



*9th Green Marsh Landing C.C. Photo by Daniel Zelazek*





# *And a marsh runs through it...*

BY JOEL D. JACKSON, CGCS

**F**lorida's Intracoastal Waterway is a network of bays, rivers, creeks and marshes all connected behind the barrier islands of the coastline. In Northeast Florida, the Pablo Creek portion of this



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waterway runs south from the St. Johns River to the Duval - St. Johns County line. Just below the St. Johns County line, we find Cabbage Creek draining the land west of Ponte Vedra Beach. Along the banks of the winding tributaries of Cabbage Creek, we find the Marsh Landing Country Club.

Many of the golfholes at Marsh Landing are nestled between and crossed by Cabbage Creek's serpentine swards of marsh grasses turned golden brown by the several hard freezes of the winter of '96.

Narrow, twisting, brackish creeks, rising and falling with the tides, meander through the marsh grass. Oyster beds protrude at low tide and wakes and swirls of cruising fish can be seen on the rising tide. Other holes wind through oak, pine and sabal palm hammocks common in the landscape just west of the great coastal beach dunes.

In contrast to the marsh grasses and the tan dormant bermudagrass roughs, the overseeded greens, tees and fairways rest like emeralds on beige velvet. The bright green islands of turf catch your eye in the winterized landscape. And like the precise facets on a gemstone, the edges of the overseeded areas are crisp and clean, reflecting the work of a master craftsman.

Ed Seay designed Marsh Landing in 1986 and for the past seven years superintendent Steve La France has been tending to the details of managing and grooming this gem of a golf course.

It is late January and Steve is giving me a tour of Marsh Landing. The winter has been just as hard on North Florida as it has on Central Florida. Marsh Landing does receive some moderating effect from being so close to the Atlantic Ocean. Their temperatures run a few degrees higher during the cold snaps than the courses farther inland.

"The biggest problem this winter has been the duration of the cold spells this year," says Steve. "The cold is lasting longer and driving the grass into deeper dormancy."

The contrasts between the overseeded and non-overseeded areas are more pronounced this year. I like

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*The 11th hole shows its mettle with a formidable bunker on the left side. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.*

the look. I call it the "Arizona Look" from the way the courses look on TV at the Phoenix and Tucson Opens.

Steve and his staff have done an outstanding job of seeding. I didn't see any ragged edges or volunteer seedlings anywhere.

"By judicious contour mowing each season, we have reduced our total fairway acreage. We have kept our seeding rate on the fairways at 480 pounds per acre. This has helped increase our overseed density without raising seed costs. We use a Viccon spreader and apply the seed in two directions," Steve explained.

"Our pre-emergent program seems to be getting more complex each year. Because we use bentgrass in our greens mix, I don't use the Kerb-charcoal program for *Poa annua* control. Instead we use the Rubigan program of splitting three applications prior to seeding.

"Around the greens perimeters we use

a drop spreader to apply Ronstar XL and then we spray Barricade the rest of the way. I have tried Kerb around the tee slopes, but two rainy years in a row right after seeding have led me to try Balan around tee, approach and fairway perimeters.

"This year we were very lucky that all the rain we were having quit so we could get the seed out before it started getting too cool for germination."

"The putting surfaces are seeded with

3 pounds of Penneagle bentgrass and 9 pounds of Laser Poa trivialis. With 30,000 to 36,000 rounds of golf a year, the owners and members want the greens on the fast side. We have only made one granular application of fertilizer to the greens since seeding. Instead we apply 1/10 of a pound of nitrogen weekly using Nutriculture's 28-8-18 Bentgrass Special soluble fertilizer. Right now we're mowing the greens at .130 inches. In the warm season, we apply 1/2 pound of nitrogen



*One of several freshwater lakes on the back nine highlights the 17th hole. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.*





*The 6th green awaits at the end of a 500 yard par 5 hole. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.*

as a granular fertilizer every three weeks and topdress the greens lightly with the Vicor."

As we continued our tour, Steve pointed out some of the natural highlights and challenges of the course.

"The front nine is built mostly in a tidal marsh with the brackish creeks providing spectacular tee and approach shots. We have seen snook and red drum in those waters. The back nine has more fresh water lakes and they have a healthy largemouth bass population. We have a nesting pair of ospreys that comes back every year, and as you can see we have mallards, egrets, herons, ibis and wood storks all over the place."

"Irrigation management is my biggest challenge because of the heavy nature of the soil profile. We grow in our green's overseeding by hand watering exclusively because many slopes can't take the automatic irrigation.

"On holes #4 and #5, we have some shading problems in the spring and fall and we selectively clear vegetation to open them up for more air circulation and sunlight.

"We also have ongoing drainage projects to relieve any problem areas that develop during heavy rainy periods like the last two summers. Last year we renovated 20 bunkers. This year we have dedicated the first six months to do 40 more. We should finish all the greens bunkers by the end of this month."

