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Friends, family will miss golfer with heart of gold

By DAVID L. SHAW / Finger Lakes Times

GENEVA — As usual, Tom Damick showed up at Big Oak Golf Course at 7:30 a.m. Wednesday for the senior men's golf league.

A few hours later, funeral services were scheduled for its owner, his good friend Graham Sharman, who died Saturday of cancer at the age of 75.

"Boy, I'm going to miss him," the Newark resident said, sipping coffee and munching on a doughnut before teeing off. "Oh, yes, I'll miss him."

"I met him in the Can-Am tournament he's run. Once you met him, you were friends. He was just a great guy," Damick said, smiling. "He was always jovial and friendly to anyone who came here."

Head groundskeeper Bill Robinson of Geneva knows what Damick means. He says when Sharman hired him 17 years ago, they became fast friends.

"He was my friend, my mentor, my peer and my boss. I can't think of too many others who can be a boss and a friend like he was," Robinson said, noting that he and Sharman's son Norm were in each other's weddings. "He cared about my family like his own. If I needed time off for a family matter, it was never a problem. It was a special relationship.

"Even if he chewed me out for something, we were still friends at the end of the day. Graham was all about people first. I wasn't just an employee."

Robinson then smiled and talked about how he dreaded seeing Sharman and his dog, Meg, coming at him across the fairways when he was mowing in the early morning.

"I knew if I saw that green golf cart heading toward me, it probably wasn't good," he said, laughing.

Good friends Bill Guest, Bill Shea and Dominic Buttaccio, worked together at Mobil Chemical, joined Big Oak together after retiring, and stood together when they joined hundreds of others paying their last respects to Sharman Tuesday at Palmisano Funeral Home.

"We came to Big Oak rather than a golf course closer to where we lived in Wayne County because of the people, especially Graham," said Buttaccio, who, like Shea, lives in Newark. Guest is from Palmyra.

"The people there are just great, from Graham on down," Buttaccio said, adding that he made Sharman signs for the golf course in exchange for his membership.

"Graham was what made it so much fun to be a member there and to play Big Oak," Shea said. "He was always smiling and doing all he could to make sure you felt comfortable and were enjoying your time there."

Buttaccio said Sharman was the kind of guy who'd tell him to get in the golf cart if he said he was having

trouble hitting his irons. "He'd take me to an open hole and give me a quick lesson and take me back. He had a heart of gold, always encouraging and helping," he said.

The trio said Sharman was especially proud of the back nine holes he added (in 1999) and loved showing the area off.

"I just saw him in June and he was a little thin, but still smiling and happy. He had cancer, but you couldn't tell by his outlook," Shea said.

Sharman's love of golf and the camaraderie rubbed off on the whole staff, they said.

"If you came there alone, you always got matched up with some other player to make it more enjoyable," Shea said.

Sharman's first love was another game, though. He'd grown up in Quebec and was an avid hockey player.

Genevan Trish Brewer belongs to one of Norm Sharman's courses, Silver Creek in Waterloo. She forged a friendship when she met Graham Sharman years ago.

"We played together. I loved playing with him and his sons. He was always generous, encouraging and supportive," said Brewer, who called him "awesome."

"He was great with kids, teaching them how to play and encouraging a love and respect for the game. He'll be sorely missed," Brewer said.

One of those kids was the son of Genevan Bob Guererri.

"I would often see him with a group of kids, 8 to 10 years old, showing them how to play and always helping anyone who asked for help," said Guererri, who belonged to the club for nearly 20 years and was not a bit surprised by how crowded Sharman's calling hours were.

But not everyone there was a golfer. Laurie Loncosky, of Waterloo, for instance, teaches plant science to special needs children at Wayne-Finger Lakes BOCES.

"Graham would always allow me to bring my students to the golf course to learn about turf and groundskeeping and how a green and fairway are developed," she said. "... he made sure they felt welcome. There was always a soda and snack for them in the clubhouse."

"He cared about all kinds of people who came to the golf course, not just the big shots," she said. "He had a heart as big as his 18-hole golf course."

Terry Busby of Waterloo worked for Sharman as a groundskeeper and, like Robinson, has fond memories.

"He was great to work for, and if you came to the course to play he'd didn't care if you had clubs or not. He'd loan you a set and made sure you played," he said.

Busby remembers one time when a mother dropped off her son, who was in a wheelchair, and Sharman worked with him and eventually got him out of it and playing golf.

"He's now a golf pro in Maryland," Busby said. "[Sharman] lit a fire in him."

Sharman, who grew up doing gymnastics as well as playing hockey, got his fire for golf lit when asked to caddy as a boy.

He moved to the U.S. in 1967 to work for Albany International textile company as an industrial engineer. He bought Big Oak in 1979, gradually improving it to the level of popularity it enjoys today.

Sharman's funeral was at 10 a.m. Wednesday at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Geneva, followed by burial

at Oaklawn Cemetery.

In addition to Norm, Sharman is survived by sons David, Jeffrey and Christopher; daughter, Susan; and wife, Elizabeth; as well as 14 grandchildren.

Christopher Sharman said the family is "overwhelmed" by the number of people who attended calling hours.

"We are amazed at how many people he knew," he said.

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