

KENTUCKY GOLF HALL OF FAME

# Mark Wilson



2009, 2014 Nomination



# PGA<sup>TM</sup>

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Dear Sir,

I have just been notified that Mark Wilson is being considered for entry into the Kentucky Golf Hall of Fame.

I would like to strongly endorse and support Mark's nomination. I have known Mark since I first visited Valhalla Golf Club, where he was the Golf Course Superintendent, in 1992 and have worked along-side and with him many of our Major Golf Championships. These include the 1996 and 2000 PGA Championships, the PGA Professional National Championship, the Senior PGA Championship and the 2008 Ryder Cup.

On each occasion, we were faced with multiple challenges, mainly due to the weather, but in every situation, Mark was outstanding. He had a wonderful work ethic, had the support of his entire staff and was a positive and dynamic leader. He was also prepared to do whatever was needed to produce the golf course in outstanding playing conditions for the best golfers in the world as well as on a day to day basis for the members and guests of Valhalla Golf Club.

Mark continues to work and use his outstanding knowledge to mentor, train and educate others whenever he is asked and is a true professional.

I would be happy to provide any other information that you may need regarding Mark's consideration but he is certainly a great ambassador and you would have no better person in the Hall of Fame if Mark were to be fortunate enough to earn such an honor.

Sincerely

Kerry Haigh  
Chief Championships Officer  
PGA of America

November 13, 2014

RE: Mark Wilson, Hall of Fame Nominee

Dear fellow committee members,

When I received the information in early August on the 2014 nominees for HOF consideration there was one name that, for want of a better way to say it, "jumped off the page" at me. From the perspective of being a superintendent responsible for grounds maintenance at a private country club for the past 40 years (in addition to having PGA status), I couldn't wait to share my thoughts with you on how positively impactful this candidate has been on golf in Kentucky through the years.

Unfortunately, the procedural move we made at the beginning of the meeting (in which we eliminated all but five of the candidates from consideration early on) left both the candidate on the sidelines for the time being and me without the opportunity to speak on his behalf. With our decision rendered for the year 2014, and consideration of the 2015 list of nominees next on the docket, the timing is now appropriate to present the following for consideration going forward.

My first thoughts on seeing the name "Mark Wilson" as a 2014 nominee were "Wow!" "What a great nominee!" When I then saw who nominated and recommended him, it fired me up even more. In the world of turfgrass and turfgrass education it couldn't get any better than Kentucky Golf Hall of Fame members Dr. Dwight Barkley and Dr. A. J. Powell, the two most respected and influential turf experts in Kentucky in the last 40 years who flat out "got it" when it came to the world of the superintendent. Their words about Mark were absolutely "spot on."

Why was I so enthused? Simply stated, Mark the person, Mark the professional, Mark the giver, Mark the sharer, Mark the team player. Over a 20 plus year span I saw him do a lot of good within a sphere of influence (which grew exponentially as time passed) to which you were not privy. More specifically, it was his involvement with the Kentucky Turfgrass Council (KTC) and its membership, a relationship that depicted the best of Mark Wilson on all fronts.

Since inception two of the constants in Valhalla's life cycle have been national prominence and course changes. In that light questions and curiosity constantly abounded among fellow superintendents and others in the profession. As our link to the "big time" in the world of golf, they always wanted to know the latest—that is, what's up at Valhalla? Not surprisingly, it came to pass that year in and year out the "Saga of Valhalla" became the highlight of the KTC's spring and fall educational conferences. And not surprisingly as well, the story of Valhalla's continuing evolution and the reasons behind it was told every step of the way by its permanent spokesman, Mark Wilson, who was more than happy to oblige.

Whether by slide show, power point, or verbal, his presentations were always well choreographed, to the point, yet detailed enough so that his peers were always kept in the loop. He did so with grace, without reservation and by virtue of sharing his knowledge, was incredibly educational through it all.

