Ward gives course feminine touch

By Vern Putney

Jo-Ann Eberle and John Ward met at the Playboy Resort, but it was all business. Down-to-earth business.

Their common interest was a love of the soil and Mother Nature.

John came to the Playboy Resort Golf Course in New Jersey in 1979 as the new assistant superintendent. Jo-Ann had been a "groundsman" there since 1975. Her fascination for the managerial part of the job brought her in closer contact with John, who liked to elaborate on the technical aspects of turf management.

He told her about Rutgers University turfgrass courses. It changed her life. She attended Rutgers in 1979 and 1980, and during that time was promoted to 27-hole supervisor at Playboy.

She became course assistant superintendent at High Mountain Country Club in Franklin Lakes, N.J., in late 1980, and early in 1982 became assistant superintendent at Americana Resort and Country Club in McAfee, N.J. Responsibilities included 27 holes, all hotel grounds and activity areas. Three supervisors and three mechanics reported to Jo-Ann. Total crew comprised 40 men and women.

Jo-Ann and John were married in 1981. He had been working as course super at Cedar Hill CC in Livingston, N.J. Daughter Kate was born Christmas Day, 1983, "in the off-season, of course," jokes Jo-Ann.

She switched to her present post, super at Sunset Valley Golf Course in Pompton Plains, N.J., in August 1984. Sunset has the past three years has been nominated for inclusion among Golf Digest's top 75 courses.

Since last August, Jo-Ann has been filling the vacancy of golf director, overseeing 36-hole Flanders Valley and 18-hole Pinchback as well as Sunset.

"At first, an 18-hole course and a 7 winter, 15 summer crew seemed like a vacation," Jo-Ann noted. "Then the push for public golf was on. Players came out in droves and continue to this day. I'm learning that communication and cooperation between pro shop personnel and the golf maintenance department is the key to mutual respect and a well-run organization."

"We try to put our best foot forward. Not only is pride the outcome, but excellent conditions for our customers. I'm often dubbed 'Unique Ward' thanks to a newspaper article referring to my pioneering as a woman in this field. I hadn't realized I was among a handful of women in the U.S. working in this position."

Jo-Ann's success meant some sacrifices for John. For 20 years, he'd managed golf courses, the last at Tannemont Resort and Country Club in the Pocono Resort Region of Pennsylvania. Their home was on the Sunset Valley GC grounds, which meant a two-hour commute for John.

In the winter of 1989, he changed careers. He became superintendent of horticulture for three internationally acclaimed arboretums in Morris County, N.J.

Jo-Ann thrives on the outdoor life, and Kate is proud of her mother's special role.

Jo-Ann is elated to be part of an industry she feels has come out of the Dark Ages and is growing by leaps and bounds. She points to sophisticated irrigation systems, computers, newer and better equipment, and a business much more aware of and concerned with the environment.

She never has encountered prejudice or discrimination among her peers and, once, has been hired for key positions where she's applied.

"I never intended to go against the club's charter, and hand out dinner tickets. I packed up my paperwork, drove two miles to the local driving range, and hit golf balls for a few hours. I returned close to dinner time, so as not to cause too much chaos."

Jo-Ann is a long-standing member of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, New Jersey Turfgrass Association, Metropolitan GCSA and the GSCA of New Jersey, in which she served as district director and chairperson for organizing state association meetings and speakers.

That post led to one memorable incident. She was conducting a state meeting at a private country club. The all-male superintendents were in the men's grill.

"I was not permitted to go in (according to the club charter) and hand out dinner tickets. I packed up my paperwork, drove two miles to the local driving range, and hit golf balls for a few hours. I returned close to dinner time, so as not to cause too much chaos."

"I never intended to go against the club's charter, but it was the first time I was flatly turned down and not able to run the meeting according to plan simply because I was a woman."

That years-ago annoying episode, she feels, has yielded to an enlightened era.

Comments now are confined to course conditions. Feedback is largely positive, and the Good Earth doesn't seem to mind that feminine hands provide the gentle touch.

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