

## Volunteer 'regulators' maintain private golf course at Dinosaur Dunes in western Kansas

By JOEL JOYNER

SHIELDS, Kan. — "It's unlike anything you have ever seen before," said Greg Strong, volunteer superintendent and one of the "regulators" here at the private Dinosaur Dunes Golf Club.

The course is unique indeed. Dinosaur Dunes is an 18-hole, 3,413-yard golf course located within the Cat House Outdoor Recreation facility in western Kansas. The owner, Clayton "Cat" Davis, designed and built the layout in 1988 along with the owner of the local John Deere dealership, David Kuhlman.

"We went out on the property with a case of beer and did all of the design work out in the field," said Davis. "I had some volunteers with me who helped with the construction work, and we built the course to our own standards. We've just continued to make changes over the years such as add bunkers, move tees around, and make changes to the design as we went."

Davis used to maintain the course himself with the assistance of some employees at the recreation facility. As other priorities at the recreation area and his cattle feed business required more of his attention, Davis has allowed golfers who are interested to volunteer their time and tools to maintain and make improvements at the course.

Superintendent Strong has volunteered at the course for about six years, and quite heavily during the past two years. "All of the volunteers are members of the club, and most are very active golfers that are out golfing every weekend. Last year, I got in 219 rounds myself," said Strong.

All of the greens at the course are either buffalograss or Bermudagrass. "We use a John Deere grooming mower on greens, fairways and roughs," Strong said.

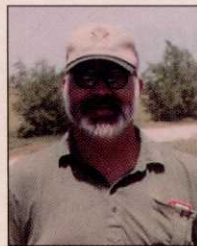
"Five of our volunteers, or regulators as we like to call them, are trained on the mower. The rest bring their own pruning saws, chainsaws, rakes, trimmers, blowers and whatever else is needed and do the work that is set out in the yearly planner. Sometimes we purchase the seed and tools needed ourselves."

The recreation area sits on about 1,100 acres. "It's one of the greatest deals in golf I've ever found," said Strong. "Membership to the recreation area is only \$125 per year. That entitles

### REBUILDING THREE NEW HOLES

This year will be an ambitious year for Strong and his regulators. "We are planning on building three new holes – to replace holes that are affected by spring flooding – reseeding five greens, building three bunkers, and adding women's tees and stretching tips to increase playability and to lengthen our course by more than 400 yards," said Strong.

The course is only a par 62, but challenging, said Strong. "It plays through canyons. I've always felt that if you can play



Greg Strong



The sixth fairway at Dinosaur Dunes Golf Club

you, basically, to unlimited golf. There are no set tee times. If you are the guy standing on the tee box, it's your tee time."

Most of the regulators are weekend warriors, but Strong tries to be out on the course about every evening during the peak playing season. "There are a couple of members who even carry pruning saws in their golf bags," Strong said. "They'll go out and play 18 holes, and then head back out to mow five or six holes."

Dinosaur Dunes, you can play nearly any course in the world," he said. "There are drops in elevation up to 100 feet in some places. It's more of a target golf course, but none of the holes are very long."

The only par 5 on the course is 414 yards. "A lot of our par 4s are in the 246 yards to 287 yards range," explained Strong. "But if you are off target, you're off a cliff or in a plowed field. In the summer time, there are silage crops that

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## Audubon survey

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lower toxicity levels.

• Efforts to address wildlife and habitat management have been equally effective, with 89 percent choosing native plants when landscaping, as compared to 49 percent before joining the program. In addition, the average number of acres devoted to providing wildlife habitat increased by 50 percent – from 45 acres to 67 acres per course – on average.

All of these strides were taken without compromising the quality of the game itself, according to the study. Nearly 100 percent of courses surveyed reported increased or maintained golf quality and player satisfaction.

### ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Combined, the golf courses that responded to the survey provided 40,214 acres of wildlife habitat, an increase of nearly 10,000 acres due to program participation. However, there is more room for improvement in categories such as: improving spill containment for pesticide mixing and containment areas (64 percent); removing exotic invasive plants (56 percent); and installing a contained equipment wash-off area (45 percent).

"We need to continue to work with courses to reduce runoff, employ BMPs [Best Management Practices] in the maintenance facility, and monitor water quality," said Jean Mackey, director of educational services at Audubon International.

The Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for golf was launched in 1991 in conjunction with the United States Golf Association (USGA). The average course covers 150 acres, with just 30 percent generally used for greens, tees, fairways and buildings – leaving 70 percent as rough, woods, water and other habitats, according to the USGA.

"Golf courses offer a unique open space in landscape for wildlife to exist and thrive. Ongoing stewardship actions and education efforts lead to habitat protection, natural resource protection, and a reduction in the overall impact of golf management practices on the surrounding ecosystem," said Joellen Zeh, staff ecologist with Audubon International. ■

## Reduce turnover with hiring plan

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objective here is to sift through the many applicants and identify those most suited for the work using a best worker profile. A best worker profile identifies the qualities of your current workforce that makes them a successful team.

