

Pete's Place



+
HOME TEAM

Bevacqua is not lacking for support from his fab foursome (from left): Tiffany, Sammy, Arthur and Jake.



The PGA of America has long been viewed as an organization without an identity, but CEO Pete Bevacqua is changing its face, winning over his 28,000 bosses while becoming a power broker in the industry

BY ALAN SHIPNUCK

Photographs by **Ben Van Hook**
For Sports Illustrated



THE ANNUAL MEETING of the PGA of America, held days before Thanksgiving, was exquisite in its awkwardness.

Three weeks earlier Ted Bishop had been impeached as the organization's president, for the crime of making insensitive comments on social media. The timing was particularly inconvenient because the meeting was being held in Indianapolis, in Bishop's home state, and it was supposed to be a grand send-off for a maverick who had energized his 28,000 constituents by insisting that the PGA no longer allow itself to be treated like a lil' girl by the game's other organizing bodies. The day's first speaker, Tony Pancake of the Indiana PGA section, pulled off an impressive bit of rhetorical acrobatics by saying he and his people were "100% behind Ted" while adding, "It is time to move on." Derek Sprague—the bookish, soft-spoken new president—took pains to "acknowledge Ted Bishop's accomplishments to the game" but then delivered the real message: "We gather here to focus on the future." And with that, the microphone was turned over to Pete Bevacqua.

Attired in a natty gray suit, the PGA CEO worked the stage with a jock swagger that comes naturally to a onetime high school football and basketball star. The cavernous hotel ballroom was packed with some 500 PGA pros, and it was not an entirely welcoming crowd. There has long been a disconnect between the rank-and-file PGA pros who pay their annual \$515 dues and the suits at the Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., headquarters who are

consumed with running two of the five most important events in golf: the Ryder Cup and the PGA Championship. Bishop was a man of the people, a former superintendent and now the proprietor of a public facility in Franklin that advertises a \$29 green fee. Plenty of Bishop's colleagues saw Bevacqua, 43, as the Georgetown Law smoothie who had unceremoniously ousted the most vocal advocate they've ever had.

But as Bevacqua spoke, the vibe in the room shifted perceptibly; it was impossible not to be swayed by his manifold passion and intelligence, and his sweeping ambition to push the PGA forward. Since taking the job in November 2012, Bevacqua has labored to institute a long-term strategic plan for an organization that seemed to change direction every two years, when the new president and slate of officers were sworn in. One of the central themes of his speech involved change of another kind. "The culture at PGA headquarters needed to be refreshed," he said. "It needed to be revised. It needed to be modernized." Bevacqua laid out the rest of his vision:

growing the game to create more opportunities for PGA pros, embracing new technology to make the membership more relevant, and improving communication with the national headquarters to make the pros feel more valued.

Yet even while thinking big-picture, Bevacqua acknowledged that the PGA needed "victories" in the short term. He noted some of the biggest wins of the last year-plus: the creation of the KPMG Women's PGA Championship, a reconstituted major that will debut in June; the PGA's principled refusal to support the USGA and the R&A in the ban on anchored putting, citing the many recreational golfers who would be disenfranchised; extending and expanding through 2030 a programming relationship with NBC; getting the PGA Championship back to the West Coast for the first time this century (Harding Park in 2020); and muscling in on one of the USGA's signature venues (Bethpage Black, which will host the '19 PGA and the '24 Ryder Cup).

Bishop loved being out in front to take credit for these big ideas, but Bevacqua was the savvy

I HEAR YOU

At last week's PGA Show, Bevacqua talked shop with some of the members he serves.



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backroom operator who got the deals done. More important than any of the above line items, however, is that Bevacqua has become the public face of an organization that has always lacked a clear identity. Organizationally, the PGA has always been a multiheaded leviathan, with the CEO, the president and the 14-member board of directors all competing for power. From the outside looking in, it has never been clear who's in charge, if anyone.

But make no mistake, the PGA of America is now Bevacqua's baby. His commanding performance at the annual meeting made that clear enough. But then in January he was elected chairman of the board of the World Golf Foundation, a position one PGA Tour executive likens to being anointed godfather. (Bevacqua, it turns out, loves to quote Corleone maxims, and not for nothing is his dog named Fredo.)

Even in exile Bishop has a clear-eyed view of Bevacqua's ascension. "The PGA of America asks a group of volunteer golf pros—the officers and directors—to run a multimillion-dollar operation,"

Bishop wrote to SI in a recent

email. "That might have been okay in 1916, but things have changed. . . . The PGA has to be more Pete's organization now if it will get anything done. The next few years will be very telling."

