

Johnson tackles Deep South problems at Key West GC

By PETER BLAIS

KEY WEST, Fla. — Resting a few feet above sea level on a narrow strip of land perched between the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico is Key West Golf Club, the southernmost golf facility in the continental United States.

Key West GC sits on the last of a series of small islands linked by a network of bridges that make up the Florida Keys off the southeastern tip of Florida. Cuba, 90 miles to the south, is nearer than Home- stead, the closest U.S. main- land city to the north.

"There's not another [18- hole resort] course within 110 miles," said Rob Johnson, 38, Key West GC's head superin- tendent. "We're like any island course, even though we have a road in here. It's a long drive, so service is limited. In Naples [where he formerly worked] we had signs saying, 'Suppliers and vendors by appointment only,' because there were so many of them around. Down here I feel like putting up a sign saying, 'Please stay' or 'Call me at home.'

"I understand. Salespeople can cover 12 courses a day if they stay on the mainland. Down here they use an entire day just to visit me. Deliveries are a problem. Everything has to be planned a week or two ahead of time."

Johnson grew up on the mainland, playing golf and working on the grounds crew during school vacations at Palm River Golf Course in Naples. After high school, he worked at nearby Imperial Golf Course, where then-superin- tendent Dan Hall and assistant Mark Black convinced Johnson to enroll in the golf course operations program at Lake City (Fla.) Community College.

After receiving his associate's degree in 1986, Johnson took an assistant's position at Atlantis Golf Club in West Palm Beach before being offered his first head superin- tendent position at Kingsway Golf Course in Port Charlotte. A few years later Westinghouse Co. hired him to grow in Pelican Marsh and Bay Colony golf courses in Naples.

Johnson arrived at Key West GC three years ago and quickly realized that his biggest challenge was water. All Key West's irrigation water comes from an effluent plant owned by the course. The plant provides between 350,000 and 500,000 gallons daily to a golf facility that could use twice that, Johnson said. There is

little annual rainfall to supplement the effluent.

"Our total rainfall for 1999 was 35 inches," Johnson recalled. "Ten inches came during a one- day hurricane."

Florida Gov. Jeb



Rob Johnson

Bush is trying to get homeowners and businesses in Key West to tie into the area's sewer system, which would provide more than enough irrigation water for Key West GC. "We're expecting to get

another million gallons within the next year," said Johnson, who has begun installing a new OSMAC irrigation system in anticipation of the additional supply. "We don't irrigate the roughs right now. Once we get the new water, we'll irrigate from property line to property line."



Johnson's second-biggest challenge is salt. "It's every- where and on everything. If it rains, there is even salt in

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Salinity, heat just two obstacles for Johnson

Continued from previous page that," Johnson said. "The air carries salt. The ground is contaminated with salt. We're always battling the salinity problem. But that's to be expected. We're on an island surrounded by salt water... If we can go plastic with everything we use here, we will. You

can't even leave a bicycle outside here without it rusting because of the salt."

Key West has Tidwarf greens and 419 Bermudagrass on the fairways, roughs and tees. "The grasses have adapted somewhat to the salinity," Johnson said. "The greens were built in 1983

[during a Rees Jones' renovation and nine-hole addition]. The Jones' renovation was basically building a new golf course. Even though there was a course here dating back to the 1920s, it wasn't much of a course until Rees came in."

Key West's third-biggest problem is staffing. Johnson's

maintenance staff ideally numbers 15 people. But maintaining that level is difficult.

"There are a lot of drifters who come down here to the end of the Earth and don't want to work. Some people come down, think they are going to like it, spend a few weeks and are gone. We get Northerners laid off at their courses who come down, say

they are going to stay permanently, and are gone in three or four months. We use some contract labor from a company that has employees mostly from the Ukraine. They speak little English but are good workers."

Environmental restrictions on the Florida Keys are severe. The par-3 8th hole, for instance, is a 178-yard carry from the back tees over a mangrove swamp that has to be trimmed down twice a year. The trimming and lugging out of branches required special permits.

"They watch us like a hawk. You can't even relocate a tree without getting a permit," Johnson said. "It stands to reason. It's all sanctuary and tidal waters that come in and out of the golf course. Some of our lakes are controlled totally by the tides."

The highest point on the course is just a few feet above sea level, Johnson said. All the course structures are built on stilts to keep them above water during storm surges and hurricanes. During Johnson's tenure, two hurricanes have struck the course, one of which required the removal of 10,000 cubic yards of debris from the facility. "During Hurricane Irene, we had fairways that were 10 to 15 inches under salt water."

As for everyday challenges, the heavy waterings required on some greens during hot weather leave them susceptible to a variety of diseases. Brown patch can be a particular problem.

