

By Bruce Berlet

Gary Sassu seemed destined to become involved in golf.

Sassu began playing the game at 10 years old, rising at 4:30 a.m. with his father Peter in Bristol and driving an hour to Canaan Country Club. The two usually arrived before owner Bill Michaels (there was no pro), played two holes and then stopped at the pro shop to pay their greens fees on the way to the third tee.

Michaels often allowed Gary to play for free because he saw the youngster's passion and love for the game. It's something that has stuck with Sassu for the rest of his life.

"My greatest passion is teaching young golfers how to play the game," said Sassu, 61, who received the 2018 Connecticut Section PGA Professional of the Year Award, the organization's highest honor. "My truly favorite day of the week is Friday morning when I teach 80-100 kids at the club."

That profession began reaching fruition about a year after Sassu began playing golf. When he and his father were heading home one day after a round, Peter asked his son what he wanted to do when he grew up.

"Some people want to be a policeman, some want to be a fireman, some want to be an astronaut, but I said I wanted to be a golf pro," said Sassu, who is in his thirty-sixth year at Chippanee Country Club in Bristol. "So at 11 years old, I knew what I wanted to be, and that's what I became and have done my whole life."

When Sassu told his father what he wanted to be, he had a simple request.

"He said if I wanted to be a golf pro, then I better be the best golf pro that I can ever be," Sassu said, "and that statement has guided me through my entire life. My business life, my golf teaching life, my playing career, and, most of all, my parent life.

"I try to be the best that I can be in whatever I do and try to pass it on to my children and because of that I've lived a very blessed life. I go to work every day at a job that I absolutely love to do in a town that I absolutely love. I do it at a country club that I love to be at and work for a fantastic group of people. And most of my best friends in the world are from Chippanee Country Club."

But Sassu spent his junior golf days at nearby Pequabuck Golf Club in Bristol learning from pro Dave Proll.

“He took me under his wings when I was a kid, and I always appreciated what he did for me,” Sassu said.

But it’s Sassu’s countless successful programs at Chippanee that helped earn him the Professional of the Year Award after previously being named Merchandiser of the Year Private (1994), Junior Golf Leader (2004) and Bill Strausbaugh Award winner (2014).

“Being named Professional of the Year is humbling more than anything else,” Sassu said. “The Connecticut Section has a lot of great candidates so just to be thought about receiving the award was enough.”

President Ian Marshall, Watertown Golf Club, “On behalf of the 250 PGA members in Connecticut and Western Massachusetts, we are proud to have Garry Sassu honored as Golf Professional of the Year. Gary has been a long time Section members who consistently demonstrates the qualities and values of this award, the highest honor that can be paid to a PGA Professional. Congratulations Gary!”

Sassu began his pro career as an assistant to fellow Professional of the Year John Nowobilski at Pautipaug Country Club in Baltic.

“He was an established player, but what impressed me was his social skills early on,” said Nowobilski, who retired in 2017 after 36 years at Tallwood Country Club in Hebron. “He ‘hit it off with the members’ right away and personified a true golf professional by appearance, character, attitude and playing skills.

“On a humorous note, I used to challenge him to finding members’ bags in their proper back room storage bin numbers. Within weeks, he batted 1,000 percent. I knew he would be successful in this business. I was right! I am so proud of him!”

Howie Friday, Secretary, who is in his thirtieth year at Tumble Brook Country Club in Bloomfield, has known Sassu since he was 8, and they grew up at Pequabuck GC.

“I always looked up to Gary,” said Friday, who was named the Section’s Merchandiser of the Year Private in 2010. “He was a few years older than I was, and he was a very good player that I wanted to be like. I hung around the club all day every summer and remember on more than a few occasions Gary asking me to join them for a few holes. It pushed me to be better and inspired me to not only love the game but to want to make golf my career as well.

“Gary has been a friend of mind and my family my entire life. He has been the consummate golf professional and is very deserving of Golf Professional of the Year. His dedication and commitment to Chippanee is second to none, and they are very lucky to have him there.”

Sassu is one of six brothers, and five who are still alive live in Bristol along with their mother, Shirley.

