

■ Number 5, Par 4. Photo by Daniel Zelazek



The Great Outdoors:

Where the GM is an MG

By Joel Jackson, CGCS

Last January Geoff Coggan, CGCS, general manager/superintendent of the Great Outdoors RV Resort in Titusville, stood on the stage of a great hall in Harrowgate, England. His heart was thumping with pride and his skin prickled with goose bumps as Sir Michael Bolland, former captain and secretary of the Royal and Ancient Golf Association, presented Geoff with his Master Greenkeeper's blazer. Twenty years earlier Coggan, the grandson of a coal miner, had been a resident of the town of Mansfield, not far from that very stage.



Native cabbage palms provide food and habitat as they accent the right side of the 15th hole. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

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During its recent meeting, GCSAA's Board of Directors approved changes to the Associate membership classification, making it more accessible to all golf course employees!

Mansfield is located in Nottinghamshire 250 miles north of London and had two major claims to fame. It was the heart of the coal mining district for the UK, and according to legend it was also the birthplace of Robin Hood. As a lad of 15, Coggan had two career choices in his hometown as he finished his secondary education: become a miner or a minstrel.

Coggan was bound and determined not to go underground for a living, so he struck off into the world of commerce to become a manager. He wasn't quite sure what he was going to manage just yet, but it seemed a better life than mining.

He began his business training as a teenage furniture salesman, which not only included writing up the orders but also hauling and delivering the goods—no mean trick for a slip of a boy with not much bulk to his frame. Not wishing to be crushed under a sofa, Geoff began looking for other ways to get into a management training position. He saw an ad for a manager trainee at Fine Fare, a store not unlike a Wal-Mart. The opening was in the garden shop.

During his hiring interview the lady tested Coggan's knowledge by asking him to identify the plant in her office window. Geoff readily admitted he had no idea what it was, but he said, "If you give me the job, I will learn the names of every plant in the garden shop and in two weeks I'll come back up here and tell you the name of that plant." He got the job.

Coggan enjoyed his work in the garden shop so much so that he wanted to go to university to study horticulture, but his area supervisor was not inclined to help people improve themselves. That supervisor was replaced a short time later by one who valued his people and supported continuing education, so Coggan was able to begin a work-study program in horticulture.

But the corporate world is fickle, and in its infinite wisdom decided they would like to transfer Coggan to other departments to round out his manager training background. Meanwhile Coggan had developed a serious case of "green thumb" and wanted to stay in the

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This lake on the 17th hole is one of 19 watery golf hazards on the course that also double as fishing lakes for the residents. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

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Included golf course superintendents from Brevard, Lake, Marion, Orange, Polk, Seminole and Volusia counties.

Activities: Hosts Larry Kamphaus Crowfoot Open. Celebrated 25th Anniversary of this statewide event in August 2001. Annual CFGCSA/FTGA Turf Research Fundraiser at the Interlachen C.C. Orange County Science Fair – judges and awards savings bonds as prizes for the best horticulture and environmental science entries.

Annual donations: Sentinel Santa program for Christmas gifts to needy children. Maitland Birds of Prey Center. FGCSA and FTGA Turf Research Funds.

Honors and Awards: Current and former FGCSA Presidents Geoff Coggan, CGCS, MG; Joe Ondo, CGCS, and Joel Jackson, CGCS.

Officers for 2001: President Scott Welder, WDW Palm & Magnolia Courses; Vice President Brian Lentz, Debarry G&CC; External Vice President John Lammrish, LPGA International; Secretary/Treasurer Brett Harris, Lake Nona CC.

Membership: Approximately 250 total including around 140 Class A, B, and C members.

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Three ghostly tree snags frame the 10th green and give woodpeckers a place to live and feed. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

horticulture field. So he moved on.

Coggan found an opening for a groundskeeper with the National District Parks and Recreation Service. In their employ he learned how to care for cricket squares and bowling greens and he even helped in constructing soccer fields on an old landfill. The position required versatility as he learned to design and install annual beds and to care for trees from planting to proper pruning.

