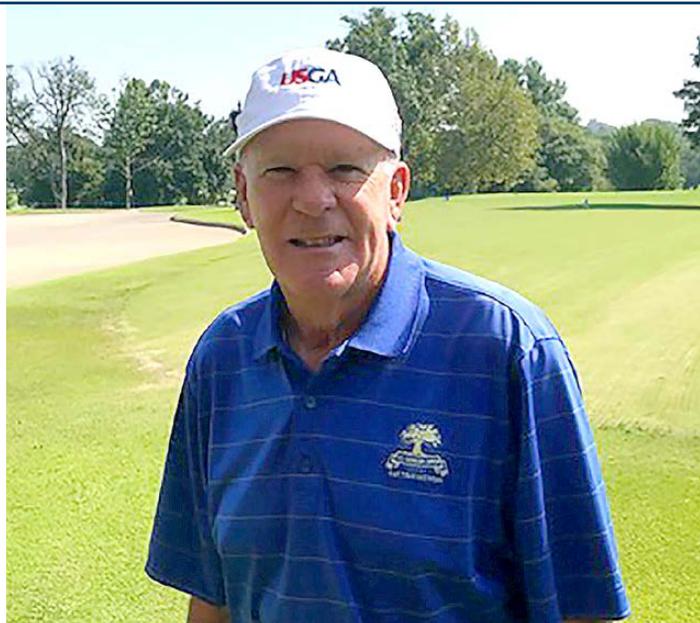




*Gene Mortensen*



*David Thompson*

# Rulers of the course

## Different approaches, one shared love of golf for long-time top OGA rules officials

BY KEN MACLEOD

If Gene Mortensen and David Thompson had a devil and an angel whispering in their ears when about to make a ruling on the golf course, there was little doubt to whom each was inclined to listen.

Mortensen was from the old USGA school of P.J. Boatwright with Jim Unruh of Tulsa his local mentor. Men who believed a rule is a rule and not made to be broken and gleefully compared the penalties handed out at the day's end like big-game hunters on safari checking their trophies.

Like Mortensen, Thompson has spent years volunteering to do rules for various USGA events, but unlike Mortensen, he has earned a reputation as a rules official who would rather help a golfer avoid a penalty and hands one out only as a last resort.

His attitude is more reflective of the PGA of America rules official than the USGA, perhaps because his boss Mark Felder, the executive director of the Oklahoma Golf Association, is a longtime PGA professional running an organization af-

filiated with the USGA.

"I had more time to school David than I did Gene," laughs Felder. "I brought him over to the PGA attitude, which is night and day from the USGA. When the PGA

of a young player he reprimanded after a temper tantrum at Karsten Creek in Stillwater. He had black stares cast his way and some players were so nervous when he was around they could hardly swing.

His own son, Joel, made him stand behind a tree when he was watching him play. He disqualified Jason Dufner from a tournament, showing he was equally stern with the famous and obscure.

"There was a guy who played in our events from Ponca City and if he knew

Gene was around, he would just say come on and give me the penalty," Felder said. "He literally couldn't hit a shot if he knew Gene was watching."

Mortensen started with the OGA under Bill Barrett's team in 1993 after retiring from a distinguished career in law. He was originally from North Dakota, attended undergraduate school at Minnesota State and law school at the University of Tulsa from 1965 to 1968, graduating on the night Elvin Hayes led Houston to its monumental upset of UCLA. At TU, he served as editor of the Tulsa Law Journal, the highest honor a law school bestows on

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*- Mark Felder, OGA Executive Director*

does a tournament, most of the competitors are either members or future customers. Gene was already well into his time with the OGA when I came in, but he did soften up quite a bit at the end."

"I don't think David likes to apply penalties," said Mortensen, now 77 and battling health issues. "I never minded it. I'm of the old school. As P.J. Boatwright said, if there's a rule and players don't obey it, it's a penalty, no questions asked. These days under some of the rules, you have to intend to break the rule for it to be a penalty. That was never the case.

"We were considered stern rulers, but

its students.

Mortensen brought his Tulsa Country Club friend Thompson into the OGA in 2006 as Thompson was retiring from a successful career that spanned many Tulsa businesses, among them WilTel Communications. Both have dedicated countless days and weeks to the organization not only in working tournaments but in serving on the OGA board, as president and helping the organization through critical stress points at various times.

Despite their difference in personality and approach, both have a heart of gold, a love for golf and a deep well of selfless giving that has been of immeasurable benefit to both the OGA and the USGA. Both have risen in the ranks to where they were in high demand to work USGA events around the nation.

And one thing they both agree on is enforcing pace of play. While the PGA Tour and major USGA and collegiate events continue to wrestle with slow golf, there is seldom a pace of play issue at an OGA event. The system is founded on allowing no more than 15 minutes per hole for a max of a 4.5-hour round.

"There is nothing more dreaded than slow play," Mortensen said. "And seemingly no one interested in solving the issue except the OGA. We have this policy of 2 hours and 15 minutes per side, stay with the group in front of you and you won't have a problem. If you finish 18 minutes behind the group in front of you, everybody gets a penalty shot. It's very simple, they understand it and they go play."

For this writer, seeing Mortensen at an event was a comfort, knowing deadlines would likely be met. For the players, it was not always the same. Mortensen would chastise those he felt were taking undue time, leading to several less than pleasant exchanges.

"Gene is actually one of the nicest, funniest guys in the whole world," Felder said. "He's been my father figure on the board ever since I got here. He helped the OGA out of a serious IRS problem back in the day and he put us on his back and got us on the other side to where we could start running the OGA as a business. What he's done for the organization has been way above and beyond the call of duty. He's my hero and not having him on the board now makes me sad.

"When David was president, we went through some real turmoil as well and he got us through that. He helped us elevate

tournament operations and the way we ran events. Both have been very important to the OGA and instrumental in getting us to where we are now."

The mild-mannered but firm Thompson was an avid amateur with what he thought was a good grasp of the rules until Mortensen recruited him. His first three-day rules workshop was in 2007 and the final day is spent taking a test in which the minimum score to be recommended to work USGA events is a 92. Thompson scored a 63.

"I came out thinking I had done pretty well," Thompson said. "I learned you have to read the entire question and not be thinking, 'I know this one.' "

He began working OGA events and by 2011 had scored well enough to start working USGA events, beginning with the U.S. Women's Amateur and the U.S. Senior Open that first year. Since 2013 he has worked more than 40 USGA championships and typically logs more than 77 days a year on the road working tournaments, all of it on a volunteer basis.

Both Thompson and Mortensen have had plenty of unusual circumstances pop

up in the hundreds of events they've officiated. Thompson recalls working a women's collegiate event at The Blessings in Fayetteville where two drives came to rest with the balls touching in a fairway divot. One player marked her ball and the other hit, exploding the divot much deeper than before. The second player was crestfallen until Thompson told her she was allowed to rebuild the lie she had originally.

"Oh, cool!" was the response.

"That's kind of an example of how the rules are there to help you," Thompson said.

Whether a rules official is there to help you to avoid a penalty in the short term or learn a hard lesson in the long run, there's no disputing this ruling: Both Thompson and Mortensen have been and continue to be a blessing for the OGA.

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