal with seven seconds left led to two free

throws with the score tied and three seconds on the clock.

“Jay didn’t miss free throws,” Williams says. “He had a smooth stroke – just like when he putted on the golf course.”

Shockingly, he missed the first, but made the second and Lafayette survived a last-second half-court shot to pull off the upset. It is still the school’s only postseason victory in men’s basketball. The *New York Daily News* ran a full back-page photo of the winning free throw going in the basket. (The moment is still iconic. Late in 2016, Mottola attended a Lafayette function and a young alum introduced herself to him and said, “If you look at that photo of you making the free throw, you can see the student section. My mother is the only female in the picture.”)

After graduation, he went to Wharton business school and landed a job with a major New York accounting firm, but within a year he was restless. When Lafayette Coach Tom Davis offered him the chance to join his staff, he took the job – and a pay cut. Three years later, he cracked the \$10,000 a year mark, barely, when Gary Williams hired him as a full-time assistant at American University.

Then came a fateful phone call from his old



Always a good sport, Mottola stood for the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge after the 2014 Met Open at Trump National Bedminster.

pal Fay.

Fay had graduated from Colgate and didn't like the New York business world any more than Mottola had. When George Peper, with whom he had been sharing an apartment, quit as the MGA's communications director to take an editing job at *Golf Magazine*, Fay wound up as his roommate's replacement.

That summer, the MGA needed part-time help administering golf tournaments. Knowing that Mottola wasn't exactly getting rich as a basketball coach, Fay suggested he make some extra money by working for the MGA. Two years later, Fay left to work for the USGA; a year after that, when tournament director Peter Bisconti left, Mottola was offered his job. He had not yet turned 30.

"I liked a lot about coaching basketball," Mottola said. "I liked working with the players, I liked the in-game strategy, and I was learning a lot from Gary about preparation and competing. But recruiting was already becoming a grind and it was hard to see a path forward from where we were at American. We didn't even have a gym.

"Plus, as much as I enjoyed basketball, I think golf was always my first love."

It was quickly evident to the Association's executives that Mottola would make an exceptional head man. They began grooming him to be the Executive Director almost immediately. The position itself had only existed since the mid-1960s, with James McLoughlin at the helm. Thanks to McLoughlin's leadership, the MGA had established itself as one of the top regional golf associations in the country. When McLoughlin left in 1980 to become head of the national course superintendents' association, the MGA Board decided to hire Jerry Mahoney — an MGA volunteer, an accomplished player, and a popular figure in Met Area golf circles — as a bridge to the eventual ascension of Mottola to the post. Two years later, the job was his.

Even before he took over as Executive Director, Mottola played a vital role the development of what became the USGA's GHIN handicap service. Handicapping had been a challenge for clubs; records were mostly kept on paper posting sheets, collected by handicap chairs and sent to the regional association by mail. The results were not networked even regionally and there was no connectivity between a handicap calculated in any two states or regions.

Handicapping was one of its most visible and widely used services and the MGA was one of the first associations to develop a networked handicap calculation service for its own clubs in the 1970's. The trick was now to connect with associations around the country — which is where the USGA came in. The GHIN concept was first put forth by McLoughlin and USGA technical director Frank Thomas, and the MGA was the first association to

offer the service in 1981. Mottola worked with Thomas and the USGA to finalize the program and to market it to golf associations around the country. Today the GHIN service connects more than 2.3 million golfers and 84 associations across the U.S. and abroad in a fully computerized on-line network.

"That was an important step forward for everyone in golf I think," Mottola said. "It was something that needed doing for a long time, and today the GHIN platform is well positioned to serve golfers as the governing bodies move toward a worldwide handicap system."

The MGA that Mottola began overseeing was a very different place than the one he will step away from. In 1982, the MGA had a seven-person staff that worked in an office building in Midtown Manhattan, across the street from Grand Central Station. One of his first decisions was to get out from under the steep New York City rents.

"There was really no reason for us to be in the city and pay what we were paying when all of our work was in the suburbs," he said. "We rented in Mamaroneck for a long time but then built and moved into our own building in 1994." The MGA now works out of a handsome building that it owns and shares with more than ten local nonprofit golf associations; its full-time staff has grown to 26, and it expands substantially during the summer with part-time employees, interns, and hundreds of volunteers throughout the Met Area.

In his more than three decades at the helm of the organization, Mottola has been involved in almost every aspect of the game. Among the accomplishments for which he is responsible or played a significant role:

- Creation of *The Met Golfer Magazine*
- Growth of the club insurance program, providing property and casualty coverage in addition to employee benefits as part of a major expansion of member services
- Revived the MGA Public Links Championship after a ten-year hiatus
- Created the Women's "Met Net"
- Purchased the rights to the Ike Championship, cementing the amateur stroke-play event's place as an MGA "major"
- Created and expanded the MGA's involvement in international matches, as "Fred's Cup" morphed into the French-American Challenge (MGA v. Ligue de Paris) and the Metedeconk Invitational became the Carey Cup (v. Golfing Union of Ireland)
- Formation of the MGA Foundation
- Creation of the GOLFWORKS program
- Building and creation of Golf Central in Elmsford
- Founding of The First Tee of Metropolitan New York



What may be Mottola's greatest accomplishment is the one that brought him full circle back to his oldest friend.