Perhaps the best part of working for the district was its work-study program, which Coggan quickly enrolled in to continue his university schooling. He would go to school part time for three years, taking one class at a time. It was during this period that Coggan found that, of all the disciplines in horticulture, he was gravitating toward the turf option in the program. But this part-time schooling was taking too long. So he quit his job to enroll full

time at the Lancashire College of Agriculture and Horticulture. It meant moving back home to cut expenses, but with his savings from working three years and a grant from the local authority, Coggan was able to complete his studies in three more years of full-time classes.

During his last year of school in 1986, Coggan participated in an international internship and worked for Tim Hiers at the Johns Island Club. Inspired by the supremely professional Hiers, Coggan applied for a work visa upon graduation and began his golf course career in 1987 as a laborer and sprayman for Dave Oliver on the Inverrary GC.

Six months later Oliver left and assistant superintendent Bob Klitz moved up to superintendent. In a move that was to alter Coggan's fate, he selected the plucky Englishman as his assistant superintendent. The year was

1988 and Coggan was learning PGA tournament preparations for the Inverrary Classic. The world was his oyster.

At that time Inverrary was under management by Club Corporation of America. CCA needed someone to take over as superintendent at a property in Titusville, The Great Outdoors Resort, a vacation destination and residential resort catering to RV owners and travelers. The course had been open almost two years and needed some attention to detail to bring it around. In fact, it was just ragged enough to not be all that impressive to young Coggan, who was tapped by CCA to move up and take over.

But fate deals strange hands in the game of life, and as CCA was undergoing some changes it had no other place for Coggan if he didn't take the job at Great Outdoors. So a reluctant Coggan settled in to get to work on the

GEOFF COGGAN, CGCS, MG



Originally from: Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, England. Home of the legendary Robin Hood

Family: Married to Lynne Hundley, daughter Sarah 11 who lives outside Atlanta.

Education: Nottinghamshire College of Agriculture, City & Guilds in amenity horticulture. (3 years); Lancashire College of Agriculture and Horticulture, BTEC National Diploma in horticulture, major sports turf Management (3 years); 1987 Ransomes Top Student Award.

Employment history: Fine Fare Trainee Garden Centre Manager; Mansfield District Council Parks; Johns Island Club, Vero Beach, Intern; Inverry C.C., Lauderhill, laborer/spray tech/supervisor/assistant superintendent; The Great Outdoors superintendent/manager

Professional affiliation and awards: GCSAA, FGCSA (president), FTGA, British and International Greenkeeper Association (BIGGA). 1996 CGCS; 2000 Master Greenkeeper. Served on Central Florida GCSA board since 1993, president 1997/99 and FGCSA board since 1996.

Mentors: My parents for giving me the encouragement and support when I needed it. John Hacker with PSD Agronomy in England. John was the head of turfgrass program at Myerscough (LCAH). Ben Andrews head of Horticulture who believed in me and encouraged me to refocus at a time when things weren't exactly going well. Tim Hiers who gave me my first job here in the States and whom I'm sure may have had one or two misgivings at the time. Bob Klitz who was truly a mentor to me and set me on the way to becoming a competent and accomplished superintendent. Larry McDaniel who was my GM here at The Great Outdoors, and has helped me in my new role as GM. Jim Swann, Jack Eckerd's stepson who has supported in my endeavors financially and by giving me the room and authority to manage the operation.

Goals: Someday I would like to move to a higher profile course that will push me further and allow me to realize my full potential. I hope to start a consulting operation down the road. I constantly strive to produce

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... continued from page 21

the best I can whether it's on the course or on the management side. I don't enjoy being still. There are always things to be done, and be done right. Having said that, thanks to my wife, I do see that there is more to life than work. It's one thing being focused on things but losing sight of the people around you is not the way to go. **Advice:** My advice to prospective superintendents is to value your family and friends. Really listen when others speak. Share thoughts and ideas with others. Do not worry about what everyone else is doing but perform your job to the best of your abilities.

Memorable moments: Checking the GCSAA Certification Exam results board with my former boss David Oliver at the GCSAA Conference and Show and successfully passing the first time. I was very proud of myself then. Most painful moment was shattering my right arm trying to rollerblade in the kitchen. Most embarrassing moment was explaining what happened to the nurses.

