

## ***Golf's Forgotten Heroes:***

# **COURSE SUPERINTENDENTS**

By David Zaslowsky  
Desert Sun Sports Editor

"The course has to be playable, has to look good, you have to please the members and if you can do all three and keep your sanity and your wife, you're doing a good job."

Golf course superintendent Bill Killen wasn't joking when he made that statement.

Any golfer worth his handicap who fails to shoot up to par may use the course as a scapegoat. It is as simple as the rough was too high or the pin placement was bad. Or half a dozen other excuses.

The people that Killen and others in his profession have to please sometimes pay as much as \$2 million to buy their dream house and a membership at one of the Coachella Valley's more prestigious clubs. The cost at other clubs often runs well in excess of \$250,000. All bring the promise of playing on some of the world's most beautiful courses.

"They (Club members) want the course to look good all year," said Jack Roessinger, director of turfgrass management at The Vintage Club. They want the club to be the best in the world and the members are paying quite a bit of money."

"But they really don't know or understand what we do. They think all you have to do is grow the grass and mow it."

A golf course superintendent's day starts as early as 5:30 a.m. The routine begins with a weather report, followed by an inspection of the course from the greens and fairways to the water pump station and the wells. Then he makes assignments for his crew and takes care of any special projects.

At many clubs, the superintendent spends more time than he wants to in the office, burdened with paperwork and the headache of budgets. It is a year-round job.

"You have to be a manager, accountant, plumber and carpenter," said Don Pakkala, course superintendent at The Vintage Club in Indian Wells.

"You need to know a little about everything."

And a lot about the weather.

In the Coachella Valley that means coping with summer temperatures of 115 degrees and near-freezing or sub-freezing temperatures in the winter.

"Everything we do is dictated by the weather," Killen said. "Our reputation is based on the weather and it's a crap shoot."

Pakalla explained some of the problems that a course superintendent can run into. "Let's say you're irrigating the course on a humid day and you get a rainstorm. It aggravates the situation because you can't control the amount of water. You must adjust your program according to what nature is doing, has done and will do. The weather is the big boss."

The type of work that has to be done also varies with the kind of grass used on the course.

Only a handful of courses—Sunnylands, The Club at Morningside, Mission Hills, The Springs, Eldorado, The Vintage Club and Palm Desert Resort Country Club—have bentgrass. The rest of the courses have bermuda grass.

"Bentgrass is a natural cool season, fine-texture grass that grows great in places like Oregon," said Bud Lombard, a salesman for Foster and Gardner of Coachella, which keeps the superintendents in grass seed, chemicals, fertilizer and the other supplies needed to maintain a golf course.

"Bentgrass is the most well-accepted putting surface, very smooth, but it goes into a warm season dormancy," Lombard added, "and it has disease problems, Pythium. It is a warm-season disease that can completely kill a green in 24 hours."

The courses with Bermuda have a different problem. Each year they must be overseeded because it is a warm-season grass that is tailor made for Coachella Valley summers, but is dormant during the winter when course use is at its peak.

Course superintendents mow down the bermuda as low as possible and plant rye grass on top of that. According to Lombard, most superintendents use one of 15 types of perennial rye for their overseeding. He said overseeding costs, including water, range from \$70,000 to \$90,000.

Overseeding a 150-acre course also means 10 to 12-hour workdays for superintendents six or seven days a week.

Lombard said most of the overseeding in the Coachella Valley is done between October and November when the courses are closed from three to four weeks.

The perennial rye then becomes dormant in the summer and the Bermuda becomes active again, aggressively "squeezing out" the rye grass and growing over it.

Other battles also are being waged at all clubs.

There is an on-going war against insects. And superintendents have to keep their lakes looking like lakes instead of marshes. To combat the growth of vegetation in the lakes, most valley superintendents use chemicals in the summer and a combination of tilipia (a weed-eating fish) and chemicals during the winter. (Tilipia die off when the water temperature drops below 55 degrees.)

In addition to overseeding and battling diseases and insects, summertime is when superintendents are busy preparing the courses for winter. The courses are completely renovated. Cart paths are redone, sand traps reshaped and trees trimmed—all 3,000-or-so when it comes to the more established courses.

All of this takes an annual budget of up to \$1.5 million for some courses and a staff as large as 50 to keep the "beautiful courses" beautiful.

"When you watch a golf tournament on television, you will hear the announcers and golfers say that the course is in beautiful shape," Killen said, "They never say who does it, but you certainly get screamed at if the course is in bad shape."