“She’s the strongest person that I know,” Gary said.

Sassu has three children – Dena, 28, Nicole, 27, and Mark, 25 – and lives with his partner Rita Joy.

Sassu said he played every sport growing up while living in a neighborhood with a lot of kids who played whatever sport was in season at the time. He instantly fell in love with the challenge of golf as well as the individual nature of the sport.

“I learned I could take it to whatever level I wanted to as long as I worked hard at it,” Sassu said.

Sassu was captain of the golf and wrestling teams at Bristol Central High School, where he was an All-CCIL golf selection in the Class of 1975. He then played golf at Stetson University, lettering all four years and serving as captain in his senior season. He was the team MVP and had the lowest stroke average in his final three seasons.

Proll suggested Sassu get involved with the PGA of America in 1981.

“He recognized my love for the game and thought it would be a good fit for me,” Sassu said.

Sassu was hired by Nowobilski later that year.

“I was extremely fortunate to start with John,” Sassu said. “He is a great PGA professional, and even though it was only two seasons that I worked for John, the lessons that I learned working for him are still part of my job practices today.”

After two years at Pautipaug, Sassu became an assistant at Chippanee under Leo Chizinski in 1983-84 and then head pro in 1985 and has seen a multitude of changes in the game through the years.

“The golf business has become an ever-increasingly difficult business in the past decade,” Sassu said. “Economic recession and internet competition are only two of the reasons that have forced us to work a little harder and longer at our respective jobs. Golf clubs at both the private and public level are struggling. We have all had to learn to be more creative in our respective positions and to do more with fewer resources.

“Things are no different at Chippanee. We have a staff of three that are responsible for the scheduling, organizing and overseeing approximately 25 rounds of golf, 42 outside golf outings, a full schedule of men’s and ladies’ golf leagues and tournaments, ladies’ clinics and a junior golf program. We are responsible for attending various committee meetings resulting in a work week that is easily 60-70 hours. I am sure many PGA golf professionals are dealing with similar situations. My staff and I continue to find ways to help promote and grow the game in our little corner of the world.”

Chippanee had only 120 members and was facing a major crisis four years ago. But the club was purchased by Fritz Blasius, and Juan Rodriguez became general manager. They lowered the dues structure to better match the market in the Greater Bristol area, and Blasius committed to a clubhouse renovation project to help make the facility more contemporary. Sassu and assistant James Hathaway created several new golf programs to stimulate interest among members and potential members, most of which were part of the PGA of America’s “Grow the Game” initiative.

Chippanee membership increased to 495 in only three years, and it was helped by new programs to retain members, starting with a “Get Ready for Golf” program for beginner ladies that provided basic instruction and getting out on the course with the hope that she would feel less intimidated over time.

“We started with clinics and playing only one hole on the course,” Sassu said. “The on-course time started with explaining things like what tee markers are, what the red, yellow and white stakes are, where they should stand, where to drive golf carts, etc. We eventually got everyone to play at least three holes by the end of the summer. Fifteen to 20 women signed up for our

program, and as a result of the program, we have seen a noticeable increase in the food and beverage for members for Thursday evenings and we have seen several of the ladies convert to full-time golfing members.”

The club also added men’s and ladies’ nine-hole leagues with a bit of a twist on what was traditionally a slow Tuesday evening. There was no week-to-week commitment for members. If someone wanted to play any given week, he or she would call the pro shop by 4:30 p.m. for a 5:30 shotgun start. Teams were created, pairings made and scorecards prepared by the start of play. In the first week, 12 men signed up, but the number increased to 25-45 per week by the end of the summer.

Another part of the membership increase was partnering with the local Chamber of Commerce to start a “Martinis and Mulligans” group. Local business women receive a clinic, followed by social hour with cocktails on the club patio. Sassu runs a similar program for members only on Thursday evenings at 6. Beginner ladies receive a free clinic, on-course work for a few holes and a wine and cheese social hour.

