

GOLF

This club pro lost his love for golf, then found it at a municipal course in Lynn. His next challenge? Cancer.

By **Steve Marantz** Globe Correspondent, Updated September 15, 2022, 10:58 a.m.



Dave Sibley loves this spot at Gannon, with the Boston skyline in the distance. STEVE MARANTZ

LYNN — “Golf is the closest game to the game we call life,” said the legendary Bobby Jones. “You get bad breaks from good shots; you get good breaks from bad shots, but you have to play the ball where it lies.”

where it lies.

Wisdom for students of the game. And for a tenured professor, Dave Sibley, words to live by each precious day. This is his ninth year as head pro at Gannon Municipal Golf Course in Lynn, and first with pancreatic cancer.

After he was diagnosed last winter he broke the news to his two bosses, Steve Murphy and Chris Carter, who run the company, Golf Facilities Management Inc. (GFMI), that manages Gannon.

“The first thing they asked me was, ‘What do you want?’ ” recalled Sibley.

He remembers thinking.

“I just want to be ... you just want to be yourself,” Sibley said. “That’s the only way to say it. To do this, play golf, and do things with life you’re supposed to be doing. At age 50 you don’t think it’s going to be the time, but here it is. You think it will be later in life, you always think you have time to do what you want. You just try to figure it out.”

Play the ball where it lies, Sibley resolved. Do what you do. And so, on a Monday morning in late August, with Gannon hosting an outing of the Greater Lynn Chamber of Commerce, Sibley addresses 104 guests in electric carts awaiting a shotgun start.

“When you’re done,” he intones into a microphone, “bring your scorecards into the golf shop. Just put your name and starting hole on them, we want to give proper credit for those great scores we’re going to shoot today. So have some fun, enjoy yourselves, hopefully we’ll see you soon.”

Carts head out, and Sibley hustles into the pro shop, to reports, payrolls, event prep, and schedules. Mid-morning, he ascends to the second-story deck of Gannon’s 1930s-vintage stone clubhouse overlooking a lush heavenly landscape. His face lights up.

“This is the office ... you come up here, you see the putting green, you look out at 1 and 9 and 10 and 18, and you see the Boston skyline, it’s pretty and relaxing and you hear the fountain, it’s just easy to look out and smile ... I don’t know what more you can ask for.”



Dave Sibley in the pro shop at Gannon Golf Club. STEVE MARANTZ

‘I kind of lost the love’

As much as golf comforts Sibley, he remembers a bleak time when it didn’t. In 2011, he walked away from the business. “I was really burnt,” he recalls.

He was 39 and had worked nine golf jobs in his 16 years out of college.

Sibley scrapes a grim memory: “It just got to be ... I don’t want to say too much ... it’s work, and I kind of lost the love for doing it for a while.”

A club pro is a distant poor cousin of the celebrity tour pro. A club pro is who members, customers, employees, vendors, and bosses turn to when they need something, now. Who runs outings, tournaments, and clinics. Stocks the pro shop. Whose bottom line demands bottomless hours, weekends, and holidays.

In November 2021, PGA of America CEO Seth Waugh spoke at the annual meeting: “We’ve gone from a demand problem in terms of [club pros] to a supply problem. The lack of supply is [due to] hours in the day, lack of balance in our members’ lives, and a lack of pipeline of talent to replace our aging population ... virtually everyone has been asked to raise the bar, to do more with the same, to work insane hours. It’s absolutely unsustainable.”

Golf Digest subsequently reported an industry “crisis” — a shrinking supply of club pros and assistants. Vacancies go unfilled, it was reported, because of inadequate pay, relentless schedules, and declining enrollments in university golf-management programs.

PGA America counts about 8,500 head and assistant pros nationwide in 2022, down from about 9,500 in 2018. PGA New England currently lists 266 head pros, 271 assistants, 69 directors, and 41 general managers.

None of this was news to Sibley, who experienced burnout long before it went viral. “I just felt kind of disenfranchised,” he recalled.

His golf odyssey had begun innocently and happily enough, in the mid-1980s, as a 14-year-old in Augusta, Maine, where his father taught him the game. “First time I got out there I loved it,” Sibley recalled. “Forgot about everything else I was doing.”

Passion ignited, he golfed for his high school, and for the University of Maine, then found his way to Methodist College in Fayetteville, N.C., where in 1995 he earned a business degree with a PGM (Professional Golf Management) concentration.

Over the next decade he was an assistant pro at Benvenue CC, Birchwood CC, Carolina CC, Pinehurst Resort, and Cohasset GC. He was head pro at Wild Wing Plantation in Myrtle Beach, S.C., and at Harman Golf Club in Rockland, and lost both jobs, painfully, to financial headwinds.

