

Waxing Nostalgic . . . Oscar Miles Talks About His Role in Creating The Merit Club



Photos by CeCe Durbin

Hole #6 at The Merit Club.

This is the first in a series of articles that will highlight various aspects of the 2000 U.S. Women's Open, to be held July 17-23 at The Merit Club in Gurnee. In this article: a look at how superintendent Oscar Miles arrived at The Merit Club and his instrumental role in building that course.

For many years, Oscar Miles, CGCS, harbored a dream. "Someday, I wanted to put my knowledge and experience into practice by being involved in the early development of a golf course . . . I wanted to apply the most up-to-date principles of golf course construction and drainage to create a better-conditioned golf course."

In 1989, just after that year's Western Open, renowned golf instructor Ed Oldfield contacted Oscar—then at Butler National—and asked him if he would be interested in joining the team Ed was assembling to build a new golf course. "I said 'no thank you,'" Oscar recalls.

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What about the dream?

"I loved Butler so much and was happy there," says Oscar. "I wanted to enjoy the results of my work—specifically, the reconditioning of the course after the rains in '87—for a few years."

Ed persisted in courting Oscar. Over dinner, the two men discussed the project in detail. Bert Getz, owner of Stonehenge Farm in unincorporated Lake County, had a passion for nature and preserving open space. Rather than sell the family farm to voracious real estate developers, Getz decided to build a golf course that would harmonize with the environment and enlisted Ed to coordinate the project. Oscar listened intently as Ed explained the team concept he had in mind: a designer, architect and superintendent working together from the earliest phases of development.

"When Mr. Getz hired me, the primary concern I had was surrounding myself with talented people," says Ed. "So I set forth to hire the best people out there,

including the superintendent, before construction had started. I wanted a superintendent to do the grassing plan, irrigation plan and drainage plan. By hiring the superintendent up front, you get all of his expertise, plus he knows and approves the infrastructure of the golf course."

Comments Oscar, "Ed felt it was very important to bring a golf course superintendent in on the ground floor. The person who would be taking care of the golf course should develop the specifications and oversee the construction to ensure it was done properly. That interested me quite a bit."

Nonetheless, Oscar again declined the offer. Over the next several weeks, Ed hired architect Bob Lohmann and took Bob on a whirlwind tour of numerous area golf courses, pointing out his likes and dislikes. Bob submitted six routing plans before Ed approved the concept for what became The Merit Club. With a routing plan in place, Ed called Oscar again. This time, Oscar asked to see the site.

Remembers Oscar, "We met at Mr. Getz's estate and walked over to about 100 acres of corn. The corn was 8' tall, and I had to stand on the top rail of the fence to see what the profile and contour of the golf course would be. I liked the openness and movement of the property. I also noticed that the watershed coming onto the golf course was very small—no major creeks or streams."

As Oscar and Ed surveyed the landscape, Bert Getz strolled down from his home and joined them. "Soon after that first meeting I was able to develop a feel for what kind of person Mr. Getz was and what kind of relationship I would have with him," Oscar says. "I was quite impressed with Mr. Getz and felt as though I had credentials that would help fulfill what he was looking for in a golf course superintendent to help with the project."

Oscar began to seriously entertain the offer at hand. "During that process, I kept the committee at Butler National fully apprised of what was going on. They were terrific and told me to do what I really wanted to do."

On a Sunday six weeks after the initial contact, Oscar met with Ed and Mr. Getz to discuss a contract. At Butler National, the committee awaited Oscar's return and a decision. "I told them I would resign that fall, staying as long as necessary to ease the transition," says Oscar.

Ultimately, Butler hired a new superintendent in October. "I left in the good graces of everyone at Butler," Oscar notes. "They were so good to me for so many years, I felt I owed that to them."



The Merit Club's 18th tee and fairway, looking towards the clubhouse.

On November 16, 1989, Oscar started work at The Merit Club. His first task, which took two months, was to write the budget and specifications for the project. Next, Oscar began to hire a staff to do grassing, grow-in and maintenance over the next two years.

“At that time, it was unusual for a golf course maintenance staff to do all this,” reflects Oscar. “Developers usually waited until a course was grassed, then they would hire a superintendent and say, now put a team together to take care of it. But with us doing it hole by hole—we’d plant it, landscape it, grow it in and then get it ready for play—that’s a tremendous advantage.”

By fall of 1990, only four holes had been shaped, leaving 17 (the balance of the championship 18, plus three practice holes) for completion during 1991. In fall of '91, nine holes and the three practice holes opened for play. July 4, 1992, marked the grand opening of the entire course and its warm, intimate clubhouse.

“By being involved from the beginning, I had the opportunity to take 28 years of experience and education and apply it in a practical way,” Oscar remarks. “I used the latest scientific information to plant the proper grasses, the correct trees, choose the right sand for the bunkers, keep the proper distance between bunkers, confine the fairways and create nice rolling contours so the course is aesthetically pleasing. The staff that did the grassing here became the maintenance staff. Now with the 10 years of experience we have with this course, we are ready to bring it into condition for the U.S. Women’s Open.”



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Ed couldn’t be more pleased that events transpired as they did. “In hiring Oscar Miles, who is acknowledged as one of the best in his profession, the golf course right now is as good a quality of golf course as you can find in the industry. We’re very proud of the condition of the golf course and we think it’s because we started doing it on the high end from day one.”



Next: The Merit Club as a showcase for golf coexisting with nature, and a look at Oscar’s top-notch staff.

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—Oscar Miles