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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**

Catalano says 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 Tillinghast, 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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USGA’s director of rules and competitions waxes on setup, the rough, etc.

Entering his fourth U.S. Open as the United States Golf Association’s senior director of rules and competitions, Mike Davis has quickly transitioned the USGA image from staid protectors of par to proponents of interesting, cerebral golf. Davis spoke to Golfdom recently about a range of subjects related to the delicate task of course setup and tournament maintenance.

A year after Torrey Pines, you’ve heard a lot of positive feedback about the setup from players and media. Have you heard of any instances where some of the course setup ideas influenced everyday courses or amateur events? I’ve heard several comments about people liking the idea of varying the teeing grounds for everyday play. The one real problem with mixing up teeing grounds seems to unfortunately involve how courses are rated for handicap purposes. Beyond that, I believe people in general like variety. Part of me believes that if golfers were a bit less concerned about their score and more focused on the challenge of each shot, they’d end up enjoying their rounds more.

What has the reaction been from golf course superintendents to the idea of variety in setup? At first, I suppose the reaction tended to be, “You’re not seriously thinking of going up there and actually using the forward tee for the U.S. Open?” I also think a few of our host venues wondered if we were going to make the setup too easy. But I think we’ve seen that mixing and matching teeing grounds to certain hole locations or to different drive zones can actually increase the difficulty because players have to think more. Moving tee markers up also tends to open up more choices of play.

Would you advocate tiered rough for the everyday course? The concept of having less penalty the closer you are to the fairway seems logical, but anything that drives up the cost of course maintenance would not be a good thing. Interestingly at our Opens, it could be argued that the graduated rough might save some manpower and money since less grass gets mowed on a daily basis (i.e., the rough further away from the fairway gets mowed less often). I suppose the same could happen for everyday play; mow the closer-in rough at a lower height and a bit more often but let the other rough go for a longer period of time, which could save on manpower, equipment wear-and-tear and fuel costs.

When you conjure up various ideas, like varied tees and tiered rough, do you consider the ramifications for the everyday game? I’m sorry to say no. It has all been about trying to do the best job possible with the golf course setup. Most of the changes are a result of Jim Hyler (USGA Championship chairman) and me believing we could improve on certain aspects.

With apologies to the golfers of New York, Bethpage Black seems a bit overrated to me as a design. The greens have little interest, there are no really dramatic risk-reward holes and the finishing hole is downright awful. Tell us what you love about it? Well, I value my life so I’ll watch how I answer this one because New Yorkers love their Bethpage! It is true that the putting greens have less pitch and contour than most...
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