

## Brian Thomson, CGCS -N-



The Thomson family: Brian, Karen, Cameron and Colin.



*This August, the MAGCS members participating in the monthly golf meeting will take a quick turn off Route 59 onto a side street named Signal Hill Road. Be advised to take the rolling drive slowly, or you could wind up in Honey Lake. A quick left turn, and you enter the grounds of Biltmore Country Club. As you look out the window to your left, witness the majestic Biltmore clubhouse. Be careful you don't make the wrong turn! You're entering the land of the "peat bog." Rumor has it that the bog has gobbled up tractors, uncooperative assistants and lazy caddies. Only the purveyor of the bog—golf course superintendent, Brian Thomson, CGCS—really knows the true history of the "peat bog" and the beautiful golf course that meanders across this unique topography.*

It is only appropriate that the superintendent of this unique landscape has a pretty interesting background in his own right. In fact, Brian Thomson's stoic, quiet nature reminds me of the very terrain that he manages.

As a six-year contributing volunteer on the Editorial Committee, I have been fortunate to meet and interview superintendents with interesting backgrounds. It is my opinion that Brian Thomson's background prior to taking the position at Biltmore Country Club has been the ultimate "rollercoaster ride."

Hold onto your seat belts!

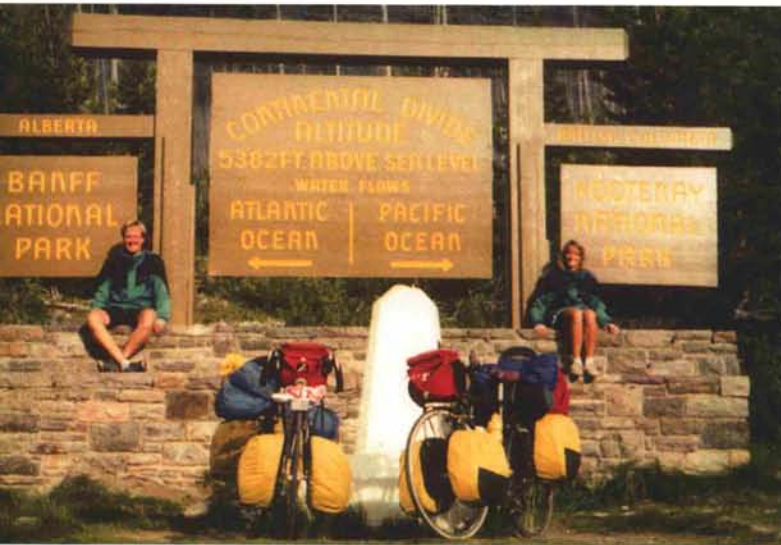
Brian was born in Baltimore, Maryland and grew up in the Detroit suburbs. His dad worked for Rexnord, selling equipment to the auto industry. The auto industry seemed a likely career path for young Brian. Boy, did he have a different idea for his future.

Brian's exposure to the turf and horticulture industry began when he worked on the grounds of Cranbrook, a 50-acre private boys' and girls' camp outside of Detroit. Brian worked on the putting green in the front lawn (no late-night putting, of course).

As Brian became more and more interested in turf and horticulture, the next great opportunity arose: summer work at Oakland Hills Country Club (site of the 2004 Ryder Cup) outside Detroit. He made the ultimate commitment and steered clear of a future in the

auto industry. In 1985, Brian enrolled at Iowa State University and majored in horticulture and landscaping design. He spent two summers working at Oakland Hills C.C., including 1985 when the course hosted the U.S. Open. In

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Brian and Karen taking a rest during their 7,200-mile, self-contained bicycle trek across North America.

summer 1988, he interned at LaJolla Country Club in San Diego, CA. The decision had been made on his future career.

Upon graduation from Iowa State, Brian spent three years working in Hilton Head, SC. Brian was assistant superintendent at the Port Royal Plantation resort course; he later went on to Wexford Plantation and last, Long Cove Club. In 1991, Brian needed a “break.” He took almost a year’s sabbatical and began his and his wife’s ultimate “vision quest.”

