



THE EARLY DAYS OF BUTTON HOLE

Reflections of the Founder, Ed Mauro

A short course for kids, the transformation of a scarred sand pit and a “give back” to a game many of us love was surely enough motivation to build a now nationally acclaimed junior golf course and teaching facility in an urban corridor.

Little did we know that in just 12 years we would have touched the lives of more than 15,000 kids.

Just as important, a crime-ridden eyesore became a haven of green recreational space.

And lastly, we gave all of Rhode Island, particularly its golfing community, a very good reason to be proud of Button Hole.



On June 26th, 2001, Button Hole celebrated its opening day before more than 500 people. Present were USGA President, Dr. Trey Holland; USGA Executive Director, David Fay; Co-chairs, Billy Andrade and Brad Faxon; local dignitaries, Rhode Island golfers, donors, volunteers and a crowd of wide-eyed kids.

But the Button Hole story began long before that. On March 29, 1997, during dinner with me, David Fay made an off-handed and seemingly simple suggestion – *“Why don’t you build a short course for the kids in Rhode Island?”*

More than three years later, with cash and in-kind contributions of \$3.2 million and thousands of volunteer hours, a celebration took place.

Just before our opening, Kris Leveillee, then director of the Olneyville Boys and Girls Club had this to say about our project as quoted in a *Golf World* article: *“It was the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard. A course in the middle of two housing projects? Tell me you’d bet on that!”* However, she went on, *“You’ve got to understand, this is much more than golf. There is no grass in Olneyville. The kids couldn’t enjoy being outside in a safe and clean environment before (Button Hole). This place has its own special brand of magic. What they’ve done is given the kids something they haven’t ever had.”*

A photograph of three young boys walking on a golf course green. The boy on the left is wearing a red polo shirt, khaki shorts, and a white cap. The boy in the middle is wearing a white polo shirt, blue and white plaid shorts, and a white cap. The boy on the right is wearing a dark blue polo shirt, light blue shorts, and a dark cap. They are all holding golf clubs. The background is a lush green field with trees.

Golf World's senior writer, Ryan Herrington, maybe best summed it up...

***“Call it hope.
Or, more appropriately, Providence.”***

The road traveled to that green grass was neither smooth nor straight.

Soon after David's challenge, a small committee of Bill Tracey, Tim Harrington, Peter Pemberton, Ron Rene, Fred Schick, Scott Cooke and Dick Schoon met to begin the journey. We turned to the Rhode Island Golf Association (RIGA) for an initial grant of \$5,000 to do a feasibility study. Its resourceful and thrifty Executive Director, Joseph Sprague, Sr., wasn't particularly happy with the thought of draining his organization's nest egg but ultimately gave his full support. (Ironically, the eventual relocation of RIGA's downtown office to Button Hole resulted in a lower rent and a far more accessible location.)

After five months of daily searching and with our enthusiasm waning, the Department of Environmental Management (DEM) of Rhode Island asked us to look at an abandoned 26-acre sand pit. The site had been rutted by dirt bikers and littered with burnt out cars. At night, it became a haven for prostitutes and drug dealers. At first glance, "The Pit" might have appeared to be far from ideal. Upon further study, its size and accessibility to Providence's inner city made it a perfect fit for our needs.

Our meeting place became the neighboring offices of Parkside Site and Utility. No one embraced the idea more than Parkside's owners, Henry and Anthony Rosciti. They gave us access to all of their facilities including the refrigerator! We even held our two early milestone events, the ground breaking and the fundraising kick-off, in their large garage. (As the project evolved, they donated a \$100,000 parcel of land which allowed us space for our 16,000 square-foot practice putting green.)

Our findings were positive!

During our first full year, 1998, a number of key events earned Button Hole some great publicity which proved to be invaluable as our fundraising began. *The Providence Journal's* sports writers, Paul Kenyon and Jim Donaldson, gave us much needed praise in print.

- Billy Andrade and Brad Faxon accepted the positions of Honorary Co-chairs.
- Golf architects, P.B. Dye and Ron Pritchard collaborated on course design.
- Governor Lincoln Almond attended the ground breaking ceremony, his first of four visits to the site.

- The state gave us a preliminary, a 99-year land lease for \$1.00 a year.
- The USGA, without a formal solicitation, committed \$220,000 to the project.
- A fundraising goal of \$2 million was set as major solicitations began.
- The good name of our fundraising Co-chair, Stanley Goldstein, CVS Founder and then Chairman, gave further credibility to the project.

By the beginning of 1999, we had pledges and cash contributions of \$1 million, enough to begin the actual construction. Shortly thereafter, we discovered that toxic waste had been buried on the site. Then, another surprise... environmental issues arose because our land bordered the Woonasquatucket River causing yet another cost concern.

- These and other unanticipated issues prompted us to increase our goal to \$2.5 million, not including in-kind donations.
- A real big boost in fundraising came from national television as NBC featured Button Hole during the USGA Open.
- In 1999 an additional \$600,000 was secured in gifts and pledges.

We soon recognized that we needed paid staff to assist in administering the project. We had the good fortune at this critical juncture to hire Don Wright. A fine Rhode Island amateur golfer with a warm personality, Don was hired as our Executive Director. He proved to be a perfect fit for the start-up organization.

The year 2000 brought most unusual events of charity, sorrow and a significant permitting issue.

A wonderful club house was designed by David Presbrey Architects. Jack Marshall, one of Rhode Island's premier builders, took control of its construction. Although our fundraising efforts were moving forward at a steady pace, the committee simply couldn't raise funds fast enough to meet payment schedules. Jack, most generously, came forward to personally finance the completion of the club house.



Graduation day celebration for Andrade-Faxon Academy students, a Button Hole program sponsored by CVS Caremark.



Dan Gaughan, PGA, Button Hole Executive Director and Head Golf Professional, provides individualized instruction to one of our Button Hole kids.

Then, truly out of the blue, Judy Bell, the first woman President of the USGA, visited the site. At the time, we didn't have the money to install a protective net for the driving range or build a bridge to the third green. Two weeks after Judy's visit, we received a check of \$134,000 from the USGA Foundation to meet those two critical needs.

Sodding the course was the next step. At no cost, every square foot of sod was laid by union members of the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA), thanks in large part to its President and golfing aficionado, Arthur Coia.

With Button Hole just months away from completion, a tragedy beyond imagination happened, as reported by the media on "an unfinished golf course." Five men kidnapped two innocent college students, Jason Burgeson and Amy Shute, robbed them of \$18 and then brought them to Button Hole. They were brutally murdered with gun shots to their heads, execution style. The "thrill-killing" occupied Rhode Island and out-of-state media for weeks. Fortunately, the name "Button Hole" was never used by the press.



A less dramatic incident of note, occurred shortly before Button Hole was to open. A Department of Environmental Management (DEM) official called to inform us that the third hole would have to be eliminated. The hole ran over wetlands, parallel to the Woonasquatucket River and a new bike path. We believed that tee shots over an existing burnt out car, yet to be removed, would not present a problem. It did! Fortunately for Button Hole the issue was resolved in our favor.

A nine-hole golf course and teaching center in an urban setting was completed.

As one reflects on these early days of Button Hole, it is impossible to give due credit to the many people who gave so much of their time, talent and treasure.

May some of these events and challenging obstacles refresh all our memories. More importantly, may these stories of our early champions serve as our sincerest expression of

Thanks!



PS: Over the past 12 years, Button Hole has introduced the game of golf to more than 15,000 kids. Many of them would not have learned important life values if it were not for their experiences playing golf at Button Hole.