Mr. Certification: Fellman leads 2nd course in Audubon

By Mike Jamison

LONGWOOD, Fla. — Adam Fellman can’t remember when he decided to become a golf course superintendent, but he knows exactly where his special relationship with the environment began. It all started, fittingly enough, at church.

“My Dad was a Baptist minister, and I kept up the grounds at the church when I was younger,” said the 29-year-old native of Moultrie, Ga. “I really enjoyed that. That’s when I found out that maintenance was much more than mowing grass.”

Fellman is currently head superintendent at the semi-private The Legacy Club at Alaqua Lakes, a new Tom Fazio design in this Taylor Woodrow Communities development just north of Orlando, which opened Sept. 1.

The Legacy Club at Alaqua Lakes is a registered member of Audubon International’s Signature Cooperative Sanctuary Program, and Fellman expects full certification soon. That means, among other things, that the developer spent approximately $150,000 extra on construction and man hours to take special care of the natural environment. Audubon International has established enough standards and requirements to fill a pair of one-inch spiral notebooks, and the work, which starts at the very beginning of development, is monitored monthly throughout the life of the project.

Although Fellman is only seven years into his career, he has been the head superintendent at two of the first nine golf courses worldwide to achieve the Signature status. Prior to The Legacy Club, he was head superintendent at Champions Club, a Signature status club in south Florida.

Why go to that kind of expense and trouble?

“Obviously there is the benefit of doing the right thing for the environment,” said Fellman, who majored in agronomy at the University of Georgia. “We also did it because of the recognition of being one of the top-notch semi-private facilities in the country. This goes hand-in-hand.”

Sarasota-based Taylor Woodrow Communities gave Fazio plenty of land on which to work, allowing ample natural buffer between fairways and homesites. As a result, two positive golf course qualities were born. Each hole became its own stage. On only one place in the routing is one hole completely visible from another. Nos. 9 and 18 share a tee, a lake and a stand of trees as they deliver golfers toward the clubhouse. The other holes are all framed by oaks and pines, wetlands and other natural areas.

Therein lies the second positive result of the land planning. The natural habitat, which includes 158 acres of wetlands, was left basically untouched. It’s one of the many reasons why The Legacy Club met stringent Audubon standards for Signature status. Prior to The Legacy Club, Fellman at Alaqua Lakes, a new Tom Fazio design in this Taylor Woodrow Communities development just north of Orlando, which opened Sept. 1.

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By Mark Leslie

West Palm Beach, Fla. — Golf course superintendents, especially in the South, are on a “collision course” with job pressures — pressures that are forcing them beyond their own personal capabilities, and pushing their turfgrass beyond its ability to survive.

That is the assessment of Dan Jones, who after 33 years has retired as a superintendent in Florida, where he once served as president of the Florida Turfgrass Association and South Florida Golf Course Superintendents Association (GCSA).

“The pressure on superintendents is getting more and more every day,” said Jones, who has left Banyan Golf Club here after 18 years of service to take on a position as sales representative for Toro Co.’s Liquid Ag Systems Inc. in Florida. “It’s like a locomotive gaining steam all the time. It has to be lower cuts, no weeds, perfect conditions, like Augusta National every day.

“Our job has gotten much more volatile in the last few years,” he added. “Twenty-five or 30 years ago, we used to do our jobs, which work, allowing ample natural buffer between fairways and homesites. As a result, two positive golf course qualities were born. Each hole became its own stage. On only one place in the routing is one hole completely visible from another. Nos. 9 and 18 share a tee, a lake and a stand of trees as they deliver golfers toward the clubhouse. The other holes are all framed by oaks and pines, wetlands and other natural areas.

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Mitchell retires from Greenbriar

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another nine-hole facility. In 1958
he left for a 12-year stint at Sunset
Country Club in St. Louis. It was
here that he and other colleagues
started the Missouri Valley Golf
Course Superintendents Association
and the Missouri Valley Turfgrass
Association, both of which he served as president. He
also served a term as president of
the Midwest Regional Turfgrass
Foundation, which is centered
around Purdue University.

Becoming active in the na-
tional GCSAA and elected as an
officer in 1967, Mitchell moved
to the influential Portage Coun-
try Club in Akron, Ohio, in 1971,
and a year later became presi-
dent of the GCSAA. It was, as
past president in 1973, when he
was preparing to captain the
GCSAA golf team against their
British and Scottish counter-
parts, that The Greenbriar came
calling to persuade him to join
them in bringing back life to the
Old White Course, and later re-
building The Greenbriar and
Lakeside (now Meadows) tracks.

"The Greenbriar," Mitchell
said, "is staggering. The job got
bigger and bigger, and today it's
quite huge."

Besides the three courses, the
property includes 60 to 70 acres
around the hotel and a number
of homes, and the grounds crew
is responsible for landscaping
all of it. Mitchell employs 31 on
his golf course maintenance
crew and 29 on his grounds unit.

With Jack Nicklaus as the ar-
chitect, The Greenbriar was re-
built in 1976 for the 1979 Ryder
Cup. "And almost every year the
first 10 or 12 years they added
buildings at the hotel and land-
scaping had to be done for each
one of them," Mitchell recalled.
"We doubled greenhouse space
and added so much landscaping
that it is utterly staggering."

In 1984 Mitchell was made
executive director of golf and
grounds, a position he held until
Robert Harris was hired as di-
rector of golf, and Mitchell could
devote full time to his true love.

"The job has gotten more
strenuous," he acknowledged.
"But the camaraderie of super-
intendents hasn't changed. I've
never seen more friendly and
helpful people.

"I've seen [an evolution to]
more dedicated people in taking
care of golf courses, doing a bet-
ter job financially, getting paid
better, too, and spending money
more wisely. The tenacity with
which they have gotten down
together for golf is fantastic."

Mitchell said the demand for
lower-cut greens and disease-
resistant grasses has not always
started with the golfer, but often
with the superintendent.

"The superintendent wants
something better to maintain —
not easier, but better," he said.
"We don't make grass grow, God
does that. But we are taking a
plant out of its natural environ-
ment and doing things to it to
make it good for golf. When
you do things like that you have
to make all kinds of conces-
sions and do whatever is pos-
sible to make it live."

Over the years, Mitchell has
been recognized for his contri-
butions to the profession. He
received the 1996 Scotts Tradi-
ton of Excellence Award, estab-
lished by The Scotts Co. to recog-
nize "outstanding achievements
among superintendents in advanc-
ing the science of course mainte-
nance and in making golf the
best it can be."

 Asked if he had any advice for
turfgrass students entering the
field, Mitchell said: "I've always
preferred country clubs over
public courses. By and large
you're under the gun more and
stress is higher. But you are more
appreciated. At the public course
you're just one of them. Golfers
don't have the same appreciation,
it appears to me, although I en-
joyed that part of my life."