

CANCER AND NAYSAYERS: MARK ROLFING TELLS IMPROBABLE STORY OF THE CHICAGO PARKS GOLF ALLIANCE



By Mark Roling

Editors' note: I had a long discussion with Mark Roling the other day about this exciting Chicago golf adventure when he mentioned this:

"My wife Debi and I are often asked the question, 'How did we get here?' Mark said.

So for the next 90 minutes, I asked the Founder and President of the Chicago Parks Golf Alliance that question and many, many more. His answers tell a truly amazing story.

It is incredible when you think about it: Motivated to improve the public golf experience in his hometown, Mark has aligned community leaders, politicians, golf industry executives, and ultimately Tiger Woods for this team effort. The vision will require continued teamwork, perseverance and generous benefactors; all elements where Mark and Debi Roling have a proven record of success.

Mark's 2015 cancer diagnosis and surgery, mere miles from Jackson Park Golf Course at University of Chicago Medical Center, galvanized an outlook of hope and possibility. He gazed toward Jackson Park Golf Course while driving by for daily doctors' appointments. Later that fall, sketching golf holes and planning ambitious youth golf initiatives bolstered his spirits during radiation treatments at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. Since 1999, the Mark and Debi Roling Charitable Foundation has provided for children in need, including 28 foster children for whom they have cared for directly. Lauding the Rolings' generosity and commitment to youth services, Hawaii Governor Neil Abercrombie commended in 2012, "You are incredible individuals who touch the lives of so many. You are truly an inspiration to us all and true pillars of the community."

Chicago is fortunate the journey of golf and life has drawn this special couple back toward their Midwestern roots. Who better to tell the tale than Mark? Enjoy reading in his own words.

—Ed Sherman

I grew up in the Chicago area. I played junior golf here. I used to play at Waveland (now Sydney R. Marovitz Golf Course). I competed in the Western Amateur and multiple other collegiate, amateur and professional tournaments across Chicagoland.

After competing professionally on international tours, an amazing journey led to Hawaii and eventually becoming a golf announcer. However, even though I didn't live here, I've always had Chicago golf in my blood. I still think it is the greatest golf town in America.

Fast forward, I come back to Chicago in 2011 in advance of the 2012 Ryder Cup at Medinah. That's when my involvement in this whole thing started.

At request of Choose Chicago and the Chicago Sports Commission, I produced and hosted a *Road to the Ryder Cup* series with a number of Chicago based sponsors, including United Airlines. During the tournament, our company, Roling Sports, hosted a hospitality tent along Medinah's 15th hole. Mayor Rahm Emanuel attended; Michael Jordan was a frequent guest. The 2012 Ryder Cup was a huge success (setting aside the Sunday results for the American Team). Chicago's hotels and restaurants had record-breaking weeks serving golf fans and helping the city shine before an international audience.



Chicago Sports Commission – “Business of Golf” Panel in 2013

I thought that would be the end of it, but the Chicago Sports Commission recognized the power of golf to drive tourism, and requested more shows which aired nationally on NBC as *Global Golf Adventure: Chicago*. The shows included Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Michael Jordan, Luke Donald, and my boyhood hero Ernie Banks. Yet, while creating these shows, I sensed a void in collaboration between local golf stakeholders. I started looking at the City of Chicago golf scene a little closer.

The reality is that the strength of golf in this area is in the suburbs. We have had 13 U.S. Opens at 8 courses. But that's in the past. Chicago's not getting another U.S. Open at this point. It's going to a course this year in Southern Wisconsin, Erin Hills.

I started thinking there's something wrong here and made my feelings known through an enthusiastic message to City Officials and local golfers. Following conversations with the Chicago Park District in 2015, I conducted site visits to advise upon the long-term viability of its golf facilities.

A shock occurred in August 2015. I was diagnosed with Stage 4 salivary gland cancer by doctors at University of Chicago Medical Center. Debi and I were shaken by the first major health scare in over 40 years together. Doctors ordered surgery within one week to remove a tumor beside my left ear. Spending significantly more time on the South Side for follow-up appointments, I experienced the Jackson Park and South Shore Golf Courses like never before. My intrigue and determination grew as I had more opportunity to walk the grounds observing the physical layout and operations. My initial site visits focused on South Shore's lakefront holes, but the proximity to the hospital raised my fascination with the Jackson Park Golf Course and appreciation for its history dating to 1899.



Erika "Birdie" Shavers

I enjoyed chatting with the golfers; many of whom were proud members of groundbreaking African American Golf Leagues with history spanning nearly 100 years. I met Erika Shavers, who at the time managed the golf shop at South Shore, and now runs programs for The First Tee of Greater Chicago. Shadowing Erika on a summer afternoon, her energy and pride in the course resounded. Yet, her ability to serve the golfers was limited. She worked independently at the facility with golf carts stored by the entry gates, nearly a full city block away from South Shore's golf shop. I started to wonder: Why aren't there more golfers on a beautiful weekend? What is the dynamic of what's going on here?

