

HOW A DREAM



2014 winner Emily Collins ran away with the IWO, winning by a tournament-record 9 strokes. (Erik Czupryn / Mistwood Golf Club)

BECAME REALITY

By Tim Cronin with Neal Kotlarek

Phil Kosin was not happy.

An advocate for equality, Kosin didn't like the way Vince Solano, then the owner of Royal Fox Country Club, went about getting publicity for his club when it hosted the 1992 Illinois Open. Solano used his sponsor exemptions to invite three women, collegians Kelly Johnston, Renee Heiken, and Nicole Jeray.

Kosin saw this as a publicity stunt, which it was. He also thought the women had no chance playing from the same tees as the men – and, hitting longer clubs into the greens, none made the cut, though two years later, Heiken qualified and made the cut on the same course.

Subsequently, during a rain delay at the LPGA tournament at White Eagle Golf Club, a number of golf writers, Kosin included, talked about what it would take to stage an Illinois Women's Open. The conclusion was it would take a winning golf course and a bunch of money to do so, and that the group had neither.

But the germ of the idea stuck in Kosin's brain.

In the spring of 1995, he unveiled the Illinois Women's Open, a 54-hole tournament to be played at Odyssey Country Club, the new layout on the south end of Tinley Park.

Backing it via publicity in his *Chicagoland Golf* and his radio show, and with his wallet, Kosin offered a \$5,000 purse, \$1,000 to the winner. Small change compared to the Illinois Open, which had the backing of the Illinois PGA, but a start. And a statement.

A history buff, Kosin had a trophy commissioned and named it for Elaine Rosenthal, the great golfer from yesteryear who played out of Ravisloe Country Club and won the Women's Western Amateur three times.

Entries for the inaugural came in, tee times were set, and Kosin and head pro Ed Staffan had Odyssey ready. Then it rained. And rained and rained. The course was flooded.

The first round was cancelled. But after 36 holes, there was a clear winner. Southern Illinois women's coach Diane Daugherty scored 5-under 139 and beat Andrea Keller by five strokes.

"I think it's important for people, especially women, to support this ongoing event," Kosin said before the second edition.



Kelpie's Corner is the nickname attached to the water-laden 14th through 17th holes. (Tim Cronin)



Scoreboards dotting the course keep players and gallery up to date. (Tim Cronin)

This was top-notch golf, and close competition. Kerry Postillion of Burr Ridge survived a 110-degree heat index and a three-hole playoff against Daugherty to win in 1997 after surrendering a nine-stroke lead while walking in that cauldron. Both players took carts in the playoff.

Entries rose from 38 the first year to 78 by 1999, the second year it was played at Mistwood Golf Club in Romeoville. That year's winner was Postillion, an eminent amateur who annexed the Rosenthal for the third time in four years.

To Phil Kosin, this was more than a golf tournament. This was close to a calling, a duty to give back to the

game. Greg Kosin, Phil's brother, saw the commitment to women's sports firsthand and was drawn in to lending a hand.

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"As a sportswriter, he had covered the Chicago Hustle (the local women's pro basketball team in the former Women's Professional Basketball League that lasted from 1978 to 81). He had a strong relationship with the team members. I really think that his involvement in that league planted the seed

for the Illinois Women's Open. Phil saw that women golfers were not being given the same chances to excel as the men. And he wanted to do something about it."



Nicole Jeray, the winner in 1998 and 2003, is trying to become the first winner in three different decades. (Tim Cronin)



Diane Daugherty, first winner of the Illinois Women's Open, was awarded permanent possession of the original trophy, named in honor of Elaine Rosenthal, in 2015. (Dan Phillips / Mistwood Golf Club)

All the Kosins, including father Joe, pitched in. Today, the scholarship awarded by tournament proceeds is the Joseph A. Kosin Scholarship. It encourages and promotes the attainment of higher education goals for women who have achieved academic excellence in the classroom, have demonstrated leadership in the community, and excelled at golf.

“Our entire family is extremely touched with the impact these scholarships have had on young women,” Greg Kosin said.

Phil ran the show and, between one-liners and pronouncements on topics of the day, golf and otherwise – being around his 50,000-watt personality was like listening to his radio show, minus commercials – ran it well.

“Phil wanted the players to feel special,” Greg Kosin said.

“He wanted the course to be in perfect shape. He wanted real-time scoring so the players knew where they stood during the competition. And he wanted to ensure most of all that the players would feel welcome. If one needed help with boarding, the tournament committee would find a place for them in a volunteer’s home.”

All of this is not lost on the players.

