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## Local man learns ropes at Oak Hill

By ALAN BRIGNALL

PITTSFORD — Sean McFetridge was nervous, not unusual for someone sitting through a job interview. His prospective employer, Oak Hill Country Club golf professional Craig Harmon, added to that anxiety, as did something Harmon said.

“He explained that he doesn’t have a lot of local assistants because he feels a facility such as Oak Hill deserves the cream of the crop,” McFetridge remarked. “He always wants to get the best (people) out there.”

This time, Harmon decided a local man was the best option.

Less than a month after their mid-September meeting a year ago, Harmon offered McFetridge a job as one of his four assistant professionals. The 28-year-old Geneva native accepted.

McFetridge, who grew up in Stanley and graduated from Marcus Whitman, began his first season working at Oak Hill in April. He said it’s been a sometimes overwhelming, often exhilarating experience, particularly with preparations for this weekend’s 85th PGA Championship in full swing when he started.

“It’s gone from anticipation to a lot of hard work to now being able to just enjoy it,” he said. “Our busiest time was about a month before the tournament until about a week ago. We don’t have a lot of stuff to do this week.

“It’s really kind of neat because it’s showed me if you work hard enough and do things the right way, even a farm kid can make it and succeed in something he wanted to do.”

McFetridge expected to spend most of the week working in the merchandise tent. On Wednesday, he spent time on the practice range sorting golf balls by brand name and distributing them to the proper players. Just before he went home that day, he was talking to his boss and Billy Harmon, one of Craig’s brothers, when Jay Haas and Greg Norman, part of the 156-player tournament field, separately wandered over to say hello to Craig. Meeting Norman was a dream come true, McFetridge noted.

“I had a cardboard cutout of him, and it might still be in my room back home,” he explained. “I have a quote from his book on my bedroom wall, and for some reason I never took it down.”

While McFetridge knew Craig Harmon was a major player in the golf business, he’s been amazed by just how widely recognized he is.

“Especially around Oak Hill, he’s a little larger than life, revered by the membership,” McFetridge assessed. “And, when Jeff Sluman is calling and Brad Faxon and Greg Norman and you’re talking to those guys on the phone, the first couple times that happens you’re a little in awe.”

McFetridge learned the ins and outs of the game and business during his childhood.

Marcus Whitman didn't offer a golf program until after McFetridge graduated in 1993, so he spent countless hours at Big Oak Golf Club in Geneva helping out owner Graeme Sharman, his mentor and close friend. In between working, he developed into one of the club's top youth players.

During college, McFetridge worked summers for another Sharman, Graeme's son Norm, after Graeme and Norm bought Waterloo's Silver Creek Golf Club in 1994.

McFetridge believes the values he learned from the Sharmans made an impression on Harmon.

"Craig asked me the most important thing I've learned in the golf business. Working for (the Sharmans), there were two things," noted McFetridge, who planned on meeting up with Norm Sharman today. "No matter what your job was you were a team member, and if they needed you somewhere else and that was going to make the operation more successful, you did it because you wanted to see those guys succeed.

"And the Sharmans always made it like a family atmosphere, that you were welcome there. I guess it goes back to the old saying if you treat people like you want to be treated, you can't go wrong."

McFetridge spent one year at the University of Florida before leaving school. After a year off, he enrolled at Campbell (N.C.) University and earned a degree in golf management in May 1999. A month before receiving his diploma, he landed his first job as an assistant at Brook-Lea Country Club in Gates. His time working for pro Jon Hoecker laid the groundwork for his current position.

Hoecker, a former assistant under Harmon, had yet to send one of his assistants to Oak Hill. Also, McFetridge was paired with Oak Hill assistant Brad Ewing in the last two Western New York PGA Section assistant pro championships.

"Jon and I both felt in my time at Brook-Lea I learned just about as much as I could from him," McFetridge said. "The next logical step before getting my own job was to try and get someplace that had name recognition that could build my résumé a little more. The only place in this part of New York that really met that criteria was Oak Hill."

Even after he decided to work for Harmon, McFetridge said he remained uneasy because he had heard stories about Oak Hill's 900-strong membership as "being blue blood and stuck up and snobbish." He soon found out that characterization was inaccurate.

"The members on a whole are great people who love the game of golf," McFetridge said. "They just happen to be in a better position in life than those who can't afford to be at a club like this.

"It's really neat when you see the leaders of business in Rochester and different parts of the world that just want to talk to you about golf, what the best driver for them is, what the winning score will be at the PGA."

McFetridge will spend the next two years at Oak Hill, part of Harmon's three-year rotation that allows his assistants to earn club pro status. After four months, McFetridge feels confident he'll be ready for his first go-round as a head pro.

"Craig is the consummate professional in terms of what a PGA professional is supposed to be," McFetridge concluded. "Some days he'll spend eight hours on the range, but he also knows

what's going on in the shop. You think you slipped something by him, and you find out a couple days later he knew about it.

“He gives you a chance to succeed, but he also gives you a chance to make mistakes and learn from those. When push comes to shove his name and Oak Hill on my résumé will be the reason I leap ahead of people when it comes time to get my own job.”