Their quest was a cycling trip (bicycle, not motorcycle) from the “top of the world highway” in Alaska to Bar Harbor, Maine through Kansas. Their trip would begin in May and end in October. Six months of cycling! Six months of camping! No walking! No riding! No injuries! No divorce! A total of 7,200 miles.

Brian and Karen didn’t just get up one morning and decide to bike cross-continent. In preparation for the “ultimate cycling trip,” Brian and then-friend Karen cycled from Seattle to Pennsylvania in the summer of 1987. I guess this was a little warm-up trip.

Knowing that the ultimate cycling trip was coming to an end and that he needed to resume his career the following year, Brian conducted a mass mailing of his resumé in the Chicagoland market during the last month of his trip. Upon completion of his adventure in October, he began interviewing for assistant superinten-



Another view of no. 7, be careful not to be long or short!

dent positions in November. I imagine he didn’t cycle to his interview in November.

In any event, Brian was hired by LaGrange Country Club and began

working for Robert Kronn as an assistant for the next four years. In 1996, Brian left LaGrange Country Club to become the superintendent at Biltmore Country Club. He replaced John Sutton. In 2000, he became fully credentialed as a CGCS.

If Brian’s cycling trips and ongoing relocations weren’t enough, he took on the ultimate challenge: management of golf course grounds that predominantly sit on a peat bog. Golf courses are generally not designed for construction on unstable ground. This unique base provides some ongoing and unusual challenges for Brian and his staff.

In the early 1900s, what is now North Barrington comprised mostly lakes and adjoining bogs. In 1926, under the direction and design of Lenard Macomber, Biltmore Country Club was built, requiring drainage of lakes, filling of bogs and covering the topography with topsoil. No one really understood how the base foun-

Photos by Jim Trzinski.



Signature hole no. 7, a par 3 over water. This green quickly breaks back to the fairway, and errant putts can end up back at the bottom of the hill.

dation would support a golf course. Even today, no one really understands the ongoing dynamics of this topography. Few if any other courses and landscaping projects are built on this type of foundation. Brian and his staff are becoming true experts on peat bog topography.

Approximately half of the golf course sits on the spongy peat bog. When sitting in a cart on the property, you can feel the ground bounce up and down. Due to the constant soil variations, fairways and roughs have peaks and valleys. This unique topography rarely provides a level lie, and though the course is reasonably short, added distance from a rolling ball is rare. Due to the peat bog base, temperatures are normally ten or so degrees cooler than in surrounding areas. The humidity is generally higher due to the bog moisture.

All the trees that grow in the bog portion of the golf course were planted over the last thirty years. The remaining willows are the original trees planted 50-60 years ago, but they are slowly disappearing. Stability of the trees and life expectancy are unknown. Brian and his staff spend a lot of time removing trees blown over due to summer and winter storms. Brian cites the Morton Arboretum as a helpful resource regarding the issues he encounters.

With respect to the greens, one green at Biltmore was built with plywood and three have plastic mesh as the base. There is always the worry that greens, fairways and trees may fall or dip due to the uncertainty of the bog.

The remaining half of the golf course runs around the perimeter of the low-lying holes. Majestic oaks and maples are situated throughout the roughs and around the greens. Golfers enjoy distinct elevation changes from tee to green. Numerous blind shots and doglegs provide added challenges.

Fairways are very tight and level lies are rare. Greens are undulating and somewhat small. Green speed provides a challenge. Strategically placed throughout the course are 60 bunkers. The three ponds really affect only two holes. One of the ponds is positioned on the signature hole, par-3 no. 7. A creek runs through four holes: 11, 13, 15 and 18. Hole no.

18, a par 5, switches back and forth and rolls uphill to the clubhouse. Completion of your round at 18 affords you a beautiful view overlooking the entire golf course.

Projects recently completed by Brian and his staff include rebuilding all 60 bunkers and construction of a new chemical building, maintenance facility and pump house. The driving range and putting green were completely renovated in 2000. A new irrigation system was installed in 2000. Every fall, three to five acres of the bog topography are graded, rolled and reseeded. This ongoing project has greatly improved the possibility of flat lies.

