

# 30 years and counting for Ohio's Bob Figurella

By PETER BLAIS

CANTON, Ohio — After 30 years on the job, you wouldn't expect job security to be an issue. Not so, according to Bob Figurella, 59, head superintendent at Donald Ross-designed Brookside Country Club here.

"It's probably worse now," Figurella said. "What you did 10 years ago won't fly today. Our course has become very upscale. We have people living in Canton who are commuting an hour away into Cleveland. There is more [maintenance] money than I ever thought would be there. Our budget has grown unbelievably over the past two or three years."

In this era of musical chair superintendencies, what has kept Figurella at Brookside for 30 years? He has interviewed for several jobs during the past three decades and accepted a few. But when he's notified his employers, they have always said: "Bob, we don't want you to go," and the two sides adjusted his contract.

"You build something and it's not complete and you want to see it through," he explained of his 30-year tenure. "There's a part of me that loves this place. It would be tough to leave."

"I'm working with second-generation members on the board now. People I used to chase off the golf course are likely to become club presidents. Most of the people who hired me 30 years ago are dead or in Florida. We're in contract negotiations right now. But I'm starting to think about going someplace else and finishing strong."

A native Buckeye, Figurella grew up in Masury. His brother worked on the grounds crew and Figurella caddied at Yankee Run Golf Course in nearby Brookfield.

"In September of 1954," he recalled, "the guy who owned the course asked me if I wanted to work on the grounds crew. Some of the people he had hired were football players and went back to school. I was 14."

Figurella's older brother went on to the University of Massachusetts turf school and the younger Figurella soon followed.

"[Dr.] Joe Troll was there," he said. "Dick Wadington was brand new. But Lawrence Dickerson was the reason I went there. He and Burt Musser were the two leading turf experts in the United States at that time."

Figurella received his certifi-

cate in turfgrass management and returned to Yankee Run as assistant superintendent. From there he went to Acacia Country Club in Cleveland and two years later, Spring Valley Country Club in Elyria hired 21-year-old Figurella as head superintendent.

"They had fired the superin-

tendent and he took his crew with him," Figurella remembered. "I didn't know what I was getting myself into, but I was excited. The course had been a month without a crew and had been neglected. They were mowing greens and fairways with mowers that hadn't been set in a month. The rough was uncut. It

took awhile to get the course back. Within two months, I got a \$4,000 pay increase. But the club was in financial trouble. I had to go buy aluminum sulfate with my own money."

Fairlawn Golf Club in Akron was Figurella's next stop. He



spent five years there. "That was my first club with real money," he recalled. "We were able to plan and do things."

Figurella's older brother was the superintendent at Brookside, but left in 1969 to spend more time building a profitable sod business. Again,

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Bob Figurella

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## Figurella: 30 and counting

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Figurella followed his older brother's footsteps, interviewing and eventually accepting the post.

"It was a pretty ordinary course at the time," Figurella said. "They had taken out 35 fairway bunkers, although the greens were still original. We've been putting bunkers back ever

since. We put six back this fall along with three tees.

"The course is very severe with slopes of as much as 8 percent on some greens. There are false fronts and hogbacks. It's definitely Ross, but with maturity it's become like a man's hairline. It's receded. Many of the bunker banks have receded up toward the greens. We're taking

those down and restoring the bunkers.

"Robert Trent Jones did a remodeling plan and has restored many of the bunkers. Someone made the analogy that we had a 1920s car with 1960s amenities. You'd look out from the tee and see a Robert Trent Jones look. But as you got toward the greens, it started to look like the other [Ross] era. We're doing most of the restoration work in house.

"But what we're known for is the severity of our greens. Whoever was around in 1922 when they built these greens knew what they were doing because they have stood the test of time. We play 120 events from mid-April to mid-September on those old greens. And they have never been rebuilt."

The greens have long been Washington bentgrass, overseeded occasionally with

Penncross. Lately, Figurella has begun introducing G2. And there is a lot of poa annua. Figurella has fought the urge to mow his greens with triplex mowers, and continued to mow by hand. Riding triplexes are used on the fairways.

Brookside does roughly 20,000 rounds annually, with play beginning no earlier than 8 a.m. "If you start any earlier, you're changing cups in the dark," he said. "It's an impossible situation. We don't start preparing the course before first light. And I pride myself on not having anyone on the course mowing when people are playing. That's helped me survive."

Figurella credits Baby Boomers with the rise in the status of Donald Ross and golf course architects in general.

"This Donald Ross phenomenon didn't happen until the 1970s," he said. "When I came to Brookside no one knew or really cared who the architect was. We have some old drawings and aerial photos of the course. The landscape architects got top billing on the old drawings. Those guys are in 1 1/2-inch letters up top and Ross is below in little half-inch letters.

"Baby Boomers have done for golf in the 1990s what they did for the baby food business in the 1950s, the Ford Mustang in the 1960s, real estate in the 1970s, and minivans in the 1980s. Now we're building drug stores and nursing homes on almost every corner. Just follow the Boomers and you see the history of our country for the past 55 years."

Figurella has so enjoyed the renovation process at Brookside that he has considered getting into the renovation business specializing in old Donald Ross courses. "I think I have a feel for it," he said. "If there is one thing I've done over the past 30 years it has been to give the course a sense of continuity from one end to the other that it was lacking when I got here."