“Everyone who competes really appreciates how well the tournament is run,” said Jeray, who played in it when she could spare a week off from the LPGA or Futures/Symetra tours. “The players are just as excited to play in the pro-am as they are to play in the open. It’s a lot of fun and the golfers who enter are simply blown away by the skills these women possess.”

Jeray, an accomplished LPGA veteran, won the first of her two titles in the finale at Odyssey in 1998, her total of 5-under 211 standing as the tournament record for seven years. She won at Mistwood in 2003, and late last year joined the Mistwood staff, shortly after Hannah Kim, the runner-up in 2017 and a

recent Northwestern graduate, raced through the field at a record-setting 16-under 200 for 54 holes.

“That is a tremendous score, especially considering the quality of Mistwood’s golf course,” said Jeray, who has also been on the short end of two playoffs, and is the only player with four top-two finishes. “I don’t know if I

Unlike the men’s Illinois Open, which is restricted to players from the state, the Illinois Women’s Open is open to the world.



Greg Kosin, brother of IWO founder Phil Kosin, helps keep his brother’s tournament alive and assists greatly with the scholarship component of the week. Mistwood general manager Dan Bradley is in the background. (Tim Cronin)



Alexandra Farnsworth, a.k.a. the Dandy from Vandy, en route to taking the 2017 title. (Tim Cronin)

have a minus-16 in me this year, but I am playing really well right now and am looking forward to playing with these amazing women.”

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Phil Kosin

This year’s playing, at Mistwood Golf Club in Romeoville on July 16-18, will be the 25th state championship for women. It’s now the Phil Kosin Illinois Women’s Open – renamed after his passing after the 2009 tournament – and a fixture on the Illinois golf scene.

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Emily Swartart prevailed in 2013 in a two-hole playoff over two-time winner Nicole Jeray. (Tim Cronin)



In 2015, 15-year-old Madasyn Pettersen birdied the last five holes to storm to an improbable victory. (Tim Cronin)

The field was dotted with entries from 15 states and Australia last year, including Wisconsin team member Bobbi Stricker, who employed a famous caddie-daddy: Steve Stricker.

Multiple-year winners include Emily Gilley and Aimee Neff – both back-to-back as amateurs – as well as Jenna Pearson, to date the only player to win as an amateur and as a professional, doing so five years apart.

Pearson had almost repeated in 2007, her first year as a pro, but for a playoff that turned into golf's version of Groundhog Day. She and amateur Nicole Schachner tied at 1-under 215. The rules called for a four-hole playoff, playing Mistwood's first and second holes, then the par-5 third hole twice.

Each carded at 18 for the quartet of holes, and it was off to sudden-death on No. 3. They parred. Back to the tee. They parred again. They matched with par 5s five straight times until Schachner made another par and Pearson bogeyed the hole to end the playoff after 10 holes.

The playoff format has been sudden-death since.

"We've seen a teenager (15-year-old Madasyn Pettersen, in 2015) win the tournament, and in 2010 we saw Allison Fouch win the tournament while she was in the middle of a very successful career on the LPGA Tour," recalled Dan Phillips, Mistwood's player development director. "We are truly thrilled to be the host venue and consider the tournament to be one of our marquee events at the club. From club owner Jim McWethy to every member of our staff, we want the Open to be the highlight of women's golf in Illinois."

As noted, Phil Kosin was not only founder but hands-on with the tournament from the start through 2009, the last one before he died.

Almost everyone who played in the Illinois Women's Open has been appreciative of its existence, but one parent of a collegiate golfer went in another direction one day at Mistwood, and confronted Kosin with others hanging about the scorer's table.

The complaint had something to do with the operation of the tournament, so obscure the memory of specifics has faded. But the point being made by the complainer was that he could run it better

than Kosin, who must have been making a fortune doing so.

"I've put \$75,000 into this," Kosin responded. The complainer had no answer to that.

"The Illinois Women's Open wouldn't be what it is today without the vision and commitment of Phil Kosin and the Kosin family," Phillips said.

Happily, McWethy believed in Kosin's tournament and took it under his and his course's wing after Phil's passing, with the charity scholarship component continuing. Today a great deal of the spadework is done by Greg Kosin. In recent years, the purse has been boosted to \$25,000, with a first prize of \$5,000 for the low professional.

