Casas wins raves as super for California mini-empire

BY PETER BLAIR

You listen to Paul Casas and Ken Hunter and you begin to think they coined the expression “mutual admiration society.”

“Paul is so enthusiastic, loyal and energetic he’s a tremendous role model for everyone he comes in touch with,” said Hunter of the man who oversees maintenance at three of his courses.

“Ken’s been an inspiration to me,” countered Casas of his boss.

“It’s a really unique situation for a boss and employee to get along so well.”

Together, the two Californians have built a golf mini-empire that includes Sandpiper Golf Course in Goleta, ranked among the top 25 public courses in the country by “Golf Digest” and second in California only to Pebble Beach by “California Golf”; La Purisima Golf Course in Lompoc, California’s seventh-ranked public course according to “California Golf”; San Geronimo Golf Course in Marin County, a renovated facility 10 miles north of San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge; and Hunter Ranch Golf Course, a public course scheduled to open next summer in Paso Robles.

Casas oversaw construction and maintenance of the three existing courses as well as the new Hunter Ranch project.

Construction began on La Purisima. Casas moved twice as much earth, 500,000 yards, at the Lompoc course as he did at Sandpiper. But again, 11 months was all it took to open the Robert Muir Graves-designed course. Casas was named director of golf courses and put in charge of the superintendents at Sandpiper and La Purisima.

Three years later, Casas was again directing earth-moving equipment, this time at San Geronimo, which closed for financial reasons in 1986. Casas set about rebuilding numerous greens, 40 bunkers and the long-neglected irrigation system. He added several new tees and a lake. After 5-1/2 months, the course re-opened in 1988.

That brought three facilities under Casas’ wing. That will increase to four when Hunter Ranch begins construction this fall.

“Ken was the assistant superintendent,” remembered Casas, who had three years earlier left a well-paying assembly-line job at General Motors to follow his dream of working at a golf course.

“He was the assistant superintendent,” Hunter said. “Paul lost something like 15 pounds.”

Casas was superintendent at Sandpiper until 1985, when construction began on La Purisima. Casas moved twice as much earth, 500,000 yards, at the Lompoc course as he did at Sandpiper. But again, 11 months was all it took to open the Robert Muir Graves-designed course. Casas was named director of golf courses and put in charge of the superintendents at Sandpiper and La Purisima.

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“That’s like asking which of your children you like best,” answered Casas, when asked if he had a favorite among the four. “Each one is different.”

As for real children, Casas and wife Connie, a branch manager at a Wells Fargo bank, have three.

Paul, 26, is attending vocational school; Christopher, 23, is a senior at Chico State University; and Melissa, 17, is a junior in high school.

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BY PETER BLAIS

Four years ago it took almost 5-1/2 hours to play a round of golf at Wellshire Golf Course in Denver, Colo.

That was before the City Council voted to begin timing players and allowing management to remove stragglers from the Donald Ross course.

The result? Forty-five minutes were shaved off the average round, according to City Director of Golf Dennis Wong. Golfers who had avoided Wellshire because of slow play began returning. And, most importantly, at least to the Mile High City's pocketbook, speedier play has meant a 20-percent jump in rounds and revenue.

Denver's experiment represents a possible solution to the slow play and crowded conditions that have accompanied golf's recent growth and threaten its future.

Fifty-five percent of golfers surveyed by the National Golf Foundation said their courses were too crowded when they wanted to play. And one-fourth said crowded courses (a problem involving slow play and course supply) kept them from playing more often.

Golf managers have tried subtle changes to speed up play — more rangers, easier tee markers and pin positions, mandatory use of golf carts, education on the importance of speedier play.

Rarely have they resorted to the radical step of timing players and removing the slower ones, partly because of golfers' reported dislike of the system. Seventy percent of golfers opposed time limits, according to the NGF.

But something had to be done in Denver, particularly at Wellshire. With its tight fairways and heavy demand, an average round at Wellshire was taking an hour and 40 minutes longer to play than the NGF's national figure of three hours and 50 minutes.

A late-1986 brainstorming session involving city course superintendents, pros and the golf director resulted in the Denver policy, explained Wong.

Beginning in 1987 at Wellshire and John F. Kennedy Municipal Golf Course, tee times were stamped on a group's scorecard at the first tee. The card was checked at the fourth hole at Wellshire, and stamped again at the ninth at both courses. If the elapsed time after the ninth was more than the recommended two hours and 20 minutes, the group was encouraged to speed up play. Course personnel also had the City Council-approved right, though it has been exercised less often in recent years, to ask the group to leave with no refund.

Wong estimated a dozen groups, mostly beginners, were asked to pack their bags that first summer. Course personnel usually suggested they play the city's par-3 course and return when they had a better grasp of the game. That advice was usually well received, said Wong.

"We timed every group to keep people aware of where they should be on the course. A lot of beginners and novices simply weren't aware. Our intention wasn't to remove people, just to keep them moving," said Wong.

Wong said experienced players occasionally balked at the time limit. "The 'men's' clubs sometimes felt we were pushing them around the course," he said. "With all the TV coverage, they'd see a pro standing over a putt forever and think they had to do the same. We have all kinds of literature from the PGA discouraging slow play that we show them. And we tell them about the penalties for slow play on the PGA Tour, how it can be a lot of money out of a pro's pocket if he is penalized a stroke or two."

"The occasional complaint aside, the vast majority favored timing players, said Wong. The program was so successful, it was extended to all seven city-owned courses. Very rarely is a player asked to leave now that golfers are familiar with the system. People are coming back to Denver's courses, particularly Wellshire.

"Word got out that you can play it in 4-1/2 hours or less, again," said Wong.

Casas—

Casas has revised his watering schedule and coverage practices in response to the price increase and the 15 percent cutback in supply imposed by the state because of the current drought. Last year's 4.35 inches of rainfall was about a third of the average precipitation rate and represented the fourth straight year of drought conditions.

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