John Szklinski's deep voice quivers and cracks, and his blue eyes well with tears. Szklinski, superintendent of Southern Hills CC in Tulsa, Okla., is a mixture of melancholy and joy when he talks about his father, Richard, whom he calls his mentor and best friend.

Szklinski leans forward in his chair and wipes the trickling tears from his face with his large, coarse hands. His eyes are bloodshot but beaming when he tells how much his 60-year-old father has taught him about ethics, responsibility and hard work.

"I am whom he created," Szklinski says softly, noting he has seen his dad, who lives in his hometown of State College, Pa., only four times in the past 12 years because they live so far apart. "I miss my dad. He taught me a lot. I'm grateful."

One of the things the sensitive and strapping 6-foot-4 Szklinski learned from his father, who worked in the electronics industry for 35 years, was an intense work ethic. That work ethic has helped Szklinski get to where he is now. Southern Hills is one of the top tracks in the country, as well as the host course of the 2001 U.S. Open, June 14-17. Szklinski, who says he has wanted to be a superintendent since he was 18, is at Southern Hills because he worked his tail off to get there.

Szklinski and Southern Hills have benefited from each other. The course's green chairman, John Frame, says long-time members of the club have told him that Southern Hills hasn't looked better in 30 years. The club's general manager, Nick Sidorakis, says Szklinski is one of the hardest-working and smartest superintendents in the business.

"John is a ball of fire, and he has tremendous

Continued on page 30
John Szklinski proves
hard work will get you
somewhere — like
Southern Hills CC and
hosting the U.S. Open
Continued from page 28

skills,” says Sidorakis, who hired Szklinski in December 1998 to replace Bob Randquist, who was at Southern Hills for nearly 19 years. “I couldn’t ask more from an employee. He works seven days a week. I have to tell him when to go home.”

But it’s more than Szklinski’s work ethic that impresses Sidorakis, Frame and members of Southern Hills. It’s Szklinski’s fervor for his job that wows them most. Szklinski genuinely loves what he does.

When he talks about preparing the course for the U.S. Open, you feel his zeal. After listening to Szklinski rave about Southern Hills for an hour, with his arms waving and head bob-

bing, you’re pumped to go out on the course and rake bunkers with him for eight hours.

“This is his love; this is his passion,” explains Frame, a Tulsa surgeon. “John is miserable when the weather is inclement, and he can’t be outside doing something.”

“He’s in perpetual motion; he’s nonstop,” says assistant superintendent Todd Towery.

Szklinski is confident in his ability as a manager of people and an authority on grass, but he’s also humble. Szklinski insists he’s the most fortunate superintendent in the world to achieve two of his top career goals — being a superintendent at a top-ranked course and hosting a Major — at the ripe old age of 36.

He may be fortunate for reaching those goals, but life as the superintendent at Southern Hills has been difficult — at times, drastically difficult. Szklinski has endured hardships in the last 2.5 years, including loss of staff, vandalism, a maintenance facility fire and a severe drought, from which other superintendents might have walked away.

“He has persevered through a lot of adversity,” Sidorakis says. “But he’s stronger for it.”

Szklinski was selected for the job from a pool of superintendents from the nation's top 25 golf courses, Sidorakis says. Szklinski came to Southern Hills from Desert Highlands GC in Scottsdale, Ariz., where he was superintendent for five years. Szklinski, who has degrees in agribusiness and turfgrass management from Penn State University, didn’t like what he saw at Southern Hills upon his arrival — specifically the work ethic

Continued on page 32

Szklinski rates Southern Hills CC for the 101st U.S. Open:

On the course: “It’s unbelievably tight. With the fairways cut down, the roughs up and the trees full of leaves, you feel like you’re in a box when playing. It’s claustrophobic.”

On the 12th hole, the course’s signature hole: “It’s a tough par 4. There’s usually rough around the green, but it has been cut down. If your ball hits right, it could trickle down to the creek.”

On the 18th hole: “It will be a brutal hole. It’s 465 yards and a par 4. It’s a dogleg right into the wind. It features a green with enough speed that balls will fall off the face of the earth.”

On the favorite: “It’s going to be someone who’s very controlled off the tee. Vijay Singh is the kind of golfer who could do well here. The course favors him if he’s playing well.”

On strategy: “As a player, you can never relax out here. There’s not a lull on the course.”
Labor of Love

Continued from page 30

...of some course employees. “There was a lot of wasted motion,” Szklinski claims.

