



A Course Worth Its

A day at Sailfish Point is just another day in paradise.

The 14th green and the St. Lucie Inlet.



Salt

Paradise

BY JOEL D. JACKSON, CGCS

It is a sunny May morning in the town of Stuart on Florida's Treasure Coast. There is a light southeasterly sea breeze blowing in off the Atlantic Ocean. I'm standing on the southern tip of Hutchinson Island with Craig Baker, superintendent of the Sailfish Point Golf Club, watching the incoming tide in the St. Lucie inlet surge through large culvert pipes that connect the inlet and the golf course.

The sparkling sea water in shades of turquoise and green fills the waterway in front of the 14th green and pushes on to the other lakes and ponds on the course. A school of silver mullet scatters in panic in the gin-clear shallows of a sand bar as a large snook prowls the edge of the channel.

At that moment I want to put down the camera and tape recorder and go fishing instead of doing a golf story.

I wonder how Craig and his staff can possibly carry out their duties without



"No mow" zones like this one on hole #3 help stabilize the banks and provide habitat for birds and fish.

daydreaming of wetting a line or getting distracted by striking fish and the constant stream of fishing boats and yachts slipping past the course leaving trails of white foam in the blue waters. It is truly a paradise setting. But paradise comes with a price, and I don't mean just land values.

Surrounded by salt water and under a constant breeze, Sailfish Point is a challenge to maintain to the high standards expected by both members and superintendent Craig Baker.

"The weather we experience here has had the most influence on my maintenance programs than at any other course I have managed," said Baker. "I have seen salt crystals as thick as frost on the course when the winds are really blowing. I have even had salt burn on the riverside part of the course once from a northerly wind during a severe cold front.

"Sometimes the wind can blow for a month at a time when a high pressure area settles in. That makes it impossible to spray for weeds and pests and it also affects the irrigation coverage."

Baker isn't complaining, mind you. He has had to adjust his turf management practices to work with what Mother Nature gives him.

"Our irrigation water tends to have a high salt index as you might expect since we're on a coastal barrier island. During the winter when more people are here, we can dilute our irrigation water with effluent, but in the summer we have to rely solely on the deep well."

Salinity of the soils is also a challenge for Baker.

"A lot of the soil here is dredged up river bottom and it has a very fine texture so not much leaches through, including the brackish irrigation water. So from time to time we apply gypsum, but I haven't seen much response. We do use it annually on the greens because they have a sandier profile. We also use an acid injection system called Phairway to help balance the pH of the soil."

Because several of the fairways had high saline and sodic areas, Baker brought in a few pieces of Adelaide paspalum grass and started plugging it in to the bare

spots in the fairways and roughs. Paspalum is a fine-textured grass with the ability to thrive in poor soils. It can be very aggressive and get thatchy, but it can be managed and provide a turf that can live in areas where bermudagrass doesn't do well.

Baker says there is no real competition between the grasses.

"The Adelaide does well where the 419 can't and vice versa. The paspalum will go off color during intense drought conditions, but at least I've got something I can grow in the salty areas. We just keep adding plugs to thin spots. One fairway was over one-third bare when I first came here now we only have a few difficult spots left to contend with."

Baker and his staff do get to do "normal" turf maintenance besides dealing with salty air, water and land. The condition of the gently rolling Nicklaus-designed course reflects the dedication and teamwork of the maintenance department.

There have been modifications to the course since it opened in 1981, and Baker



Early morning view from behind #4 green. The #3 green and the Indian River are in the background. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

has been there from the rebuilding of the greens in 1988 to the ongoing drainage work in some of the fairways and bunkers.

Baker said, "Last month we had a week of rain totaling 14.65 inches with the last 7.25 inches all falling on a Wednesday. We were open by Friday. We can take spring and summer rains, but when we have the fall flood tides and a wet cold front we stay wetter. There have been sometime periods in the fall when I won't water fairways for 30 to 40 days."

Another modification Baker introduced was the taller cut along the banks of the water hazards.

"The banks used to be kept mowed down to the shortest possible Flymow height. We started having erosion problems from heavy rains and the rising and falling tides. We even had to install some bulkheads to keep from losing a green.

