Dave Catalano and Craig Currier are making history at Bethpage State Park

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

hen he speaks of Craig Currier, Dave Catalano does so with complete reverence.

When he speaks of Dave Catalano, Craig Currier does so with unabridged esteem.

But neither man talks fondly of the other in an effort to curry favor. The pair speak openly about their mutual admiration because they’ve earned it from one another by working together for the past 12 years at Bethpage State Park in Farmingdale, N.Y., site of this month’s U.S. Open.

Catalano is director of Bethpage State Park, and Currier head superintendent of the park’s five public golf courses — the Red, the Yellow, the Green, the Blue and the prestigious Black Course, where the U.S. Open will be played for the second time in eight years. The 61-year-old Catalano, who has spent most of his career at Bethpage, hired the 38-year-old Currier in 1997.

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About the Cover

When I saw this photograph of Tiger Woods and the Bethpage Black golf maintenance staff hanging over Superintendent Craig Currier’s desk, I asked myself, “How cool would that look on our June cover?” The photograph was taken after Woods won the 2002 U.S. Open. Clutching his trophy, Woods posed with Currier and his cheering staff. Currier gave me the name of the photographer, Larry Lambrecht, and I contacted him and purchased the photograph. — Larry Aylward
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Ask anybody who knows anything about golf course management, and they'll tell you Catalano and Currier are the guys who make Bethpage’s 1,500-acre complex’s motor hum like a just-out-of-the-box, high-horsepower fairway mower.

Mike Davis, senior director of rules and competitions for the United States Golf Association, marvels at the two men’s dedication to Bethpage. “What’s so neat is that they absolutely love Bethpage,” says Davis, who’s in charge of tournament setup on the Black Course.

Charles Robson, executive director of New York’s Metropolitan PGA Section, says Bethpage wouldn’t operate as well if Currier didn’t have Catalano or vice versa. “They believe in each other,” Robson says. “They both have the same goal, which is to make it the best place it can be. They’re as concerned about Joe Golfer on the Yellow Course as they are about Tiger Woods on the Black Course.”

CATALANO IS the first to admit things would be different without Currier around. “Nothing holds him back,” Catalano says. “There’s nothing I’ve asked him to get done that he hasn’t gotten done — and gotten done better than anybody else I know could get it done.”

That’s a steep compliment coming from someone who has spent more than 20 years at the Long Island facility and has seen a lot of people come and go.

Catalano goes as far to say Currier is one of a handful of prominent people who has contributed to the “evolvement, success and reputation” of Bethpage in its history. Catalano also includes A.W. Tillinghast, renowned golf course designer of the Black Course, among those people.

“I feel that strongly about Craig,” Catalano says. “He bleeds for this place.”

Catalano was impressed with Currier when he interviewed the then-26-year-old for the job in 1997. Bethpage had recently been awarded the 2002 U.S. Open and much work was needed on the bartered Black Course as well as the entire complex, which opened in the mid-1930s. Catalano knew he had to make the right hire. There was little margin for error.

“Craig had a spring in his step and a smile on his face,” Catalano says. “He was...
confident he could do the job.”

But Currier was concerned his youth would impede his chances to get the job. He asked Catalano not to hold it against him.

“No, I won’t hold that against you,” Catalano, who was 50 at the time, told Currier. “That’s what you have going for you because we don’t need any more old goats like me around.”

Catalano says Currier had excellent references, including one from Robson, whose opinion Catalano values greatly. Robson knew Currier from Garden City Golf Club, also on Long Island, where he was a member. “I knew he was doing a great job there as an assistant,” Robson says.

Catalano says Currier, like a lot of young people, believed he just needed a chance to show his stuff. He did both at Bethpage. “He hit the ground racing, not running,” Catalano says.

But nobody figured Currier would quickly develop into, as the USGA’s Davis calls him, “one of the best golf course superintendents in the country.”

“Did I know he was as good as this? Absolutely not,” Robson adds. “He was a 26-year-old kid. He could have come in and decided he wanted to party more than prepare a golf course.”

