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Arnold Walker, a longtime champion for golf in Wisconsin, dies at age 97

By GARY D'AMATO

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Arnold Walker was a longtime USGA rules official who worked the Wisconsin PGA Junior Championship as recently as last year. He died this week at the age of 97.

Wisconsin.Golf photo / ROB HERNANDEZ

Though he never won a tournament of any consequence and struggled to break 90 on his best day, Arnold Walker left an indelible mark on Wisconsin golf.

A champion of the public links player and an indefatigable advocate for golf and golfers in general, Walker died Tuesday in hospice care, after falling and hitting his head. He was 97.

Walker, of Fox Point, ran the Milwaukee County Public Links Association for many years, served as secretary of the Wisconsin State Golf Association and volunteered as a rules official at hundreds, if not thousands, of tournaments on all levels in Wisconsin.



In 1998, the MCPLA renamed its premier event the Arnold Walker Milwaukee County Championship. Walker was inducted into the Wisconsin Golf Hall of Fame in 2011.

“Arnold was the epitome of volunteerism,” said WSGA president Randy Warobick, a longtime amateur competitor. “He gave so much more back than he ever took from the game of golf. I can’t say enough nice things about Arnold Walker and the time he devoted to all golfers. The Milwaukee County Public Links Association, the Wisconsin Public Links Association, the WSGA, the WPGA – the list goes on and on. His giving was nonstop.”

“I made a comment that Arnold is now up at Pearly Gates Golf Club and the angels up there had better beware because the pace of play is now being overseen by Arnold Walker.”

– *WSGA president Randy Warobick*

Walker jokingly referred to himself as a “thorn in the side” of Milwaukee County officials, as he constantly pushed for better course maintenance and advocated tirelessly for the MCPLA. Though he butted heads with county officials many times over the years, he was so professional and respectful that they couldn’t help but admire him.

“Arnold fought with the county constantly to get things done for the MCPLA and for all public links players,” said Bob Freuck, who took over as MCPLA tournament director after Walker stepped down in 2004. “He never said a cross word to anybody, but he got stuff done that no one else could get done.

“It took years but he got a usage agreement with the county that is still in place and available to us – discounts and tee times and programs that none of the other counties have.”

Walker also worked behind the scenes to get the county to hire PGA professionals at its 18-hole courses.

“He pushed hard to get that done as an advocate,” said Joe Stadler, executive director of the Wisconsin PGA Section. “That was huge. They’ve had professionals at courses since, and that relationship between the Parks and us is still strong.



"I know his heart was always in the right place. There were times he'd butt heads with people, but that's OK. He would always do it in a respectful way."

Rob Jansen was named WSGA executive director in 2010 and by then Walker was in his mid-80s and was pulling back from some of his volunteer duties. But Jansen quickly came to admire him.

"He was kind of at the twilight of his involvement but even then, he just had a way about him that kind of endeared himself quickly to you," Jansen said. "Obviously, I knew he had given the majority of his life in service to the game. He loved the game and always wanted to be a part of it. He gave so much to the game through all of his efforts. Although he wasn't as actively involved during my time, his impact was still felt. He was still involved as the WSGA secretary when I started so it was great to be able to work with him pretty closely. I'll certainly remember those things fondly.

"Even in recent years, he was a frequent visitor to the office. Always impeccably dressed and a complete gentleman. It was hard not to smile when he'd stop by to say hello."

Almost everybody who has played competitive golf in Wisconsin over the last 50 years knew Walker as a rules official who was respectful but unwavering in his rulings. Even into his 90s, he worked dozens of events annually, from high school tournaments all the way up to the State Amateur and State Open.

"A couple years ago, I was a scorekeeper for the Symetra Tour when it was at Brown Deer Park," Freuck said. "I was in the group behind Bobbi Stricker, and Steve was out there, walking ahead and trying to be incognito. I saw them bring Arnold out in a cart and they had him sit on a bench on the fifth hole. So my group is on the fourth hole and I see Arnold sitting there and Steve Stricker goes over, sits down, puts his arm around him and talks to him for 15 minutes.

"After Steve walked away, I went over and said, 'Arnold, you know everybody.' And he said, 'Well, I was a rules official when he was a high school kid.'"

When informed of Walker's death, Stricker wrote in a text message to Wisconsin.Golf, "Oh, that's sad! Arnold was always someone I looked forward to talking to. Friendly man with a smile on his face. Very helpful, and someone I looked up to when I was growing up playing in Wisconsin. Pass on my condolences, please."

Walker was also known as a stickler for pace of play. If a golfer was dallying over shots, or a group fell a hole behind, he let them know about it in no uncertain terms.



"At the Billy Sixty Best-ball one year, I forget who we were paired with but they were 30 seconds late getting to the first tee," Warobick said. "Arnold looked at one guy and said, 'That's two (penalty strokes) for you,' and he looked at the guy's partner and said, 'And that's two for you.' Those guys were never late again to get to the tee.

"I made a comment that Arnold is now up at Pearly Gates Golf Club and the angels up there had better beware because the pace of play is now being overseen by Arnold Walker."

Walker was preceded in death by his wife, Betty. He is survived by his son, Arnold A. Walker, nieces, nephews and hundreds of friends in the golf community.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, no services are planned at this time.

"It's a shame we can't have a funeral service," Freuck said. "We would have to have it at Miller Park for him if we did."

In lieu of flowers, the family requests donations to your favorite charity.

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Gary has covered golf in Wisconsin since 1980 and is a multiple award winner in the GWAA writing contest. He was inducted into the WSGA Hall of Fame in 2017 and joined Wisconsin.Golf in 2018 after a distinguished career at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

