Eighteen years ago, Laurel Oak opened the Gary Player-designed West Course just a few miles east of Interstate 75 in Sarasota north of Bee Ridge Road. Five years later, the East Course opened in 1994. It was also designed by Player. Then in 2006 Rees Jones and Southeastern Golf tackled a major renovation and redesign of the West Course. The course is maturing nicely according to Director of Golf Course Operations Adam Wright, who has been at the helm of the 36-hole complex since 2002.

“We may have opened a tad early last year, putting a little more stress on the new turf initially than we would have liked, but time heals all wounds and the course has really shaped up and is performing well,” said Wright. Ten years ago Wright was finishing up his degree in agronomy at Tennessee Tech University.

He said, “Like many college students I was seeking my path and had changed majors a couple of times including Engineering and secondary education. They are wonderful fields to major in, but neither made me happy. I was looking for a profession that would
allow me to be outdoors, be free and enjoy what I would be doing for a living. That type of career choice finally led me to golf course management.”

Now he finds himself leading a 40-person staff that maintains the 220 acres under his charge. Fortunately, Wright says, the roadways and common areas are maintained by an outside landscape firm, so he and his crew can concentrate on the golf courses and clubhouse grounds.

The renovation to the West Course introduced TifEagle greens to the list management responsibilities, while the East Course still has Tifdwarf greens. To make sure his superintendents, Adam Ellison and Zach Lane, and assistant superintendents Jimmy Barker, Matt Eichmann and Theo Evans get well-rounded experience and learn all the nuances of each course Wright is experimenting with a rotation system that will move his managers around every 3-6 months so they can become familiar with the required management practices.

Meanwhile at the maintenance operations center Equipment Manager Andrew Messina runs the shop and keeps the equipment tuned up and reels sharpened. In the office, Wright’s indispensable administrative assistant, Lori Brown, keeps the paper work moving so he can spend as much time as possible on the golf course.

Wright said, “Our assistants also serve as irrigation and pest control technicians, so it is imperative that they learn how the different courses – and especially the different greens’ grasses – perform and respond to pest and environmental stresses.’

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Laurel Oak Country Club

**Location:** Sarasota

**Ownership/Playing Policy:** Private

**Number of Holes:** 36 - East (6,898 yds) and West (6,934) Courses; both Par 72


**Management Team:** David Whalen, club manager; David Gale, club president; Ed Nettles, green chairman; Chris Brandt, head club professional; Adam Wright, CGCS, director of golf course operations.

**Acreage under maintenance:** 220

**Greens:** Tifdwarf (East), TifEagle (West); avg. size: 6,500 sq.ft.; total acres: 5.6; HOC .125 -.145 in.; green speeds: 8-9 ft. summer; 9-10 ft. in season. East greens only are overseeded with Poa trivialis at 8 lbs/1000 sq. ft.

**Tees, Fairways and Roughs:** Tifway 419; tees 6A, HOC .500 in., rye overseed tees only @ 20 lbs/1000 sq. ft.; fairways 46 A; HOC .550 in.; roughs 140 A, HOC 1.75 in.


**Natural areas:** 12 crushed coquina waste areas under trees and with cordgrass in roughs

**Waterways:** 23 lakes and ponds. Outside contractor maintenance.

**Irrigation:** Effluent with supplemental well; East - Rainbird Hydraulic, West - Toro Site Pro; 1,900 heads, fertigation system.

**Staff:** 40 total including superintendent and 2 part time (student and retiree); weekly budgeted hours 40 straight time. Key team members: East Superintendent Adam Ellison, West Superintendent Zach Lane. assistant superintendents Matt Eichmann, Theo Evan and Jimmy Barker, administrative assistant Lori Brown.

**Special events:** The annual Laurel Oak Cup which benefits the Special Olympics. PGA Tour Pro Paul Azinger is heavily involved.
Environmental Laurels
The Florida Dept. of Environmental Protection, in conjunction with the Florida Golf Course Superintendents Association and other agencies and groups, has just released a manual for the Best Management Practices for Enhancing Environmental Quality on Florida Golf Courses. Of course many facilities like Laurel Oak have already been engaged in Best Management Practices. Here are just a few. Photos by Joel Jackson.