Catalano was impressed with Currier’s leadership skills, which was crucial because Bethpage had a large crew to direct. Currier also had to help lead the Black Course’s restoration. Bethpage had operated on a shoestring budget, but that was changing with golf’s big-top circus coming to town and millions of dollars being invested in the complex by the state and the USGA.

Catalano provided Currier what he needed in people, equipment and supplies and then got out of his way. In fact, Catalano, who was superintendent of Bethpage’s Green course in 1976 and 1977, rarely gets in Currier’s way when it comes to golf course agronomics.

“Obviously, there are budget constraints, and we have frequent conversations about that,” Catalano says. “But I don’t interfere with agronomics. He does that extraordinarily well. He also has an extraordinarily strong supporting cast.”

**CATALANO IS IN** awe of Currier’s passion for Bethpage. Of course, Catalano shares Currier’s passion, which has made them bond even more.

“Craig is as committed to this place as I am,” says Catalano, sipping green tea while sitting in his office on the second floor of the Bethpage clubhouse. “He takes as much pride in this place as I do. . . . I’m thrilled he sees this place the way I see it.”

Catalano pauses. “You can’t write that into a job description,” he adds.

On a recent brisk afternoon under an overcast sky, Currier is busy putting that passion to work on the Black Course. Like members of his maintenance crew, the strapping 6-foot-5 Currier is dressed to work outdoors. He wears four layers of clothes on his upper body — a polo shirt, a Pittsburgh Steelers (his favorite football team) sweatshirt, a windbreaker and a dirt-smudged Columbia coat. His well-worn boots have been updated with new shoelaces. A Bethpage ball cap, with his name draped across the back, hugs his head.

“Dave allows me to spend all my time out there,” says Currier, who admits he abhors paperwork. “He makes it easy for me. It seems like a lot of golf course superintendents these days . . . half the guys aren’t even on the golf course. They’re too busy doing everything else. I’m the total opposite. I basically spend all my time out here.”

Currier attended the State University of New York (SUNY) at Cobleskill, where he graduated with a bachelor’s degree in plant science and an associate’s degree in turfgrass management. When told that Catalano mentions him in the same breath as Tillieghast, an astonished Currier says it’s Catalano who should be held in such distinguished company.

“Without Dave, none of this would’ve happened,” he says of Bethpage’s reformation the past decade.

What Catalano likes about Currier are the same attributes Currier likes about him. “Dave is a no-nonsense kind of guy,” Currier says.

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The USGA’s Davis likes that about Catalano as well. Davis says the superintendent is the most vital person to any U.S. Open operation. But in Bethpage’s case, Davis says Catalano is just as important as Currier.

“Even though he’s not out there every day doing what Craig is doing, Dave understands it,” Davis says. “He doesn’t micromanage Craig, but Dave is incredibly supportive of him.”

IT’S CLEAR WHY Currier and Catalano connect. Both come from hard-working, blue-collar families.

Currier grew up on a dairy farm in upstate New York in the tiny town of Cedar Lake near Utica. His father and his uncle operated the farm, and Currier observed and adopted their intense work ethic. “After watching them every day, this job is a piece of cake,” Currier says.

Currier says his dad, Clarence, didn’t take off much time, except maybe an occasional Sunday afternoon. “It was mostly all day and every day,” he says.

Catalano credits his strong work ethic to his upbringing. His father, Charles, worked three jobs to support the five-member family, including cleaning up trash at the Bethpage picnic area on weekends. “The man worked hard his whole life,” Catalano says. “And he never complained.”

Catalano began working for Bethpage in the summer of 1967 when he returned home from his first year of college. Like his dad, Catalano worked for the park’s picnic area and cleaned toilets and picked up trash, among other duties. He was 19 and earned $1.19 an hour.

“I can assure you that in 1967, when I reported to work that first day, I didn’t have some master plan that I would one day be preparing for the U.S. Open,” Catalano says, adding he was simply looking to make some money to further his education.

