

Up Close

Follow the Light

MGA outgoing president Don Hendler found a way to give back to the game and illuminate the lives of others – a subject he knows something about

BY JEANNE MCCOOEY

Don Hendler gets up each morning at 5:30 to swim, bike or take a spinning class at the gym before heading to his office in the eastern Queens neighborhood of Little Neck. As President of Leviton Manufacturing Company, one of the world's largest electrical and electronic wiring device manufacturers, the 61-year-old Hendler knows the importance of keeping parts well-conditioned and in working order. His fitness regimen is typical of the discipline that has guided his success as a business executive, family man, athlete and, for the last 10 years, as one of the local golf community's most respected leaders.

JEFF WEINER



Hendler (top) sets a cooperative tone at a recent MGA meeting. His golf snapshots include a trip to Scotland, a winning moment with his wife and parents, and a balanced follow-through.



Raised in Rockville Centre on Long Island, Hendler lived for sports as a kid. He excelled at soccer, track, biking, skiing and even javelin throwing, as well as golf. His parents were members of Cold Spring Country Club, and Don would sit on the range as his older brother hit balls. “I would watch him all day long and then go out and imitate him,” says Hendler. He paid close attention, and by the time he was 12 he was competing in junior events. He maintained a good enough game to make the team at Franklin and Marshall College, where he enrolled in 1964. He thrived on the competition and worked his way to No. 1 man and captain by his senior year.

Following graduation, Hendler joined the New York Air National Guard. While in camp for the Guard, Hendler met fellow Long Islander and top Met Area player John Baldwin, whom he soon discovered shared his dedication to community service and his love of golf. The two remained friends after their Guard duty ended. Later in life, Baldwin

would prove to be instrumental in Don’s introduction to the MGA, Long Island Golf Association (LIGA) and Long Island Caddie Scholarship Foundation. His involvement in all three continues to this day.

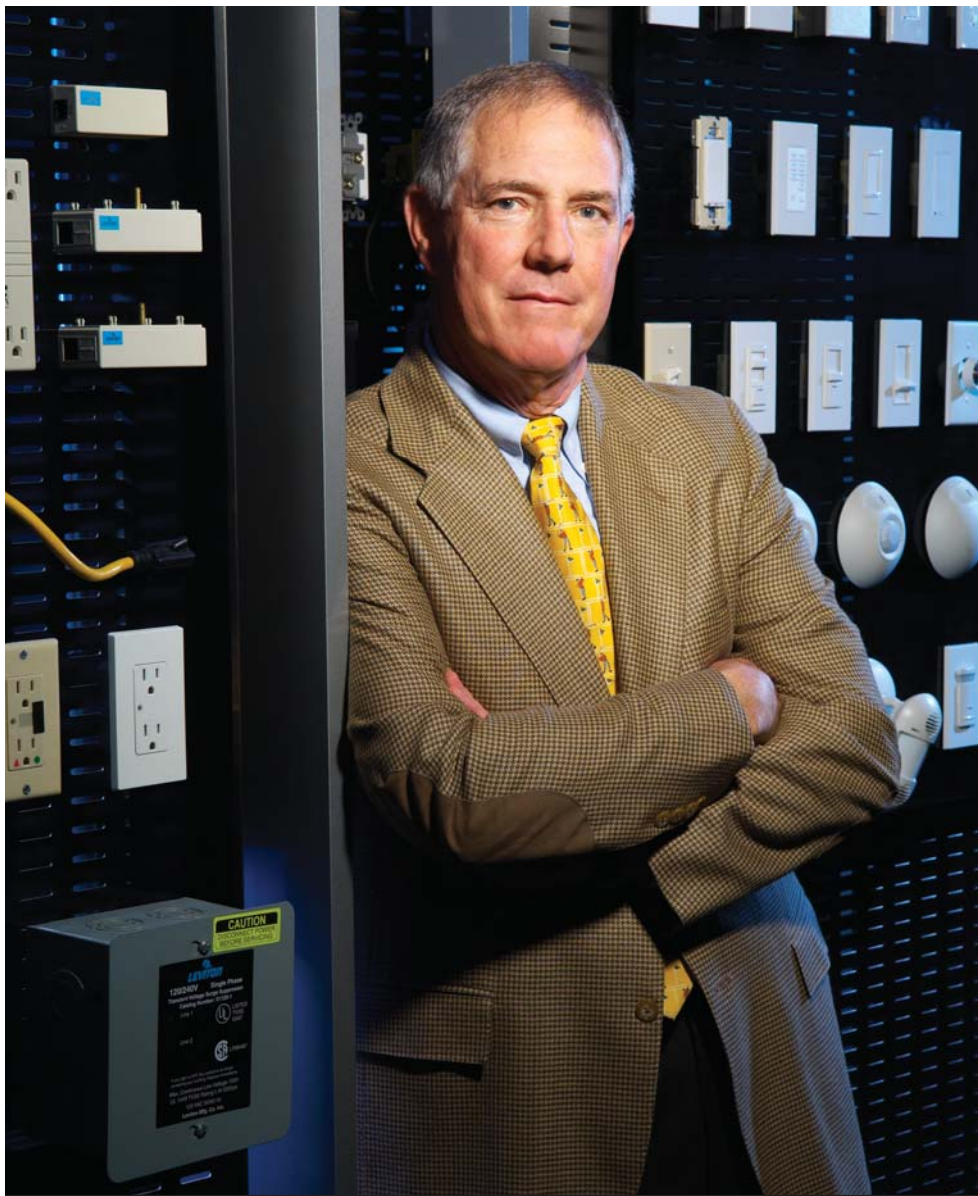
In 1968, Hendler married college sweetheart Adee Leviton. That same year he entered a training program with his father-in-law’s namesake company. “I didn’t know much about the business at the time, but the fact that it was a small, family-owned company really appealed to me,” says Hendler.