There are some advantages to the bog terrain. It keeps geese at bay. Or maybe thanks goes to the coyotes running around the golf course.

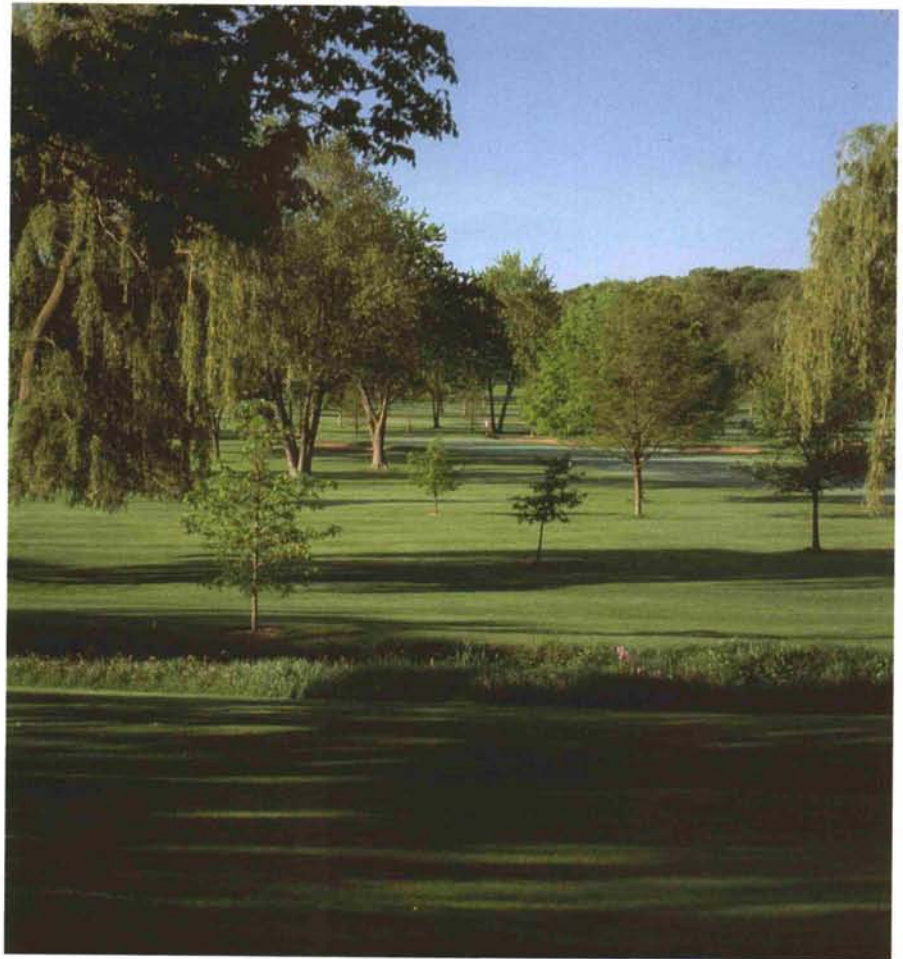
Brian is sincere in thanking the mentors he's had during his career, including Ted Woehrle, past superintendent at Oakland Hills; Lee Record, past superintendent at Long

Cove Club; and Robert Kronn, superintendent at Woodstock C.C. He hopes that he will provide the same advice and direction to his assistant, Adam Pierce.

Brian is married to his cycling partner, Karen. Karen owns a topiary business that she runs out of their home. Brian and Karen have two boys: Cameron, 10, and Colin, 7. When not wrestling with the bog, Brian spends free time on soccer with the kids, camping, scouting and environmental committee issues in North Barrington.

Knowing every place Brian's been and the experiences he's had, I asked him if there is anything missing. He smiled, admitting that cycling from the tip of North America to the bottom of South America has always been a desire of his. This is a two-year sabbatical trip.

See you in August at the bog!



*This long par 4's green is built on sheets of plywood to keep it "floating" in the peat. The peat is up to 20' deep in this area.*