

2009 VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR By Tony Regina



Thomas Conboy *Sandy Run Country Club*

IN THE MID 1990s, pop culture gave birth to a declarative fashion fad: shirts that proclaimed one's love for a sport or activity.

Thomas Conboy's would have read: "Philadelphia golf is life. The rest is just detail." The Sandy Run Country Club member fell in love with the game at age 12. Since 1994, he has been a dedicated volunteer for the Golf Association of Philadelphia. And it's his dedication and commitment to the game that earned Conboy the 2009 Volunteer of Year Award.

"I didn't expect this at all. It was a nice surprise," Conboy, of Oreland, Pa., said. "Every guy that I know that does volunteer work deserves to be recognized. I'm very honored. Philadelphia golf for me is what my whole life has been about."

Conboy, 79, became involved with golf as a caddie at Roxborough Country Club (now Eagle Lodge Country Club) under the encouragement of a friend.

"He said, 'Man, I make a dollar, and a quarter tip,' so I went with him," Conboy said. "It was neat being out with the people that I caddied for. I hooked onto golf."

As a caddie, Conboy learned the rules and embraced the sport's competitive spirit. He recalls playing Low Man Chases among 15-20 of his fellow caddies. Each participant would take a club and hit a ball, and whoever struck it the shortest distance had to collect everyone's ball and return it.

"We did that while we waited to go out [on the course]," Conboy said. "That was kind of the thing. It was competition."

And Conboy soon transformed into a competitor himself. Every day after work, he played golf until he was 18. Each year, he improved, and in 1950, Conboy, then a member of Whitemarsh Valley Country Club, defeated Lincoln Roden, III of Huntingdon Valley CC, the 1949-50 Amateur Champion, to advance to the Junior Boys' Championship Final (He then lost to William J. Albertus of Overbrook GC, 1-up, at Tully-Secane CC). "That was my first real test of golf," he said.

In 1972, Conboy passed perhaps his greatest golf test by advancing to the Amateur Championship final. He lost to Raymond Thompson of Overbrook GC, 5&3, at Aronimink GC, but the experience remains "one of the highlights" for Conboy. Throughout a near 40-year career on the competitive circuit, Conboy amassed 20 club championships between Eagle Lodge, Whitemarsh Valley and Sandy Run, appeared in two USGA Senior Amateur championships and won the 1987 GAP Senior Amateur Championship by defeating six-time

Champion Allan Sussel of Squires Golf Club and Bob Kilgore of Merion Golf Club in a playoff.

After being diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1991, Conboy stepped away from golf competitions. He spent over a year on disability, during which the disease was removed successfully. In 1993, Conboy retired from Cigna, where he spent 45 years. Golf remained a part of his life, though he played less frequently. But Conboy wanted to become more involved with the sport he loved so dearly.

Enter good friend and fellow Sandy Run CC member Bob Fitzgerald, the Association's 2008 Volunteer of the Year. Conboy wanted to do volunteer work, and Fitzgerald suggested that he latch onto the GAP.

"I'm always talking [being a GAP volunteer] up," Fitzgerald said. "[Tom Conboy] is a good man and a good person. He's dedicated to the game. He really enjoys volunteering."

"I thoroughly enjoyed it from the start," Conboy added. "I just like the people. I know most of the guys. It just keeps me in touch with some of the guys that I used to play with and some of the guys that I never played with. I just enjoy being out there and shooting the breeze with the guys."

As a starter, Conboy tries to "relax players" as they come to the tee-box. One of his fondest memories as a volunteer came a few years ago. Robert Galbreath, Jr. of Huntingdon Valley CC, a record four-time Junior Player of the Year, was attempting to qualify for the Amateur Championship.

"I've known him since he was 5," Conboy said. "He was so excited. I'm trying to calm him down. He hit his drive down the middle [of the fairway] and off they went. Unfortunately, they didn't have the scorecards with them because I was so intent on getting the kid off the tee. I had to run down the fairway and give them their scorecards."

Conboy will continue to be a GAP volunteer "as long as my health keeps me going." He also volunteers for Chestnut Hill Meals on Wheels. When he isn't dedicating his free time to service, Conboy plays about 45 holes of golf a week at Sandy Run, where he's been a member since 1964.

"I really enjoy being here. This place is pretty special," he said.

It seems that the printing on Conboy's metaphorical shirt will never fade.

Tony Regina is the Assistant Director of Communications for the Golf Association of Philadelphia.



Thomas Conboy, GAP's 2009 Volunteer of the Year