Hobbies and interests: Tennis, soccer, rollerblading (never again!)

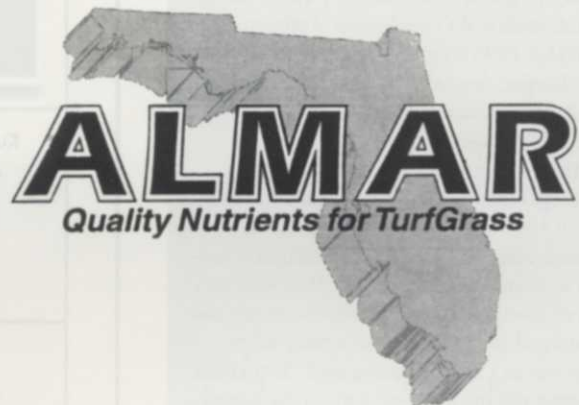
Here are some things you might not know about our cover story superintendent.

1. Car: 2001 Pontiac Grand Prix GT
2. The last good movie I saw: What Women Want
3. I stay home to watch: Football – Soccer to you!
4. The book I've been reading: Don't have time after reading all the trade magazines.
5. Favorite meal: Filet mignon,
6. Favorite performers: Michael Caine, Monty Python, The Beatles
7. Prized possession: Sense of humor
8. Personal heroes: Winston Churchill
9. Nobody knows that I: Am not in line to the throne.
10. I'm better than anyone else when it comes to: Locating local English and Irish pubs.
11. If I could do it over: I'm actually quite happy. No need to do it over.
12. I'd give anything to meet: Michael Palin
13. My fantasy is: Owning a luxury boat
14. The one thing I can't stand: People who sue others at the drop of a hat
15. If I could change one thing about myself: I would like to get back some of the brain cells I lost in college.
16. My most irrational act: Rollerblading on linoleum
17. My most humbling experience: Having to explain my broken arm. See #16
18. The words that best describe me: One of a kind



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Location: Titusville

Ownership: Jack Eckerd

Playing policy: Semi-private

18 Holes: Blue 6542 yards, par 71; Course/Slope Ratings: Blue 72/128, White 70.2/126, Gold 68.3/119, Red 69/114

Designed by: Ron Garl; opened in 1988.

Management: Club manager/superintendent, Geoffrey H. Coggan CGCS, MG; pro shop manager, Lori Jones; assistant golf professional Mike Owen.

Major Renovations/Ongoing Projects: Completion of program to replace all irrigation

pedestals with new Toro pedestals complete with hydraulic valve banks. Tee leveling and enlargement on holes 9 and 12.

Total acreage under maintenance: 80 acres turf
Greens: Average size: 5700 sq. ft., total 2.5 acres, Tifdwarf. Height of cut: 5/32" Overseeding: 80/20 blend of Lolium perenne (Perennial Rye)/Poa trivialis @ 25lbs/1000 sq. ft. Green speed goals: "Smooth and consistent. They probably roll at about 8 but numbers aren't important to the members. Enjoyment is the goal."

Tees: 2.5 acres of Tifway 419 Bermuda. HOC: 1/2". Overseeding: Lolium perenne @ 20lbs/M

Fairways: 23 acres of Tifway 419 Bermuda. HOC: 1/2". Overseeding: Lolium perenne 370lbs/A.

Roughs: 44 acres of 419 Bermuda. HOC: 1.25".
Overseeding: Type and rate - Lolium perenne 270lbs/A

Bunkers: 18 bunkers with #20 sand. Hand rake two greens bunkers. Mechanically rake all others with Toro Sand Pro 5000 with standard tines and flaps. Three sandy waste areas.

Waterways/Lakes: 19 Lakes covering 44 acres maintained on a monthly program with contractor. Cost shared 50/50 with the Community Services Association



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Fertigation system was originally installed but taken out of service in 1990 since course system also serves residential irrigation.

Total staff including superintendent: 14 full time and 10 part time. Golf Course (12), Pro-shop (5), Cart attendants, rangers, etc (7). Average weekly budgeted hours: straight 40, overtime 6.