Many other superintendents find themselves faced with labor markets that are challenged by low unemployment, high housing costs, and few responses to the traditional methods of seasonal staffing. For those in a tough labor market, it is important to effectively compete for candidates that fit your best worker profile.

### WORKING WITH NEW EMPLOYEES

After selecting the right individual, steps need to be taken to increase the odds of their success. It is critical to know how the position meets their needs. You need to know what brought the person to the job. This information will allow superintendents to better motivate the person and will help reduce turnover.

After the decision to hire and before communicating this news to the applicant, it is important to manage expectations. Share all the negative aspects of the job up front; it is

important that they understand and accept that they will be doing manual labor, getting up early in the morning, working weekends, etc. Do not hire until you have clearly communicated the aspects of the work that have caused some to leave your operation. Rather than selling them on all the great aspects and hope they can handle the challenges, it is much wiser to undersell the positives and focus on gaining acceptance of the challenges.

### MOTIVATING WORKERS

When applicants are looking for work, they know the very lowest wages they will accept. It is important to learn this number. If the goal is to obtain effective staff with limited turnover, then it may well be counter productive to agree to pay someone the very lowest wage they can accept. Paying somewhat more than the minimum they will accept allows you to exceed their expectations and helps them to accept the challenges of the position.

Having a plan that addresses the challenges you face in hiring staff is site specific. The better one understands the community and its dynamics, the better they will be able to identify opportunities to attract successful applicants. By taking full advantage of this experience to establish and manage staff expectations, superintendents can dramatically reduce future turnover. ■

## Thomas' Tools

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maintenance operation at Oak Creek.

"Our main battles at Pelican Hill are the poor soil conditions, transition problems and using reclaimed water," said Thomas. "With a 75-man maintenance team, we have created an intense cultivation, irrigation and fertilization program to combat these issues."

One tool Thomas has recently implemented is the use of a Drill-N-Fill machine. "This machine helps us with our heavy clay soils by injecting sand and helping with drainage and compaction," said Thomas. "We've done complete fairways with it, traffic areas in the rough and other high compaction areas such as green walk-ons and the driving range tee.

"I currently spend most of my time at Pelican Hill, but I also oversee Oak Creek as well," explained Thomas. "It's a wonderful challenge to keep both facilities in tournament condition on a daily basis." ■



## Employee turnover

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pro-active approach to determine a reasonable and effective turnover rate for their particular operations.

### REDUCING TURNOVER

According to Sibbald and Gustafson, the first step is to differentiate between voluntary and involuntary turnover, and to understand who leaves and why.

"While employees should be regarded as assets rather than expenses, some positions should simply not be regarded as permanent," said Gustafson. "It is often more cost effective to allow employees in easily filled positions to move out or up. As for the truly standout employees, promoting from within allows management to create opportunities which in turn reduce the turnover rate."

Sibbald and Gustafson noted that for the great number of seasonal golf club operations, retaining trained and experienced help is particularly aggravating. They suggested that owners be creative in their incentives and recognition programs to encourage their best employees to return.

Hiring the right person for the job at the onset is, of course, the best means to control the turnover rate. In times of employee shortages, managers pressed for time can easily get a little careless in the selection process. Sibbald and Gustafson reiterated the dangers of "labor crisis management" that involves little more than quick interviews without careful reference checks.

"Simply filling positions with warm bodies can lead to the problems that plague the industry," said Sibbald. "Hired in a crisis mode, new employees are not properly introduced to the company, and usually receive only minimal training, creating the situations that lead to their quitting or being involuntarily dismissed."

They suggested seeking new and perhaps non-traditional sources for new employees such as university programs, internships, the aging workforce, and even welfare to work programs and rehab centers. ■

## Dinosaur Dunes

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can reach up to eight feet high. If you hit your ball into a silage field, it's gone. Our roughs, in some places, reach up to six feet tall."

### MAINTENANCE CHALLENGES

The challenge for Strong and his regulators is that the course is played quite often. "We don't have somebody that manages the course constantly," said Strong. "Members tend to take liberties at times."

For example, there are 20 golf cars on the course owned by individual members. "There are no golf cars provided by the club," Strong explained. "Some golfers will even use John Deere Gators, Quads, ATVs, or - when it is really cold - some will even drive their truck out on the course."

"The constant play makes redesign, maintenance of fairways, changing of tee boxes and everything a real challenge," he continued. "We can't really shut the course down to maintain it or make changes."

The main five regulators - the big helpers - include: Jerry "Big Daddy" Kirchoff, Ron German, Joe Heath, Larry "Swede" Fagerquist, and Paul Parker. Other regulators include: Jim Davis, David Kuhlman, Steve and Melva Barnett, Nikki Hemel, Bev Kirkoff, and Richard and Teresa Hemel. ■

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