

Steve Solloway: The 'best friend' of Maine golf enters Hall of Fame write way

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After writing thousands of words detailing Maine golfers and the games they play, Tom Chard wonders what he'll say Thursday when he accepts his induction into the Maine Golf Hall of Fame. For the first time since his days as a three-sport athlete at Deering High, the spotlight will be on him.

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Chard is my colleague at the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram. We're not in the business to write about each other. But it's not often someone is beckoned into a hall of fame.

Chard might have wished he had won at least one Maine Amateur tournament. He hasn't lost his competitive edge. In fact, at age 61 he carries a 4 handicap and in recent years has made that tournament's cut.

"I'm older and smarter as far as game management goes. That's it." He all but shrugged. He's much more comfortable reporting what he sees and learns. He's a messenger, not a talker.

Chard enters the Maine Golf Hall of Fame for his writing. "He's been golf's best friend," said Gary Rees, the hall's executive director. He has seen Chard at the high school tournaments and the big summer tournaments, such as the Maine Open, for more than 30 years.

After the nomination and the voting, Rees picked up the phone. "I called him. Tommy, you're in. He said, 'No, no, not now.' I told him: you don't have a choice."

Chard began his weekly golf column in the Maine Sunday Telegram in 1981, succeeding Vern Putney. That's symmetry. Putney, along with Dr. Carman Pettapiece, Joe Stillman and Dick Doyle, another Press Herald sports writer, started this hall of fame 20 years ago. The four have since died.

Putney was a mentor. He wrote about all sports, but especially golf and running and boxing where individuals stood apart from teams. Putney may have been the first sports writer to recognize the resolve and talent of Joan Benoit Samuelson. He convinced his editors he needed to be at the Boston Marathon in 1979. He put aside his objectivity to cheer Samuelson when she crossed the finish line as the women's winner.

Putney wasn't a runner and didn't box. He did play golf.

"Vern learned (golf) as a caddie," said Chard. "He had bad asthma and couldn't play sports like football or basketball or baseball."

Remembering his own introduction to the sport, Putney helped promote the long-ago caddie school at the Portland Boys Club. Caddies could play for free one day a week at Portland's Riverside Golf Course. Chard never caddied but he also fell in love with the game that pushes players to their mental breaking points.

His working career began at a time when newspapers used copy boys, or go-fers — which he was — and typewriters. Now he's plugged into social media like everyone else.

Mark Plummer, winner of 13 Maine Amateur championships, has frequently been the subject of Chard columns and stories. This summer, the two were paired in the Maine State Golf Association's Senior Amateur tournament after both shot a first-round score of 74. It was the first time the two veterans in their fields played together.

"Obviously I was a little nervous," said Chard. "You're talking about Mark Plummer. But he makes you feel at ease, as much as you can be. I birdied two of the last three holes to get back to respectability."

Plummer won the 36-hole tournament with a score of 147. Chard shot an 81 in the second round to finish 8 strokes behind the winner. And then went to his laptop to write the story.

It might be Chard's great regret that a family commitment kept him from the 1995 U.S. Amateur tournament in Rhode Island. Plummer played Tiger Woods in the semifinals, taking him to the 18th hole in match play.

The 2012 class of inductees includes John Hickson of Topsham and Albert Noyes of Falmouth, who have won Maine championships. Hiram Ricker and Frank Tirabassi, champions from the 1920s and 1930s, will be inducted posthumously.

Chard will be presented by his niece, Shelby Marshall, a softball and basketball star at York High in the late 1980s and an all-Ivy League catcher at Brown. Then it will be his turn to speak.

"That's going to be the hard part, but I'll be all right. I feel honored."

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