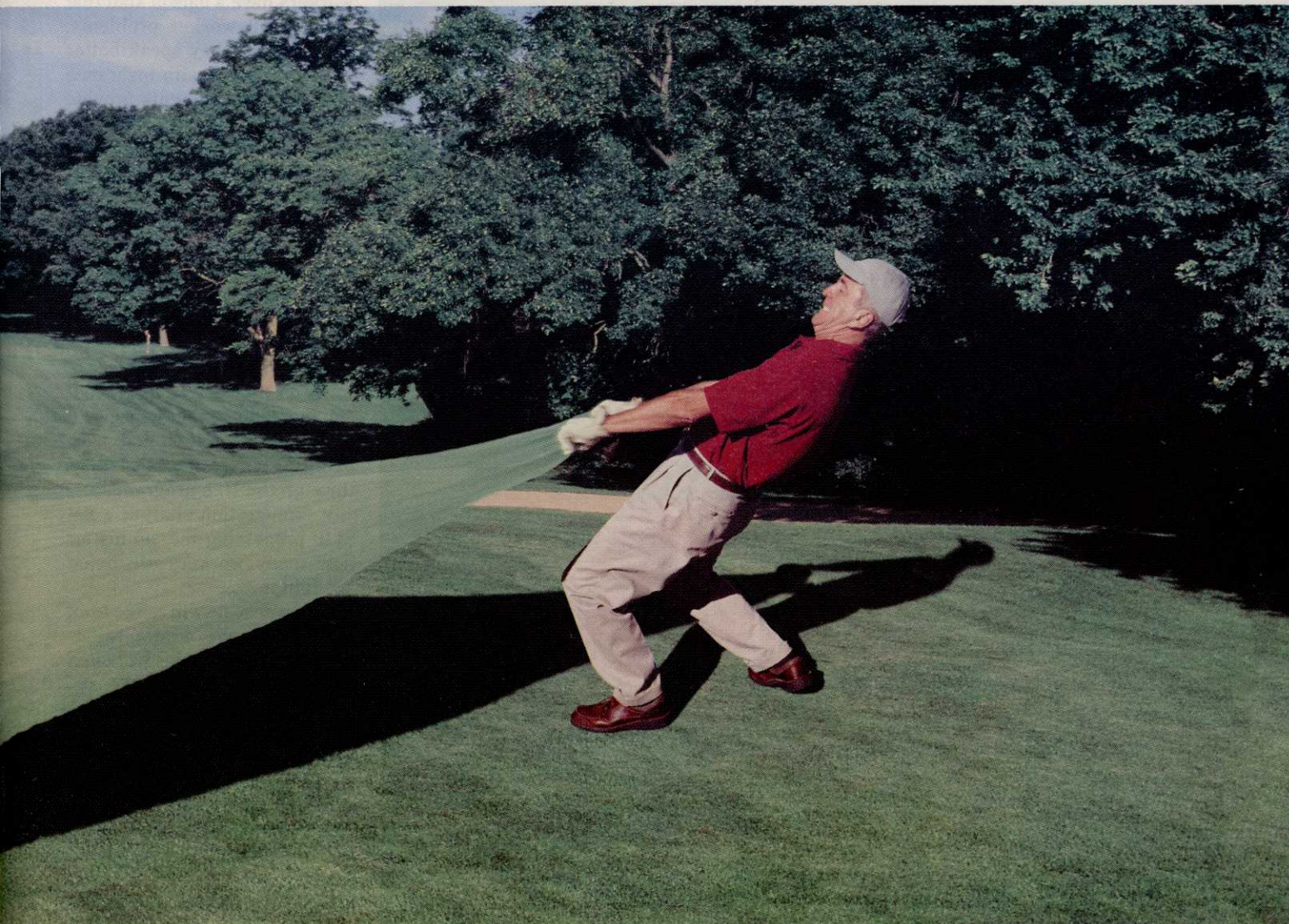
Insects are rarely a bother. "Mole crickets are a big problem throughout Florida, but we hardly see them down here," Johnson said. Fire ants can be an occasional nuisance, especially after major rainstorms when they seek out higher ground.

Johnson hopes to begin rebuilding Key West's greens to USGA specifications as soon as the enlarged sewer system is installed. He is looking forward to the project, having grown in two courses in Naples and having rebuilt greens in Port Charlotte. He has also installed four irrigation systems over the years.

"We'll plant the most salt-tolerant, successful Bermuda-grass we can find," he said.

Johnson said he enjoys Key West, squeezing the occasional fishing excursion in between his job and raising two children.

"I'm happy working for a single owner who is looking to buy more courses," Johnson said. "And we're doing roughly 65,000 rounds a year." ▶



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