Student interns: In the past we have employed an Ohio State International Exchange Program student.

Leadership: Assistant Superintendent Alan Jackson; Mechanic Phil Dascole; Pest Control Technician Walter Kincaid; Irrigation Technician - Open; Administrative assistant Ginger Wright; Pro Shop Manager Lori Jones.

Special circumstances: The course was built adjacent to the St Johns River and features a number of designated wetland areas. The soil is predominantly a heavy clay/fine sand mixture. The water table is very high and salt problems have been the number one problem. When I first started here, the pH ranged between 3.5 to 7.9 and the base saturation of sodium was an average of 33% on fairways. Percolation rates are poor and additional perforated pipe drainage and swales have been installed to assist.

Communications: Attend Men's or Ladies Golf Association by invitation, about two each season. Advisory board with 2-3 members

from each association meets with me regularly through the season. We deal with a consensus of the members rather than everyone with their own agendas. I invite them down to our break room. Provide them with coffee, juice, bagels, etc. and have a good discussion. I have meetings with all employees or individual crews as needed, but every two months the employees choose an employee of the month who then receives a \$50 gift certificate. Their picture is posted in the clubhouse. I also enclose memos with paychecks as I see fit. The members all receive a state-of-the-course address along with their new dues rate structure in the fall.

Cultural/Fertility/IPM programs: We try to incorporate four or five aerifications of greens each year, three on fairways and tees and twice in the roughs. Verticutting of greens is done bi-weekly and the entire course twice per year. Greens top dressing is monthly on average. Greens fertility is between 12 and 18 lbs N/year. The entire course is fertilized every nine weeks, and the tees receive additional fertilizer applications. Chipco choice has been applied alternating annually between tees and fairway and the roughs. The heavy soil composition I believe helps as we have not had any cricket problems in these areas since. Our biggest problem is grubs, not because of the damage they do, but from the scavenging of the armadillos, possums and sandhill cranes.

Equipment Inventory: Toro 3100 triplexes for greens and tees. Timed replacement with Jacobsen Greensking 4-Plus mowers. Jacobsen LF-128 for fairways. Toro gang unit for the roughs.



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course which still sported some bare fairways two years after grow-in.

About the time Coggan got the course looking presentable, CCA lost the management contract, but the owners liked what he had done to the course and asked him to stay on. Making a leap of faith, Coggan accepted the offer. Eleven years later, he is the general manager of golf operations, a Certified Golf Course Superintendent, a Master Greenkeeper and the new president of one of the largest golf course superintendent associations in the country.

Of all the two dozen or so superintendents in the U.S. that have become Master Greenkeepers with the British and International Greenkeepers Association, understanding Coggan's motivation is the perhaps the easiest given his heritage and Coggan admits his roots had a big part in deciding to pursue the MG classification. He was spurred to take action after a three day visit to the Great Outdoors by fellow superintendent and noted con-

sultant Terry Buchen, CGCS, MG. Buchen had been among some of the early Americans to attain MG status.

Buchen was hired by the Homeowners Association to do due diligence on the golf course operations as they considered buying it from the developer. During the intensive Q and A sessions with Buchen, Coggan had to dig deep into his background and training and recall all those classical reasons for doing the things we do almost subconsciously on the course because we sometimes get dulled by the day to day routine and political shenanigans that creep into the daily grind.

Having to reexamine his motives and methods energized Coggan and with a little encouragement from Buchen, he embarked on the course of study leading to the Master Greenkeeper examination.

Coggan says of the MG exam, "It is a totally different ball of wax than from the multiple choice format of the CGCS exam although it is also six hours long.

"There are two parts to the exam and only six questions total. The first part is only one question. They give you a scenario and you have to respond to the conditions that are presented. Your answer requires you to show the analytical thinking process and the application and justification of the solutions you propose to deal with the problems presented. You have to provide a great deal of detail to explain yourself because you must cover all the bases as the grading process is quite subjective."

"The second part was made up of five essay questions that all required going into a great deal of detail to fully answer all aspects of the questions. The toughest part was that most of the questions dealt with aspects of cool season grasses naturally, and I had to really think back to my days in England to put myself in the proper frame of mind for the answers. Some of the questions were generic in nature, but most were heavy into cool season turf problems. I failed part two the first time, but passed

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it three months later on reexamination.”

