

Kurt Sams, CGCS -N-



The Sams family: Kurt, Lexy, Hunter, Vanessa and Nolan.



"When you know, you know."

Kurt Sams, CGCS at Idlewild Country Club in south suburban Flossmoor, applies this truism not only to meeting his eventual wife during the first GCSAA national conference he attended, in 1999, but also to his career choice.

Photos by Jim Trzinski



A new tee for no. 12, a 185-yard par 3, was constructed in 1999.

It's a sure thing as well that Idlewild C.C. being the host site for the September MAGCS meeting and golf championship means a memorable day for participants. For some attendees, coming to Idlewild—a venerable par-72 layout playing 6,704 yards from the tips at a 137 slope—will be a homecoming of sorts, as Kurt explains, "A lot of superintendents in the area have passed through here, grew up around here and worked here."

Kurt is NOT among the MAGCS members to have a previous connection to Idlewild. He was born and grew up in rural northwestern Ohio, the grandson of a farmer who imparted to Kurt a strong work ethic. While he started playing golf during his freshman year of high school, at that time the game "was just a hobby, something to do as a kid."

When Kurt entered Ohio State University in 1990, it was as an engineering major. "After two years of that, it didn't feel quite right," Kurt recalls. He initially looked into switching his studies to landscape architecture. Then came a momentous conversation with a career counselor. "She asked my interests, I told her being outdoors and playing golf, and she suggested agronomy," says Kurt. "Two days later I was working at a golf course for the first time, on the grounds crew at Brookside Golf & Country Club in Dublin, a top-three course in the Columbus area."

Working in golf "just clicked." In fact, Kurt credits Carl Wittenhauer, his boss there, as a significant influence. "Working for him struck a chord, I knew within a few days that it was the right thing for me career-wise," notes Kurt.

(continued on page 16)

Kurt hustled to finish his agronomy degree in two more years. Between his junior and senior years, he interned at another acclaimed golf course, Ridgewood Country Club in New Jersey. Upon his graduation, he returned to Ridgewood as an assistant superintendent, spending two years in that capacity.

Not a huge fan of the East Coast, Kurt headed back to the Midwest in 1997 as assistant superintendent to then-superintendent Dave Holler at Idlewild. In August 1998, at a relatively tender age in today's job market, Kurt became head superintendent. "I have definitely been fortunate," Kurt reflects.

Meanwhile, Kurt's personal life began to percolate. He attended his first GCSAA national conference in 1999, and one evening, out for dinner with some friends, he met his future wife, Vanessa, an Orlando native. "We went to a movie the very next night, and when I came back to Chicago, she started flying up once a month to see me," says Kurt.

Kurt points out that Vanessa had never really been around snow before they started dating. However, the two were immersed in a taste of

Midwestern winter in February 2000, when—on a snowmobiling trip in Wisconsin—Kurt proposed and Vanessa said yes. The couple married in December of that year.

Now residing in New Lenox, Kurt and Vanessa have three children: son Hunter, almost 7; daughter Alexandria (Lexy), 3; and son Nolan, 11 months. Reno, a 10-year-old yellow lab, is also part of the family. "He's been a golf course dog his whole life, and Idlewild hasn't had a geese problem since I arrived with Reno," Kurt laughs.

Family life agrees with Kurt, and he says his primary leisure activities involve doing things with family and friends. At this time of year, that includes cookouts and playing with the kids in the backyard. Another pastime—if you can call golf a pastime when the golfer maintains a 6.5 Handicap Index!—is golf. Kurt is also a baseball fan who enjoys both the Cubs and the Sox, though he admits, "I am more at heart a (Cleveland) Indians fan because I watched them stink for a lot of years as a kid!"

Idlewild, Kurt's home course, has been around almost as long as the Indians. In fact, the Indians franchise

was only seven years old when Idlewild was founded in 1908. Al Naylor, who went on to become the club's first pro and superintendent, first served as architect at the behest of the club's founding fathers, who wanted a place away from the city but near the train line to convene for golf.

