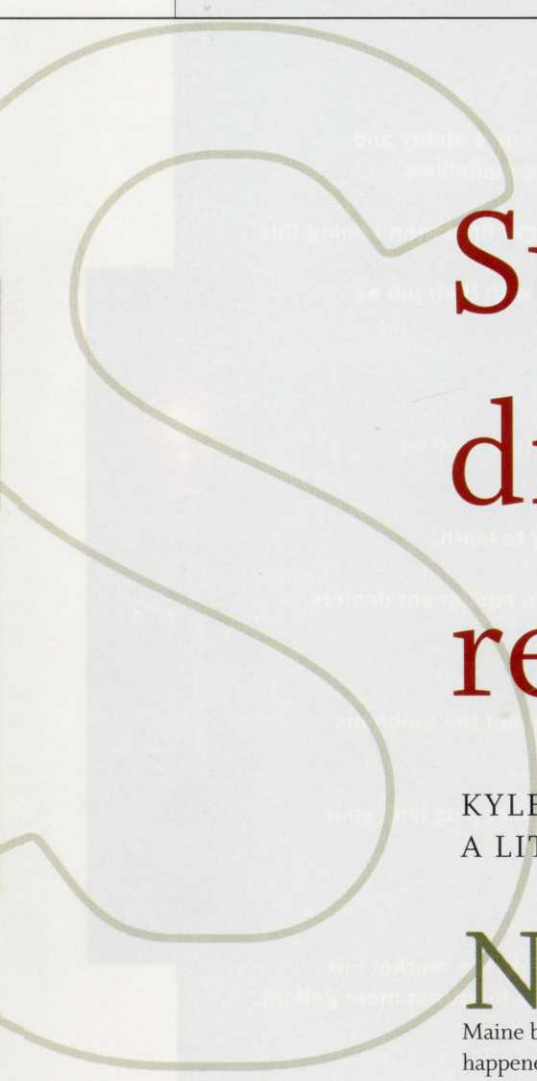


BY MARK LESLIE



# Superintendent's dream turns into reality

KYLE EVANS OPERATES BELGRADE LAKES GOLF CLUB  
A LITTLE DIFFERENTLY THAN MANY OTHERS WOULD

**N**o range. No locker room. A sandwich shop but no 19th hole. Not even a pro. Yet “Top 100” is written all over Belgrade Lakes Golf Club in Maine. The driving forces behind its quick ascension to America’s elite group of public golf courses are two diverse personalities –Harold Alfond, a Maine businessman and philanthropist, and Kyle Evans, a former golf course superintendent who once happened to tell Alfond about his aspirations of operating his own golf course.

It’s a classic story: boy works at golf course growing up; learns the ropes from mowing to working the pro shop, managing the books and cleaning toilets; goes to college and gets a job at a big-time, out-of-state golf course; returns to his roots; is befriended by a wealthy club member; and, together, they make his dream come true.

Along with two other partners – realtors Pat Donahue and Gail Rizzo, who found the property – Evans, Alfond and British golf course architect Clive Clark developed a golf course on a hill that features a 360-degree view of several lakes and a forest.

“We knew we had a unique piece of property, but we never imagined we’d be ‘Top 100 in America, Best New Upscale Public Course in America,’ one of only a dozen courses given five stars by Golf Digest,” says the 49-year-old Evans.

