

HORTON SMITH AWARD

This award bestows special recognition on a PGA Professional for outstanding service and contributions toward developing and improving educational opportunities for PGA Professionals and Associates.

Mark Russo, PGA

*MR Golf Instruction at Night Hawk Golf Center
Gambrills, MD*

Mark has attempted to inspire his fellow golf professionals through education and mentoring. In his presentations and education events, Mark tries to give the PGA Professionals and Associates in attendance some simple and easy ways to make a difference in the games of their members and guests, and to increase their value at their facilities. Mark understands how important this education can be to his fellow PGA Professionals for career enhancement and job retention.

Mark Russo was born July 15, 1976 in Upper Marlboro, MD to parents Ron and Bobby Russo and has one sister, Elena. Mark began playing golf very late in life, having picked up the game on his own at the age of 17. Mark's dad, a retired Navy commander, introduced him to sports early on in life, but there were no golfers in the family at the time. His dad loved the game of baseball, having grown up in Rhode Island idolizing Red Sox great Ted Williams. So, Mark played the game and was a catcher up until the age of 17. At the age of 10, he also began playing ice hockey and that became his passion.

Mark travelled all over the East Coast with his mom at the wheel of the family car, as he played competitive travel hockey for Bowie Hockey Club, as well as 4 years of varsity hockey at DeMatha Catholic High School. He began working at Night Hawk Golf Center in high school as a summer job, mostly to hit baseballs in the batting cages. But he soon picked up a club and began to love to hit balls, as the motion was very similar to his baseball and hockey backgrounds. It didn't take long before he was hooked, had a set of clubs, and was playing regularly with his co-workers. He then went to Towson University, where he played hockey for the Tigers, and also played a year of Junior B for the Baltimore Junior Bandits at the age of 20.

Mark graduated from Towson with a B.S. in Mass Communications. During his time at Towson, he was fortunate to learn about sports broadcasting first-hand, having interned at Channel 2 in Baltimore in the Sports Department. He even solo produced a sports broadcast for long-time sports anchor Scott Garceau. This experience was critical in helping to learn about communicating and working with others as a team and has helped him in the golf business tremendously.

The biggest influence in Mark playing golf and developing his love for the game was when he began to work in the bag room at The Courses at Fort Meade in 1996. The military facility, now closed, had 36 holes and was a great environment for a young person to work in, as the management at the facility was very supportive of staff members playing golf. Mark would often play 54 holes in a day with co-workers and members of the facility, including many rounds with his future father-in-law, Tom

Carpenter. This access to the courses really created a love for the game in Mark that stayed with him going forward, while also creating an appreciation for the military and the mission of providing a fun outlet for them away from work.

Mark took his first assistant professional job in 1997 at Marlborough Country Club. He started at Turf Valley Resort as an Assistant Professional from February 2000 to July 2000 then moving back to Marlborough Country Club as an Assistant Professional from July 2000 to May 2001. In May of 2001, Mark was promoted to Head Professional at Marlborough and stayed in that position until September 2002. In October 2002, Mark moved to The Country Club at Woodmore and served as the Assistant Professional until March 2006 when he was promoted to Head Professional. While at Woodmore, Mark began the PGA program and was elected to membership in May 2005. In March 2012, Mark left his job at Woodmore and founded MR Golf Instruction at Night Hawk Golf Center. Since then, Mark has been recognized by his peers for his skills and passion for the game, being named to the Golf Digest “Best in State” rankings for Maryland in 2017 and 2019. In the Middle Atlantic Section, Mark received the 2018 MAPGA Teacher of the Year Award, and now can add the 2020 MAPGA Horton Smith Award to his list of achievements.

Over the course of his career, Mark has had several mentors in different areas that have helped him progress and grow. He credits Steve WenPetren, PGA as a big influence in his golf career, as Steve hired Mark for his first assistant professional job at Marlborough Country Club, and then recommended Mark for 2 other jobs to other professionals, both of whom hired Mark. Steve’s friendship and support over the years has been a big part of Mark’s success and career path.

In addition, on the instruction side, Mark counts Rick Krebs, PGA, as a mentor. Rick and Mark met in 2000 when Mark worked briefly at Turf Valley Resort. After he left Turf Valley, Mark continued to stay in touch with Rick and took lessons from him and credits his instruction and support with helping him pass his PAT. Rick also allowed Mark to sit in on lessons and learn how to handle students and structure a lesson. Mark still uses Rick as a guide for how to deal with students, and Rick has been tremendously supportive of Mark in his career and in the business of instruction. Rick is truly the epitome of what a mentor should be for a young professional in the PGA.

Mark also counts Andrew Rice as a big influence in his teaching, having spent time with Andrew in South Carolina and Georgia. Andrew took Mark in and allowed him to spend multiple days on the lesson tee with him, as well as letting him stay with his family at their home. Mark has learned how to handle people and deal with swing issues in a simpler manner from Andrew, while still being able to integrate technology like TrackMan into the lesson. Whenever Mark has a special issue that he needs advice on, Andrew is there to offer feedback and help Mark continue to learn and grow as an instructor. His treatment of others, as well as his wealth of knowledge, is why Mark lists Andrew as a mentor and friend.

Finally, some other great instructors and educators in the game of golf have become friends and mentors, including Martin Chuck, Pat Coyner, Sean English, Chris George

and Ryan Chaney. These fellow professionals have influenced Mark and driven him to improve as a coach, as well as inspired him to help want to help others through education.

Mark is lucky to have been married to his high school sweetheart, Lori, for 18 years. They met as teenagers in 1994 and have been together ever since; through college, lots of weekends working in the golf business, and several trips to Scotland. In marrying Lori, Mark was also able to gain an incredible second family with his in-laws, Tom & Mary Ann Carpenter, his brother-in-law, Nate, and his wife Patty and two kids, Corey and Garrett. Along with his brother-in-law Andrew, married to his sister, Elena, Mark has an incredible family based right at home in Maryland and feels very fortunate.

In October 2011, Mark & Lori were blessed with a son, Blaine. Now 8 years old, he is a very smart, loving boy who is crazy about cars and computers, loves to be around his family. In March 2016, the family was blessed once again with another son, Quinn. His loving personality and great smile keep everyone around him happy and he loves nothing more than to snuggle with his family and chase his big brother.

Mark believes that his success has come from two things: communication and caring. If you care about what you do as a professional and show the person in front of you that you care about them as well, you will have success. Then you need to communicate clearly and honestly with each and every person. If you can communicate clearly while showing a student that you care about them as a person first and a student second, you will be successful in helping them love the game and forge a strong relationship with them that will last a long time.