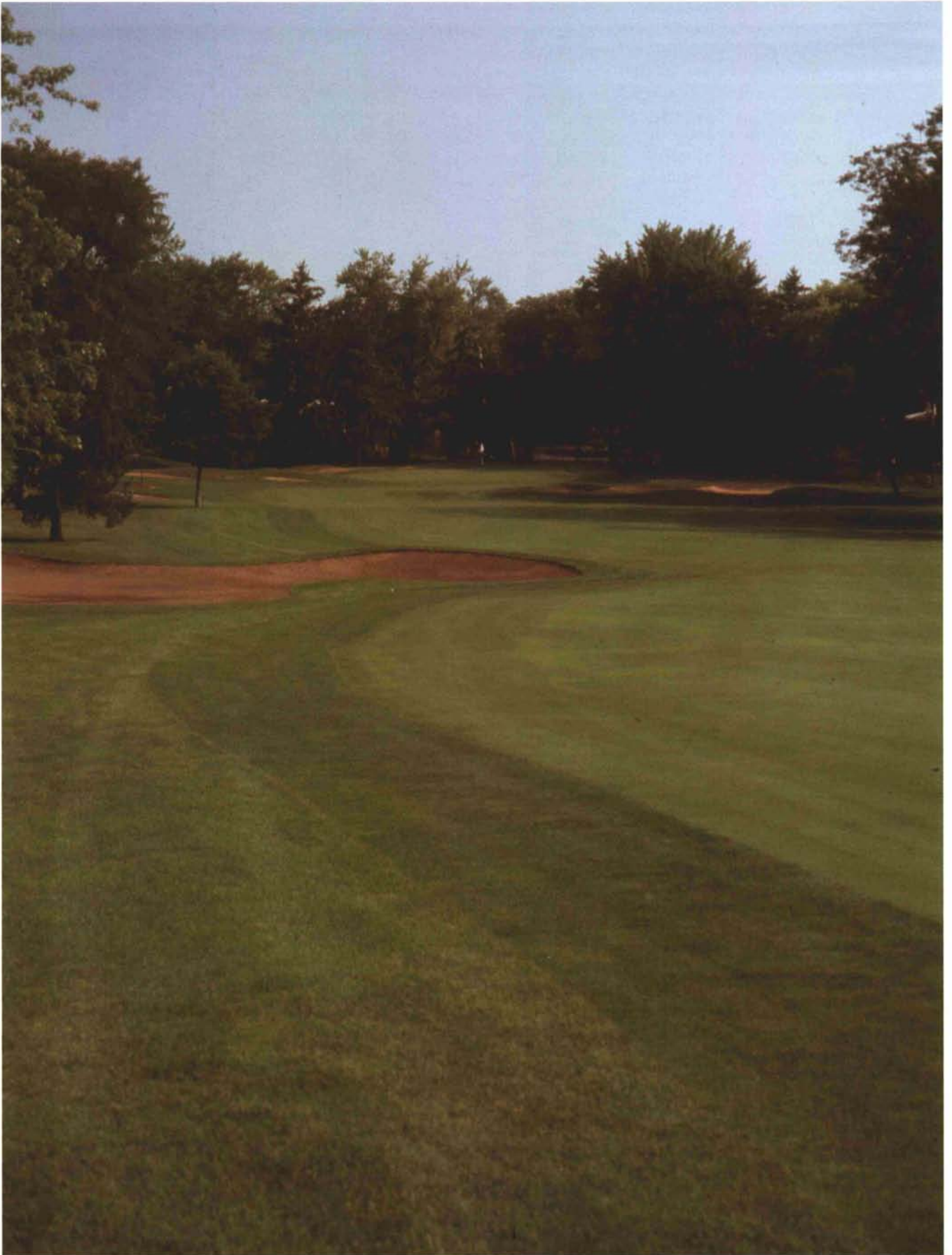
A classic parkland-style course, Idlewild features subtle greens, lots of trees, water in play on several holes and plenty of wildlife, including a couple dens of foxes and numerous deer. Kurt predicts that the key to success here for championship contenders will be the short game. "If you can hit it straight, it's easy to get around here—but maneuvering the old, classic greens with a lot of subtleties can be challenging," Kurt notes.

While Idlewild retains much of its original character, the clubhouse was redone in 2000, and Kurt and his greenkeeping predecessors have made many updates to the course over the years. Some of Kurt's projects have included implementing new tees, a process that involved killing off the existing tees and reseeding with bentgrass. Last fall, Kurt and crew redid the tee and bunkers on no. 2, a project that membership greeted enthusiastically.

(continued on page 18)



Hole no. 6 at Idlewild is a par 3 playing 210 yards.



Idlewild's no. 14, a 391-yard par 4.

"Everyone liked what we did on no. 2 and continuing similar work in-house is on the docket for the next two to three years," Kurt says. In fact, a full-fledged master plan to continue course improvements like renovating bunkers, removing some trees, etc. is in progress, scheduled for completion to coincide with the club's centennial celebration in 2008.

This summer, owing to the hot, humid weather, Kurt and his team focused on no. 3, which rests in a hollow by a creek, clearing the creek bank of smaller underbrush. "We weren't getting much air movement, so we tried to improve circulation for future years," says Kurt.


"We've had a pretty successful year thus far," Kurt continues. "Overall I'm pretty proud of what we've accomplished here. After a few rough years with membership numbers—we're in the same area as Flossmoor, Olympia Fields, Ravisloe, Calumet, so many other quality clubs—the future looks bright."

Like any successful superintendent, Kurt—who earned his CGCS

designation in 2002—is eager to praise his crew. "My staff is consistent, most have been with me five-plus years, so I'm very fortunate there." He gives special mention to Tommy Lee Walker, a 46-year Idlewild veteran who is a jack-of-all-trades and oversees irrigation; Dion

Pearce, his assistant of one-and-a-half years; and Enrique Sahagun, his equipment technician.

Come out to Idlewild Country Club on September 19th and enjoy the fruits of their labors for yourself!



OLD DUTCH SAND COMPANY

A Division of Jack Gray Transport Inc.

- VARIOUS BUNKER SANDS
- CART & ROAD MATERIALS
- COBBLES AND RIP RAP
- ALL GOLF COURSE AGGREGATES

Call (773) 374-2303
Richard E. Mika (847) 228-9607
(219) 938-7020



Nels J. Johnson Tree Experts, Inc.

Since 1930

A Tradition of Excellence.
More than 70 years of complete, dependable and economical tree service for residential homes, municipalities, schools, industrial areas, parks and over 125 golf courses.

847-475-1877
fax - 847-475-0037
www.nelsjohnsontree.com