Mark shared, gave and looked out for his peers in other ways as well. On the two occasions when it was decided to re-grass Valhalla's greens (that is, strip off the old greens so that a newer variety of seed could be sown in its place), he got the word out and made the stripped (perfectly good) sod available to any and all that could go get it. Those pallets of sod were like gold, but were of no use to him going forward. Seeing these as opportunities to help his peers, he did just that, directing the forklifts carrying the pallets of sod to one truck bed after another until there was no more left to give. I was fortunate enough to get in on both "windfalls," most grateful for the opportunity to make my course better.

The fact that Mark was always about "we" and not "me" and the industry wide respect he gained therein is best exemplified by the following. When needed, he didn't have to go far to ask for help. When the call went out for the task force that would become the "extra help (volunteer) maintenance team" for the majors, his peers and qualified industry representatives were ready to drop everything and join in. They didn't care about the around the clock schedule that would be part of the deal. They were "all in," full of pride and most anxious to be part of something bigger than themselves. They knew that collectively, they would comprise the final piece to the puzzle, making sure that every "i" was dotted, "t" was crossed, and the game plan completed to the letter.

Although many of you have had the opportunity to get pretty tight with some superintendents through the years, unless you've actually walked in the shoes of one, you can't totally understand and appreciate neither the responsibilities he faces nor the scrutiny that always follows him. We know the PGA professional can wear a lot hats, but so, too, does the superintendent, whose myriad of everyday concerns are so varied, dynamic, and volatile that any one can require crisis management at any time. Concerns like, BUT NOT LIMITED TO irrigation complexities and drainage consistencies, levels and consistencies of mowing heights and turf cuts, turf diseases and pest problems, arbor, horticulture and ornamental issues, never ending environmental protection (and sanctuary) concerns, overall boundary to boundary aesthetics issues, course playability, personnel staffing, training and proper staff size, maintenance equipment (the complexities therein and never ending repairs thereof), budgeting, projections, future planning, improvements (to course, grounds, infrastructure, etc.) and last, and arguably his biggest challenge, the never ending search for the blueprint detailing how best to always work WITH instead of AGAINST Mother Nature.

Try wrapping your arms around all of that every day at a Valhalla, keeping the course in the tip top shape in which he had it all those years and maintaining your sanity all the while! Did he have help? Sure, good help—and the resources to boot. Those, however, are givens at clubs of that stature. He still had to "get it done." And he did, so well that, if viewed under the prism of just being the normal superintendent, he was superb. But he was charged with being much more than the norm, however, and this is where he set himself apart.

Going from a normal superintendent on the normal job to becoming “THE MAN” charged with running all of those major events, to have faced and worked through the countless number of modifications to the course proper, change orders, tearing out only to rebuild again and again, and facing critical deadline after critical deadline was taxing enough. But that was just the start. What about the infrastructure changes needed just outside the lines of play all of which were vital components in making the whole show go—the miles and miles of cable that had to be laid (or buried), television towers, media outlets, scoreboards, practice range logistics, concessionaire placements, crowd control for tens of thousands, bathroom facilities, chateau and bleacher placements, countless meetings, increased speaking engagements and interview commitments with the media, time and again answering to boss after boss, etc.? Put them into the mix. And finally, add in the additional scrutiny that came with having not only the locals, the state, the nation, but the international community watching his every move. How was he able to process and compartmentalize it all? Like all of the best, somehow, some way, he had the wherewithal to figure it out. It took a rare breed of cat indeed to hold it together mentally in the face of all of that.

This past August we discussed the merits of a number of good stories from viably good candidates, yet ultimately had to decide whether or not the stories were “Hall of Fame” good. Going forward, the story behind Mark’s nomination needs to hold up under the same scrutiny. I contend that it should. He was the man in charge when the nation and the world came to Valhalla. He was there through the thick and thin and met the challenges that come with a facility in a constant state of flux. Undeterred, he fought through and endured over 20 years of countless change orders and deadlines and somehow, when it came to crunch time, had Valhalla so pristine in appearance that, to the unsuspecting viewer on the outside, it had always looked that way. Proof that he remained “all in” and team oriented from the beginning to the end of his stint was the praise heaped upon him by Ryder Cup Captain Paul Azinger in 2008 for teaming up to produce the exact layout requested. He was championed as much a part of the American victory as the team members and coaches themselves. Six years, three Ryder Cups and no victories later, Ryder Cup 2008—and Mark’s stellar contribution—takes on added significance.