GOLF WAS a big part of Bevacqua's life growing up in Bedford, N.Y., a leafy town in Westchester County. Arthur Bevacqua was a dentist who ritually spent Monday afternoon and all day on Wednesday bonding with his only son on the golf course. Pete has four older sisters but is the baby by five years, so once the girls had left home, he often tagged along with his parents to Manhattan for grown-up fun: Marlon Brando film festivals, Johnny Cash or Perry Como at Radio City. On Wednesdays in the summer Arthur would take Pete and his best friend, Larry Marchini, to Bethpage, beginning the journey at 6 a.m. They'd play 36 holes, then go to Jones Beach to cool off in the ocean, followed by a late dinner at an old-school steak house in the Bronx. "Some of the best memories of my life," says Pete.

Arthur wasn't a great golfer, owing in part to a set of prehistoric Tommy Armour blades he refused to part with, but he pushed his son to excel. "They were close like you can't believe," says Marchini, "but they would have amazing blowups on the course. It was pretty funny, actually. Pete would hit one into the trees and Mr. Bevacqua would say, 'How'd you hit that one?' *Not so good, Dad.* 'How come?' *I don't know, I wasn't trying to do that, Dad.* 'What do you think you could have done differently?' Boy, he could drive Pete crazy, but he did it because he cared so much. Then on the drive home he'd replay every bad shot Pete had hit!"

Bevacqua's golf training was enhanced by Walt Ronan, the charismatic head pro at Bedford Golf and Tennis Club, where Pete began caddying at age 10. Many of his friends were members at Bedford, but Bevacqua's family was not. "It was a nice old club," says Marchini. "In a funny way it was like *Caddyshack*. Somebody there fit every major role in that movie." Ronan gave Bevacqua lessons and free run of the course on Mondays—squeezing in 72 holes wasn't unheard of—and ultimately moved him from the caddie yard into the pro shop. He continued to work there summers while an undergrad at Notre Dame. "Walt taught me everything about the game, not just how to swing a club," Bevacqua says. "How to treat the people who walk into a golf shop, how to behave at a member-guest, how to teach the fundamentals of the sport to men and women and children, just how to carry yourself in every situation. It was a tremendous education."

WHEN HE was 17, Bevacqua finished birdie-eagle-birdie-birdie to shoot 68 at Bedford, still the low round of his life. He was the captain of his high school team at the Brunswick School; asked to tell a story from those glory days, Bevacqua opens a vein. "It was one of the last league matches of my senior year, at Stanwich," he says. "We started on the 10th hole, and my golf coach at the time, Donald Swanbeck, was watching me. I duck-hooked my drive out-of-bounds. I reteeed and duck-hooked another O.B. Retee, snipe another one O.B. I took a 12 on the hole. To this day I still have dreams about that."

WEDDING VOW

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Nevertheless, Bevacqua is remembered around Brunswick as the guy who wanted the ball in his hands at the end of the game: He was a decorated quarterback and point guard, and always the team captain. Bob Sampson was Bevacqua's football coach, and the two remain so close that the protégé recently introduced Coach Sam when he was inducted into Brunswick's hall of fame. "Pete was an outstanding quarterback, but he had

only one half-assed receiver, so he didn't get to show off his arm that much," says Sampson. "Still, we lost only one [regular-season] game his senior year because he was a great leader who took care of the other kids. He knew the playbook as well as any of the coaches."

Bevacqua brings the intensity he displayed on the football field to the links. Despite not being known for his finesse, he carries a three handicap. "He swings as hard as he can on every shot, whether it's his driver or his wedge," says Sprague. "He can probably hit his sand wedge 160 yards." The other day Bevacqua found himself in a cutthroat game at Trump Jupiter, and on the opposing team was Kerry Haigh, the PGA's chief championship officer who plays off scratch. Bevacqua didn't miss a shot coming down the stretch,

despite having to carry the dead body of an over-matched sportswriter. The closing hole has a devilish green fronted by water; behind the putting surface an addition to the clubhouse was being built. Standing in the fairway, Bevacqua not only called out which window was his target line but then he flushed a 6-iron, the flight of his ball never leaving the pane. He didn't say a word, but the sly grin he flashed at Haigh told the story.

