They are a fussy bunch, the members of Oakmont Country Club. They expect nothing but premium playing conditions on their exalted 104-year-old golf course, the site of this month’s U.S. Open. And even though the golf course maintenance staff provides an outstanding setting, the members still find things to fret about.

John Zimmers Jr., Oakmont’s grounds superintendent, takes the members’ criticism in stride. In fact, he welcomes their myriad opinions about the golf course he oversees.

The thick-skinned Zimmers, who’s in his eighth season at the Pittsburgh club, realizes that dealing with the club’s 400 members — considered the most demanding fraternity in golf — is an essential part of his job.

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Which brings us to the U.S. Open, whose preparations have also been a vital part of Zimmers’ job the past five years. Now, if you’re the superintendent of a U.S. Open host course, you’re probably under more pressure during championship week than Jack Bauer during an episode of “24.” Such tension comes with the territory of staging one of golf’s greatest spectacles. Not only are the world’s greatest players playing your course, the most hypercritical golf “experts” are scrutinizing its every grass blade.

But Zimmers might be an exception to the U.S. Open pressure cooker. That’s not to say the 36-year-old isn’t feeling the searing heat to stage a magnificent championship. It’s just to say he’s accustomed to facing the same loud music from his club’s members — every day. So you won’t see Zimmers pulling his closely cropped hair out if the world’s greatest golfers complain that Oakmont’s rough is too tough.

In fact, as absurd as it may sound, the U.S. Open may provide respite for Zimmers from his normal workweek. “This is a really bizarre thing to tell you, but I actually think there’s a little less demand associated with the championship when I think of what the membership strives to do here every day,” Zimmers says. What exactly do the members strive to do at Oakmont? In short, they want Zimmers to make the course as grueling to play as possible. They want their course to be the ultimate test of golf. If someone shoots par, someone else says, “We can’t have that here.”

Of course, the demand for difficult conditions can have Zimmers and his crew walking a tightrope when it comes to the turf’s health. Take the greens, for instance, which the members want running at 13 feet on the Stimpmeter. And they want Zimmers and his crew to triple-cut the Poa annua-bentgrass greens almost daily and roll them several times a week to achieve their breakneck speed. And, yes, they expect Zimmers and his crew to keep the greens alive despite subjecting them to such stress.

“The members just embrace fast greens,” Zimmers explains. “We’re more on the extreme of speed versus any club out there.”

The greens are so fast that the United States Golf Association plans to slow them down for the U.S. Open. (Is that a surprise?) So you can see why Zimmers might feel less anxiety during U.S. Open week. But make no mistake: The U.S. Open won’t provide a quick getaway to Margaritaville for Zimmers and his crew, who have been preparing fervently for the week of June 11 through June 17 for several years. They plan to make the club’s members, the USGA and themselves proud. “When you prepare a golf course at this level every day, you want to show it off to the world,” Zimmers says.

One doesn’t become the golf course superintendent at a place like Oakmont without having a passion for work. So it’s no surprise that Zimmers comes from a family of hard workers. He grew up in Sinking Valley, Pa., a small town between State College and Altoona in the state’s central region. Zimmers says his grandfather, also named John, was his biggest influence in regard to his work ethic. “He was the hardest-working guy I’ve
ever met,” Zimmers says of his grandfather, who worked for 43 years at a paper mill.

Zimmers’ grandfather died last year. His framed black-and-white photograph sits on Zimmers’ desk. It serves as a reminder to Zimmers that hard work can get you everywhere in life.

Zimmers’ foray into the golf industry came after he answered a help-wanted ad in The Altoona Mirror when he was 18. Paul R. Latshaw, the then-superintendent of Wilmington Country Club in Delaware, placed the ad.

Zimmers rarely read the newspaper then, but he did on this day and saw the ad. Zimmers had recently graduated from high school and was working for a local landscaper. He figured he had nothing to lose by phoning Latshaw to find out more about the job.

Zimmers liked what he heard and took the job on Latshaw’s crew. He worked for Latshaw, hailed as one of the top superintendents ever, for four years at Wilmington. Zimmers also decided to attend Rutgers University to study turfgrass management while he worked at Wilmington. He received a two-year turfgrass certificate in 1993. Later that year, he followed Latshaw to Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Md., where he became Latshaw’s first assistant. Zimmers stayed there for two years before taking the superintendent’s position at Sand Ridge Golf Club, a new Tom Fazio design in Chardon, Ohio.

