Major Role: EC resident and UW-Stout prof has been at the center of U.S. Open planning as part of the Erin Hills staff

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Seven years of planning and anticipation will come to fruition this week for an Eau Claire woman and UW-Stout professor when the 117th U.S. Open men’s golf tournament — one of sports’ greatest spectacles — comes to Wisconsin for the first time.

Of the approximately 40,000 people each day who will be at Erin Hills, an 18-hole course in the Washington County town of Erin about 35 miles northwest of Milwaukee, it’s safe to say that very few will be more excited than Kris Schoonover.
She hasn’t just witnessed the course being transformed the past few months, weeks and days into a major championship venue; she’s watched it unfold since 2010, when the course was named a future Open site and the planning began.

Schoonover, an Eau Claire Memorial and UW-Eau Claire graduate, has worked summers in operations at Erin Hills since 2007, the year after the course opened. She also works as an assistant professor in the golf enterprise management program at UW-Stout.

“Everybody on the Erin Hills staff is excited, and the energy level here is amazing,” Schoonover said.

For the U.S. Open, Schoonover is assistant director of competitions/operations director, a key member of Erin Hills’ 250-person staff, which is working side-by-side with the United States Golf Association to stage the event. She held the same title when the course hosted the 2011 men’s U.S. Amateur.

Schoonover has attended all USGA meetings — officials have been on site for about a year — for things such as security, transportation, communications and emergency evacuations. To prepare, she also has attended the past five U.S. Opens with Erin Hills staff.

“It’s incredible how this place has been transformed,” Schoonover said. “The most interesting part is to watch this golf city come alive with the infrastructure.”

For example:

- The 18th hole, a sweeping, long par 5 where the tournament could be decided, now is lined with tall grandstands.
- A temporary bus depot, where the 25,000-plus spectators will be dropped off daily, is near the 10th hole.
- A 39,000-square-foot merchandise tent will greet spectators when they enter the windswept, links-style course.

“When you come through the main gates, the golf course opens itself up. Fans will be able to see multiple holes from a landscaped area, look at 10, walk down to 1 tee and see the grandstand at 9 or watch the Jumbotron,” Schoonover said.

Practice rounds are Monday through Wednesday, and the tournament is today through Sunday.
Uniquely Wisconsin

The defending champion is PGA Tour player Dustin Johnson, who has warned of potentially high scores if conditions are windy because of the long, thick grasses that frame the virtually treeless course.

The course will play close to 7,700 yards long, and if it tops that figure on any given day it will be the longest layout in major championship history.

Because the course is relatively new, it will be an enigma for most players at least the first part of the week. The greens and fairways are reported to be in great shape, and the course is expected to play long, firm and fast. The X factor will be the wind, which so far this year has been blowing hard from a variety of directions, Schoonover said.

“We’re hoping for the winds to make players play a lot of different shots and every club in the bag,” Schoonover said.

The course features a natural, rolling landscape in the southern kettle moraine area of Wisconsin, with postglacial features such as eskers and drumlins. Architects left the landscape intact, routing holes around them.

Even if pros in the international field, competing for one of golf’s four major trophies, don’t try one of Wisconsin’s specialties — deep-fried Ellsworth Creamery cheese curds, Usinger bratwurst or beer — chances are they’ll leave Wisconsin with an indelible impression of Erin Hills and the challenging Wisconsin landscape.

One of the reasons the USGA chose Erin Hills, only the sixth public course among the 51 venues to host the event, is because of the size of the property, 652 acres, its ability to host large crowds and stadium-like natural mounds on many holes that will give spectators great vantage points.

“The USGA puts on a great show inside and outside the ropes. It’s a seven-day event and all outdoors so it’s a huge undertaking, with evacuations and safety issues. That’s the part that’s truly impressive with the USGA. They have it all down, along with local law enforcement. Once inside the gates, this will be the safest place in the state of Wisconsin,” Schoonover said.

