

THE BIRTH OF GENEVA

The NFL was created in an auto showroom in Canton, Ohio back in 1920. Several visionaries had an idea to form a set of rules and pay men to play football. The first year teams were located in Canton, Akron, Decatur, Columbus, Green Bay, and Racine among others. The monster they fathered is now an American phenome. It is the most popular sport in the country and play in places called New York, Chicago, Boston, Detroit, and Cleveland.

The Geneva Open was a brainstorm of Adrian Skunza in a Howard Johnson's hotel room in 1975. I remember it well. I was there. I have killed many brain cells since, but there is a room somewhere in my memory chamber that has those precious two days of sowing a seed for a golf weekend at this carnival site locked securely away. I remember the gleam in Adrian's eyes as he spoke of gathering two or three foursomes for a Geneva get away. It was the same gleam Marty Schottenheimer preached to BROWNS players in a playoff game. It is apparent Adrian's gleam was more successful than Marty's.

How did the gleam materialize? Adrian was laying carpet in Howard Johnson's and invited me to join him for a couple of days. His work day ended around four then we would grab our clubs and head to Deer Lake Golf Course. After playing Raymond, Airport, Bolton Field, Minerva Lake, and Thorn Apple in the Columbus area long before they matured, the tree lined fairways of Deer Lake intrigued both Adrian and me. Two years later, tee times were made for a weekend of golf and Geneva was born. Except for the eight Charter Members, few Geneva participants realize Deer Lake once existed.

Uneducated about the Geneva-on-the-Lake landscape, eight of us booked four rooms in the Howard Johnson's at the I-90 exit. The original cast of characters were Adrian, Legend Frank Alexander, Legend Gary Glanzman, Mini-Legend Jerry Graves, Dick Barrett, Jim Nogawick, Bob Berger, and non-golfer but good party partner, Mike Sachs. The only golf on the Deer Lake tract was the first round of the initial Geneva gathering. That one round is most remembered for the three wheeled, one man carts. If you saw these screwy carts crossing from rough to rough, you may think they look like circus clowns in a July 4th parade.

With our alcohol induced red noses, all we needed was hard candy to throw. It was the only round on Deer Lake because of clover filled fairways.

Dissatisfied with the course condition at Deer Lake, Legend Gary Glanzman, before reaching legendary status, set out to find better playing facilities.

"I knew about the Geneva-on-the-Lake Municipal Golf Course from our warehouse manager of the 70's", Gary said. "His brother owned a bar called Yogi's on Route 20. He knew the area very well. I specifically remember his description of No.9 and the hill behind the green.

"We set out to find that other course. Apparently, the weather had been perfect that year and when we pulled into the parking lot next to Pera's Motel, we saw it. Wall to wall, emerald green, just at dusk. Perfect. We got tee times for the next day and the rest is history...over 40 years of incredible history".

No truer words were ever spoken. We never hacked around Deer Lake again. The rolling hills, tree lined fairways, and the wonderful hospitality of Geneva-on-the-Lake course pro, Chuck Webb, won the hearts of the Charter Members especially the Commissioner, Adrian Skunza. The best promotional tool of Geneva was word of mouth. The results immediately impacted attendance at the second Geneva Open. The likes of Legend Vince Gatto, Mini-Legend Jack Berger, and John Skunza joined the Charter Members.

Unlike the immediate change of courses, it took an extra year before the Geneva field left the remodeled Howard Johnson's for the half-star rated Pera's Motel. The Ho Jo's accommodations were 5 miles from the Swiss Chalet which was not a Geneva tradition yet. Instead, two townie bars down the road full of hillbillies and tattooed women were the frequented attractions. During the first year, we tried playing cards in the room like we heard free times were spent on most golf outings. That did not fly. After one night, we realized it was not the deuces that were wild. From the earliest days, it was obvious Geneva was going to be something special.

One tradition some still partake is dinner at the restaurant across the street from the old Howard Johnson's. Ask me to this day and I still do not know the name of this establishment back in the day. We called it the Restaurant Lounge because, quite honestly, that is what it read on its sign high above the building.

On the first night, we were introduced to a near sixty (not sexy) year old waitress named Irene. For years she was our personal server who appreciated our humor as much as we appreciated her professionalism. This bond between Irene and us strengthened with each yearly visit. Old but Geneva hipped, she informed us of the Geneva hot spots and we would honor her with a chorus of “Good Night Irene.” This place is now called Chops but there is no Irene.

Geneva has changed drastically since those first two years. I have not seen a deck of cards in Geneva since 1977. Howard Johnson’s is still open but under a different name and no longer a landing spot for the outing. The three wheeled carts are gone and so is Deer Lake Golf Course. The Commissioner’s Dinner moved from the “Restaurant Lounge” to the golf course without Irene. Still, those years laid groundwork for today’s Geneva.

Thanks to Legend Gary Glanzman and Mini-Legend Jerry Graves for their contribution to this article.