

*The clubhouse behind the 18th green welcomes golfers as they finish their rounds on a course that Jack Nicklaus has called one of his most imaginative and one of the best he's ever done. Photo by Daniel Zelazek*



## THE LOXAHATCHEE CLUB *A River Runs Near It*

*By Joel Jackson, CGCS*

When I learned that The Loxahatchee Club had been selected by the Palm Beach GCSA as their representative course for this issue, a floodgate of memories opened up. My dad grew up in Jupiter and we spent many family vacations and holidays with my grandparents at their home on Riverside Drive along the north fork of the Loxahatchee River. In the early 1900s dad's family followed Uncle Charlie south to Jupiter from Camden, NJ, and Uncle Charlie used to haul mail and kids to school in his boat, which was the most efficient transportation of that time.

We spent many hours, day and night, on the river – fishing, boating to the inlet, swimming and exploring the sand pine woods and scrub oak wilds that later became Tequesta. We used to travel up the headwaters to the home of the reclusive Trapper Nelson who kept a wildlife menagerie on his secluded property. Not a visit to Jupiter went by that scrub jays didn't congregate by the

back steps of grandpa's house to take raw peanuts from our open hands. Yes, lots of great memories of Jupiter and the river, but now it's time to tell the story of The Loxahatchee Club.

Loxahatchee is a Seminole Indian

word meaning turtle river. The main branch of the river intersects the Intracoastal Waterway in north Palm Beach County near the Jupiter Inlet at a point closest to the Gulf Stream. Following the river's main course inland, you wind your way northwest up into Martin County into Jonathan Dickinson State Park and then turn southwest as the channel



*It is long but scenic journey down the 552-yard, par-5, 8th hole with dense aquatic plantings of arrowhead to protect the lake and enhance the view with massive purple flowers in the spring. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.*

finally disappears in the Loxahatchee Slough along the eastern edge of the Everglades.

Back in the early-to-mid-1980s, golf legend Jack Nicklaus was well into his golf course design career, and he teamed with Canadian developer Gordon Gray to create what is now The Loxahatchee Club a few miles east of the southwest fork of the Loxahatchee River, east of the Florida Turnpike and just south of the Indiantown Road. On the Nicklaus Design Web site, The Bear says about Loxahatchee, “the course was designed as a ‘members course,’ with flavorings of the old Scottish game mingled with the finest characteristics of modern American golf.”

In fact, the rough mounds and sandy transitional bunkers planted with native grasses were the beginnings of the changes in modern golf design which uses less irrigated acreage and intensely managed turfgrass.

The course was renovated in 2004 and greens were planted in TifEagle ultradwarf bermudagrass, while the rest of the course was converted from Tifway 419 to SeaIsle1 seashore paspalum. In May of 2007, James Sprankle III, CGCS took over the reins at this Nicklaus Signature Golf Course after six years at the Ibis Golf & Country Club (another Nicklaus design) just down the road. In fact, Sprankle has been associated with the Nicklaus course design and management team for many years during his career with some of that time spent overseeing courses in Mexico, Indonesia and the Phillipines.

Sprankle talked about his career path that led him to his current post, “After graduation and several years as an assistant, I came into contact with John Hamilton, who at the time was the Asian agronomist for Nicklaus Design.

“I expressed interest in traveling and very soon after speaking with John I was in Indonesia at age 25 growing in two golf courses in two different locations.

“I have to say that this was the start for me and being exposed to the Nicklaus organization at a young age really molded me. Their commitment



*Some of that Scottish flair Nicklaus mentioned in his comments on the Loxahatchee design is evidenced by the double green serving the par-5, 13th hole and the par-4, 15th holes. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.*

to their projects, professionalism and attention to detail has solidified my relationship with the organization through the years. I owe a lot to the entire architect and agronomy arms of the Nicklaus and Dye organization.

“A few who have influenced me and have trusted me with their vision are Jack Nicklaus, Pete Dye, Lee Schmidt,

Brian Curley, Greg Letsche, Chris Cochran, John Cope and Troy Vincent. And the agronomists who have been there to assist me with situations and offer some much-needed conversation at some very remote locations are Ed Etchels, John Scott, Jay Spurl and Dave McIntosh.