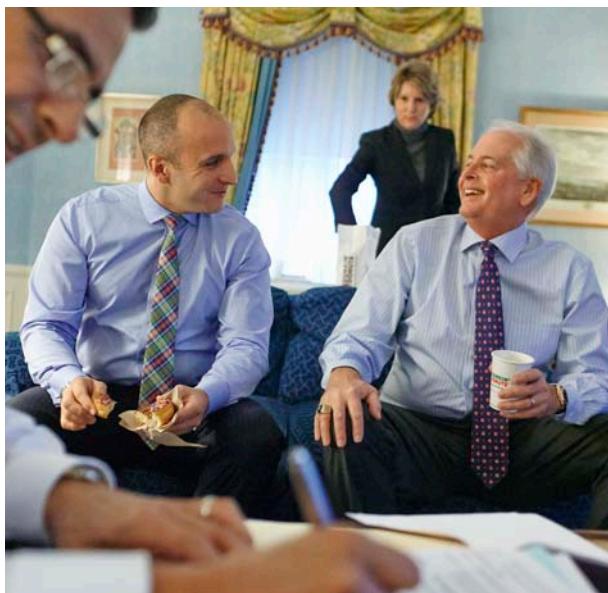
Bevacqua's passion for the game is deeply personal. "There's not a round that goes by that I don't think about my dad," he says. In 1997, Arthur decided a nice surprise Christmas present would be to put some sweet Newman leather grips on Pete's old Mizuno blades. On his way to pick them up, Arthur, 64, made an ill-advised U-turn; an oncoming vehicle hit a patch of ice and T-boned his car. He died three days later. Pete never reclaimed his clubs, but to this day he carries in his wallet the receipt for the new grips.

LIKE TWO of his sisters, Bevacqua was a high school valedictorian. At Notre Dame he was an English major with a minor in film; he served as the movie critic for the school paper and is rather proud to have won a statewide award for excellence in film review. (Surely, Bevacqua is the only golf executive extant whose office wall is adorned with a poster of *The Bicycle Thief*, the 1948 classic of Italian neorealism.) After breezing through Georgetown Law—his roommate was Matt Casey, whose father, Bob, was a two-term governor of Pennsylvania—he took a job in New York City at the white-shoe firm of Davis Polk, specializing in commercial real estate. He was at a party at a friend's apartment when Tiffany Barbera walked in. Bevacqua had never laid eyes on her, but he whispered to a friend, "I guarantee you I'm going to marry that woman." Tiffany is tall and beautiful, but there are a lot of women like that in Manhattan. How did he know she was the one? "Just this unexplainable feeling that we were supposed to spend our lives together," he says. "It sounds cliché, but it hit me like a bolt of lightning." Five years later they were married.

As an associate at Davis Polk, Bevacqua was expected to work crazy hours. He endured one three-day bender during which he returned home only to shower, and near the tail end of it he started combing through the Georgetown alumni directory, looking for a way out. He came across the name of Romney Berson, then the chief legal officer for the USGA. "Wow, I never thought of that," Bevacqua remembers thinking. "So in the middle of the night I wrote a letter and sent my résumé to Romney."

Months passed without a response, but then suddenly Bevacqua was summoned to Far Hills, N.J., for an interview. He couldn't resist the lure of getting back into golf, so beginning in 2001 he served as the USGA's in-house counsel. Two years later he was made managing director of U.S. Open championships, a troubleshooter often left with the thankless task of dealing with the persnickety host clubs and their neighbors. "That's where Pete really blossomed," says former USGA executive director David Fay, whom Bevacqua cites as a mentor. "That job

HARD DAYS
Bevacqua calls the ousting of Bishop (right) "the toughest period of my professional life."



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requires extraordinary people skills because you're usually dealing with big egos and often have to get these people to see the error in their thinking."

By 2009, Bevacqua had been bumped up to USGA chief business officer and was widely considered a rising star in golf circles. When the LPGA went looking for a commissioner, he made a strong push. Ultimately it came down to him and Mike Whan. "The right guy got the job," says Bevacqua, but

it still hurt, partly because "my name had been in the paper way too much." He decided it was a good time to see a different side of the business, so he took the position of head of global golf at CAA. Two years later Joe Steranka stepped down as CEO of the PGA, and Bevacqua landed the perfect job to marry his passion for golf with his business smarts. Two days before he started, Ted Bishop was elected the 38th president of the PGA of America.

ONE OF Bevacqua's first edicts was to ban staff from wearing ties at PGA headquarters. "We're in the golf business; it's supposed to be fun," he says. "Let's look the part."

Maybe the best example of his leadership style came in the creation of the KPMG Women's PGA Championship. Less than a quarter of U.S. golfers are female, and thus all other girls and women are a key demographic for growing the game. Bevacqua hatched the idea for the event, and last year at Augusta he brought together all the significant stakeholders for breakfast. "Pete opened the meetings by asking what everybody needed to get out of the partnership," says Whan. "It was a little disarming, and I thought a mature way to handle it. It forced all of us to think about a responsibility bigger than our own interests. I've never been a part of a meeting at that level with so much sharing and collaboration."

It helped that Bevacqua brought to the table not only youth but also an improvisational, rock-music sensibility. (He was most likely the only person in the room who can riff on early Radiohead albums.) "He's young and full of fresh ideas and not bogged down by 50 years of this-is-how-we've-always-done-it," says Whan. "The golf industry is already benefiting from his open-mindedness."

