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## COVER STORY

# Helping Windy Harbor Golf Club

HOW A PONTE VEDRA BEACH NONPROFIT IS WORKING TO RENOVATE AMERICA'S MILITARY GOLF COURSES

BY JUNIOR SKEPPLE  
jskepple@bizjournals.com

The 18-hole Windy Harbor Golf Club opened over half a century ago and sits within the gates of Naval Station Mayport in north Jacksonville. ¶ The course, which is available to the public and opened in 1960, still has some of the original structures on the property and is fighting to provide a golf experience that matches the sacrifice and service of the people on-base. ¶ A golf cart ride around the 6,400 yard Windy Harbor Golf Club provides views of massive naval ships at Port, serviceable fairways and greens and U.S. Navy MH-60 Seahawk helicopters flying overhead. ¶ But with the good that comes with Windy Harbor Golf Club, the course is stretched thin with its limited workforce, low wages and outdated facilities. ¶ “We are a five-star operation for the things we are required to do and we are probably a four-star operation because of things we can’t do,” said Jon Fine, who manages the course and four other entities on base. “I challenge anyone to look the way we look with the size of our staff.”





▲ The cart barn at Windy Harbor Golf Club

◀ Jennifer Poth, founder of Operation Support Military Golf

JAMES CRICHLLOW

# W

ith only five full-time employees tasked with maintaining Windy Harbor the team focuses on the essentials to keep the course running, but it lacks the finely manicured look of other golf venues in northeast Florida.

There are roped off areas on the course that flood during heavy rains, patches of unkept grass, aging structures and bunkers that can be improved.

The cart barn, which houses the course's golf carts during off hours and extreme weather, can't house all the carts at Windy Harbor. About a third of the fleet is under a covering with lighting fixtures that have exposed wiring and the cart barn area floods when it takes on too much rainwater.

With so much working against Windy Harbor, the course still logged nearly 42,000 rounds played last year and are projecting to eclipse that number this year, but Fine warns some of the course's increase in business is due to displaced golfers from Jacksonville Beach Golf Club - which is under extensive renovation.

The added business helps Windy Harbor because revenue generating entities on military bases, such as golf courses, have to be profitable without the help of tax dollars.

"Golf, bowling, clubs and catering are all referred to as 'Category C' business operations within morale, welfare and recreation," Fine said. "What that means is our tax dollars don't come to support these facilities. They have to be standalone, profitable and self-sufficient."

This is where Operation Support Military Golf (OSMG) comes in, the Ponte Vedra Beach-based organization's mission is to raise \$1 million, per project, for facility upgrades at America's ailing military golf courses.

### From Tragedy to Triumph

On April 15, 2013 at 2:49 pm two homemade devices were detonated near the finish line of the Boston Marathon killing three civilians and injuring hundreds of others.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attack Jennifer Poth founded Operation Support Military Golf, an organization through which corporate partnerships and private donors can help military golf courses stateside and abroad.

"It [the Boston Marathon bombing] was my reminder again that I wanted to serve, but I can't serve, and I was trying to figure out how to combine a lifetime in golf with our military and nothing clicked all these years until the Boston Marathon Bombing," Poth said.

Poth, the daughter of a retired lieutenant colonel in the Air Force, is unable to serve in the military because at birth she was diagnosed with Congenital Adrenal

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Hyperplasia, also known as an Adrenal Disorder.

Poth's condition prevented her from fulfilling her childhood dream, but the game of golf became a way of filling the void.

"I admire our military and being the type of kid to want to follow in my dad's footsteps, serving was just out of the cards from birth," she said. "My dad saw something in me and tried gearing it towards sports and at the age of five he introduced me to the game of golf."

Thanks to Poth's father, she took her love of the game to play for the Texas A&M University women's golf team, working for the PGA Tour, coaching the Jacksonville University women's golf team and eventually to founding OSMG.

Following the tragedy in Boston and years of work, Poth and OSMG are preparing to break ground on the organization's first project: Naval Station Mayport's, Windy Harbor Golf Club.

### Answering the call of duty

When it comes to proposing any action that pertains to active duty soldiers, there are handfuls of regulations that takes years to navigate and the process has been a challenge for OSMG.

"There is a huge amount of leg work, which I think is exciting and rewarding," Poth said. "In many cases, civilians assume active duty soldiers are completely taken care of through tax dollars, because they are still in uniform, but that is not always the case."

To make the renovations happen at Windy Harbor, OSMG approached the base commander at Naval Station Mayport, then went to the regional office and the final approval for the course enhancements came from Washington D.C.

The approval for the project was signed off by the secretary of the Navy on Dec. 23, 2015.

"Please convey my personal appreciation and gratitude to the members of Operation Support Military Golf Inc. for their sponsorship of this very valuable project," former secretary of the Navy Sean J. Stackley wrote in a letter to OSMG. "Your outstanding support of our service members and their families is greatly appreciated."

Over the span of four years, OSMG has been building credibility, creating partnerships in the golf community and raising needed funding for the Mayport project and beyond.

In building the organization's notoriety in the area, OSMG held a golf

invitational at Windy Harbor in 2015 with proceeds going towards renovations at the course.

2005 Players Champion, Fred Funk, came out to support OSMG and play in the tournament and he says the service men and women across the globe are "true heroes."