Zimmers says Latshaw taught him most everything he knows about the business. Zimmers says he’s also grateful to Bill Conway, owner of Sand Ridge, for giving him his first job as a superintendent when he was only 25 and involving him in the construction and grow-in of one of the top clubs in northeast Ohio.

“I was really fortunate,” Zimmers says. “I was able to do things there that I didn’t get to do at other places.”

But it’s not just good fortune that has propelled Zimmers’ career. Dedication to improving his craft has much to do with it.

“If you want to be better than anybody else, you have to be willing to put in the time,” Zimmers says.

The amount of work he puts in is “mind-boggling,” says his wife, Tracey, who is the office manager at Oakmont’s maintenance complex. Zimmers is at work by 4:30 a.m. daily to begin his crew on their assignments. He also works weekends. Near-100-hour weeks are the norm.

Sometimes it might seem like John is married to the golf course and not her, says Tracey, his high-school sweetheart. Continued on page 44

They can crawl, but they can’t hide.
No buffer zones to worry about.
Continued from page 43

and wife of 17 years. But she understands the commitment John had to make when he became superintendent of Oakmont. The couple has no children.

"It's a way of life for him," she says.

But while his work consumes him, John has realized the importance of family, Tracey says. He is there when family members need him. He doesn't use work as an excuse to miss important family functions.

"Do you live to work or work to live?" Tracey asks. "Sometimes you have to find a balance, and John has. I'm proud of him for that."

With nearly eight years in at one of America's premier golf clubs at such a young age, some people wonder if Zimmerm will ditch his pressure-packed job and move on after the U.S. Open.

But Zimmerm says he's not going anywhere. Oakmont is the place for him right now. Besides, the prestige of another Major tournament — the 2010 Women's U.S. Open — is on the horizon.

"It fits my niche of where I'm at in my life right now," he says.

But Zimmerm, like any career-minded individual, thinks about his future and is keeping his options open.
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Construction equipment was a common sight on the course during the renovation.

Oakmont Regains Its Grueling Image

BY LARRY AYLWARD

In preparing for this month's U.S. Open, John Zimmers Jr. helped oversee Oakmont Country Club's massive golf course restoration, which began before Zimmers arrived at the Pittsburgh-area course in 1999 and ended in late 2005.

Thanks to the restoration, which included the removal of more than 5,000 trees, Oakmont has regained its take-no-prisoners image. Of course, that's the image the late Henry C. Fownes sought when he designed his only golf course in 1903.

"He set out to make the hardest golf course in America, and I think he achieved what he wanted to do," Zimmers says.

Oakmont's grounds committee decided it was time to bring down the trees. Oakmont was designed as a links-style course, not a parkland course, they reasoned. Not surprisingly, the board's decision sparked controversy.

The tree-removal program began in 1995 under the direction of Mark Kuhns, who spent nine years at Oakmont and is now director of grounds at Baltusrol Golf Club. Zimmers inherited the project upon his arrival in 1999. Most of the work was done in-house and in the winter so tree-sentimental members wouldn't witness the severed lumber toppling to the ground.

Zimmers explained to members the nuances of certain agronomic procedures in terms they can understand.

"You know he knows more about grass than you ever will," Wallace says. "But he has a way that involves you. So the members don't walk away with their heads spinning.

Tim Moraghan, the United States Golf Association's director of championship agronomy, has known Zimmers since his days at Congressional. Moraghan has watched Zimmers grow into a superintendent who can handle the pressures that come with being superintendent at a top club. Zimmers doesn't get too high or too low, which is the best way to operate at a place like Oakmont.

"It is one of the all-time great courses in this country," Moraghan says. "And John survives it all very well."

Wallace is impressed that Zimmers sur-
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Tim Moraghan, the United States Golf Association’s director of championship agronomy, describes the finished tree-removal program as “mind blowing.” “If you had seen the course before 1995 and seen it today, your jaw would hit the ground,” Moraghan says.

Oakmont’s turf will benefit from the tree removal, says Moraghan, who supported the endeavor.