The Valhalla Saga is a story of unequivocal success. Valhalla’s rise to prominence began with a dream over 25 years ago and, keyed by a run of sound business and course altering decisions at the right times, it now enjoys a place among golf’s most recognized and well known sites. Think the name “Valhalla” today and exciting, riveting finishes immediately come to mind. Is “hallowed ground” status far off?

Mark Wilson was among but a handful of “key” players along the way. In many instances he was the poster boy of the story and without question was the face of the Kentucky superintendent. His work was the climax, the choreographed finished product that everybody saw. His work was done in Kentucky alongside Kentuckians for Kentuckians, yet benefitted the game and those who play it well beyond the state’s borders. His work was instrumental and played an integral part in bringing notoriety, fame and fortune (through huge economic windfalls) to the club, to Louisville itself, and the state. His work stood the test of time and got better through time. And finally, while doing his work he never forgot who and what he was (and still is)—a (CGCS) superintendent who had the foresight and wherewithal to take his peers along for the ride, work with them, and help them whenever he could.

No golf course superintendent has had a greater, more dynamic and more positive impact on golf in Kentucky than Mark Wilson. It’s most apparent to me that he meets all of the requirements necessary for induction into the Kentucky Golf Hall of Fame. In that light I wholeheartedly recommend him for induction.

In closing, thank you for bearing with me on this—granting me the time and having the patience to “see” this through. If anyone deserves the complete, unabridged version of his accomplishments, it’s Mark Wilson. Any presentation falling short of that would have done him an injustice.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert M. (Bobby) Baldwin, PGA

Chris Osborne  
Kentucky Golf Hall of Fame  
Golf House Kentucky  
1116 Elmore Just Drive  
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2014

To: The Kentucky Golf Hall of Fame Selection Committee  
From: Dr. A. J. Powell, Jr., U of Ky Professor Emeritus and a 1994 Golf Hall of Fame Inductee  
Re: 2014 Hall of Fame Nomination

It is with great honor that I can support the nomination of Mr. Mark Wilson for the 2014 Golf Hall of Fame.

Mark Wilson's success in golf course maintenance has been well documented during the many Valhalla venues such as the PGA Championships, Ryder Cup, etc. But maybe more important to KY has been his tremendous leadership in training numerous young people to be outstanding superintendents. He has always been willing to foster professionalism by training hundreds of volunteers for the PGA events, giving outstanding presentations in meetings across the US, hiring summer interns from Turf Programs at UK, WKU, ECU and Purdue, and training numerous assistants that have since moved on to their own golf course careers. Mark has always been on the forefront of accepting new technology, thinking outside the box, and actually doing what he preaches. Although his own course, whether at Audubon or Valhalla, has occasionally been less than perfect but these courses have always been better than almost any other local course because Mark is proactive when it comes to adjusting maintenance as the upcoming weather dictates. Being ahead of our often severe weather is the mark of a great golf superintendent.

Mark Wilson's outstanding success in golf course maintenance relates to his abilities to agronomically analyze and share his expertise with simplicity. He has meant more to aspiring superintendents and university professors than any formal training. He is detail oriented and willing to mesh his turfgrass

maintenance practices with new environmental quality norms that are professed throughout the industry.

Mark Wilson is likely the most heralded and professionally experienced Golf Course Superintendent that has ever worked in Ky. He has an unusual ability to teach aspiring superintendents and course laborers with a tough love attitude that becomes very contagious for youngsters and their university professors. He may be short in stature and talk a little funny at times, but when Mark Wilson speaks everyone listens. I have had many students go through their intern program at Valhalla and certainly not all survived the rigorous demands he placed upon them. But, even those that failed never had a negative comment about Mark Wilson.