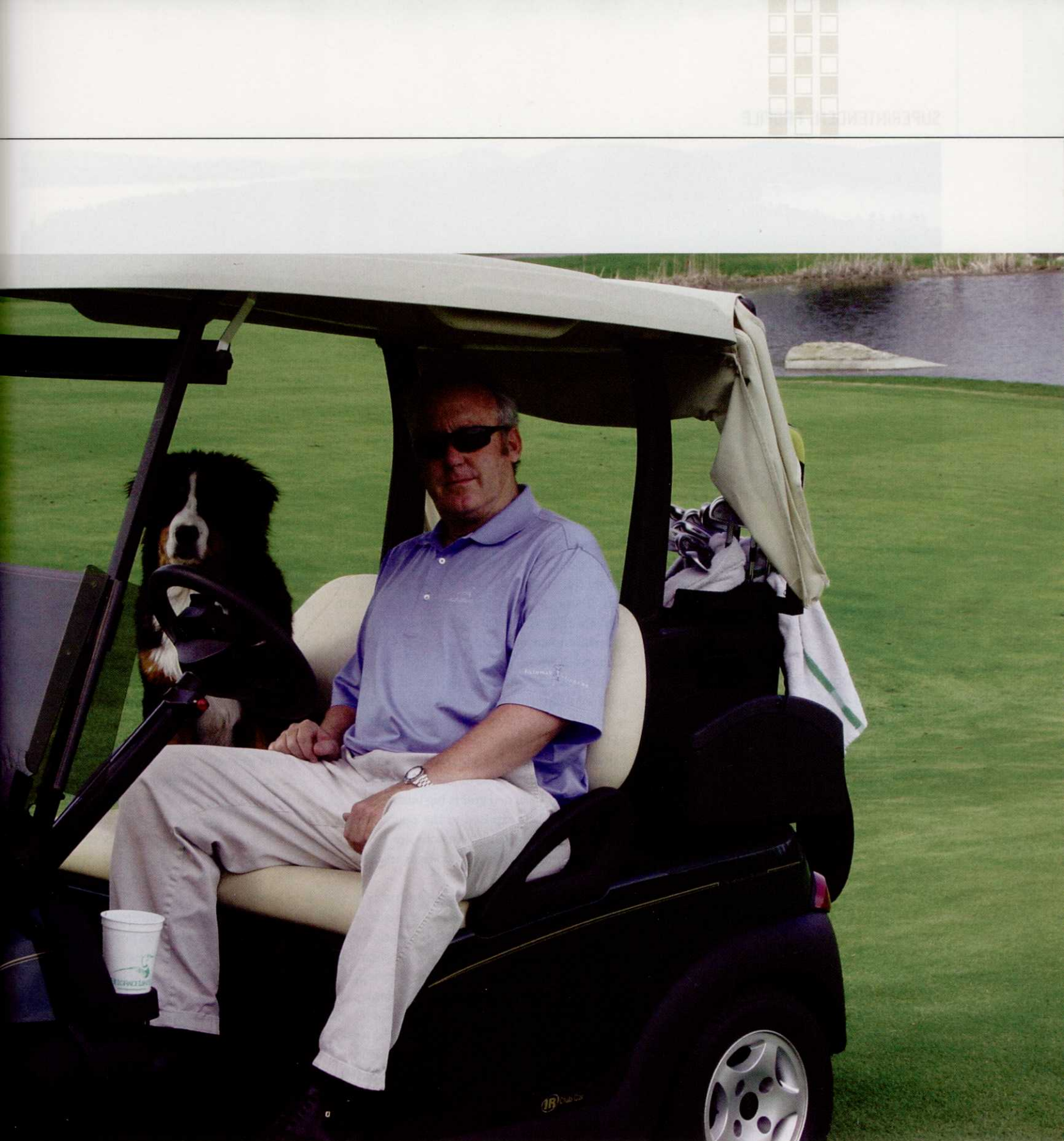
The 120-acre golf course, which is part of a larger 260-acre property, has appeared in golf calendars, desk calendars, books and in a series of postcards. Sparkling white birch trees flash through pine trees and dark evergreens, and piles of sun-washed white stones form 12-foot-high walls and line several fairways. The first hole features a 100-foot drop to a wide hilltop that falls away to the green, and the 18th hole features a 20,000-square-foot double green with the ninth hole snuggled at the foot of a steep incline about 150 feet below the clubhouse.

Evans shared his dream with Alfond about a dozen years ago.

“My course will be public-access only – no members, a quality product, playable and built to be easily maintained,” Evans says.

#### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

There have been two defining moments in Evans’ career: the day he began working at Naples (Maine)



Kyle Evans and his dog McKinley drive throughout the golf course with an eye for detail. Evans says every day has to be the best because the staff never knows who's coming. Photos: Belgrade Lakes Golf Club

## SUPERINTENDENT PROFILE



The first hole features a 100-foot drop to a wide hilltop that falls away to the green. Photo: Belgrade Lakes Golf Club

Golf and Country Club as a teenager and the instant Alford asked him if he was ready to risk he and his wife Margie's "fortune" and add it to those of Alford, Rizzo and Donahue to realize his dream.

When Evans was 15 years old, he worked with golf pro and superintendent Chet Cutting, an old-school hard worker who taught Evans a strong work ethic and how to treat people the right way. A competitive golfer, Cutting took Evans as his caddy to tournaments throughout New England and exposed him to the golf culture, including excellent golf courses, players and superintendents. Donald Ross's Portland Country Club and Poland Spring Golf Club became Evans' favorite local layouts while playing on his high-school golf team.

With a degree in commercial recreation from Springfield (Mass.) University – where Evans also played on the men's golf team – he returned to Naples in 1980. He intended to teach – like his father, Dean, who, now retired, works at Belgrade Lakes part time – but Evans became more interested in golf and drifted toward the maintenance end of the business.

"It was more interesting than the pro shop," he says. "I had never realized how technical maintenance had become."

At that point, Evans met Joseph Troll, a

professor at the University of Massachusetts' Stockbridge School. Troll encouraged Evans to attend the Stockbridge School, which accepted only 30 students at the time. Evans did, and, with the help of Troll, eventually became an assistant superintendent at Spook Rock Golf Course in Ramapo, N.Y.

"It's a terrific product and one of the really successful municipal golf venues," Evans says. "It hosted 50,000 to 60,000 rounds a year and held a PGA qualifying event while I was there. Angelo Palermo ran a well-orchestrated machine that was profitable and a good model for other towns. That's where I learned golf is big business."

Evans also was exposed to the operations at Winged Foot Golf Club, Westchester Country Club and other classic golf courses in eastern New York.

Meanwhile, the golf course industry was changing rapidly. Vast strides were made with lightweight mowing, automatic irrigation systems and new types of turfgrasses. Also, chemical controls for turf disease were being developed.

After two years at Spook Rock, a homesick Evans returned to Maine as superintendent at Springbrook Golf Club in Leeds. There, he made a number of changes to the course and oversaw its maintenance during the two years it hosted the Maine Open.

"That was probably the toughest job I ever had because of the lack of resources," he says. "In New York, if they needed it, they had it. But when you can afford just two fertilizer applications a year, you want to make sure you use them the right way. The same with other chemicals. If you ran out, you didn't get more. Also, using

older equipment and dealing with the labor force – there were no full-time people – was challenging. For example, we used a fire truck to pump water to the entire golf course."

After five years working with Shirley Hamel and Joe and Jeanine Golden, Hamel's son-in-law and daughter who had become Evan's close friends, Evans wrested himself away and became superintendent at the private Waterville Country Club in Maine. It was there he met Alford, and it was a friendship that led to the second defining moment in Evans' career and life.

After walking the Belgrade Lakes property with Rizzo and Donahue, having completed preliminary engineering work and a business outline, Evan's dream suddenly became a scary reality one night.

"Mr. Alford told Gail and Pat the only way he'd invest in the project was if I agreed to go in on it; and I had to put my mortgage on it," Evans says. "That's the way he does business. He wants everyone who's involved to have a financial part in it so you won't quit, and you have three or four minutes to make a decision."

Evans and his wife Margie have two sons, Tyler and Rees, who were 9 and 5 years old at the time, so there was much to weigh.

### ATTENTION-GETTER

Alford's mantra was golf, golf, golf and don't get caught up in anything else, just go with what we know, Evans says. That simplicity, along with the beauty of the location and challenge of the golf course, attracts wealthy people.