“I would be remiss not to mention



*The use of sandy waste (transitional) bunkers and native grasses on the par-3, 12th hole was a proactive design change pioneered by Nicklaus and others in the 1980s to create dramatic views and protect the environment. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.*



## THE LOXAHATCHEE CLUB



*The Loxahatchee Club Golf Maintenance Team*

**Location:** Jupiter, FL

**Ownership:** Member Owned

**Holes:** 18; 7,147 yards; Par 72

**Slope/Rating:** 151 / 76.2

**Design:** Jack Nicklaus

**Original builder:** Wadsworth

Construction (opened 1985)

**Renovation:** National Golf (2004)

**Management:** General Manager/

COO Kevin Carroll; Club President

Robert Hooker; Green Chairman

Richard Herlehy; Golf Chairman

James Long; Head Golf Professional

Wilson Zehmer; Superintendent James

Sprankle III, CGCS.

**Ongoing projects:** Improvements to cart paths and native areas

**Total acreage:** 100. Turf acreage under maintenance: 70

**Greens:** TifEagle; Avg. 5,500 sq.ft., 2.3 A; HOC .100 (Oct-Mar) - .120 (Apr-Sept); Green speed goal: 10-11.

**Overseeding:** None

**Tees, Fairways and Roughs:** SeaIsle 1 seashore paspalum, no overseeding.

Tees 2.8 Acres, HOC Walk mow tees and approaches year round at .300".

Fairways 25 A; HOC .325"; Roughs: 32 A; HOC 1.25" with rotary mowers.

**Bunkers:** 55, G-Angle sand, hand-rake greenside bunkers, machine-rake remainder with Smithco Superstar.

Waterways: 13 lakes (71A) maintained by outside contractor.

**Irrigation:** reclaimed; Watertronics 2,000 GPM pump station. Controls: Rainbird Cirrus System, 1,573 heads.

**Staff:** Total including superintendent: 24 (22 full time, 2 part time).

Straight-time hours 40 per week and 2.5 hours of overtime. Two student interns budgeted from May to August. "Sometimes we get them, and sometimes we don't."

**Key maintenance staff members:** First Assistant Charlie Rimpela; Second Assistant Nathan Wallace. Equipment Manager Juan Martinez; Pest Control Technician Joel Martin; Irrigation Technician Willie Avellaneda; Administrative Assistant Esther Lopez splits her time between Golf Maintenance and the Homeowners Association.

**Communications:** Crew meetings every Tuesday. Golf Committee meetings monthly from November to April. All department heads meet weekly in season and I attend the annual board meeting.

I also do a weekly article for the membership email newsletter and an article for the quarterly club newsletter.

the shapers I have worked with – and I have worked with the best. No need to mention names. They all think they are the best."

During his years overseas Sprankle developed his keep-it-simple and stick-to-the-basics management style out of necessity, since it was very difficult, sometimes impossible or downright too expensive to import chemicals, fertilizers, materials and even equipment into foreign countries.

With all the products available at his fingertips here in the U.S., Sprankle maintains the 100-acre property at Loxahatchee with 24 people compared to the 200-member staff he had in the Phillipines. Hand labor had to make up for the lack of technology.

He learned to adapt to the culture where he was. In a sense we are all currently faced with adapting to a changing culture which is demanding more conservation of our resources.

"I sometimes struggle finding a way to balance golfer expectations with the message we keep getting from regulators, which is basically 'Do more with less.'"

"American golfers just need to play the game," he offered. "In Scotland and Ireland, it's all about playing and enjoying the game. The lushness of the golf courses is not the main focus. It's all about playing the game."

To the credit of the Loxahatchee members, that appears to be exactly what they do. As we drove around the course, it was pretty much a tie between the members or Sprankle as to who waved and called out first. While it is a full-service country club, golf is the main activity, and the members truly seem to enjoy not only the golf course, but the genuine friendly atmosphere of one another's company. That warmth and friendliness permeate the organization and make for great working conditions for Sprankle and his staff.

General Manager and Chief Operating Officer Kevin Carroll is involved with the Club Managers Association of America and has worked closely with the GCSAA on education and organization issues. He had strong

## SUPERINTENDENT FACTS

### James R. Sprankle III, CGCS

**Originally From:** Born in Alaska but moved to south Florida while still in diapers. Lived in Jupiter since 1980.

**Family:** Married to Patricia with three children: Madison (6), Emily (7), and Zak (11).

**Education:** A.S. Degree in Golf Operations from Lake City Community College, 1989

**Employment:** May 2007 to present golf course superintendent, Loxahatchee Club; 2001-2007 director of golf course maintenance, Ibis G&CC, West Palm Beach; 1997-2001 vice president of operations over eight golf courses, Golforce, Inc. (Fil-Estate Golf & Development, Inc.), Manila, Philippines; 1994-1997; director of maintenance, Las Vegas Paiute Resort, Nevada; 1993-1994 golf course superintendent, Cabo del Sol Golf Club, Cabo San Lucas, Mexico; 1992-1993 golf course superintendent, Damai Indah G&CC (two courses), Jakarta, Indonesia

**Professional Affiliations:** Member of the GCSAA (22 years) and Palm Beach GCSA. Became a GCSAA certified golf course superintendent in 2001.