"For years, Jay kept telling me we [the USGA] needed to take a hard look at taking one of our events to Bethpage Black," David Fay said. "We even sent some of our people out there to take a look at possibly holding a Senior Amateur there in the early '90s. They came back and said, 'The golf course is in awful shape, they wanted the players to pay greens fees during the event, it's just a no-go.' I told Jay, 'Well, we tried.' He said to me, 'David, you don't understand, we just held the Met Open there [in 1989]; the place is good enough if fixed up to host *anything* – including the Open.'

"Frankly, I thought he was nuts. But the idea of going to a real public golf course got stuck in my head. Plus, it was Jay. When Jay talks, people listen. So I kept the idea in the back of my head – way in the back of my head."

It was Long Island traffic – or the lack of it one night – that brought Fay to Bethpage. He was early for a dinner party because he'd expected more traffic one spring evening in 1995, when he noticed that he was approaching the exit off the Southern State Parkway for Bethpage Park. On a whim he veered off the highway, drove the five miles to the park entrance and, just before dusk, took a walk on the golf course.

"When I stood on the fourth tee I knew Jay was right," Fay said. "The bones were there."

Most people know the rest of the story: Fay made a deal with the State of New York that called for the USGA to pump \$5 million into the golf course in lieu of a rental fee. The 2002 U.S. Open was a huge success and, since then, the Black has hosted another U.S. Open, several PGA Tour

events, and will host the PGA Championship in 2019 and the Ryder Cup in 2024.

All because Mottola kept whispering in his old friend's ear, "Fix it and they will come."

The three people who worked most closely with Mottola essentially from his first day to his last as executive director were Westmoreland, Jeanne McCooey, and the Met PGA Section's executive director Charlie Robson.

Westmoreland, like Mottola, was a very good golfer who was also a coach (baseball and basketball at Pace University). He came to the MGA in 1978, a year after Mottola, and followed him up the ladder: part-time on-course administrator, tournament director, assistant executive director.

"I think we worked well together because we respected one another, not just in a personal sense, but in a decision-making sense," Westmoreland said. "I almost never made a decision without saying to Jay, 'What do you think,' and he'd usually do the same with me even though he had the final say." Also a former caddie, Westmoreland was a key figure in helping Mottola keep the MGA's caddie programs strong – something that was very important to both men. In the late 1980s, at Mottola's urging, he authored a book/pamphlet entitled, "How to Get Started as a Caddie." It included basics like where to stand, how to tend a flag or rake a bunker, and advice on how to contact caddie masters and where and how to look for work. The MGA began running caddie academies in the early spring at no cost to the students or clubs, encouraging young people to learn how to caddie and then go out and find work. The program today attracts a few hundred participants each year.

"Among the many things I admire about Jay, his devotion to caddie programs is right at the top," says Jimmy Roberts, the longtime NBC and Golf

Clockwise from bottom left: The Mottola family at the 2016 Met Golf Writers Association Awards Dinner; with Bruce Beck after winning the 2016 MGWA Distinguished Service Award; showing off "new" MGA flags with Westmoreland; hard at work in the office.





Jay Mottola, flanked by Westmoreland and McCooley and surrounded by the MGA staff at the 2016 MGA Annual Meeting and Dinner.

Channel commentator and another former caddie. “Most of the time when he calls asking me to do something it has to do with caddying, whether it’s making a video or being the MC at a fundraising dinner. At a time when caddying has been dying in most places around the country, he’s not only kept the programs here going, he’s strengthened them.”

George Peper, the prolific golf author and editor, adds that saying no to Mottola when he asks for help – regardless of the subject – is almost impossible.

“He’s Mr. Smooth – but in a very real way. It’s not phony, which makes it irresistible,” Peper said. “He can talk anyone into anything. That’s why the clubs never say no to [the MGA] when [its people] call and ask, ‘How about giving us your club for a week so you can host one of our events?’ The kind of clubs they have in the MGA, you’d think they’d say, ‘No way, no how, no thanks.’ Jay calls and they say, ‘When exactly do you want our golf course?’”

Mottola notes that Winged Foot and Baltusrol have always been willing to step up and host MGA events, and that leads others to follow suit. “Two years ago our three biggest championships were hosted by Winged Foot, Baltusrol, and Friar’s Head,” he said. “Thanks to the work of Gene Westmoreland and Brian Mahoney, we’re now scheduled out into the early 2020s at the kind of places we want to take our championships.”

“Let’s face it, our events aren’t like an Open or a PGA. You don’t have to turn the golf course over to us years in advance. You don’t have to get your green speeds up to 12 or 13. You don’t have to build grandstands or have huge areas rendered unusable for months because of tents or parking or construction vehicles coming in and out. It isn’t as hard.”

It also isn’t nearly as lucrative, and yet the MGA membership has almost always said yes when Mottola asks. “I think a lot of that is because we’ve

never failed to be grateful – publicly grateful,” Westmoreland said. “We used the magazine [*The Met Golfer*] to make sure people knew what a great job a club had done hosting and talked up all the folks who had helped us out. It was genuine – but it was also smart.”