From Mill Run to Erin Hills

Schoonover, like the pros and Erin Hills staff, is ready for the U.S. Open test.
Her role has expanded for the event to include credentialing, background checks and access issues for the staff along with public safety per USGA standards. She typically works closely with staff orientation and training, customer service and aspects of lodging at the course’s cottages.

“During the U.S. Open, I’ll do whatever the USGA needs. I’ll have an Erin Hills radio and a USGA radio. I’ve been working 12 hours a day, seven days a week for the last three weeks. This week, I’ll get here at 4:30 a.m. and leave about 10 or 11 p.m. each night. By the end of the week I’ll probably have glazed-over eyes,” she said.

Although she’s worked her way up to an important position at a now-famous golf course, Schoonover counts herself lucky to be part of the Erin Hills staff. She landed the job with a bit of persistence and serendipity.

She worked at Mill Run Golf Course in Eau Claire while in college at UW-Eau Claire, where she earned marketing and teaching degrees in 1987 and 1990, respectively. She graduated in 1983 from Eau Claire Memorial High School, where she played golf and basketball.

“Some of my best golf memories are from Mill Run, working with (former owners) Jim and Isabel Ray,” Schoonover said.

She coached women’s golf and was an assistant women’s basketball coach at UW-Oshkosh between 1996 and 2006, after which she switched to UW-Stout to teach and coach women’s golf. She wanted to get back into golf course operations in the summers and applied at Erin Hills, a new course she had heard about.

She didn’t hear back but then crossed paths with the Erin Hills owner and founder, Bob Lang, at a golf expo in Milwaukee, again asking about openings. Lang said there were none. However, Lang’s assistant with him that day, Suzanne Schroeder, recognized the Schoonover name and asked Kris if she knew a man named Tom Schoonover.

“I said, ‘He’s my dad.’ She said, ‘He was one of the most important people in my life,’ ” Schoonover recalls Schroeder saying.

Tom Schoonover was a longtime teacher, basketball coach and then principal at Cornell High School starting in the mid-1950s. He is in the Wisconsin Basketball Coaches Association Hall of Fame. He later was a president of Hobbs Supply Co. in Eau Claire.
Schroeder, formerly Suzanne Walters of Cornell, told Lang to hire Schoonover, and she’s been at Erin Hills ever since, working there in the summers and through a course ownership change while teaching at UW-Stout during the academic year. She remains a part-time resident of Eau Claire.

Students in UW-Stout’s golf enterprise management and hospitality programs have benefited from Schoonover’s connections. Six of them are interning at Erin Hills this summer, and three graduates are on the course’s staff.

“As a professor, the applicable learning I can bring back in the classroom is extremely helpful for students who want large-scale operations experience,” Schoonover said.

**Thinking of her father**

Schoonover said she and family members will be thinking often about her dad on Sunday, the final day of the U.S. Open, which also is Father’s Day. Tom Schoonover died in September at age 87. He was diagnosed the last seven years of his life with lewy body dementia.

Along with her father’s reputation playing a role in her getting the Erin Hills job, Kris owes her love of golf to him. She partly grew up in Cornell and learned to play at the nearby Bloomer Memorial course when her father gave her and siblings a few clubs and got them to the course.

“My father got me into golf, and I’ve loved it ever since,” she said.

Tom will be missed dearly, but the U.S. Open still will be a Schoonover family affair. Kris’ mother, Marilyn, of Eau Claire, sister, brother and two nieces will be attending as spectators or as volunteers. “We’ll all get together Thursday, and I’ll take some time to be with them and watch some golf,” Kris said.

After seven years of planning, it’s time to have some fun and see the best golfers in the world compete for the men’s national championship on Wisconsin turf.

“To be part of Erin Hills for the U.S. Open is to be part of this big party we’ve been planning for a long, long time,” Schoonover said.

*Poling is a freelance writer from Eau Claire.*