

Scott Robertson Memorial honors long-time starter Bill Shrader and Northside senior Nick Crawford

By: Steve Hemphill

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When a golf tournament like the Scott Robertson Memorial continues to thrive for 40 years, it takes a little luck and a lot of hard work.

As the years went on, the prominent junior event was fortunate enough to draw some fields that were as competitive as any tournament in the country. They kept coming back because of the people who made sure the players who made the trip to Roanoke Country Club were provided with a great experience.

That experience often began when the tournament's long-time starter, Bill Shrader, welcomed them to the first tee.

"Oh, yeah, I've seen some great ones come through," said Shrader, who has handled starter duties for five decades. "Hunter Mahan, Lanto Griffin, Kevin Na. ... Kevin won it twice. What a great player!"

Shrader is one of scores of volunteers who have helped make the SRC possible since its debut in 1984. Now in his 90s, he has reduced his role to an emeritus status, but hopes to welcome at least a couple of groups to No. 1 in his own way.

"And when he's out there, he doesn't announce it as the 9 a.m. tee time," said tournament administrator Debbie Ferguson. "He calls each group to their 'game.'"

Shrader, a Roanoke native who graduated from Jefferson High School then went on to play basketball for two seasons at Duke, was honored by the Junior Golf Foundation of Virginia the night before the start of the 2024 Scott Robertson Memorial for the role he has played since he returned to Roanoke after his retirement in the late 1980s. He was inducted into the Roanoke Valley Golf Hall of Fame in 2014.

While Thursday night's reception put the spotlight on Shrader, he pointed out he is just one of many RCC members and other Roanoke Valley golf enthusiasts who come together every May to make sure the tournament runs smoothly.

"There's a lot of clubs where members will gripe about losing a few days to let a bunch of juniors come in and play," Shrader said. "That was never the case here. Everybody gets involved and they really enjoy it."

Ferguson, who has been involved with the tournament since the late 1990s, said that while her role of putting together the fields for the four playing divisions keeps her busy, she also has the comfort of knowing that she can focus on her specific duties, because there is a trusty group of volunteers taking care of their own assignments, such as recording scores, providing hospitality for the players and making sure the competitors get on the golf course when they're supposed to.

"He's a prime example of that (teamwork)," Ferguson said. "There are certain core groups of people that take care of other jobs that I never have to worry about, and Mr. Schrader is one of those. He always has his guys ready to do the starting. I never had to worry. ..."

"One of the best parts of the Scott Robertson week is when I first get out here, I get my hug from Mr. Shrader."

Also honored on Thursday was Northside High School senior Nick Crawford, a long-time First Tee participant and the winner of the VSGA's Mike Wise Award. In addition to that scholarship, Crawford also found out he was getting two scholarships, as he was also one of 24 graduating seniors nationwide to be honored as a First Tee Scholar.

That topped off a memorable senior year for Crawford. Last fall, he was part of Northside's Blue Ridge District-champion golf team and has also committed to play golf next fall at Emory & Henry, where he plans to major in business. He credits the well-rounded First Tee junior program, where he didn't just learn how to play golf, but also found how the game can help make you a well-rounded person.

"It taught me a lot of core values, life lessons, and a lot of golf skills," Crawford said. "It's impacted me in a lot of ways -- not just in golf but in life."

"... The core value that stuck with me the most was probably honesty. At school, being honest with different things and in life. That has really stuck with me."

Before leaving for college in the fall, Crawford will be transitioning from a First Tee student to being part of the staff.

Junior Golf Foundation of Virginia chairman Briggs Andrews said Crawford has been a great representative of the local First Tee operation.

"That's what the First Tee is there for," Andrews said. "We try to cover the valley, we work in the schools and we get individuals like Nick to come and work with us over time. It's very heart-warming to see these kids develop."

Three champions return

When play gets under way on Friday, three of the four divisions will have defending champions on the course

Defending 15-18 boys winner Tyler Mawhinney for Fleming Island, Florida, tees off at 11:20 a.m. Also in the 15-18 division will be last year's 14-under winner Zabe Shores of Pinehurst, North Carolina.

Grace Carter of Jupiter, Florida, who won last year's 14-under girls event at the age of 12, will again be in the younger girls' field.