Figurella is beginning to look forward to retirement. Last year he hired an experienced assistant superintendent, who afforded him the opportunity to take his first August weekend off in more than 30 years. Otherwise he's still there seven days a week, returning at 7 every night to walk the course and make any necessary adjustments to Brookside's computerized irrigation system.

Figurella's extended family includes five children. His oldest son is also a superintendent. Another son has a master's in business administration degree and works for a plastics company near Pittsburgh. A daughter works in public relations. A stepson is at Ohio State and a

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## Roundup-resistant bent due in '03

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grasses for the past several years, Meier said, using rights obtained to the Roundup-resistant gene from Monsanto and the gene gun insertion technology from its inventor, former Cornell University professor John Sanford.

Scotts is concentrating on these varieties because of the large market for these grasses. Bentgrass and Kentucky bluegrass are cool-season grasses used extensively on golf courses throughout the country. St. Augustinegrass is a warm-season turf used on some Southern courses.

Research expenses for genetically modified grasses are very high, Meier explained. Scotts hired 15 people in the past three years to work solely on this project. Even more costly are licensing expenses.

The problem with developing Roundup-resistant grasses, opponents argue, is that such species could become a super weed that farmers and homeowners could not control by conventional means. Meier countered that bentgrass and Kentucky bluegrass are generally not considered major weed problems in agricultural circles and can be controlled using other herbicides.

Bentgrass will not cross-germinate with other grasses that are considered agricultural weeds, he added.

What has Scotts' research shown? Scotts has applied Roundup to its test bentgrasses at rates of 256 ounces per acre, four to eight times the recommended rate of 32 to 64 ounces per acre for weed control.

"We looked for injury [to the bentgrass]," Meier said. "There wasn't any. We still have a lot of testing to do to make sure it performs the way we'd like to see a bentgrass variety perform."

Scotts' Kentucky bluegrass has withstood Roundup applications of 128 ounces per acre, two to four times the recommended rate, Meier said.

Scotts is also seeking genes that would provide genetically modified grasses with disease resistance. Those grasses may not be available for another 10 to 15 years, Meier said.

Are there drawbacks to genetically modified Roundup-resistant turfgrasses or GMOs in general? Could they somehow be toxic to people or animals? Could they present environmental or food production problems?

"At this point I'd just say there are issues about whether GMOs should be used at all," Meier said. "The Food and Drug Administration has approved Roundup-resistant and Bt-resistant [for insects] crops in foods and feeds."

The Roundup-resistant gene, Meier explained, is made up of proteins. The proteins are made up of amino acids. The gene is one of several hundred in a healthy-growing cell.

"I'm assuming that if you can eat the stuff, you should be able to walk or play golf on it... That's the assumption we're making and that's all the evidence at this point. We haven't found any detrimental aspect of the Roundup-resistant gene."

## Welding table moves with ease

By TERRY BUCHEN

ARCADIA, Mich. — Because their welder, tank and welding table were difficult to move, the maintenance staff at Arcadia Bluffs Golf Club here devised a portable welding table on wheels.

Property maintenance person John Fisk and equipment manager Patrick Sullivan built a designated table on wheels that holds the welder tank off the bottom shelf in a horizontal position,

which has plenty of storage room for clamps, gloves, helmets, goggles, etc.

"We plan to install a permanent vise," said superintendent Paul Emling. "The welding table may be somewhat costly because we outfitted our shop in two areas and our cold-storage area with 220-volt welder outlets. We also purchased a long extension cord for the welder, as it is sometimes easier to take the welder to the equipment than it is the equipment to the welder."



The portable welding table is on wheels for easy movement.

Material costs for the portable welding table were:

- 2-by-2 by 1/4 angle - 55 feet \$47.25
- 72- by 36- by 1/2-inch plate \$171.00
- 72- by 36- by 1/8-inch plate \$36.00
- Four castor wheels \$52.00
- Total \$306.25

## Figurella: 30 and counting

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stepdaughter at cosmetology school. Figurella concedes that the head superintendent's job is demanding, costing him time with his children and perhaps a marriage.

"There's something inside you that compels you to go there [the course] every morning, to be there at six o'clock," he said. "With my new assistant, I've started going home after eight or nine hours, but I always come back to baby-sit the course later in the day."

What is the major change he's seen in the past 40 years? Fungicides.

"We have things now that work," he said. "We used to use fungicides that came from the agricultural industry. They didn't work very well. Now we have specific fungicides that do work well. I'm concerned we may lose some of them. I don't see a new contact fungicide coming out. We have one right now, daconil. If they take daconil from us, I don't know what we're going to do."

"We also have more user-friendly products that are safer for the person applying them. We used to use things like lead arsenic that built up in your system. There's been a big improvement in quality."

As for the future of golf course design and maintenance, he said: "What I don't want to see is Donald Ross greens altered for the new grass cultivars. They have to soften up greens and soften slopes [at older courses] when they plant the new As and Gs. They have to change the contours so there are pin positions. If speed does that to golf, that's wrong. Ross built these greens. If he's the man they say he is, why would you want to alter them?"

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