Trumbull CC’s Denning still making a difference

BY PETER BLAIS
Someone once asked Dwight Eisenhower what he considered his greatest contribution. The United States chief of staff during World War II thought about his part in leading the Allies to victory over Hitler, and shook his head.

Then he leaped through his eight years of memories as the 34th president of the United States and again looked elsewhere.

“His greatest contribution was the work he did on his Gettysburg (Pa.) farm because he always left it better than he found it,” said Bruce Denning, superintendent of Trumbull Country Club in Warren, Ohio.

“Superintendents tend to look at things the same way. We like to make a difference. It’s nice to know that a tree I planted here will provide shade for a golfer long after I’m gone. Being a superintendent has let me leave things a little better than I found them, too.”

Golf found Denning 37 years ago. Drafted into the Navy during the Suez Canal Crisis in 1954, the Shen沙特, Pa. native was assigned to the golf course at the Patuxent, Md., flight test center as a staff superintendent. There he came under the tutelage of superintendent Bill Striver.

“Bill took a real interest in me. He got me excited about the profession,” remembered Denning.

Denning accompanied his mentor to monthly meetings where the apprentice was fascinated by speakers like Pennsylvania State University agronomist Fred Grau. Grau and H. Burton Musser established a turfgrass extension and research team at Pennsylvania State University in the 1930s that was continued in recent years by others like Joseph Duich.

The presence of such men attracted Denning to Penn State after his discharge. He graduated in 1960 with an associate’s degree in turfgrass management.

His first head post took him to Frosty Valley Country Club in Danville, Pa., where he helped oversee construction of the Wil- liam and David Gordon-designed course. He remained there four years.

While at Frosty Valley he first met longtime friend Paul Latshaw (see last month’s Super Focus), the only superintendent to host three major tournaments (U.S. Open, PGA and Masters) and current head man at Wilmington (Del.) Country Club.

“Frosty Valley was a growing 18-hole course. We had no irrigation system and we had no fertilizer. Our first superintendent was a greenkeeper. We would hand out bags of grass seeds to members in the fall and they would plant them in the spring to get the next year’s grass.”

His next stop was the Sycamore Country Club in Cleveland, Ohio where he became assistant superintendent.

In 1964, “I decided to change careers completely. I had become bored with the turf and wanted to get into construction. I wanted to be my own boss.”

After four years with the Women’s Cleveland Country Club and the Reservoir Country Club, “I decided I wanted to do something different.”

In 1968, “I came to Trumbull CC,” Denning said. “I was impressed with the reputation the course had and the people here. The course is quite different than any other I’ve ever worked at before. It used to be all sand and mix tees. They just started putting in greens and fairways. We’ve come a long way since then.”

“Freeport CC (see last month’s Super Focus) was a little more traditional than Trumbull CC, but the people here were more open-minded and progressive. I think golf courses are literally and figuratively growing.”

The Trumbull CC head was immediately impressed with the layout and potential of the course.

Denning, who is not a CGCS, believes the program could exclude experienced superintendents because of the requirement that two certified superintendents, who maybe less-qualified than a non-certified superintendent, favorably review the applicant’s course.

“Sometimes what appears to be a problem is just Mother Nature’s way of saying that a plant has to protect itself,” he said.

But overall, superintendents are excellent stewards of the land, Denning said. They are in the forefront when it comes to knowledge about what will help or hurt the environment.

“I think there are bigger problems for them (environmentalists) to go after,” said Denning. “But we’re under a microscope. There are a lot of homes near our course. If the people who live there see us out spraying, and we’re wearing respirators and coveralls, they get upset. We don’t have to wear those things. We just do it to be in compliance with the law. The stuff we use any homeowner can buy. In fact, we can’t use things the home- owner can, like Dazylon.”

“People are so educated today. They’re aware of all the things that are happening around them.”

While Denning enjoys taking classes at winter meetings, “I’m not a professional” professor. “I can’t answer questions like a professor because I don’t have the training. I have my own experience.”

Drawing on his past, Denning is mindful of the industry’s needs.

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