Steve also showed me some isolated areas along the outer roughs that defied all attempts to grow good turf. These were in deep shade or in low runoff areas that were hard to drain.

"We converted these areas into 'waste bunkers' by cleaning out the mucky soil and bringing in some crushed coquina. Now all we have to do is touch it up from time to time when we're raking bunkers.

"Currently, as the Marsh Landing community matures, the course is being impacted a little by some of the new construction. Typical stuff like an irrigation line getting cut.

"On a larger scale we are realigning several cart paths to set up the holes better as homes are added nearby. That is one of the things I like about the ownership. They are willing to make the investment to do things right. Our department used to have landscape responsibilities around the development.

"The owners wanted the course to rise to the next level of excellence, so we added a couple of people to the staff and we work only on the course. Now we can devote more attention to details like more frequent cart path and bunker edging."

That attention to detail at has not gone unnoticed in the golf world. Besides being a premiere residential county club facility, Marsh Landing annually hosts



the PGA Commissioner's Cup tournament held during The Players Championship week.

Marsh Landing has also been selected to host regional U. S. Open and U. S. Amateur qualifying tournaments. That is quite a compliment to the efforts of Steve and his staff since Marsh Landing is but one of over a half dozen courses competing for favor in the Ponte Vedra Beach area.

Steve's ability to manage a high profile golf facility is a result of a familiar journey taken by many in similar positions, but also unique like the individual dreams, visions and talents we each bring with us.

Steve grew up working at the St. Joseph's Bay C. C. in Port St. Joe, Florida all through junior and senior high school. This is where golf professional Code House taught Steve to play golf and love the game.

He worked all the jobs associated with

the pro shop and eventually he worked on the course maintenance staff. When Steve was competing on the golf team at Lake City Community College, he recognized the limitations of his skills. House, his mentor, encouraged him to enroll in the Golf Operations Program at LCCC, and Steve has never looked back.

Steve arrived at Marsh Landing by way of South Carolina, Alabama, and Palm Beach County, Florida. Each stop was a lesson in what it takes to be a successful superintendent.

At Palmetto Dunes on Hilton Head Island, Steve, the OJT student, was distinctly impressed by the totally professional demeanor and people skills of Billy Fuller. Billy, you may remember, went on to serve as superintendent at Augusta National in the mid 1980s.

In Alabama, as a young assistant, Steve came under the tutelage of Ken Dillard, CGCS. Active in state and national asso-

ciations, Ken gave Steve insights into being responsible to a profession as well as a position.

At the Boca West complex, Steve got to polish his skills in a highly competitive atmosphere under the guidance of the talented and versatile Billy Wright, CGCS. (1995 FGCSA President's Award winner)

Natives of North Florida and Georgia, Steve and wife Amy are happy to be in the Jacksonville area to be closer to their roots and to begin their family. If you draw a line on a state map due west from Marsh Landing and Ponte Vedra Beach, you will come to Port St. Joe. The little coincidences in life can be very interesting.

Now sporting an 8 handicap, Steve still enjoys playing golf, especially at other courses to get new ideas, but he finds his playing time diminishing and limited to monthly North Florida GCSA chapter



*The approach shot on the 8th hole must carry the marsh fronting the green. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.*



meetings.

Perhaps Steve finds himself learning a new lesson as he lists spending time with the kids as one of his primary interests on this part of his journey. Setting priorities and finding that balance between work and personal life seems like a goal that Steve is mastering at home and at Marsh Landing.



*Ibis, egrets, mallards and a wood stork share the marsh pond behind #3 tee. Photos by Daniel Zelazek and David Bailey.*



*Marsh Landing's 1996 bunker project is under way on #17 green. Photo by Joel Jackson.*





*Superintendent Steve La France (left) and his assistant, Daron Mueller. Photo by Joel Jackson*

## Steve La France

**Originally from:** DeFuniak Springs, FL

**Family:** Wife, Amy. Two sons, Logan(5 yrs) and Marshall(18 mos.)

**Education:** Golf Course Operations Degree, Lake City Community College

**Employment:** 1989-Present, Superintendent Marsh Landing CC, Ponte Vedra Beach; 1986-89, Superintendent Boca West, Inc. Boca Raton; 1981-86 Assistant then Superintendent Olympic Spa G & CC, Dothan, AL; 1979-80 Student OJT at Palmetto Dunes Resort, Hilton Head, SC.

**How did you get into the business:** I grew up working on a golf course in Port St. Joe, FL from the age of 14. I worked all jobs from life guard to cart attendant to pro shop and eventually golf course maintenance all through junior and senior high school. I received a Golf Scholarship to LCCC after high school.