During that time, I wanted to see if there was something I could do to make a difference for golfers in the heart of the city. I tried to come up with ideas to improve the "core" of the glossy apple that is Chicago Area Golf.

I started to talk to the PGA Tour and golf industry leaders in Chicago. I didn't know where it would go, but I thought it was important to bring all the potential stakeholders together. I realized it would take a robust team to deliver this vision.



Debi, Mark and BJ

Debi was supportive, but questioned if we'd have the energy necessary for this pursuit. A native of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, Debi shared Midwestern community values and grasped the allure of the historic site along Lake Michigan. I pleaded to her (and admittedly myself), "We've got one more in us. This could be a game-changer for Chicago if we do it the right way."

Remarkably, the idea of combining Jackson Park and South Shore had been discussed as early as the 1970s when Calvin Peete visited the courses. The Park District's 1999 Framework Plan recommended upgrading the golf courses to "modern industry standards," but it never materialized. Together with the Park District, we came up with a structure and financial approach for the newly created Chicago Parks Golf Alliance to raise charitable contributions supporting design, golf course improvements, and expanded youth programming at South Shore and Jackson Park.

All the while, people kept telling me that I was crazy for pursuing this. They said it would never happen. I remember talking to my good friend Ed Sherman in the lobby of a hotel. He told me, it was a noble idea, but I had no chance of pulling it off. I'm thinking, "He knows more about golf in Chicago than I do. Maybe he's right?"



Mike Keiser

Renowned golf developer Mike Keiser has been a valuable adviser to Debi and me. Mike and I worked together to develop Sand Hills in Nebraska during the 1990s, with our common Chicagoland roots prompting friendship. Yet, he ascended within the golf industry by developing courses in remote settings in Michigan, Oregon, Nova Scotia, and his newest attraction Sand Valley in Wisconsin. During Spring 2014, he graciously invited me to his office to discuss this fledgling plan. He loved the Park District Golf Courses, but offered 1% chance of success—too many competing factions and interests in an urban setting, particularly Chicago. Nonetheless, at 1% the door remained a crack open for quarterly visits.

By June 2016, we progressed far enough for Mike to visit South Shore, along with his son Chris, for a tour guided by Chicago Park District Superintendent and CEO Michael Kelly. Once again expecting Mike's skepticism, I was energized when his appraisal shifted toward cautious optimism. He shared our fascination with the potential for this lakefront gem. Mike and Chris volunteered to join the team, dramatically enhancing our golf industry credentials. Mike's thorough assessment of both challenges and opportunities continually provides steady counsel.



Tiger gazing toward Lake Michigan at South Shore

Later during Summer 2016, Jackson Park was making national headlines as the future site of the Obama Presidential Center, another exciting development on the Fredrick Law Olmsted designed grounds which hosted the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. By August 2016, Tiger Woods expressed interest to be involved as the architect for the golf course restoration. Tiger had visited Jackson Park Driving Range for a youth clinic in the late 1990s. President Obama later reminded him of his hometown courses during a round together in the first term of his Presidency. Fortuitously, the opportunity now emerged for Tiger to design a golf course adjacent to the grounds of the first African-American President's Library.

Without any fanfare, Tiger quickly arranged to visit along with colleagues from his TGR Design team on a summer Thursday afternoon. When Tiger toured the courses, he kept saying, "Where are all the kids?" It was a beautiful summer day. Lake Michigan glistened, but golf course activity was sparse. He saw the potential of what could happen here. Could we produce the future of sustainable urban golf? His answer was yes. He saw it immediately.

Bolstered by a phenomenal team ([read more about them on our site](#)), community momentum on the South Side, and deep appreciation for all facets of this opportunity, we pushed onward. In December 2016, Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced the formation of the Chicago Parks Golf Alliance. Mike and Lindy Keiser generously stepped forward along with other founding contributors. The Jackson Park Advisory Council provided valuable support, including their golf course committee's appraisal that the project "could bring prestige, status, and new economic benefits to the community."

Going through my cancer journey, I realized that the only thing that was going to save my life was hope. That's what everybody should have. That's why golf is the greatest game in the world. It's all about hope that you're going to play your greatest round or hit your greatest shot.



2016 Jackson Park Junior Championship

That's what we're trying to do here. Our goal is to build a course good enough to host the best golfers in the world, and accessible and affordable for the recreational players who are thrilled to break 100. We also want to have a facility that will help produce the next generation of golfers. Get the young kids from the surrounding neighborhoods and beyond to start playing the game.

Who knows? We might find the next Tiger Woods.

This teamwork has already had a considerable impact. The Western Golf Association is partnering for a caddie program to create summer jobs for 20 local high school students beginning in June 2017. Registration for The First Tee of Greater Chicago has grown by 10% citywide from 2016-2017. Meanwhile, the Chicago Parks Golf Alliance has provided equipment, professional lessons, and mentors to 10 new junior golfers who have started a team for the Excel Academy of South Shore.

I know we have a long way to go, and face many challenges. However, I also know we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do something special for golf in Chicago. Please continue visiting www.ChicagoParksGolfAlliance.org to support the effort and follow our latest updates.