"We raised the height of cut and just go in and trim it when needed. A side benefit is that we now basically have a (no

mow) zone along our waterways that helps to capture and filter any possible runoff."

Baker and his staff are charged with keeping the Tifdwarf greens medium fast to fast all year long so the greens are kept rolling from 8.5 to 10.5 on the Stimpmeter. Baker "interseeds" with light rates of *Poa trivialis* in the fall. This year he put out only 5 to 6 pounds per thousand square feet and he rarely exceeds 8 pounds in a typical year.

One of the benefits of the oceanfront location is that the temperatures do stay quite a bit warmer than the inland courses. It takes a really hard freeze to affect the turf here.

Baker also rolls his greens on Mens Day and Ladies Day, sometimes expanding that to three to four rollings per week. The height of cut in season is at 1/8th of an inch.

Since play is seasonal at Sailfish Point, Baker and his staff carry out most of the project work from May to October while

still preparing the course for the 20 to 30 players that might tee it up during the summer months.

In the fall and winter, play can average anywhere from 175 to 240 players a day giving little time except for course grooming. This summer work is under way preparing a short-game practice area near the clubhouse just left of the eighteenth fairway.

Later the bridges on holes #2 and #7 will be reworked to replace the planking and cross beams. Then there are over 200 landscape beds to be reshaped and refurbished. Without a dedicated landscape crew, this work falls to the golf maintenance staff to take care of as part of their routine.

Baker recalled one of the more difficult landscape jobs they had to perform.

"We lost a huge sea grape in the cart path turnaround on the Number 2 and 7 double tee island during the 1989 freeze. We wanted a specimen plant to replace it so we bought a large phoenix *robellini*



Craig Baker, GCS.
Photo by Joel Jackson.

Craig Baker

Originally from: North Webster, Indiana.

Family: wife - Connie; son - Tony, assistant superintendent, Loblolly Pines G.C., Hobe Sound.

Education: A. S. Golf Course Operations - Lake City Community College, class of 1974.

Employment History: 1988 to Present, Sailfish Point Golf Club, Inc., Superintendent. 1977-88 Indian River Plantation Resort, Superintendent. 1974-77 Lone Palm Golf Course, Asst. Superintendent. 1973 OJT at Harbor Town Golf Links, Hilton Head, SC. 1972 OJT at Gainesville Golf & Country Club, Gainesville, FL.

Professional affiliations/Offices held/Honors/Awards: Member of: GCSAA, FTGA, FGCSA. Founding member of the Treasure Coast Chapter of the FGCSA — Served as president, vice-president and treasurer. Received an FTGA scholarship to Lake City Community College Golf Operations program. Honors — Sailfish Point being picked by peers to represent the Treasure Coast as the Florida Green Summer '97 cover story.

People in or out of the industry who have influenced your life and career: My mother and father for giving me a strong work ethic and supporting me through college; Mr. Jerry Cheesman, LCCC instructor & former superintendent, for giving me the whole picture of the dedication it takes to be a superintendent; my wife for tolerating many early departures and late returns.

How did you get into the business? Worked on a golf maintenance crew in Indiana in summer of 1965 before attending college. My cousin, Rick Baker, attended LCCC, class of 1972 while I was in the Navy. I then attended LCCC after my Naval service.

Goals/accomplishments/personal philosophy: To be the best superintendent I can be. To continue to learn daily. To accomplish your goals, you must surround yourself with a strong support staff.

Advice to prospective superintendents: When you think you know most everything, you will be humbled by Mother Nature!

Personal memorable moments good, bad or humorous: (1) When Roger Welker (now with U.H.S.) worked for me at Indian River Plantation and was bitten by a rat snake. However, I told him it was a copperhead — all color immediately drained from his face! (2) When Dick Gray (Loblolly Pines - Florida Club) worked for O. M. Scott's and came in to my office, complaining of a sore back, and lay prone on my office floor moaning! (3) One day I sent an employee to trim mangroves. As I was checking a nearby green, I noticed he hadn't moved for approximately 10 minutes. When I went angrily to confront him, I found him working diligently. He had laid his hat on top of the mangroves. You had to see it to appreciate it!

Hobbies and interests: Golf, fishing, all sports.



Sailfish Point GC

Location: Hutchinson Island, Stuart, Florida.

Ownership: Member owned.