**How did you get into the business?** I worked in the bag room at Indian Creek, a public golf course in Jupiter right out of high school. The owner, Sonny Smith, owned a fertilizer and chemical distributorship and soon had me mowing greens in the morning



*Superintendent Jim Sprankle can't say enough about the friendly engaged membership at The Loxahatchee Club. Green Chairman Richard Herlehy, left, agreed to "take one for the team" and pose with Sprankle. He graciously obliged during his round of golf.*

and delivering products in the afternoons. I enjoyed the maintenance aspects so I soon applied to LCCC with the help of Darryl Rejko, the superintendent at the time.

**Work philosophy and advice to prospective or new superintendents:**

Choose to work for a quality organization. I truly believe this overshadows location and notoriety. Don't chase money. With hard work and a good reputation, money will come to you. Don't over think. Keep it simple. Attention to detail is the key to success.

**Hobbies & Interests:** Boating, snowboarding and kids' sports..

words of praise for Sprankle's business, communication and leadership skills. Not coincidentally, those are the same skills GCSAA is trying to focus on as it markets and brands "Class A" and "Certified" superintendents as professionals committed to growth and development.

Along with his business card, Carroll also shared The Loxahatchee Club's mission statement and components of "The Loxahatchee Club Experience," which embodies keywords like: Welcoming, Friendly, Personality, Enthusiasm, Respect, Helpful, Clean,

Secure, Teamwork, Quality and Tradition.

Over the years, I have observed that clubs that are successful – not only in appearance, but also in productivity and morale – are those that have clear, written commitments and plans to guide all phases of the operation. Once again it goes back creating positive working conditions.

Working conditions for a golf course superintendent also mean turf conditions, since that is one of key measurements of success in our business. To be successful, Sprankle

says superintendents need to get a handle on and fight for the Big Three in maintenance: labor, fertilizer and chemicals.

"Every course is different, but those three line items will be key factors in your budget. You have to have the people to mow and go, and enough fertilizer to keep the turf healthy, and finally the products necessary to combat weeds, disease and insects."

Note: I would add a fourth key element and that would be water. But the availability and quality of the irrigation water is not always within the superintendent's or even club's direct control. However, the superintendent is the one who must manage the resource for the greatest benefit.

"We only receive 550,000 gallons of reclaimed water per day from the local utility," Sprankle said. "That amount was even cut back 20 percent in 2008 during restrictions. We set irrigation run times based on visual and weather-station feedback. To make our irrigation as effective as possible, we apply wetting agents to tees and greens monthly and to fairways monthly from October to May (dry season). We hand-water greens six days per week and, on the seventh day, we flush them with 1 inch of irrigation to move the salts from the reclaimed water out of the root zone."

Sprankle's cultural practices and nutrient management programs have entailed a search for a balance that produces acceptable playing conditions while protecting the environment. The installation of TifEagle and SeaIsle1 have allowed him to reduce the amount of nitrogen on the course.

"The greens receive about 5 pounds of N per year, most of which is through weekly applications of a Milliken foliar program, Crytogro and Primo at 3 ounces per acre," he said. "We will apply some granular as I am not a proponent of starving the greens to achieve speed. We also apply Anderson's 0-0-28 every three weeks to supply needed potassium.

"The tees are sprayed with a foliar mix twice a month and the fairways once a month. In addition the tees receive a Milorganite application in the



spring and fall at a rate of a half-pound of nitrogen per 1000 square feet. The fairways have one pound of Milorgantie applied in October and May. The roughs receive one pound of nitrogen in the spring and fall via applications of sludge.”

So with 5 pounds of N on the greens and 2 pounds of N in the fairways and roughs, The Loxahatchee Club is well within the nutrient-management recommendations in the Florida Golf BMP manual. That is one of the benefits of using the new grass varieties that require less nitrogen.

But healthy turfgrass requires some TLC besides feeding. Judicious cultural practices can ensure successful playing conditions.