**People who have influenced your career:** Code House was the golf professional at Port St. Joe. He taught me to play golf and encouraged me to attend the Golf Operations program at Lake City. During my first OJT at Palmetto Dunes, I worked for Billy Fuller. After being exposed to Billy's people skills and professional manner, I felt this was what I wanted to do. He probably had the biggest single impact on my early career. From Ken Dillard in Alabama, I learned the value of networking and being involved in our associations. Under Billy Wright's watchful and trusting eye at Boca West, I was given the opportunity to run my own course in the very competitive Palm Beach area. It was a tremendous learning experience.

**Personal philosophy of work and life:** Keep your priorities in order. Take things one day at a time. Be hands on. My wife is from Georgia and I'm from North Florida so we have really enjoyed moving to this part of the state. The ownership at Marsh Landing is very willing to invest in the quality of the total development, and that makes it fun to work here.

**Advice to prospective superintendents:** Be patient and work hard. Hard work always pays off! Develop your people skills. That is just as important as any technical knowledge of turf management.

**Professional affiliations:** Current board member North Florida GCSA, FTGA, GCSAA. Past board member, Alabama Turfgrass Association.

**Hobbies and interests:** Golf, fishing and spending time with the kids.





*The Marsh Landing Golf Maintenance Team. Photo by Joel Jackson.*

## Marsh Landing Country Club

**Location:** Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida

**Ownership:** M.L. Partnership

**Playing policy:** Private.

**Management Team:** Club Manager, Sally Larkin Hall; Director of Golf, Marc "Dewey" Arnette, Head Golf Professional, Mike Barlow

**Designed by:** Ed Seay. 18 holes.  
Length = 6,841 yards.

**Course/Slope Ratings:** Championship - 72.7/131; Gentlemen - 70.8/128; Seniors - 68.6/123; Ladies - 68.7/121

**Constructed by:** M. L. Partnership.  
**Opened:** May 1986

**Recent projects:** Rerouting paths on some holes. Construction of 3 new lakes for drainage and retention. Renovating and installing bunker drains.

**Acreage:** Total turf = 101 acres.  
**Waterways** = 50 acres.

**Greens:** 3 acres. Average size = 6,000 square feet. Turf type = Tifdwarf. HOC = .125(1/8") to .156 (5/32"). Overseeding = 3 pounds

Penneagle bent and 9 pounds Laser Poa trivialis per 1,000 square feet.. Green speed goal = 8.5 - 9.0. Special events 10.0+.

**Tees:** 3 acres. Turf type: Tifway 419. HOC = 7/16" - 9/16". Overseeding = Perennial ryegrass blend at 20 pounds per square feet.

**Fairways:** 25 acres. Turf Type = Tifway 419. HOC = 7/16" - 9/16". Overseeding = Perennial ryegrass blend at 480 pounds per acre.

**Roughs:** 70 acres. Turf Type = Tifway 419. HOC = 1.25" - 1.50". No overseeding.

**Irrigation:** Source = Effluent. Equipment = Carol Childers pump station. Toro VTII Central Controls. 730 Toro 670 heads covering 100 acres.

**Staff:** Total of 20 including superintendent. Assistant Superintendent, Daron Murrell. Equipment Techs, David Lindsey and Chris Shackelford. Pest Control Tech, Tony Sanders. Irrigation Tech, Bill Evans.

**Unusual conditions:** Tidal marsh environment and heavy soil profile makes proper irrigation management critical.

**Mowing equipment:** Greens = Jacobsen walk mowers. Tees & collars = Lesco triplexes. Fairways = Jacobsen LF-100's. Roughs = Two Jacobsen pull behind, 5-gang units.

**Cultural and Fertility programs:**  
Aerification: Greens = 2 times per year. Core aerified in spring and deep drilled in the fall. Tees & Fairways = Core aerified once per year. Fertility: Greens = 12 - 16 pounds of N per year. Combination of weekly liquid spoon feeding a few granular applications. Tees = 6 - 8 pounds of N per year. Fairways & Roughs = 4 - 7 pounds on N per year. Other: The greens are lightly verticut and topdressed every three 3 weeks in summer and as needed the rest of the year.



## Tip to speed up play

Discovering new ideas is one of the fringe benefits of traveling all over the state to write cover stories for *The Florida Green*. Here's one that caught my eye on this assignment.

Pace of play at golf courses is one of the most difficult problems to manage.

Marsh Landing has installed the usual devices:

- vertical 150 yard markers in the roughs.
- yardage labels on the irrigation heads.
- engraved in ground granite markers at 200, 150 and 100 yards.
- markers on the cart paths at 200, 150 and 100 yards.

With all those commonly used distance aids, how many times have you still seen golfers wasting time wandering about looking for one of those painstakingly laser calibrated and labeled irrigation heads? Marsh Landing takes a very proactive step and makes those heads very easy to spot by painting a bright orange circle around the heads marked with yardages. It works for them. Maybe it will work for you!

*Joel D. Jackson, CGCS*

