Tony Rowe Inducted Into The Connecticut Section PGA Professional Hall of Fame

By: Russ Held, November 21, 2016

Tony Rowe's first head professional job was also his last.

And in the middle?

Just your basic Hall of Fame career.

Rowe spent 29 seasons as head golf professional at Ellington Ridge Country Club, building a legacy that has now landed him in the Connecticut Section PGA Hall of Fame.

Rowe will be joined in the Class of 2016 by Paul Ryiz, Stan and Ted Pisk and Bob Bodington, a group that will be honored at the Section's Hall of Fame and Champions Tribute at Lake of Isles on November 28.

Connecticut Section PGA Executive Director Tom Hantke welcomed each into the Hall of Fame.

"This year's class of inductees represents a broad cross section of the Connecticut Section PGA's golf professional heritage, both in terms of generational era and service to the game of golf," Hantke said. "The Stan and Ted Pisk father to son passing of the torch begins during WWII and spans through the 20th century.

"Bob Bodington was the consummate golf professional of his time during the 1960s and '70s, and a leader of the section in the formidable developmental years of the organizations growth, whereas the careers of Tony Rowe and Paul Ryiz represent a parallel of the golf professional's evolution of as mentor, promoter, statesman, teacher and player."

Rowe's career has been synonymous with Ellington Ridge since Day One.

"Ed Keating, who was on the (Ellington Ridge) selection committee, asked me if I looked at it as a career move or as a stepping stone," Rowe said. "I knew that I wanted my first job to have to be the one I retired at. My father worked at the same place for 37 years . . ."

Rowe officially retires from Ellington Ridge on December 31, after spending nearly three full decades at the private club on Abbott Road.

"The Hall of Fame was not ever something I thought about it," Rowe said. "Each year I'd admire those who got in and they are all so deserving. Then more and more, guys more my age like Tim Gavronski, Tom Gleeton, Ron Beck . . . they all started getting in."

The Tennessee native built his career not on specific playing, teaching, business or customer service skills - but rather on a combination of those strengths.

"I have never been the most talented, other pros gave better service, were better teachers, played better," Rowe said. "But I felt like I was pretty good at every aspect of being a golf professional. I don't think I have too many weaknesses, but I don't really have one great strength.

"I grew up with the game since I was 10. I have always taken it seriously, I never took any of it for granted and I always strived to be better, each year."

Rowe's resume within the Section includes a handful of major honors, most notably winning the Bill Strausbaugh Award in 2009. The national award, which honors those within individual sections, recognizes PGA professionals who have distinguished themselves by mentoring their fellow PGA professionals in improving their employment situations and through service to the community.

"No question, that is my most cherished," Rowe said. "It's the spirit of that award. Eighteen of my former assistants went on to become head professionals. That's absolutely incredible.

"Some people look at that as my legacy. I always gave young people the opportunity. I'd hire good players, career oriented, service oriented and humble. People like me, it wasn't about me. It's about the club, the membership. I've always had huge respect for the members."

Rowe was also honored as the Section's Merchandiser of the Year in 1990, Golf Professional of the Year in 1992, the Horton Smith Trophy winner in 1994 and the Junior Golf Leader Award recipient in 2006.

Rowe served on the Section's Board of Directors for 10 years, serving two as its president in 1997 and 1998.

"I had 10 good years, but I didn't want to outlive my stay," he said of his time on the board of directors. "I wanted to turn it over to the next generation."

Rowe grew up a half mile from a golf course in northeastern Tennessee and spent time there as a caddie and picking up range balls.

"I lived at the golf course, I was there first thing in the morning and went home at dark," Rowe said.

Rowe won the Tennessee PGA Junior on his home course in 1973 and a collegiate tournament while at Carson Newman College, but "was realistic, knowing that there was never going to be a future out there competing against the best."

His first opportunity in the business came at Plainfield CC in Edison, N.J., where he credits the Philbrook family as one of his most influential in his career.

"I went from being a golf pro to being a golf professional," Rowe said.

Rowe later searched everywhere for a head professional opening and Ellington Ridge fit his criteria.

"A private club, family membership, good golf course, good condition – a place to be proud of," Rowe said. "There were 12 or 14 Connecticut PGA Championships, two state opens, state amateurs . . ."

Rowe, who grew up with two sisters, has a daughter Jenny living in New York City and has spent "seven meaningful years with significant other" Denise Lord.

Rowe spoke highly of the Section's leadership, particularly that of executive director Tom Hantke.

"Tom's been a member at Ellington Ridge for 17 years. We've been close friends and when we hired him (in 1993) I think it was the best move the Section has ever made.'

Rowe's 29-year run at Ellington Ridge also matched that of Wally Cichon, who was the club's first head professional.

"Ellington Ridge has had two head pros, both there for 29 years," Rowe said. "Wally was my biggest supporter when I started here. Everyone loved him and when he embraced me . . . I knew I was immediately held in high esteem. I inherited what Wally had built."

Cichon passed away in 2009, but Rowe said longtime assistant Bob Schaefer has been a living link that spanned both careers.

"He was there for 45 years, from 1963 to 2008," Rowe said. "It was his life here. He poured his whole life, his soul into Ellington Ridge every day."

He poured his whole life, his soul into Ellington Ridge every day?

Sound familiar.