"[Windy Harbor] is their home when they're home, I think it's a place they can all interact without the life-threatening situations they are in when they are on the road," Funk told the Business Journal. "You've got to have a great place for these people to take the pressure off and take a deep breath."

OSMG is looking to do just that.

Windy Harbor's practice facility, cart barn and two cinder block restrooms – that have stood since the course was built over a half century ago – are going to be renovated with the funds raised by OSMG.

The improvements will be a welcome sight for the course's manager, who has worked at Windy Harbor for 25 years.

Jon Fine, the business activity manager for morale welfare and recreation (MWR) for Naval Station Mayport, came to what was then Mayport Golf Club in the early 90's.

With hiring staff from outside the gates difficult due to low wages and security protocols, Fine helps out with everything from running the golf cart barn, trimming greens and preparing food when employees miss work at Bogey's – the on-base restaurant and hangout.

"When I got here in 1993, I would say it was an average golf course, it was run down a little bit and there wasn't really a vision because they hadn't had a golf pro here for close to five years," Fine said. "My goal when I got here was to provide the service men and women with a private club atmosphere, at military pricing."

"I think I have accomplished that for the most part," he added.

In Fine's time at Windy Harbor Golf Club, the golf clubhouse was rebuilt in 1996 and the course was renovated by famous golf architect, the late Willard Byrd, in 2000 – but since then there haven't been any major changes to the course.

### The Cost of Change

OSMG continues to work towards raising the near \$1 million in monetary and in-kind funding for the Naval Station Mayport golf course upgrades, but the organization's plan is ready to go and Poth is "confident" the money Windy Harbor needs will come through.

"It's [\$1 million] small enough to be attainable and it's a number that can make a difference to a golf course, if spent and thought out wisely," Poth said. "OSMG is not handing over a giant check and saying 'here you go,' we are seeing the projects through from start to finish, which is exciting."

Poth has spent countless hours overseeing the recruitment of companies that are on board to make the Windy Harbor renovations possible.

CXT Inc. has committed to renovating both on-course restrooms that will double as storm shelters. Poth says both restroom renovations will cost just under \$300,000 combined.

The practice facility, designed by Arnold Palmer Design Company, will feature an expanded putting green and driving range along with a brand new chipping, pitching and bunker area.

The cart barn is still the original structure from when the course opened in the 1960's and OSMG plans to have that building demolished and rebuilt. Poth says the cart barn rebuild will cost around \$400,000.

Poth, who can't step foot on the Windy Harbor Golf Club grounds without being greeted by current and former soldiers, is personally invested in the success of her organization – and its first project – because Naval Station Mayport is a part of her military family.

"I've met our medically retired service members who are getting fitted for prosthetics and they tell me stories of working with their great nurses, but it gets boring being in a building all the time," Poth said. "They stress to me the added bonus of being on a golf course, because it's that much more comfortable and safe to them."

Navy soldiers can work long shifts and spend months at sea. When service members arrive back to the base, many of the service men and women look to Windy Harbor to be an outlet for the toll the job takes on them.

"You work 12 hour days, you rarely get any time off and you are away from the family – military life is tough," Master Chief Petty Officer (ret.) Carlos Henriquez said. "It [Windy Harbor Golf Club] helps me get away from it all, especially when I was on active duty."

Once renovations are complete, Windy Harbor Golf Club and its patrons will hopefully see more activities available at the course.

"I believe it [renovations] will drive more rounds, we can create different practice programs and offer those to families and to our sailors and introduce them to the game of golf. Then this becomes a home for them," Fine said.

With increased visual appeal and added business after renovations are complete, Windy Harbor and its growing uses for the course would be an asset to soldiers across the region.

"The money doesn't come back to the course that we make, it goes in to one fund for the 23 bases within the southeast region," Fine said. "We are one big family and if there is a shining star in the enterprise that can make more money, that's a bonus to all people and that's what we all aim to be."

OSMG plans on completing the practice facility upgrades before the fall weather arrives. The restrooms and cart barn are planned to be completed as soon as sufficient funds are raised.

Although the Windy Harbor Golf Club renovations are still in the works, OSMG is in talks to bring their mission to another Florida military golf course.

### What's Next for OSMG

With the Naval Station Mayport project on the horizon, OSMG has already began the work for its next venture: Bay Palms Golf Course at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa.

Poth completed a walkthrough with the golf course architect on the project this June for the 36-hole course.

The 6,400 yard North Course at Bay Palms was built in the 1940's and the 6,700 yard South Course was built in 1986.

Both courses feature bermudagrass greens and four sets of tees for different skill levels.

OSMG has Sanford Golf Design and Wadsworth Golf Construction Company on board for the project, but the organization still is in need of the funds to continue accomplishing the OSMG mission at courses across the nation.

"There are still bills to be paid," Poth said. "I haven't taken a salary from this organization, I have used my own savings and I believe in what we are doing and pushing through."

OSMG needs individual donors and company partnerships to have the resources to bring lasting change to more courses and help as many retired, veteran and active duty soldiers and their families as possible.

Information on how you or your company can become a part of the OSMG family is on the organization's website.

"There is something about golf that is almost like being in the military. You have to be on-time, follow the rules and there is honor and integrity of the game," Henriquez said. "I've made good friends here, it's my home course."