

THE REMARKABLE LIFE OF MARVIN STAHL

By Brent D. Rector

"The best way to learn the golf swing is to watch and mimic."
MARVIN STAHL, former Blythefield golf professional

During Blythefield Country Club's almost 100-year history, there is probably not a better story than that of Marvin Stahl. He was our golf pro for just one year, 1948. His life before and after is nothing short of amazing, filled with both triumph and tragedy.

Born in Grand Rapids, Marv was left fatherless and poor and began earning money at a young age to help his mother. After becoming a professional golfer as a young man, he lost both his pregnant wife and their unborn child during delivery. He raised his surviving three daughters as a single parent and eventually remarried. He later lost two more daughters as adults, and later his second wife died. As a young boy and long before these tragic losses, he was exposed to golf.

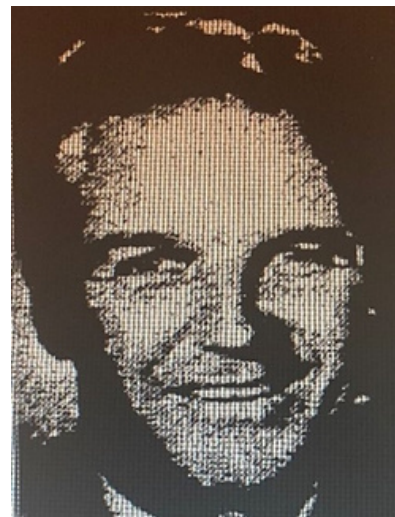
Learning to play as a caddie opened the door to him becoming an accomplished player and head pro at top clubs. This led to his stint as a Hollywood producer and golf teacher to the stars. Along the way, he became our club pro. After one year, he shifted from golf to business, and later became Club President.



1924 - High School



1938 - Golf Professional



1960 - Businessman

His fascinating life was featured by author Susan Lovell in a book she wrote, *A Dozen of the Best: Improvement Association 1940-2011*. Her book tells the story of the Improvement Association (“IA”) that was formed by a group of local men before the United States entered WWII. These “IA” members used their own success to promote Grand Rapids. In her book, Mrs. Lovell gives biographical information of the “IA”, of which Marvin Stahl later became a member. (Note: You may recall that Susan, a fine fiction writer and a long-time GR resident, was also editor of *Cadence*, which for many years was the weekly newspaper in East Grand Rapids.)

Susan’s book about these prominent local citizens has a chapter recounting the life of Marvin Stahl. Here is how she told of Marv Stahl’s life:

“Amidst all the storybook lives led by every member of the Improvement Association, probably none is more heroic or tragic than Marvin Stahl. His is a bootstraps success tale interwoven with threads of a Greek tragedy. While Fate dealt him fabulously good fortune with one hand, it handed him infinite heartbreak with the other.

“Marvin Stahl, whose golf foursome would one day include Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, and Buddy Rogers, did not start out with a bright future. When Marvin was nine, his father left his mother Laura and was never part of his son’s life again. Young Marvin and his mother had to move in with her parents, and Laura took a job selling advertising to support her son as a single mom.

“But Marvin was determined to help the mother he adored. When a new country club named Cascade Hills opened in 1922, 13-year-old Marvin rode his bike from Oakdale Street to Cascade Road looking for a caddying job. The golf club’s new head pro Maurie Wells saw something special in the young teenager and he soon became the dad Marv didn’t have.

“‘Maurie Wells changed my whole life,’ Stahl would say years later. ‘I so admired the man, I wanted to be just like him.’ To be like Maurie Wells meant golf. ‘I fell in love with the game that first summer.’

“Country club rules prevented Wells from giving caddies golf lessons, but Maurie wanted Stahl to learn the game right. In those days before motorized ball retrievers, Wells always asked Marvin to shag balls for him when he was giving a lesson. Stahl would hustle the balls back to Wells who made sure the boy could hear what Maurie was teaching the member. The eavesdropping and natural ability would ultimately lead Stahl to three Michigan Open Championships in 1936, 38, and 39.

“In 1926, with his mother’s reluctant approval, Stahl quit high school and became Maurie Well’s assistant at Cascade Hills. His academic life was over, but golf was to open doors for Marvin and Laura Stahl they could never have dreamed of.

“One of Marvin’s several part-time jobs teaching golf was at the Whitefish Lake Golf Course, where he met a young man named Jim Carpenter cutting the greens. Jim and Marv immediately clicked as friends half a century before they joined the prestigious Improvement Association. Jim Carpenter later became president of Union Bank and was a valued business advisor to Stahl.

“In 1933, Stahl began making sports headlines winning the West Michigan Professional Open four straight years and the Michigan Open three times. But far more important to the man who would always put his family first, Marv married the love of his life, Loraine. Within four years, they had three lovely daughters.

“Stahl’s growing golf reputation led to a dream job as head golf pro at the exclusive Seminole Country Club in Palm Beach, Florida. Members included the Kennedys and Edsel Fords as well as millionaire investor Robert Young, chairman of the New York Central Railroad. When the attack on Pearl Harbor shut Seminole down for the war years, Young offered the 34-year-old Stahl a job making Navy training movies in Hollywood. Actually Stahl could have starred in the films with his riveting blue eyes, dark curly hair and tall, lean stature.