Friday mornings during the summer are for the junior program, which has 80-100 participants ranging in age from 5 to 17 and have exclusive use of the course from 7:30-11 a.m. for safety reasons. The different age/skill levels arrive at different times for a one-hour clinic, followed by on-course time, with the number of holes played depending on their skill level. Sassu also started a PGA Junior League team in 2017 for junior golfers who need a little something more to challenge their games.

“Our goals with all the new programs is to keep the longtime members and the new members engaged as much as we can so they will feel there is a real value to the membership and with the hope they will form friendships with other members that will lead to them staying with the club for the long term,” Sassu said.

Parents and grandparents of the junior golfers are encouraged to come to the course with their children. The season-ending Parent-Child Championship and Awards party attracts more than 100 players each season.

“The Junior Golf program adds significant revenue to our club’s bottom line because we convinced ownership that establishing a PGA Junior League team would help grow the game as well as our facility,” Sassu said. “We have been truly blessed in the sense that we have seen many of our junior golf graduates continue to play after the program with some going on to play high school golf and several reaching All-State status. Some also have gone on to play college golf, become PGA members and some have even become full golfing members at Chippanee when they reached adulthood.”

The club added a second assistant pro, who is focusing on junior golf, especially the PGA Junior League team. Sassu hopes to take advantage of a successful first year and continue to grow the player base by adding a second team.

Sassu played in the Greater Hartford Open, now Travelers Championship, in 1987 and in the National PGA Championship in 1991. He is a certified club fitter for PING, Titleist, Taylor Made, Calloway and Cobra Golf companies and was selected the PING Golf Company Regional Club Fitter of the Year in 2002. In 2009, Sassu was recognized by the Bristol Tramps and was inducted into the Bristol Sports Hall of Fame in 2014.

Sassu said the most important aspects of being a good golf professional are no different than being good at any other job.

“Never stop perusing opportunities to better educate yourself and your craft,” Sassu said, “and the PGA of America has many opportunities for you to better yourself. Know your customer and always treat them fairly because they will know the difference. As a professional/leader always show respect and compassion for every employee that you supervise. Give credit when credit is due and don’t boss them, inspire them so you will earn their respect and loyalty.”

Sassu said he feels very fortunate to have had the support of so many members and friends and to have the job at Chippanee in the town that he grew up surrounded by his family and longtime friends doing the exact job that he always dreamed of having.

“As far as any contributions, I would like to think that those that I’ve made to the game are a result of the gifts that have been given to me,” Sassu said. “Gifts like Chippanee allowing me to develop a junior program that includes so many young boys and girls, and we never leave anyone out. I love merchandising a golf shop, I love playing the game, I love teaching the game, I love mentoring a new assistant pro to help make him/her a better golf professional. I’m a very lucky man to be given the opportunity to do all these things I love.”

Other Section award winners are George Connor, Farmington Woods CC, Teacher of the Year; E.J. Altobello, Tekoa CC, Westfield, Mass., Youth Player Development; Paul Bank, Copper Hill GC, East Granby, Player Development Award; Joe Connerton, Hartford GC, Bill Strausbaugh Award; John Steffen, Twin Hills CC, Longmeadow, Mass., Horton Smith Award; Larry Antinozzi, TPC River Highlands, Cromwell, Merchandiser of the Year Private; Jantzen Vargas, Lake of Isles CC, North Stonington, Merchandiser of the Year Public; Evan Lambert, Hartford GC, Assistant Professional of the Year; Jim Mayo, Jim Mayo Golf, White River Junction, Vermont, Sales Representative of the Year; Westwoods GC, Farmington, Walter Lowell Public Golf Course Distinguished Service Award; and Joe Cordani, Hop Meadow CC, Simsbury, Patriot Award.

Westwoods officials, including PGA Professional Larry Graham, will be honored during the Walter Lowell PGA Tournament at Wethersfield Country Club on May 29. The Lowell Award honors a public course for its dedication to the promotion of the game based on an unwavering effort to make golf fun and accessible to all, the advancement of the understanding and application of the Rules of Golf, the enforcement of proper etiquette among its patrons, the promotion of the traditions and values of the game and the promotion of junior golf programs. Sassu and the Special Award winners will be recognized at the Golf Professional of the Year Dinner on Saturday, August 18, at Chippanee.