One day, Wayne Huizenga, a billionaire businessman, helicoptered in with Bobby Wadkins,

a PGA Tour pro, and Tom Fazio, a golf course architect only to return for an encore a couple days later. Another time, Hootie Johnson, the president of Augusta National Golf Club, helicoptered in with friends. One summer, Paul Newman was a frequent visitor while filming a movie nearby. Many others, well-heeled enough to have their own helicopters but unfamiliar to Evans, have landed on the practice green atop the hill.

"They all changed their shoes on the bench next to the putting green," Evans says. "We treat everyone the same."

Since joining the Belgrade Lakes project, Evans has been involved in operating a facility that has attracted attention from the beginning. The course opened shortly before The Country Club at Brookline outside Boston hosted the Ryder Cup. Since Clark, a former BBC color commentator and British amateur champion, had designed the course, media and professionals from Britain, Europe and America traveled to Belgrade to play it.

Though the center of attention at times, Evans defers credit to those around him, some of whom have worked with him for 20 years, including business manager Nate Fulling, superintendent Phil Landry and mechanic Doug Gordon. Fulling has worked for Evans since he was 14, and Landry and Gordon were on Evans' crew at Waterville.

#### THE MENTOR

For Evans, he is to his employees as Chet Cutting was to him.

"He is my mentor," says Fulling, 32, who has worked for Evans since he was a high school freshman. "One of Kyle's major strong points is dealing with people and employees in particular. To use a sports analogy, compare him to some of the better football coaches. Some guys you want to play for, and some you don't. The atmosphere that Kyle can instill makes you want to work hard and do your best for him."

"Kyle always treats us with respect," says

Landry, a business school graduate who has worked for Evans since 1990. "He always listens. We feel a pride in the golf course. We all treat it like it's our own."

Landry says that, like Evans, he instills pride in his crew by being flexible and listening to them.

"We have a lot of retired guys who have a life outside here, and we try to make it a great place to come to work," Landry says.

The most important thing Landry has learned from Evans is paying attention to details.

"It's the little things that count, whether listening to an employee or picking up a piece of trash on the golf course," Landry says. "People see the little things."

Keeping employees long term is important to Evans, who says the bottom line is hiring the right people, seeing their best traits, having confidence in them and giving them the tools to succeed.

"If you can't get them exactly what they need, if they know you're trying to help, it makes a big difference," he says. "Employees are involved and have a part in the decision-making. We're a team, and that's how everybody looks at it. Consistency with our employees is a great help to our business. Everyone has a vested interest."

#### DIFFERENT OPERATION

Evans and his staff treat every golfer, rich and famous or not, the same, which means treating them specially. People-carriers meet golfers at their cars in the parking lot down the side of the hill, as well as at the ninth and 18th greens, and

carry them up the hill to the golf shop and first and 10th tees. Guests are treated like royalty by all the staff, from the pro shop to the starter to the grounds crew. And 15-minute tee times mean nobody is rushed.

"We only have one chance with golfers," Evans says. "Every day is a member-guest day for us. We have a unique approach to golf compared to most private clubs. We make sure we don't bother golfers – every day, not just on tournament days. We get out of people's way and make sure they have a great time. We don't have the luxury of just gearing up for the weekends. Every day has to be the best for us because we never know who's coming. Whether you're answering phones in the pro shop or raking bunkers, the attitude is the same among our employees."

Even though many operators reduces their rates in the fall, Evans doesn't.

"That's the best time to play up here," he says. "It's cool. The colors are gorgeous. We don't reduce rates in the fall. The days are shorter, and there are fewer tee times. I'd like to charge more."

In a world of cookie-cutter clubhouses, parking lots and practice ranges, simplicity and natural beauty set Belgrade Lakes apart.

"You can't mimic what we have here," Evans says. "People are blown away by the simplicity of it." **GCI**

*Mark Leslie is a freelance writer from Monmouth, Maine. He can be reached at [gripfast@adelphia.net](mailto:gripfast@adelphia.net).*



The crew, from left: superintendent Phil Landry, managing partner Kyle Evans, head mechanic Doug Gordon and business manager Nate Fulling. Photo: Belgrade Lakes Golf Club