In 2007, he became general manager at Wentworth GC, a public-private course in Plainville. It was then he met Cecelia Keller, a pediatric physical therapist at Tufts Children's Hospital in Boston. To be near her, he took a job as head pro at private Ipswich CC in February 2009. They were married that May and settled in Melrose.

By mid-2011, Sibley wanted out. "He was just tired, and miserable, really," Cecelia recalled. "He felt like we didn't have enough time together. I said, 'This is your identity. It's what you went to school for, it's all your friends. What will life look like after golf? Will you be happy?'"

Sibley tried his hand selling residential real estate in Boston, and didn't hate it. Yet something deep within, an insistent yearning, would not let go. In mid-2012, a friend, Dave Dionne, head pro at Beverly Golf & Tennis, persuaded Sibley to work for him part time. Murphy and Carter, whose company managed Beverly, were impressed by Sibley's diligence and pleasant manner. They were about to assume management of Gannon, where longtime head pro Mike Foster was set to retire, and offered Sibley the position. Sibley wanted to avoid the unhealthy grind of his prior jobs, and got the assurances he needed.

Sibley discussed the offer with Cecelia. Before he accepted he insisted they play a round at Gannon, a hilly target layout threading through Lynn Woods Reservation.

"I'm like, 'Seriously?'" Cecelia recalled. "It's late October or November [2013] and it's cold and I only own golf skirts. I don't play in the cold. So we played a round and my hands froze. But it was beautiful and I was like, 'OK, take the job if you'll be happy.'"

A club pro was born again. The 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. workdays, member issues, tournaments, outings, merchandising, teaching, club repair, all of it. "In a small facility like this you don't live off the job description," Sibley says. "Whatever comes up. If a toilet needs plunging I've plunged a toilet. I've changed lightbulbs. I try to make the club as presentable as possible."

Sibley and Gannon proved to be a match made in ... Lynn. Rounds-played crept upward, from

about 40,000 in 2014 to 50,000 in 2021. Membership crept upward, toward 500. Tournaments and outings fill the calendar. Online reservation was introduced, and a new \$2.5 million irrigation system went in, with Sibley and superintendent Patrick Manning coordinating.

Some members are miffed when tournament payouts are shifted from cash to pro shop credit, and when non-members are allotted desirable tee times, but most respect Sibley's steady hand.

"Dave listens to people's problems and tries to placate them," said Murphy. "He doesn't play favorites and he seems to get along with everybody. He's a straight shooter, very organized, and he gets the job done."

Gannon is a good fit, Sibley says, because it's unpretentious and, well, public. "I grew up playing golf at places just like this," he says. "You go to school ... and of course I thought I wanted to be at a private club. And I had opportunities. But at the end of the day this is where I'm supposed to be."



Dave Sibley and his wife, Cecelia Sibley, at the PGA National Champions course in 2021. COURTESY/CECELIA SIBLEY

Stoic and deterministic

Cancer wasn't in the script, it never is. Sibley gets chemo and continues to work. His former 7 a.m. arrivals are now 9 a.m., and if energy and mood wane, he takes off.

“He amazes me every day — he hasn't really missed much work,” says Cecelia. “He shows up every day, so I can't sit home and cry — I have to work, too. It gives him a sense of routine, and we're just sticking to routine, hopefully for as long as we can.”

Murphy appreciates that Sibley worked until twilight at the peak of summer, and shows up on weekends, when the course is busiest. “He's fighting through it,” said Murphy. “He seems to keep his chin up, and to be in the best spirit possible under the circumstances.”

Sibley is fully reconciled with golf; keeps abreast of its news. He and Cecelia want to play Pebble Beach later this year. He's in for a reunion with his college buddies in North Carolina. He wants to see Australia.

Some days Sibley carts out to Gannon's most distant hole, the 16th, parks at the turf nursery adjacent, chips a few, and ponders the universe, the big one, beyond golf. Raised a Catholic, no longer practicing, he is stoic and deterministic.

“At first you ask the question why,” said Sibley. “I've always believed stuff happens for a reason, and I've always believed there is a balance, in some way, shape or form. If you do bad there's a consequence, if you do good there's a reward. I think at the end of the day it balances out, but the how and whys, I don't know. That's tough to understand.”

He knows the odds. Knows the golf-is-life metaphors.

“How do you want to be remembered here?”

“I don't want them to start remembering me for a long time, that's for sure,” he replies.

Brief chuckle, thoughtful pause.

“You want to do what you're supposed to do,” Sibley says. “I want people to think their time spent here while I was here was a good time.”

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