“We make up our maintenance schedule a year in advance, so we can plan our turf maintenance needs around the club’s seasonal events,” Sprinkle said. “However, we are not a slave to the printed schedule. We keep



*The par-3, 5th hole is guarded by one of 13 lakes on the course. Part circle heads, taller grass along the shore and aquatic plants guard the lake’s water quality. Photo by Daniel Zelazek*

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**FUN FACTS**



*Jim Sprankle says kids' sports is one of his favorite things to help find balance in his life. Emily(7), Madison (6) and Zak (11). Photo by Patricia Sprankle.*

- Vehicle:** work vehicle Toyota Tacoma/Fun vehicle 1987 Porsche 911
- The last good movie I saw:** High School Musical 3 with the kids
- I stay home to watch:** Sad to say but the "Oakland Raaaaaiders"
- The book I've been reading:** The Last Lecture by Randy Pausch
- Favorite meal:** A nice steak
- Prized possessions:** My family
- Personal heroes:** Anyone in the armed forces
- Nobody knows that I:** Have met 4 presidents: Indonesia, Mexico, Philippines (2)
- I'm better than anyone else when it comes to:** Staying balanced
- If I could do it over:** Nothing
- I'd give anything to meet:** Have dinner with Robin Williams
- My fantasy is:** Have lived it
- The one thing I can't stand:** Repeating myself
- Most humbling experience:** Heart issue in 2004 made me think of more than work
- The words that best describe me:** tough but fair
- My best fish story:** Double hooking a 550 lb. blue marlin with Greg Letsche in Cabo, we landed it after 3 hours.
- My most amazing/lucky/important golf shot:** Chipping my ball off the road behind 17 green at St Andrews to about 4 feet

an eye on the weather and growing conditions and adjust accordingly. TiffEagle and seashore paspalum need a firm hand, but you also need to know when to back off.

"On the greens we schedule half-inch, hollow-tine core aerifications in May and September and we do a Graden half-inch verticut in July just prior to a solid tine aerification. We hydroject monthly, skipping the aerification months and verticut as needed May through September. We spike the greens, apply gypsum to offset the bicarbonates build-up from the reclaimed water, and lightly topdress (dust with dry green sand) from December to April, and the greens are brushed three times a week with the walk mowers.

"The tees, fairways and roughs are aerified three times a year. The cores are allowed to dry and then dragged to separate soil and organic material and then the debris is cleaned up with a sweeper. We slice the fairways and roughs in the off months and they are cleaned up with a follow up mowing."

As far as pest control programs, "We employ a preventive fungicide program on the greens from April to October, and we apply grub-control products to greens, tees, fairways usually around June. Since seashore paspalum doesn't tolerate many of the conventional herbicides used on bermudagrass, we apply Barricade to the roughs in October and January and Dimension in March and June to prevent weed emergence as much as possible.

*(Continues on Page 22)*

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The Loxahatchee Club has pervious cart-paths made of concrete screenings. While they are considered a “low maintenance” item, they do require periodic maintenance and repair, especially after a very heavy rain.



Senior maintenance staff members from left: Second Assistant Nathan Wallace, First Assistant Charlie Rimpela, Equipment Technician Juan Martinez, and Golf Course Superintendent Jim Sprankle III, CGCS. Sprankle hopes the Loxahatchee experience will give his assistants a boost for their first head superintendent opportunity.



Loxahatchee superintendent Jim Sprankle, CGCS puts his finger on the fine line maintained between the TifEagle greens and SeaIsle 1 paspalum collar. Photo by Joel Jackson.



In the foreground is a nursery plot of seeded SeaSpray Paspalum being evaluated for possible use in the future. Newly planted TifEagle nursery greens are growing-in in the background.

  
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“And last – but not least – is the ongoing program to remove residual bermudagrass areas in the paspalum. We spray it, cut it out and resod as needed each summer.”

The mechanics and realities of turf maintenance are often dictated by the club’s physical setting and fiscal resources, but most of the time it is the attitude of the superintendent that is the deciding factor. That attitude is a product of formal education and life experiences. Jim Sprankle has had his share of both and he humbly summed up his career to date.

He said, “One of my greatest satisfactions comes from the nearly 15 assistants who I have worked with who are now successful superintendents around the world. I would like to feel I had a hand in their success. My younger brother Jason is a successful superintendent at the Turtle Creek Club in Tequesta, which makes me very proud.

And now Sprankle is home again working near the river I knew as a boy.

*A few who have influenced me and have trusted me with their vision are Jack Nicklaus, Pete Dye, Lee Schmidt, Brian Curley, Greg Letsche, Chris Cochran, John Cope and Troy Vincent. And the agronomists who have been there to assist me with situations and offer some much-needed conversation at some very remote locations are Ed Etchels, John Scott, Jay Spurl and Dave McIntosh.* ■

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# THE LOXAHATCHEE CLUB

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