Charlie Robson was head of the PGA’s Met Section when Mottola took over the MGA. He wasn’t certain how well they would work together because the goals of the two organizations don’t always jibe.

“One thing I always respected about Jay was he’d always give me a heads-up when he thought it best for the MGA to do something that might not be the best for our group,” said Robson, who retired in 2015 but remains active as a consultant. “I appreciated the fact that whenever we had a meeting, he was prepared. I doubt if I ever heard him say, ‘I haven’t had a chance to look at that yet.’ He was always prepared.”

“We really bonded when our associations started working on creating the local First Tee chapter together because we all agreed that growing the game that way had to be a good thing. But Jay was never afraid to think out of the box. When he first took over, the thought of corporate sponsors was a no-no for organizations like the MGA. He not only got them involved, but did it without getting anyone upset. That wasn’t easy.”

The growth of *The Met Golfer* was due in large part to McCooley, whom Fay hired as his assistant when she graduated from Hunter College. A non-golfer, McCooley saw being assistant communications director of the MGA in 1977 as a way station until she found a teaching job. She retired 38 years later, having taken over for Fay when he left to join the USGA.

“Jay always had a very clear idea of what the mission of the MGA was supposed to be,” she said. “We needed to make golf better and figure out ways for the MGA to fund programs that made it



better for clubs and golfers and brought it to more people. He was always looking around the corner and around the bend for the next thing."

Which was why, in 1989, Mottola set up a panel to discuss ways to not only get more kids involved in golf but keep them in golf. McCooey was on that committee; so were Fay and several MGA board members. "David told us about a program in Oregon, a small one, that took kids from schools and gave them jobs for the entire summer," McCooey said. "His notion was that a one-day clinic where a kid might never go back to a golf course wasn't enough. You needed to get kids immersed in the culture, not just get a quick look at it. I think Jay and I looked at each other and said, 'That's it, that's the way to go.'"

Those meetings led to the creation of the MGA Foundation in 1991; three years later, the idea Fay had described became GOLFWORKS, the Foundation's signature student intern program. McCooey went out and recruited the first dozen high school kids and found them summer jobs at local clubs.

"Jay's idea was this was a win-win," she said. "We'd raise the money to pay them; the kids would have good paying jobs and the clubs would connect to their local communities. We had 12 kids that first summer working at six clubs and went from there."

GOLFWORKS now funds more than 250 kids a year – most of them non-golfers when they join the program – at 80 different clubs in the Met Area. The Foundation is also a founding partner of The First Tee of Metropolitan New York and took the MGA's caddie programs and junior competitions under its umbrella.

"The thing with Jay has always been that he finishes one project and he's always working on three more," McCooey said, laughing. "He could make you crazy, especially when he would walk in at 4:30 on Friday afternoon and say, 'I just had an idea, let's get started on it.'"

"But that was Jay. He was a natural leader. After a while you got used to it and you got caught up in it. We all wanted to get things done the way he wanted to get things done."

"It was Jay's idea to resurrect the Public Links Championship," Westmoreland notes. "He thought, We ought to be running this. He added the women's side of the Met Net, the second of the Father-Son events, the Senior Net, they all grew out of the popularity of

our other events but were designed for the average player. It was important that he'd always played competitively, that he had a really good feel for tournament golf. He was also instrumental in the growth of the purse for the Met Open from \$25,000 in 1980 to \$150,000 today."

"When I was there, [the MGA published] a newsletter, nothing more," Fay said. "Actually we called it a snoozeletter. Now look at [*The Met Golfer*]. Its growth kind of symbolized all that Jay's done. He's taken the MGA from humble to magnificent."

"Jay always gets his way," Peper adds. "In part because of his charm, in part because what he wants is almost always the right thing for the game."

That leadership has extended well beyond the Met Area. The MGA is a bellwether for many efforts of the USGA, and Mottola's influence has been considerable. "Quite simply, he is one of the best leaders the game has ever had," says Mike Davis, executive director of the USGA since 2011. "The MGA was already one of the finest golf organizations in the game before Jay Mottola, but he took the association to new heights [with] his ability to strengthen existing relationships and build new ones. He has never stopped working on behalf of the member clubs and the people of the MGA."

"Jay has been a force in the industry, not just in the Met Area but truly on a national scale," says Pete Bevacqua, executive director of the PGA of America. "I was always so impressed with his leadership style, which combined utter preparedness with a sense of dignity and grace. Jay is a dear friend, and I will continue to turn to him for advice and counsel well into the future."

Not long ago, Peper and Fay nominated Mottola to be a member of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club and he was named a member last year. The headquarters of the Royal and Ancient at St. Andrews is a long way from the caddie barn at The Tuxedo Club – literally and figuratively.

"No," Mottola said when asked if he ever dreamed that the two boys in that old kindergarten photo might someday both be members of The Royal and Ancient Golf Club.

Then he had another thought. "But it wouldn't have surprised me if you'd told me we'd both make our lives in golf because, if nothing else, we've both always loved the game."

"I've been very lucky all my life." ■