

# THE MAN FROM K.U.N.K.E.L.

by Neal Kotlarek

Step through the bag room at Sunset Ridge Country Club in Northfield and you enter a cozy office filled with a couch, a countertop and a cluttered desk. While the office's primary occupant is caddie master Greg Kunkel, the room is a whirl of activity as caddies walk in every few minutes to confirm schedules, receive wages and just hang out with "Kunks," as he is known to caddies, members and friends.

Attired in a Northwestern University sport shirt, Kunkel looks up at the pictures lining the office walls and points out that three current college coaches are members at Sunset Ridge, including Northwestern's football and men's basketball head men, Pat Fitzgerald and Chris Collins. The office is a virtual sports hall of fame, incorporating bobbleheads, pucks, baseballs, team photos, mini football helmets and autographed golf balls. Most if not all of the memorabilia are tokens from Chicago professional sports heroes who have been members or guests at the private North Shore club at one time or another.

While Kunkel has developed close friendships with many of these athletes and has dozens of stories to tell

about each, many of his favorite mementoes from his 31-year career at Sunset Ridge rest inside a drawer. He reaches in and retrieves a stack of postcards and notes from caddies he has mentored over the years. He randomly opens one from a summer intern who had served double duty as a tournament scoreboard keeper due to her impeccable handwriting. Indeed, the card is written in calligraphic strokes and serves as a thank you note to Kunkel for the intern's great experiences and education at the club. Kunks studies the note for a second and nods his head.

"These kinds of cards are what make my job so fun and fulfilling," he says. "I've been at Sunset Ridge for over three decades and I still love coming to work."

Kunkel remarks that the character of the club makes it special if not unique across all of Chicagoland.

"We are a true family club," he says. "Everyone knows everyone here. Caddies and employees are extended members of the family. And we treat guests as new members of our family, as well." His point is underscored by the fact that some members' sons and daughters are also caddies at the club.

At least part of the success of Sunset Ridge's caddie program, Kunkel explains, can be attributed to a strategy of pairing up golfers with caddies who fit their needs and preferences. "We work to match the caddie to the player," he says. "Some members ask for a specific caddie who knows their games and knows how every putt breaks on our greens; other members like to work with new and younger caddies, and some guests look for a caddie who can teach them about the course."

In total, Sunset Ridge hosts over 120 caddies during the prime summer season, including ten this year who participate through the Daniel Murphy Scholarship Foundation which provides high school financial assistance and educational support to Chicago school kids from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These caddies take residence at nearby Lake Forest College and commute to the club daily.

The caddie program at Sunset Ridge Country Club has been referenced as one of the finest in the nation, as walking the course with a caddie is strongly encouraged for members and guests. The course was designed by William Diddel in

1923 and underwent a renovation by Libertyville architect Rick Jacobsen in 2004. His work was recognized in 2006 as "Private Club Golf Course Renovation of the Year" by *Golf Inc.* magazine. Most holes are lined by mature trees with greens and fairway landing areas protected by sweeping sand bunkers. On a chilly week in 1972, the course hosted the Western Open, Jim Jamieson the winner.

Club members and managers have been enthusiastic supporters of the Evans Scholars Foundation, which awards college scholarships to caddies with limited financial means. Administered by the Western Golf Association, the program is funded by contributions from over 30,000 Evans Scholars Par Club members across the country, as well as proceeds from the BMW Championship, played this year at Conway Farms Golf Club in Lake Forest. Kunkel says he has hopes and expectations that as many as eight to 10 caddies currently at Sunset Ridge are in position to earn the Evans scholarship in coming years.

"The entire group at the Western Golf Association is incredible," Kunkel says. "I'm a huge fan of (president and



**North Shore's  
legendary  
caddie master  
has impacted  
the lives of  
thousands**



# PLAY

Where else can you spend the morning playing on a championship golf course, the afternoon exploring trails of a National Forest, and the evening sipping wine at an award winning winery?

**ONLY CARBONDALE**




carbondale tourism

ILLINOIS ARE YOU UP FOR AMAZING? *ALMA*

126 S. Illinois Avenue | Carbondale, IL 62901 | 618.529.4451 | carbondaletourism.org

## Save The Dates The Golf Expos!



www.tencoevents.com



**Tinley Park Golf Expo**  
Feb. 9-11th 2018  
[www.tinleyparkgolfexpo.com](http://www.tinleyparkgolfexpo.com)

**Northern Illinois Golf Expo**  
Feb. 16-18th 2018  
[www.northernillinoisgolfexpo.com](http://www.northernillinoisgolfexpo.com)

For more info on attending or exhibiting visit the websites listed above

CEO) John Kaskowski and the Evans Scholarship program.” Kunkel’s affection for the WGA was reciprocated in May 2015, when he was inducted into the association’s Caddie Hall of Fame.

“Greg has shaped the lives of thousands of Sunset Ridge caddies, Evans Scholars Alumni, four current Evans Scholars, and another Sunset Ridge caddie awarded the scholarship in fall,” said WGA chairman Dennis O’Keefe at the ceremony. “Greg cares about the caddie training and performance; the golfer’s experience; and perhaps most important, about the lives of his caddies,” said Bob Caldwell, a club member and WGA director. “He is a friend to many and a giver in countless ways, taking care of those in need in his own, inimitable style.”