Szklinski says some employees wouldn’t listen to his commands regarding course maintenance. For instance, the collars around the greens were erratic in width. In one area near a green, the collar was 9 inches wide but dropped to 2 inches in another area. Szklinski says he told workers to mow the collars to a consistent width, but they wouldn’t follow his direction. “They didn’t care enough to perform the job correctly,” he says.

Szklinski challenged his employees to work harder. He admits he came on like a freight train at times, but he was also dedicated in his approach.

“I wanted to get them excited about what we were doing,” Szklinski says. “I mean, this is Southern Hills! This is class!”

But not everyone wanted to follow Szklinski’s lead. Thirty of 38 crew workers quit during Szklinski’s first six months on the job. Some older workers left on good terms to seek less-strenuous employment, and one employee was fired, Szklinski says. But other employees who remained were bitter at Szklinski and challenged his authority. Szklinski says they told him he was foolish for doing certain procedures on the course, and that he wouldn’t last two months at Southern Hills. But eventually those employees also left Southern Hills, Szklinski says.

Unfortunately, one disgruntled employee who quit allegedly poured acid on 12 of the

Continued on page 34
Labor of Love

‘John is the most intense superintendent I’ve ever seen.’

— Keith Foster, architect

Continued from page 32

course’s 27 greens, including eight greens on the championship course. The employee, who
quit his job the morning after the vandalism,
has not been charged, but Szklinski says a war-
rant was issued for his arrest.

The vandalism occurred in June 1999, al-
most exactly two years before the U.S. Open,
and Szklinski was devastated. “I was rock bot-
tom,” he says.

Szklinski admits he was also concerned what
others, especially green committee members,
thought of their new superintendent after he
was the target of vandalism and lost about
80 percent of his work force. “I was worried that
fingers would point at me,” he says.

But Frame says he never doubted Szklinski’s
integrity. “Through all the bad things that hap-
pened, I was not concerned in the least about
John’s ability as a superintendent,” Frame says.

Still, it was a dismal time at Southern Hills.
Sidorakis says Szklinski took the vandalism
harder than anyone. But after a few days of
brooding, Szklinski and the others took a con-
structive approach to the situation. They de-
cided it was a perfect time for renovation at
Southern Hills. The damaged greens needed to
be repaired, they thought, so why not restore
the other 10 greens on the championship course,
as well as the bunkers and tees. It was also a good
time to lengthen a few holes for the U.S. Open,
install a new irrigation system and improve
drainage. Szklinski could also replenish his staff
with his style of workers.

Szklinski told his peers: “This is an oppor-
tunity to turn a strong negative into the strongest
positive you can imagine.”

Southern Hills’ members supported the pro-
ject, and the course was closed for nearly a year
to be renovated (see sidebar on page 32). Keith
Foster, a Paris, Ky., architect and a student of
Perry Maxwell, who designed Southern Hills
in 1936, was hired to direct the renovation.

Szklinski and Foster hit it off. One of the

History Repeats Itself

When Teyye led his fellow vil-
lagers in the song “Tradition”
in Fiddler on the Roof, they
weren’t singing about the
United States Golf Associa-
tion — but they could have been. After all, just
as Teyye lauded a traditional family structure,
the USGA lauds traditional course design in
its choices to host Majors.

You can almost hear the officials in Far
Hills, N.J., speaking in solid and respectable
tones as they choose their Major courses: “In
2001, we will hold the U.S.
Open at Southern Hills
CC (circa 1936) and the
Senior Open at Salem CC (circa 1925).”

In the midst of declarations that modern
equipment has left classic courses impotent
against Tour-caliber golfers, the USGA still
chooses those same courses as the venues
for the U.S. Open and U.S. Senior Open. The
U.S. Women’s Open will soon return to the
classics for a long-running engagement.

In the past decade, the men’s Open visited
Pebble Beach (twice), Pinehurst No. 2,
Olympic Club, Congressional, Oakland Hills
and Shinnecock Hills. The Senior Open has
been played at Saucon Valley, Des Moines
Golf & CC, Riviera, Olympia Fields, Canterbury,
Congressional, Pinehurst No. 2 and Cherry
Hills. The ladies, while interspersing modern
clubs like Blackwolf Run and Pumpkin Ridge
with notable oldies like Broadmoor and Colo-
nial, will begin a run of classic venues begin-
ing in 2006, according to David Fay, USGA’s
executive director.