Coggan is now among those few superintendents who are wearing two hats or at least a different hat—the one that says general manager on the nameplate. It is an eye-opening experience that can almost be schizophrenic at times.

For those contemplating a career move to a general manager position Coggan had these comments, “I didn’t seek out this position, but as a team player trying to do my best in my own area I paid attention to detail. I learned that lesson from staff meetings when other managers couldn’t explain certain monthly expenses in their own departments.”

“I made sure I could explain my budget variances in a business-like manner each month, and I paid attention to the monthly statements of the other departments as well to see how the whole operation was doing. I wasn’t being nosy, just interested in the overall health of our company. I guess my diligence paid off when it came time to do some reorganizing. They gave me an opportunity to move up.

Coggan says, “As the superintendent you see things that you want to do to make improvements to the golf course. As the general manager you have to calculate the return on the investment of those improvements. You have to balance where the revenues will come from against the expenses you have budgeted. You begin to appreciate the total business plan when sitting in the GM’s chair. On the other hand, you can see the folly of making unrealistic demands on the maintenance department as well.”

Coggan knows the maintenance phase very well as he has tended the golf course for over a decade’s worth of growth and maturity, which has included modifying the original design occasionally to accommodate the development of some of the home sites. The resort is now approaching total build-out and Coggan won’t miss adjusting the property lines and their impact to the adjacent golf holes.

The resort lies on the eastern flank of the St. John’s River basin where S.R. 50 intersects I-95 just west of Titusville. Much of the property

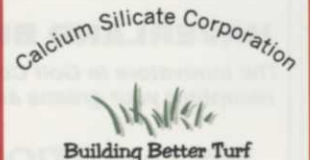
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remains pristine riverine wilderness dotted with moss-covered oaks and clusters of sabal palms and southern pines with thickets of holly, wax myrtle and palmettos. The golf course is a links layout that starts at the first tee and doesn't come back to the clubhouse until the 18th green.

One of the most appealing aspects of his tenure at The Great Outdoors is Coggan's never-ending amazement and appreciation for the natural beauty of the site and the steps taken by the resort to manage and enhance its place in the old Florida landscape.

Coggan says, "At many golf courses the superintendent has to take the lead in environmental awareness and promoting programs like the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary. At the Great Outdoors, the resort maintains over two miles of nature trails and nature walks are conducted by request.

"The resort has established a fisheries and wildlife program of habitat management, stocking, forage management and supplementary feeding-pro-

ducing an angling paradise and an excellent turkey-management program. The resident bald eagles are protected and monitored by the Florida Department of Natural Resources. They can be seen swooping down to snatch a bite of lunch from the lakes from time to time.

"No hunting is allowed, but the resort has become a bird-watcher's paradise, of which 300 species have been identified. Fishing enthusiasts take to the resort's 22 lakes in pursuit of the fighting largemouth bass on a catch-and-release basis. Other stocked species like black crappie, bluegill, perch and catfish are fair game for the frying pan.

"The Great Outdoors Resort is a rather unique RV property in its total scope and operation. This isn't a place where anybody pulling a pop-up camper can stop for the night. The RV rigs that pull in here run into the six figures, and most of the people here are residents, even if they are only here for the winter season.

"I have seen the home sites develop from a simple slab and utility

shed set-up in the beginning all the way to free-standing homes with huge carports for parking the RVs. Regardless of the configuration of the site, RV people remain some of the friendliest in the world and have been a great bunch to work with over the years. Maybe it's the common bond of wanderlust and road warrior camaraderie.

"Since I report to the resort ownership, we don't have a green committee per se, but the golf members do have an advisory committee that meets with me several times a year to discuss possible course or operational improvements. We work with them to address their concerns and to provide them with the best service possible."

When things get a bit hectic or revenues are lagging below projections, Coggan thinks about his old chums back in Mansfield most of whom never moved more than a few miles from their birthplace. He thinks about the world of opportunities they missed exploring and he is thankful he came to America to give it a go.

Cheers Geoff.

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