Mark Wilson, although a native of Ohio, has had an enormous influence upon quality golf in Ky. Every time we put Mark Wilson on an educational program the audience was packed; they expected to hear Mark share expertise and everyone respected him, even superintendents from competing courses. He has been the 'mainliner' for turfgrass educational programs in Kentucky for some 25 years or more.

In my opinion, Mark Wilson has been the true 'Professor' of golf turf in Kentucky.

To: Mike Riley, PGA President  
From: Dwight G. Barkley, PhD  
Subject: Kentucky Golf Hall of Fame  
Date: July 20, 2009

Please find enclosed my nomination of Certified Golf Course Superintendent, Mark Wilson for the 2009 Kentucky Golf Hall Of Fame. Mark has made tremendous contributions to golf and the Superintendent Profession in the past twenty plus years. Our Commonwealth, the City Of Louisville and Valhalla have gained world recognition due to his efforts in providing a quality venue for the Professional Golf Association. I heartily endorse his nomination.

## MARK WILSON, CGCS VALHALLA GOLF CLUB

Mark Wilson is a native of Ohio. He enrolled in the Associate Degree Program in Turfgrass Management Program at Eastern Kentucky University in the mid 1970's. He played with the ECU Golf Team. He was an excellent student but declined a suggestion that he earn a Bachelor's Degree with a minor in business.

Mark was anxious to get to work. He became an assistant superintendent at Harmony Landing Country Club under Superintendent Roy Hourigan and then an assistant at Louisville Country Club under Superintendent Louis Miller. When Tom Sams retired as Superintendent at Audubon Country Club, Mark was named Superintendent, a position he held for eight years. During that time he initiated several projects to improve the course and also hired several ECU students for summer help through the Cooperative Education Program..

The opportunity to become the Superintendent at Valhalla occurred in 1988. Mark and owner Dwight Gahm developed a close friendship and they had for several years a weekly golf date when they would discuss golf and course improvements. In eight more years Valhalla was chosen to host the 1996 PGA Tournament. Changes and working with Course Architect, Jack Nicklaus were made prior to that tournament and proved to be a valuable learning experience for Mark and his crew as well as scores of volunteers who assisted with the tournament.

Course changes followed the 1996 tournament and the PGA increased their 25percent interest to 50 percent and awarded the 2000 PGA Championship. The PGA Club Professional Championship was held in 2002 and the Senior PGA Championship in 2004. During this time the course was continuously being tweaked and improved by Mark and his crew. The PGA bought the course outright after the 2002 tournament and Mark adjusted to the new ownership.

The next major event was the 2008 Ryder Cup and the course was dramatically changed again with the new construction and location of some of the greens, reseeding or sodding greens and tee boxes and the addition of 22 new bunkers under the direction of Jack Nicklaus and his associates. New infrastructure was also added to accommodate more tents, bleachers and bus space. Mark's crew grew by ten to 35 for the Ryder Cup and he had some eighty volunteers work during the tournament. This requires tremendous organizational ability and it was obvious that occurred because the Ryder Cup went off without a problem.

Mark worked closely with Ryder Cup Captain, Paul Azinger to prepare Valhalla the way which would best suit the American Players. Their relationship was excellent. Azinger said that, "The Superintendent and I understand each other. I told him I felt like he could help me and be an integral part of our success." Kerry Haigh, the PGA's managing director of championships takes a hands-off approach to the day to day management of Valhalla. He knows that is feasible with Mark Wilson as superintendent. Marks

contribution to the Golf Course Industry is immeasurable. Nine of his crew from the 1996 PGA Championship are superintendents at other courses. He continues to lead by example and teach the finer points of course grooming which are so necessary for the golfing public from beginner to professional.