“Are we there to play golf on quality turf grass, or are we there to take a walk in the park and look at the birds in the trees?” Moraghan asked. “It’s hard to convince people in the environmental community that taking down trees is beneficial. But were not taking down trees in a national park. Were taking down trees on a golf course.”

Fazio’s Tom Marzolf was the architectural anchorman for the restoration. Marzolf’s first order of business upon arriving in 1999 was lengthening Oakmont from the trees. More than 200 yards was added to the course, which now plays about 7,255 yards. A new par-3 tee on No. 8 will make the hole 290 yards for the U.S. Open.

Oakmont’s existing bunkers were also restored, and 10 bunkers were rebuilt. Fownes designed Oakmont with 300 bunkers, but many were removed to cut back on overall maintenance. There are about 200 bunkers on the course now.

The project included the refurbishing of the church pews bunker, one of the most famous bunkers in golf. Over the years, the church pews bunker floor had accumulated so much sand that it had become raised. The floor was lowered and the bunker’s bottom was rebuilt. Two additional pews were also added to each end of the bunker.

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Oakmont’s other hazards — its ditches — also were repaired. Oakmont has no water hazards, but the ditches act as functional hazards and provide good drainage on the course.

Oakmont’s push-up greens, which hadn’t been disturbed in 102 years, also needed renewal. They were restored to their original size. Oakmont also installed the XGD, or Existing Greens Drainage, on all of its greens. Developed by T.D.I. International, XGD is a subsurface drainage system that removes surface water more rapidly and lowers the water table in the green, thereby improving turf drainage.

Zimmers has worked closely with Moraghan on course setup for the U.S. Open. “Hard and fair” is how Zimmers describes how the course will play.

Oakmont is known for its fast greens, which members prefer to run at 13 feet consistently on the Stimpmeter. The USGA plans to slow them down for the U.S. Open.

Oakmont’s members, who love a tough test of golf, will take pride in that, Moraghan says. “They’ll be boasting, ‘We have to slow down the greens for [the pros].’” Moraghan says.

Oakmont’s members like to brag about their course. They have plenty to talk about considering that this year’s U.S. Open marks the club’s eighth national championship, more than any other establishment.

Usually, a course closes a few weeks before U.S. Open week so divots and ball marks can heal, and loose ends can be tied up. Oakmont’s members are not giving up their course to the championship until a day before the first practice round.

“That tells you how passionate they are about their golf,” Zimmers says.
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Dave Catalano has worked himself way up the ladder at the historic park, which hosts its second U.S. Open in 2009

Above Dave Catalano's office door is a sign that reads, "Golf Stories Told Here." It's an appropriate statement, considering Catalano's rags-to-riches story about his career at Bethpage State Park.

As the story goes, Catalano worked his way up from scrubbing toilets in the park's picnic-area restrooms to overseeing the staging of the U.S. Open on Bethpage's Black Course.

Talk about a rise to the top.

Catalano, the director of Bethpage State Park, worked hard to get where he is and says he caught a few breaks along the way to help him progress in his career. The 59-year-old is grateful to begin his 40th year working for the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation this summer.

"My career has been a blessing," he says.

Catalano has spent almost 20 of those years at Bethpage, best known for its five golf courses, including the Black Course, which hosted the U.S. Open in 2002 and will host it again in 2009. Bethpage also offers picnic facilities, playing fields and other recreational endeavors.

Catalano's office is on the second floor of the golf complex's clubhouse, which sits amid the five courses, all named after colors — Red, Yellow, Blue and Green in addition to Black. His office is adorned with several photos and illustrations of the park's courses.

Bethpage is divided into two divisions, operations and maintenance, both of which Catalano oversees in addition to the pro shop and catering license operation. Bethpage employs six golf course supervisors, including Craig Currier, superintendent of the famed Black Course, who reports to Catalano.

Catalano grew up in the Bethpage area. His father and uncle worked at Bethpage. His great uncle helped build the complex in the 1930s. "I have a family history of working in the park," Catalano says.

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

"But that was good by me," he says of the pay.

The next summer Catalano began working for the Blue course's maintenance staff. He moved over to the Yellow course for the summer of '69.

Catalano decided to forgo the rest of college to work full time at the Yellow course in 1970. In 1976, he was named superintendent of Bethpage's Green course. 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. He