He moved from positions in sales, marketing and product development to become Vice President of Strategic Planning in 1994. It was during the next ten years that Hendler helped to spearhead the company’s global expansion by seizing on the opportunities presented by emerging markets in China and parts of Europe, and he became Leviton’s President in 2005. “The work ethic at Leviton is much like my own. It’s very progressive, but very service-oriented. I spend most of my time meeting with people (customers) to make sure we serve their present and future needs. I love the interaction and the challenge.” He also loves the travel. A self-proclaimed travel junkie, he spends about 35 percent of his time these days traveling throughout the U.S. and around the world to help promote the company’s products. (Just look around your house – check the lights, the wall switches and the surge protectors – you will no doubt find the Leviton brand name.)

Despite the demands of his job and growing family, Don never ceased his involvement in golf. His competitiveness made him a serious contender in many Met Area events, and over the years he racked up impressive finishes in the Anderson Memorial, Wilson Cup and Hochster Memorial, among others. He has also qualified for the Ike, Met Amateur and Met Open, and represented Long Island on the Stoddard Trophy Team three times. He still plays to a 2.4 Index, and in 2000 he became a member of Meadow Brook Club, which is conveniently adjacent to his backyard.

As Don became more involved with the game in the late 1980s and early ‘90s, he knew instinctively to look for ways to give something back. “It’s the way I was raised,” noted Hendler. “You get, and you give back.” Through his old pal John Baldwin, who was longtime friends with former MGA and LIGA President George Sands, Don served first as a LIGA tournament official and then on the LIGA Executive Committee. He also became involved in the Long Island Caddie Scholarship Fund. “I discovered that helping young people in need was incredibly rewarding and knew then that I wanted to do more.”

Don’s reputation caught the attention of the MGA, and in 1991 he was invited to serve on the Tournament Committee. His very first assignment was a baptism of fire. “Tournament Director Gene Westmoreland assigned me to a Women’s Net Team qualifier at Nissequoque, and my first ruling involved notifying Gene that two players – who



Hendler leads a successful company whose products are in homes and offices around the world.

happened to be members of the host club – had played from the wrong tees and had to be assessed a two-stroke penalty. I felt just awful, and hoped there wouldn't be many more days like this."

In fact, things brightened considerably for Don. Within a year he was asked to join the MGA Executive Committee, and his background in strategic planning proved invaluable during a period which saw the birth of the MGA Foundation, the move to Golf Central, the MGA's Centennial and the launch of a major Capital Campaign.

"Working on the inside of an organization like this was really eye-opening, and exciting. I was fortunate to have served under some really talented and inspirational presidents like Connie DeLoca, Paul Dillon, Joe Cantwell, Jim Cotter and others who, along with a talented professional staff, have skillfully guided us through all these challenging times and kept us focused on our goals."

Hendler moved through the officer ranks and became President in 2005 and was thrust into the midst of the MGA's major Capital Campaign that was just beginning its important "club" phase. With typical optimism, he saw this not as a daunting assignment but as an opportunity to increase MGA awareness in the golf community. "It was amazing to me that most club members had no idea of the breadth and scope of services that the MGA and our Foundation perform on behalf of area golfers and golf clubs."

Admittedly, the Capital Campaign has been an uphill battle. "The perception of the MGA as an organization that simply runs tournaments and supplies handicaps is a tough stereotype to crack," says Hendler. The campaign will continue into 2007, and Hendler confesses he is disappointed that he will leave office before its conclusion. However, he is confident that all the effort has been worth it. "I really feel that we have made great strides in establishing a better link with our clubs through this campaign, and created a better understanding that all of us have to contribute something back to the game to ensure its future."

Hendler talks enthusiastically about the growth of The First Tee and GOLFWORKS, two of the Foundation's flagship programs that have exploded in recent years, as well as another highlight of his presidency: the opportunity to be one of the walking officials with Michelle Wie during U.S. Open sectional qualifying at Canoe Brook this past June. "To watch this courageous young girl really put herself and her talent on the line and handle all the pressure as well as she did was very moving and something I will always remember."

While Hendler will no longer have to preside over Executive Committee meetings or hand out trophies at championships, he hopes to remain as involved as ever. "Being a part of this game at so many levels has given me a great deal of pleasure and taught me many lessons that have helped me throughout my life. I want to continue to do whatever I can to make sure these opportunities are available to everyone, and especially to young people who were less fortunate than I was."

These are well-spoken words from a man who seems to have a special talent for enlightening those around him. ■