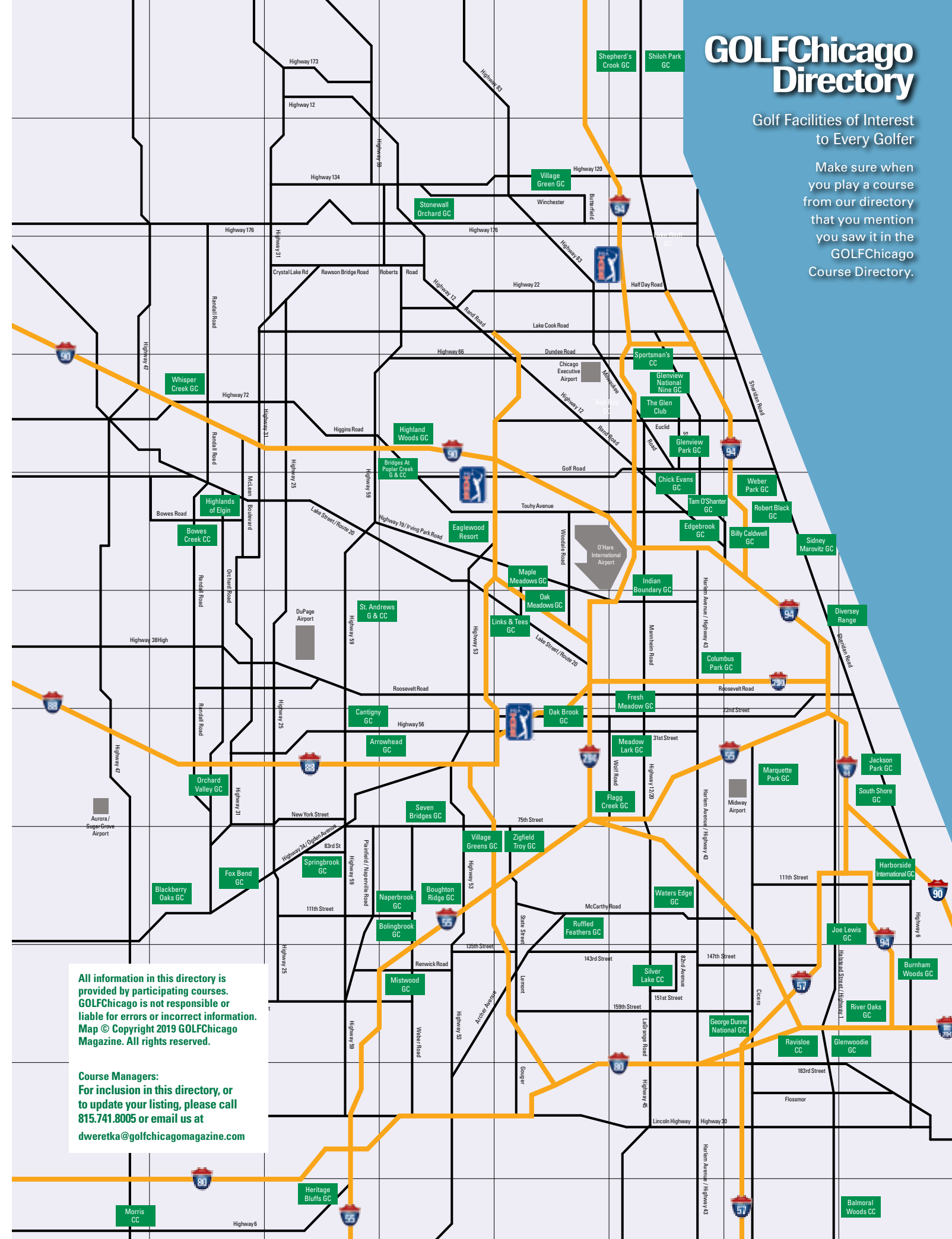
"Phil was a pretty amazing man," Jeray added. "His vision of an Illinois Women's Open has motivated other states across the country to hold their own women's state opens. He created a legacy that has impacted and inspired hundreds and hundreds of women."

Twenty-five years after the soggy start, the Illinois Women's Open is a welcome and permanent part of the state's golf scene. If not for Phil Kosin, the women of the state and beyond might still be waiting for someone to create it.

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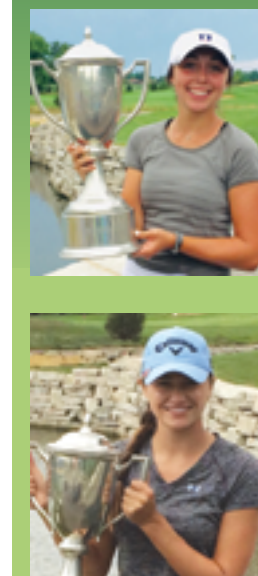
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