John Veihmeyer, the CEO of KPMG, says, "What impressed me most is how involved Pete was every step of the way. He was in on the nitty-gritty. Sixty days after that breakfast we had contracts moving, which is almost unheard of."

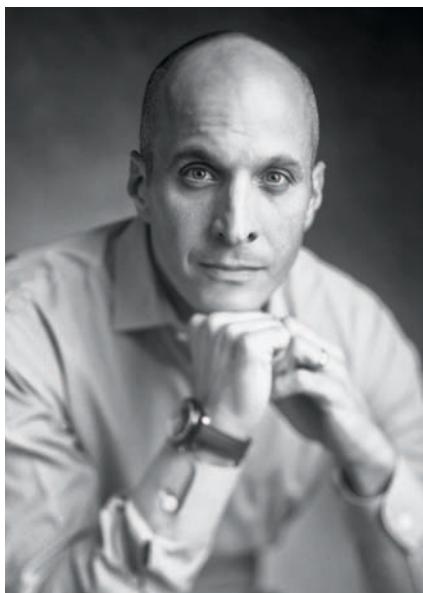
Bevacqua has brought the same focus to the much-ballyhooed Ryder Cup task force, of which he is cochair. It says much about his powers of persuasion that he was able to get Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson in the same room in the middle of winter. Of course, it doesn't hurt that he's about the same age as both men and, like them, has young children (Sammy, 7; Arthur, 4; Jake, 19 months). In a conference room next to his office, Bevacqua presided over a five-hour gabfest. "He earned the respect of everybody in that room," says a member of the task force, who requested anonymity because participants were asked not to speak to the press. "It's obvious he's a very smart guy who is going to do what it takes to get this right. I definitely have more confidence in the process after seeing him in action."

A S CHAIRMAN of the board at the World Golf Foundation, Bevacqua is keeping company with a different set of heavy hitters: Whan; PGA Tour commissioner Tim Finchem, the immediate past chair; Mike Davis of the USGA; Peter Dawson of the R&A; George O'Grady of the European tour; and Will Jones, executive director of the Masters. Bevacqua is flattered by his new post but insists any glory is institutional. "It's a great compliment to the PGA of America," he says. "It shows that people are taking notice of what we've done over the last couple of years. It reflects incredibly well on the organization and the membership."

And yet one of the central tenets of Bevacqua's speech at the annual meeting was the need to realign the PGA's priorities. Its big-time tournaments get all the attention, but theoretically the association exists to benefit its 28,000 pros. "Far too often the tail is wagging the dog," Bevacqua told the membership in Indianapolis, to the nodding of countless heads. "This strategic vision has to change that. There's nothing wrong with a vibrant sports business, but it has to serve the membership." Bevacqua is not above buying affection; he has instituted a five-year plan that will

HIGH PRAISE

Bevacqua has earned respect from club pros to Tour players to industry heavyweights.



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double, to \$180,000, the amount each of the 41 PGA sections will get annually from Palm Beach Gardens to spend on programs and initiatives. But he is also big on soft power. "We tell staff, If you get back to your desk and there's a call from a PGA member and a call from a corporate partner, get back to the member first," he says. "I think I have 28,000 bosses. It makes my skin crawl when I walk into a golf shop and they call me Mr. Bevacqua.

No, it's Pete! I'm working for you."

This humility has helped him curry favor with the PGA's board of directors, which ultimately has to sanction his deals. Bevacqua introduced a monthly conference call to keep the 14 directors in the loop, and he often seeks them out privately for skull sessions. "He has included and empowered the board to the point where they would run through a wall for him," says Jeff Price, the PGA's chief commercial officer.

It was the board's decision to impeach Bishop, but Bevacqua had a big part in the process. "He was levelheaded throughout," says Sprague. "He made sure we followed protocol at every turn, and we gained a lot of feedback in-house and from the outside."

Bevacqua calls Bishop's denouement "without a doubt the toughest period of my professional life." It was his grim duty to deliver the news. Bevacqua called his friend's office and left a voice mail.

"That hurt," says Bishop.

They had spoken nearly every day for two years, but then the line of communication went silent. Finally in mid-January, following a couple of email volleys, Bishop wrote in another email to SI, "You prompted me to think out some things last week, and I reached out to Pete and we spoke today."

Bevacqua describes the call as "the weight of the world coming off my shoulders. I think we both felt that way. It's the beginning of rebuilding a relationship between two people who like each other and admire each other and love golf."

As for the larger issue of who now runs the PGA, Bevacqua is dismissive of the line of questioning. "The president is the leader of the organization," he says. "I would state that unequivocally. I never forget for one second that I'm staff, and I report to the officers. I'm hired by the organization to do a job."

Yet he has done the job so effectively that the natural order of things has been upended in Palm Beach Gardens. The PGA sacrificed a president but gained a leader. □