

Sartell man honored for ground work to get Champions Tour golf event to Twin Cities

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It was more than Ron Sanders was expecting and it has inspired him to try to do something similar in the area.

Sanders, who lives in Sartell, was recently given a plaque to honor his ground work that helped get the 3M Championship pro golf tournament on the PGA Tour Champions in the Twin Cities.

"I expected an 8½-by-11(inch) plaque," Sanders said. Instead, the framed plaque is about 3 feet high by 3 feet wide.

He received the plaque from Hollis Carner, the organizer of the 3M Championship.

"When he did that, he quite frankly just blew me away with his kindness and generosity of the recognition," Sanders said. "Most of the guys who are working on this now are people I was working with to get it here."

The 3M Classic, which is being played Friday through Sunday at the TPC Twin Cities in Blaine, is celebrating its 25th year. Sanders, 75, is a retired wireless communications executive.



How it began

Sanders was an executive with New Vector Communications in the 1980s. The Senior PGA Tour began in 1980, and New Vector was looking for visibility.

"We were a start-up company and we were thinking of what kinds of things can we do to get our name out there," Sanders said. "We didn't have much of a budget to do the North Stars or the Twins or a major sports team. The pro teams wanted \$20,000-\$30,000 to be a sponsor."

At the time, Sanders was also golf chairman of Rolling Green Country Club (now Medina Country Club) and decided to help sponsor a Minnesota Golf Association senior golf tournament in 1985 for \$1,500.

"We decided to marry that to some customer entertainment and then the second day, the state senior open would start," Sanders said. "Over the next eight years, every year, I built it up a little bit more."

In 1987, the name of the event was changed to US West Classic. In 1988, Senior PGA Tour players Doug Sanders, Bob Brue, Bob Toski, Tommy Aaron, Howie Johnson, Miller Barber, Don Massingale, Bobby Nichols and Orville Moody took part in the activities involved in the tournament.

As the event continued to grow, Sanders' vision for what the event could be did as well. In 1989, he was the chairman of a committee that put together the first proposal to host what would become the 3M Championship.

"It was rejected because we didn't have a viable 501(c)(3) organization ... other than the US West Foundation," Sanders said. "But they encouraged us to get a 501(c)(3) and more sponsorships and make a bid for 1991 and 1992."



Moving overseas

In 1989, Sanders was transferred to Budapest, Hungary, to oversee international efforts by US West.

"I stayed in contact with everyone involved in the bid and a few other people took charge and the bid eventually ended up being accepted for the tournament to be held for the first time in 1993," he said.

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By then, Sanders had moved back to Minnesota. He took part in the pro-am golf tournament part of the week's activities when it was held for the first time, but was no longer part of the organizing group.

"I played, but I think the playing spots were \$5,000 apiece at the time, which I paid," he said. "At that time, from a corporate point of view, I was doing pretty well so I could afford to pay for the playing spots.

"I always had a little part of my heart that was broken and I was hoping, that sometime along the line, somebody would say, 'You had something to do with this.' "

He had a recent conversation with Carner and then received the plaque, which is now hanging in the bar and grill area of Blackberry Ridge Golf Course in Sartell. Sanders does some outside services for the course as an adviser, golf ranger and golf starter.

But the recent recognition for his work in helping secure what is the 3M Championship got his creative juices flowing. He is hoping to put together an event that would eventually get a pro golf event in the St. Cloud metro area.

"This is something that we could get going with some collaboration for a community event with community involvement that includes celebrities and entertainment," Sanders said. "I've had some health issues in recent years and one of these days, I'll be gone and this is the legacy that I'd like to leave."

Sanders and his wife, Sara, have been married since 1965 and have two sons, Doug and Bruce. What does Sara think of Ron's latest idea?

"She thinks I'm nuts, but she already did," Ron said, laughing. "She tells me I should just go play golf now.

"She's been my core and been supportive and lived with me all these years."

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