Playing Policy: Private and guests of members.

Management Team: Club President - Samuel Zemsky; Head Golf Professional - Victor Tortorici; Green Committee Chairman - Robert Greaves; Asst. Chairman - Hugh Beath; Club Vice President - John Lindsay; Treasurer - David Armstrong; Secretary - Naomi Tolley. Golf Course Superintendent - Craig Baker; Assistant Golf Course Superintendent - Steve White.

Designed by: Jack Nicklaus. Constructed by: Dickerson Construction, Inc.

18 holes: Par 72 at 6,832 yards. Opened 1981.

Course Slope/Rating: Gold = 74/137; Blue = 71.8/132; Green = 69.6/127; Red = 71.8/127.

Major renovations/projects: Rebuilt greens in 1988; reconstructed & drained bunkers in 1989; complete re-landscaping of course after 1989 freeze; ongoing drainage in many fairways; rebuilding of several tees; rebuilding two bridges in 1997.

Acreage under maintenance: 116 acres.

Waterways: 28 acres of salt water tidal lakes, canals and ponds.

Greens: 4 acres. Average size = 8000 sq.ft. Turf type = Tifdwarf. HOC: .105" - .140" including seasonal changes. Overseeding - Type and rate: Interseeding w/Poa Trivialis @ 6-8 lbs/m. Green speed goals: 8.5' - 10.5'

Tees: 5 acres Turf type = Tifway. HOC: .375" - .450" including seasonal changes. Overseeding = Perennial Ryegrass @ 14-20 lbs/m.

Fairways: 36 acres. Tifway 419, Adelaide Paspalum and Common Bermuda. HOC including seasonal changes = .500" - .625." No overseeding.

Roughs: 71 acres. Turf type = Tifway 419, Adelaide Paspalum and Common Bermuda. HOC including seasonal changes) = 1.25" - 1.50." No overseeding.

Irrigation: Source = 1100' deep Artesian well. Salt concentrations have reached as high as 2300-2400 PPM. Can supplement with effluent water during peak winter season. Equipment: PSI pumping station. Heads - Toro, 694's, 692's and 670's. Controllers - Toro Varitime II.

Staff: Total of 18 - 22 including head superintendent.; assistant superintendent, Steve White; Ren Deagle, head mechanic; Scott Perry, asst. mechanic; Domenic Fazio, irrigation technician; Bernadette Pratt, administrative/human resources; William Greaves, crew leader. 3 Licensed Pest Control applicators.

Management challenges: Water quality - sodium ppm 650-750; chloride ppm 1600. Salt concentration (TDS) has been as high 2300 ppm. Water pH - 7.5-9.5 (use Phairway Acid Injection). Barrier Island, can be very windy; lots of salt spray, and at times, salt water intrusion. Many fairways built from dredged material from Indian River. Maintenance of over 200 ornamental beds.

Equipment: Greens: John Deere walk mowers, Oct-May; Jacobsen Triplexes, June-September. Tees: Jacobsen Triplexes. Fairways: John Deere 3235A, summer & winter; Toro 5100, winter. Roughs: Jacobsen Blitzter; Ransome Rotary mower. Green and Tee Slopes: John Deere 2653 & Nationals. Club Car Utility vehicles. Cushman sprayer.

Cultural/pest control/fertility programs: Aerify Greens: 3 times with Toro Hydroject (Jan/Feb/March); 1 Deep Drill (May), 2 Coremaster (June or July & Sept.). Tees - 2 to 3 times with Coremaster. Fairways - 2 Aerway, 1 Jacobsen 590. Verticut greens, tees as needed. Topdress greens 15 times/yr. Fertilization: Greens: 18#N and 24# K per year. Tees = 12#N and 18#K per year. Fairways = 6-8#N and 8-10#K per year. Roughs = 4-6#N and 6-8#K per year. Above areas are supplemented with fertigation in winter.

Wildlife: Throughout the course of the year, there are approximately 80 different species of birds that have been noted at Sailfish Point. The Audubon Society does an annual Christmas bird census and always finds at least 50 different species; some of the more unusual are: Roseate spoonbills, pelicans, sandpipers, terns, gulls, herons, plovers warblers, black skimmers, ospreys and a variety of ducks. Bobcats and otters have also been observed.

palm. We trucked it in as close as we could and then we were going to use a combination of a crane and a loader to lift and shuttle the palm into place.