The explanation

“There are some great old golf courses that
have proven they can host the Open,” says
Tom Meekes, USGA director of rules and
competitions who sets up the courses for
the championships. “We have been to these
old courses and know the challenges they
provide. We know in advance [that] they are
going to work. A good new course might
come on the scene, but it hasn’t been tested
yet. Right now, we have so many great old
courses available, it’s hard to not go back
there periodically.”

Ron Forse, a golf course architect who
has performed restorations of two of the last
three sites to host Senior Opens, as well as
this year’s venue, Salem CC in Peabody,
Mass., says the choice of classic courses
makes sense because the USGA is
tradition oriented.

“They lean more toward the strategic and
traditional courses,” Forse says. “They under-
stand the character of the classic course is
more [than] a championship test of golf. They
could choose any number of difficult new
courses, but those places would not have a
sense of history.”

“We don’t want to turn our backs on new
courses,” Fay says. “But we can only go where
we are invited. You see the same names com-
first things Foster noticed about Szklinski was his work ethic — he wasn’t afraid to get dirty, and no job was below him. Foster says Szklinski was always picking up trash on the course. Even late in the day, when the two were exhausted from working, Szklinski would stop the golf cart they were riding in to pick up a piece of trash.

"John is the most intense superintendent I’ve ever seen," Foster says. "I don’t know of anyone as driven as he is."

Foster remembers Szklinski helping workers dig a ditch late in the day to find a leak in an underground pipe.

"He was like a steam shovel; there was mud flying all over the place," Foster says. "He was in this slop up past his knees. He said, ‘We’re going to find this water if it kills us.’"

Foster comforted Szklinski when the club’s maintenance facility burned down in February 2000. The fire, caused by an electrical short, wasn’t as bad as the vandalism because a new maintenance facility was already under construction. Still, it was a downer. Szklinski lost important paperwork in the fire, which also damaged expensive equipment.

Foster says he told Szklinski that bad things happen to everyone. "But the measure of a person is what they do when those bad things happen," Foster adds.

Szklinski didn’t let the fire get him or his revamped staff down.

"John kept the staff going forward instead of backward," says Towery, who worked for Szklinski at Desert Highland for 1.5 years before joining him at Southern Hills in early 1999. "He always tries to look for the positive things instead of dwelling on the negative. Like he says, ‘If it doesn’t kill you, it makes you stronger.’"

The course completed the renovation in time for one of the hottest and driest summers in

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Unfair criticism?

But what about critics who charge that new equipment is rendering the classic courses obsolete? Recent history says today’s greatest players are not beating the Pinehurst No. 2s of the world into submission. In fact, the only course that cried uncle recently was Pebble Beach last year when Tiger Woods played as if he were on another planet and finished at 12-under par. But he was the only player in the field who broke par. In the previous five years (1995-99), the winners shot a combined 7-under par at the U.S. Opens.

The seniors have fared better over the last decade, with the winning score coming between 6- and 13-under par half the time, but at even or over par three times. This year, Meeks warns, players won’t be nearly as happy with the choice of course.

*The players thought we were angels last year at Saucon Valley,* [but] they may not think so this year," he says. "The greens are severely sloped at Salem!"

The women, meanwhile, have been tearing up the modern courses at their Opens, clipping along with winning scores at 16-, 10-, 8-, 2- and 7-under par, with a dip on the screen of 6-over par at Blackwolf Run in 1998. Perhaps their return to classic courses in five years will humble them. If humility is not the aim of USGA officials who set up the Open venues, it’s at least a byproduct.

Fay says there will be no unnecessary toughening of Southern Hills this year in response to Tiger Woods’s extraordinary victory at Pebble Beach last year.

"We just witnessed an extraordinary golfer with his A game," Fay says. "I can assure you there will not be the Winged Foot response."

Fay was referring to the failure when Johnny Miller shot a 63 in the 1973 Open at Oakmont. The next year, Winged Foot became a nightmare. Players complained of rock-hard greens, ankle-deep rough and narrow fairways. The 1974 Open will forever be referred to as The Massacre at Winged Foot, when Hale Irwin’s winning score was 7-over par.

*Before declaring that the ball is going further and that our great and classic golf courses are becoming obsolete, you have to*
Continued from page 35
Tulsa's history. In fact, Tulsa endured the driest July, August and September on record since the Dust Bowl days of 1936. The course lost some fescue grass under trees, but that was the only damage, Szklinski says.

With all that's happened to him, Szklinski only half-jokingly says his career at Southern Hills is 2.5 years going on 10 years.

"But you know what, I'm better for it," he says. "I've learned a lot."