“Three weeks after unpacking, Marvin Stahl’s handsome face did make Hollywood headlines – but not as a movie star. The new kid in town became an instant celebrity by winning the Los Angeles Open Victory tournament in a city rife with golf-crazed Hollywood stars. Stahl shot a blistering 64 – beating the great Lloyd Mangrum – to set a course record at Wilshire Country Club still memorialized on a plaque in the club house.

“Within days Marv was playing golf with Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Danny Kaye, and Buddy Rogers – husband of the film goddess Mary Pickford. ‘All the golf nuts wanted to play,’ Stahl recalled years later. Then he added with the humility that typified his character, ‘But Hollywood blows sports way out of proportion.’

“What happened next to Stahl reads like a movie script tragedy. In late 1943, Lorraine was pregnant with their fourth child when she and Marv met Dorothy McBrayer, an assistant screenwriter, at a party. Dorothy’s hobby was reading palms so she studied Marvin’s. Knowing nothing about him, she said something would change his life on his 35th birthday.

“February 25, 1944, Marvin turned 35 and his beloved Lorraine, only 27, died in childbirth along with their fourth baby girl. When Dorothy found out, she never read another palm. The grieving husband left alone with three daughters ages 5, 7, and 9 needed to find out how Dorothy could have foreseen this. They became friends, and, over time, fell in love. Dottie became the second Mrs. Stahl in 1946.

“When Marvin’s boss in the film industry asked him to plagiarize other scripts to make inexpensive movies, Stahl realized Hollywood was not for him. A man of honor, Stahl knew only one way to run a business, play golf, and live his life honestly.

“The five Stahls moved back to Michigan where Marvin became manager of Lansing Country Club. When golfers Karl Herrud and Otto Norton found out Marv was inside, not outside teaching golf, they brought him to Blythefield Country Club as head golf pro in 1948.

“Marv moved on to represent Jack Chaile’s Rospatch selling labels to Detroit’s auto industry. In 1949 Marvin ran into Art Sparks, the Cascade Hills Country Club golfer he’d most liked caddying for in the 1920’s. Right on the sidewalk, Sparks hired his former caddy to sell A. J. Sparks conveyor belts to the car makers in Detroit.

“Two years later Marvin landed the Ford Motor account, and in 1954, Art Sparks made Stahl his company’s general manager. When Art Sparks died 18 months later, Stahl bought the A. J. Sparks company through a buy-sell agreement the two had made. Stahl proved to be an entrepreneur, expanding his company into six operations plus a holding company. Among his entrepreneurial moves was buying options on a big farm near what is today Centerpointe Mall.

“When its predecessor the original Eastbrook Mall was being developed, Marv’s investment gave him naming rights for two roads leading into the mall, one major, one a side road. Turn off East Paris today and you will be on the big road: Sparks Drive. Then you’ll see the smaller road called Stahl Drive. Marv’s integrity was only matched by his humility and gratitude.

“Marv Stahl became a wealthy man but his family tragedies weren’t over. Two of his three daughters died within a year of each other in 1976 and 1977 – one was 43, the other 39. Despite his heartaches, Marvin made time for good works, including the boards of St. Mary’s Hospital, United Way, the American Cancer Society, and as Rotary president. He also served as a director for his fellow IA member Jim Sebastian’s Rapid-Standard Foundation.

“In 2002 when Marvin Stahl died at age 93, his many friends, including his special IA pals, recalled him as a ‘star golfer,’ ‘movie mogul,’ and ‘self-made millionaire.’ But the most repeated tribute, including a eulogy from John Wardrop, Jr., said simply, ‘Marv Stahl was a man of integrity.’”

Quite a story, huh? DYK will add a few more details of this remarkable man.

- In 1948 Marv became Blythefield's third head pro. After just one year at Blythefield he left the golf profession to become a manufacturer's representative. This eventually led him to work for A. J. Sparks Co. first as a sales rep, eventually as general manager, and later as owner after Arthur Sparks died.
- Marv became a Blythefield member in the 1950's and was our club president in 1958. A couple years later he built a home near our third green. (Bob and Paula Sedrowski now live there.)
- All his life he met and impressed people. As a young caddie he met Arthur Sparks, who decades later would be instrumental in Marv's business successes. Cascade Hills pro Maurie Wells gave Marv his start in golf, teaching Marv the game and later as Wells' assistant, how to teach golf and how to run a pro shop. This led him to prestigious head pro jobs that eventually included the Seminole CC job. There he met Robert Young, a Seminole member and prominent New York businessman. Young set Marv up with the Hollywood job early during WWII, when Seminole was closed. Caddying in his youth for Arthur Sparks of Cascade Hills later resulted in his second career as a businessman.
- Marv eventually retired from A. J. Sparks and moved to Palm Springs, where he died in 2002 at the age of 93. Before he died, he was inducted into the Michigan Golf Hall of Fame. See [Marvin Stahl – Michigan Golf Hall of Fame](#).

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PS: Our beautiful new clubhouse has plenty of room to display artifacts of Blythefield history. If you have any photos, books, or memorabilia which would be helpful for this, please let me know.