Some extreme rough areas have been converted to bahiagrass turf which requires less water and fertilizer.

Bulrushes line the shore and littoral zone along the second hole on the West Course. The plants provide food and shelter for fish and birds and help filter storm runoff.

A 30-foot buffer zone (left of the red stakes) was created around this wetland on hole No. 10 East. The height of cut is 4 inches and no chemicals or fertilizers are applied in the zone.

Hand watering of localized dry spots with wetting agents is more efficient than just turning on the a sprinkler head.
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make it more efficient in an era where water conservation is a critical issue. If we tackle the East Course it would likely be in stages and not all at once like the West Course.”

With its older Tifdwarf greens, overseeding on the East Course is mandatory to have a consistent playing surface during the winter golf season where 200 rounds per day are not uncommon.

With a warmer and drier winter and spring than usual, the transition from the overseeding back to the bermuda base has been a challenge. Wright said he only had two frosts this winter and they were on back-to-back mornings.

Regarding this year’s transition Wright explained, “We talked it over and rather than have a prolonged, indefinite period of transition with questionable quality putting surfaces, we decided to bite the bullet and spray out the Poa trivialis and concentrate of growing them back in as quickly as possible. So far so good. They roll okay, but don’t look great color-wise, but with the warm weather they will green up in a hurry.”

Another challenge that Laurel Oak shares with many other courses is dealing with off-type bermudagrass in the fairways. The renovation of the West course helped remove a lot of the patches of off-type grasses and has given Wright and company a foothold to fight the infestation with repeated coordinated applications of Round-up® and Fusilade® and eventual resodding of some areas. On the East Course Wright uses applications of Primo® in the spring to suppress the seedhead production phase of the off-types and, when kept mowed on schedule, they are virtually undetectable to all but the trained eye.

Judicious use of aquatic plants enhances playability and water quality on hole No.12 West. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

‘It’s right and proper that we are critical of course conditions. That is our job, but I sometimes think we do it to ourselves when we become overcritical... Sometimes we push the turf and ourselves to the edge and that’s not good for either.’
Perennial purple Plumbago plants are highlighted by just a few bright-colored impatiens.

Using colorful perennial plants like these Mexican Bluebells instead of short lived annuals saves labor hours and materials cost.

Aquatic plants like these Blue Flag Iris, above, filter runoff from the shoreline turf and provide food and cover for wildlife.

Landscapes ecological assets
Besides providing color and character, golf course landscapes can also be environmental assets. Photos by Joel Jackson.

Laurel Oak is using more native plant materials, left, to reduce maintenance costs and inputs like water, fertilizer and labor for excessive required pruning.
Adam Wright, CGCS has been at Laurel Oak C.C. for five years. Photo by Joel Jackson

Adam Wright, CGCS

From: Murfreesboro, Tenn.
Education: B.S. in agronomy, Tennessee Tech University, 1997

Professional Affiliations: GCSAA, FGCSA and Suncoast GCSA vice president 2005-07.

Work philosophy and advice: Work, play and laugh hard. Treat people the way you want to be treated and always remain professional when others are not.

Mentor: I owe a lot of credit to Tom Valch who hired me right out of college to be his assistant at the Pine Tree Golf Club in Boynton Beach. Then he hired me to be a superintendent at the Greystone G&CC in Birmingham, Ala. He believed in my ability had taught me everything I know about the business.

Accomplishments/Goals: Attaining CGCS status at the age of 28. Begin work on an MBA degree.

Hobbies: I am a fantasy football junkie.

And as for that trained eye, Wright says, “It’s right and proper that we are critical of course conditions. That is our job, but I sometimes think we do it to ourselves when we become overcritical. We need to discuss expectations and communicate freely and often with our managers and members, so we really know what they want and need. Then we can provide the best conditions we can within the allotted resources. Sometimes we push the turf and ourselves to the edge and that’s not good for either.”

I asked Wright his thoughts on the future of superintendent associations and if job stresses and demands are depleting the ranks of potential volunteers who are the lifeblood of the local and state chapters.

He commented, “There’s no question that expectations are higher than ever and superintendents are very conscientious about their responsibilities. I’m sure some are not always comfortable being away from work. However, I feel like our chapter’s..."