Kunkel began his golf career in 1969 when he caddied at Winnetka’s Indian Hill Country Club – the same club where comedian Bill Murray and his brothers caddied at and which inspired the movie “Caddyshack.” In a remarkable coincidence, Kunkel’s first loop was real life club member Mrs. Haverkamp whose name was inserted into the movie script by Murray. “I waited three weeks to get my first loop and it was Mrs. Haverkamp,” Kunkel marvels. Brothers Bill and Brian had already moved on from Indian Hill when Kunkel arrived, but he says the exploits of all of the Murray brothers at the club and around the community remain the stuff of legend.

Despite what must have been a rough 18 with Mrs. Haverkamp, Kunkel fell head-over-heels in love with golf and caddying. He showed enough skills to earn the bag of touring pro Marty Fleckman at Medinah Country Club in the 1975 U.S. Open. Winner of the 1967 Cajun Classic Open and a three-time college All-America, Fleckman fired a first round even-par 71 to tie for ninth at that stage, three strokes ahead of eventual winner Lou Graham.

Over his caddie career, Kunkel has carried bags leading to two Illinois Open champions and over 30 titles in Illinois PGA Section tournaments over his career. Of all those titles won, Kunkel says his favorite occurred just a year ago when friend (and WGA director) Ron Waytula won the 2016 Illinois Senior Open at McHenry Country Club.

“Ron really wanted to win that tournament for his father who had

passed away,” Kunkel remembers. “It was a real emotional final round and trophy ceremony. I can say that it was a special experience to be with Ron through his final putt.”

When he’s not caddying or managing the caddie program at the club, Kunkel can often be found on the golf course. He has played to a handicap as low as 2 but plays to a 9 today as he continues his recovery from a catastrophic illness.

In August 2014, Kunkel survived a three-hour surgery to remove a cancerous bladder and prostate. An ileal conduit procedure required taking a piece of Kunkel’s intestine and connecting it to one of his kidneys. The prognosis prior to the cancer surgery was dire, yet his body’s response following 11 total procedures was nothing short of miraculous. While Kunkel gives full credit to Dr. Michael McGuire, the urologic oncology specialist who performed the surgery, he heaps equal praise on his wife, Debbie, and the prayers and good wishes of hundreds of family members, friends, club members, caddies and former caddies who helped him get through the entire process.

“I am a blessed man,” Kunkel states categorically. “I not only survived a Stage 5 kidney disease, I got reminded of how many friends I have in the world.”

Kunkel counts among those friends Blackhawks Hall of Famer Pat Foley, Bears former linebacker Brian Urlacher and the greatest basketball player of all time, Michael Jordan. “Michael spent a lot of time at the club,” Kunkel says. He’d stick around after a round and challenge the caddies to ping-pong matches.”

One of Kunkel’s favorite stories involving Jordan was a request from the friend of a member who asked if she could meet Jordan before or after he played at the club. She was dying from cancer and had hoped to meet the basketball superstar sometime in her life. “The lady approached him and he sized her up. ‘You are beautiful,’ he told her. It was a great moment.”

Kunkel’s family includes four children, all of whom were caddies at Sunset Ridge. What are his instructions to all would-be caddies? “The basics of the profession,” he says with a laugh: “Show up. Shut up. And keep up!”

Beyond those basics, Kunkel says the best caddies are those who are students

of the course and who look forward to spending time with their loops. “I really think we have the best caddies in Chicago,” he says. “Over the years, they learn how to help their loops choose the right clubs and aim putts on the correct lines. But, more importantly, they give them a great Sunset Ridge experience.”

While not every caddie qualifies for the Evans scholarships, the club has developed secondary scholarship programs for those who don’t. The Sunset Ridge Scholarship Fund provides \$155,000 of support for caddies who qualify. Caddies also contribute to a fund that provides up to \$10,000 in scholarships to worthy colleagues that include workers at the club’s pool and snack bar. Kunkel states that one of his proudest achievements is the creation by the club of a Greg Kunkel Scholarship that allows him to choose the recipient based upon academics, need and caddie skills.

Over his 31 years at Sunset Ridge, the man known to all as “Kunks” has guided thousands of caddies through their paces and touched the lives of thousands of members and their guests. Somewhere in heaven, Mrs. Haverkamp must surely be proud.

## “Pure Golf at its Finest”



**STONEWALL ORCHARD GOLF CLUB**  
An Arthur Hills Masterpiece

(847) 740-4890

Located 1 mile east of Volo on Highway 60  
(1 mile west of Fairfiled Road / ½ mile east of Route 12)

[www.stonewallorchard.com](http://www.stonewallorchard.com)

- Host to US Open Sectional Qualifier (final stage)
- Home of Illinois PGA Sectional Championship (on rotation with Medina and Olympia Fields)

“One of Chicago’s top public courses you can play”—Golf Digest  
“One of America’s best public courses”—Zagat Guide to Golf