

Keepers of the Conservancy: Meet The Merit Club's Dedicated Green Team

This is the second in a series of articles highlighting various aspects of the 2000 U.S. Women's Open, to be held July 17-23 at The Merit Club in Gurnee.

"Golf is a way of enjoying the outdoors," proclaims Bert Getz, founder of The Merit Club. Indeed, the venue for this year's U.S. Women's Open was born from Mr. Getz's desire to preserve the cattle farm where he raised his family as open space in an increasingly dense suburban area.

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Built on 325 acres, The Merit Club defies any notion that great golf and environmental sensitivity are incompatible. Its rolling topography incorporates prairie, wetlands and oak savannas; wildlife abounds on the course, moving among generous buffer zones between holes. With each season, prairie grasses and wildflowers offer a vivid—and continually shifting—color palette.

More than a top-100 golf course, more than an environmental showcase, The Merit Club is in fact part of the Liberty Prairie Conservancy, a 2,000-acre area comprised of both public and private lands. In 1993, with the assistance of CorLands, the land-preservation affiliate of Openlands Project, Mr. Getz established a conservation easement for The Merit Club property. A conservation easement is a written agreement between a landowner and a government agency or nonprofit organization that permanently limits development of the land. Even if the owner sells the land or passes it on to heirs, the conservation easement remains in effect.

All of the course's acreage—with the exception of the clubhouse and parking area—is protected by the easement, says CorLands' Nancy Kaszak. That acreage encompasses 75 acres of restored prairie, 30 acres of wetlands, 30 acres of oak and hickory savanna and a two-acre tree nursery.

"The Merit Club's easement allows construction of golf-related structures in restricted areas; if golf course operation were to cease for any reason, the land must remain open and be allowed to revert to its natural

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state,” Kaszak explains. “These restrictions apply even if the land is sold, thus preserving it for future generations.”

Since the easement's inception, The Merit Club's superintendent, Oscar Miles, CGCS, has worked diligently to cultivate and fortify the course's natural habitats. With guidance from CorLands, Oscar applied three decades of experience, specialized research, careful experimentation and his own heartfelt appreciation for the outdoors to nurture The Merit Club to where it is today.

A look at Oscar's top-notch team

Always shying from the limelight, Oscar is quick to point out that he is not The Merit Club's sole custodian. In fact, he praises his current staff, and recognizes in particular three men whose roles are critical to The Merit Club's smooth operations: assistant superintendent John Nelson, foreman Enrique Valadez and head mechanic Joel Guadarrama.

“If a superintendent is looking for dedication and loyalty among staff, these three have what's necessary to be the leaders of The Merit Club,” says Oscar. “They have good values, they are good family people and they are sensitive to and respect our members.”

John worked for Oscar in the early '80s as an intern, then moved on to assist Al Fierst at Oak Park C.C. After moving to Florida for a brief period, John approached Oscar in 1990 about job opportunities in Chicagoland. Oscar hired John as construction foreman for The Merit Club. Eventually, in 1996, John earned the first assistant position.

“I like the way our team is organized,” says John. “The sense of cooperation, camaraderie and

friendship are strong, and we have achieved some longevity with our crew.”

Of the opportunity to prepare The Merit Club for the Open, John notes, “I'm very excited. You can get stuck in a rut with everyday routine maintenance and this is a nice change of pace that has afforded the chance to do a variety of tasks you don't normally get to do working on a golf course.”

Like John, foreman Enrique Valadez has a longstanding relationship with Oscar. Hired on at Butler National in 1986 as extra help during the Western Open, Enrique impressed Oscar with his work ethic. By summer of 1988, he was Butler's foreman. When Oscar left Butler in 1989, course officials permitted him to take a few employees with him, including Enrique, who joined The Merit Club after 1990's Western Open.

As foreman, Enrique applies his fluency in English and Spanish to act as liaison to a largely Hispanic crew. He oversees all special projects, including the construction of a new practice tee last fall and its grading and seeding this spring.

“Hard work is coming up with the Open, but we're all really excited,” says Enrique. “We're all working together for a united purpose.”

Head mechanic Joel rounds out Oscar's key staff. At the age of 20 or so, Joel came to work on The Merit Club's grounds crew during seeding, sodding and hydromulching of the new golf course. After being seasonal for several years, Joel expressed interest in working full-time in equipment maintenance. Two years ago, Joel moved up into the role of head mechanic.

With the Open looming, Joel needs to focus on making sure all mowers and other equipment are running well. The fleet is expanding, too, increasing Joel's responsibilities as he prepares for his first tournament. Like his colleagues, he is rising to the challenge.

“So many worldwide will see this tournament,” Joel says. “We can present this place where we've been working together and be proud.”



Next: Preparing The Merit Club for the 2000 U.S. Women's Open, and a tourney preview.



(L to R) The Merit Club's head mechanic Joel Guadarrama, foreman Enrique Valadez, assistant superintendent John Nelson and superintendent Oscar Miles.