During the renovation, Szklinski admits he felt severe pressure. There was so much work to be done that he worked five months without a day off. But he was invigorated by it.

"It was addictive — having so many irons in the fire and so much responsibility," he says. "At times, I felt like I was getting squashed, but it was exciting."

Szklinski knows his rigorous work ethic has helped him scale the ladder of his profession. But his work ethic can also intimidate. "There are people who work for me that think I'm a little twisted to the extent I'll go to get something right," he admits.

But Szklinski makes it a point to let his employees know he's not above what they do. He'll mow fairways, spray the greens and dig ditches with them.

"I look for opportunities to get in the trenches," Szklinski says proudly. "I'm the muddiest guy on some days."

He course is ready for the U.S. Open, but Szklinski is not done with the course. He's champing at the bit to get going on other projects when the tournament is over. "I want the course to be the best it can be," he says.

Szklinski and his crew will continue repairing the courses eroded creeks. He also wants to bring the course's 1936 vintage bermuda-grass fairways up to date.

Continued on page 38
Szklinski also says he's eager to get back to his family life — his wife of 10 years, Jill, and his two young children. Szklinski wants to be home for dinner and play with the kids on the family-room floor.

"Jill has been awesome," says Szklinski, aware that it takes an understanding woman to be married to a man who gives so much to his job. "She knows this was my goal for 15 years."

Szklinski is not one to dwell on the obstacles he has overcome at Southern Hills. Never once does he exude even a hint of self-pity. As is his style, Szklinski takes a glass-is-half-full approach. Of course, he learned that positive approach to life's hardships from his father.

"There has been a lot of adversity," Szklinski says. "But all those gray clouds over Southern Hills ... well, every damn one of them had a silver lining. I've had people say I'm unfortunate, but I'm the most fortunate guy in the business."

Continued from page 36

"I have a certain vision for Southern Hills, and we haven't scratched the surface of what we want to do," Szklinski says. "Do you know how awesome Southern Hills can be?"

Because there's so much work to be done, Szklinski vows there will be no letdown when the U.S. Open ends and the media circus leaves town with its bright lights and fanfare.

Continued from page 36

of 1.5 percent to 2.4 percent, the classic courses sometimes have green slopes of 4 percent or 5 percent. Modern cutting heights on old-time greens equal ... well, do you remember the old Bugs Bunny baseball cartoon where he was the pitcher, catcher and played every field position at once? "Therein lies the chief and primary defense," Foster says.

At Salem, Forse added tees to lengthen the course.

"You need to increase length and ensure that bunkers come into play as they were intended," Forse says. "Sometimes we will add fairway bunkers to keep the design intent intact.

"But when you narrow the fairways so much, the roughs become the hazards instead of the bunkers, and that is unfortunate," he says. "The problem is that rough has replaced sand [in the Open template]. Often, holes are more than 400 yards of hazards, with intermittent pockets of sandy relief."

Finesse players do better at the Open because recovery shots are more demanding, says Rees Jones, who is nicknamed the U.S. Open Doctor because of his work on many of the host courses. Narrowing the fairways and lengthening the rough causes some players to opt for irons instead of drivers off the tee, giving the courses extra length that might not be possible otherwise, Jones says.

Critics charge that the added length tailors the Open courses to cater to only one type of golfer. Moraghan says the criticism is true only in the sense that the Open is designed to identify the best players in the world.

"OK, we identified Tiger Woods, Jack Nicklaus, Ben Hogan, Arnold Palmer and Lee Trevino," Moraghan says. "I'm sorry — those are some pretty good players."

"It's a great, great tournament," Foster says. "Why shouldn't it uphold as many standards of the game as possible? Winning the Open is a big deal."

"The USGA wants players to think their way around a golf course, not play it by rote by the yardage," Jones says. "You want a player to decide when to go for the flag or green, according to where he hits his drive. If he hits an iron off the tee, he may have to go for the green rather than the flag."

The USGA wants golfers who can manage their games to win, Jones says.

"The USGA does that by making the hazards difficult," he adds. "It is the magician, not the mechanic, who prevails during the Open."

Is that how it was foreseen by the men who designed these great classic courses — Donald Ross, Alistair Mackenzie, A.W. Tillinghast, Perry Maxwell and Jack Neville, among others?

"If I were designing today, I would add some room [to add length] 50 years from now," Moraghan says. "I think those men had the foresight that the equipment would get better, and I believe they added the room because of that."

There's apparently enough room in most cases to help tradition prevail.²

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