Catalano worked for the Yellow and Blue courses’ maintenance staffs during the summers of ’68 and ’69. He decided to forgo the rest of college to work full time at the Yellow Course in 1970.

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CALL FOR ENTRIES! 2010 Dog Days of Golf Calendar

Is Your Canine Camera-Friendly? If so, please submit a photo of your dog to be considered for the LebanonTurf’s 2010 Dog Days of Golf calendar. Photos of your dog in a golf-related setting, in action or with you are encouraged. The 2010 calendar will feature dogs from your favorite course and be circulated to golf course professionals throughout the country. Any questions? Please call Cynthia Andrews, 1-800-532-0090 ext 253.

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Catalano and Currier don’t view their jobs at Bethpage as work. Both men live on the Bethpage property — Catalano on the Black Course’s 14th hole, and Currier near the Green Course.

“This isn’t a job — it’s a way of life,” says Catalano, who sports a black sleeveless U.S. Open sweater over his white polo shirt. “And it’s a great way of life. This place is in my blood.”

Says Currier: “The work here is endless — it’s a big place. But that’s what I love about it.”

It’s clear to others who know them how much Catalano and Currier value working at Bethpage.

“If it was just a job, Craig would have gone someplace else and made more money, and Dave would have retired,” Robson says. “It’s more than a job for these guys. They’re committed to seeing this place be the best public golf course facility in the world.”

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Catalano was promoted to superintendent of Bethpage’s Green Course in 1976. He left the Green Course in 1978 to become superintendent of New York’s Caleb Smith State Park Preserve in Smithtown, N.Y., about 20 minutes from Bethpage.

Catalano left Caleb Smith in 1981 to be superintendent of Sunken Meadow State Park in Kings Park on Long Island. He was promoted to the state parks’ regional headquarters in 1982. He stayed there 13 years and was promoted to director of operations. “I had the opportunity to come back to Bethpage in ’95, and I’ve been here since,” says Catalano, who grew up four miles from the park.
Because they spend a lot of time together and share many ideals about their profession, Catalano and Currier have grown close personally. Sometimes Catalano, who has two daughters, views Currier as a son or a younger brother. “That’s how strongly I feel about him,” Catalano says.

The feeling is mutual. “He has been like a father figure to me,” says Currier, who lost his dad when he was 22.

Sure, Catalano and Currier might argue on occasion. And they’re constantly ribbing each other.

“Craig brings a smile to my face 99.9 percent of the time,” Catalano says. “The other one one-hundredth part of the time I’d like to give him a pop on the head.”

EVEN THOUGH he loves his work as few do, Catalano is pondering retirement after 43 years of working for the state’s park district. But he’s not thinking about retirement because he doesn’t want to work anymore; he just knows he’s slowing down. “I would argue that I’m a little less sharp,” Catalano says. “Does that mean I’m doing a poor job? No. And it doesn’t mean I need to be replaced. It’s just reality.”

Catalano could retire now and make almost as much money from his pension as he does his current salary. “So why am I still working?” Catalano asks. “Because I love it.”

Catalano also admits it’s the people at Bethpage who keep him going. “I’m not ready to retire because I’d miss Craig,” he says.

The remark sounds like a wisecrack, but it’s not. “I’d miss the people I work with too much,” Catalano says softly. Currier knows Catalano is contemplating retirement. While he won’t try and talk him out of it, Currier laments the day his boss and confidant calls it a career.

Currier’s peers keep asking him when he plans to leave Bethpage. They figure he can write his own ticket and go anywhere he wants and make more money after hosting two U.S. Opens.

“I have no desire to leave,” Currier says, adding he looks forward to a possible third U.S. Open at Bethpage.

Davis, who has come to know Catalano and Currier well over the years, says he cringes to think about Bethpage without Catalano, Currier or both.

“Not that anybody isn’t replaceable, but there’s a part of me that says I would hate to go back to Bethpage if there’s no Craig or Dave there,” Davis says. “It just wouldn’t be the same.”

Catalano and Currier will someday be engraved in Bethpage’s storybook history. In fact, they already are.