“The darn thing was so heavy the crane couldn’t hold it when it slid off the truck. We had to cut the root ball into three pieces and then reassemble it in the hole. I dumped in 20 bags of Milorganite and kept a water hose trickling on it for a month. It never had a problem since.”

The course abounds with sea grape and Australian pine, Norfolk Island pine, palms of several varieties, green buttonwoods, oleander, hibiscus and mangrove. While shade from the trees does not cause a turf thinning problem, it has had Baker wondering about influencing grain on some of the greens.

“You can see a perfect outline of the tree tops along the edge of the grain patch on No. 13 green. It appears as if the turf is

growing east-southeast because it can’t follow the setting sun since the trees are blocking the light. It’s the darndest thing I’ve ever seen!”

The nine-year-old greens were showing a few of the “mutation/contamination” spots that are common to courses all over Florida. While the jury is still out on exactly what we are seeing — mutation or contamination — Baker has made an interesting observation that points more toward the mutation theory.

Baker says, “I have these spots on most of the greens. The worst green is the 18th. It sits right on the beach dune. It gets the most salt spray and the most desiccating winds. It isn’t much of a stretch to imagine that if living things evolve or mutate in response to environmental pressures, then these grasses we are dealing with might just doing that very thing.”

Baker is a veteran “coastal superinten-

dent,” working his way south from the Spessard Holland course in Melbourne to the Indian River Colony Club where he spent eleven years before moving down the street to Sailfish Point in 1988.

Baker is also a founding member of the Treasure Coast Chapter of the Florida Golf Course Superintendents Association and has held all the offices on the board

“In the beginning when we had about 27 to 28 courses in the area, we had almost 100 percent superintendent participation at our meetings. Lately, I have seen that participation fall off.

“I think the demands placed on most superintendents today has them staying home more and more. That’s a shame because those meetings are a great source of problem solving information from your peers.”

Baker is very proud of his staff, and he



Pink and white oleanders highlight the 7th green on the course’s shortest par 4 hole. The par 3 8th hole is in the background.
 Photo by Daniel Zelazek.



Water guards the green and runs along the entire left side of the 515 yard par 5 10th hole. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

I'm very glad the club lets the employees have access to the course. It gives them a much different perspective of the course... They get the complete picture. It is a great pride and morale builder.

appreciates the benefits the club provides for his crew, from the afternoon golf and fishing privileges during closed days and off-season times to the health insurance, uniforms, lunches, paid vacation and sick days.

Baker also budgets money for education and training for interested crew members.

"I'm very glad the club lets the employees have access to the course. It gives them a much different perspective of the course and the conditions than from just seeing it from the seat of a mower. They get the complete picture. It is a great pride and morale builder."

With those comments Craig and I finished the ride of the course and the

interview. He took me on a tour of the marina located just behind his maintenance building, and he talked about the snook, redfish and trout he has seen in the waterways on the course and in the river behind his shop.

Once again I wished I had a fishing rod in the trunk of my car. As for Craig, it is almost noon on Friday and the crew will be leaving soon.

He will be going back out on the course to check today's work, make notes for tomorrow's schedule and set up the irrigation.

Just another day in paradise.



This daunting shot faces players teeing off from the blue tees on #12. A special permit is required to keep the mangroves trimmed in front of the tee. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

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Sailfish Pointers Photo Page

Photos by Joel Jackson



This LANDA self-contained washdown and recovery system collects and separates clippings and rinsate from golf course equipment. It also serves as a mix and load site.



Remote divot sand fill stations on the front and back nines allow members to refill sand buckets on their golf carts during the round.



One of several turtle crawl boards provided on a water hazard that is surrounded by a sea wall. The cattail planting signals "water hazard" to unwary golfers down the fairway.



Communicating daily pin locations is done with permanently mounted greens diagram on the cart steering wheels. Each green is divided into 5 zones. The zone in use is posted daily on the first tee with a removable numbered tag.



Practical Alternative - This area was once a crushed shell waste area. Constant tidal flooding and shell pieces scattered into the turf was solved by adding fill dirt and sodding to make a grassy bunker.