

## SUPER -N- SITE

Matt Breeden, *Evanston Golf Club*

# John Nelson -N-



*Superintendent John Nelson and The Merit Club, in Libertyville, will host the Illinois Turfgrass Foundation/MAGCS golf outing in May. I recently sat down with John and got to know a bit about his professional career, the course he oversees daily, and his family life.*

Graduating from Joliet Junior College in 1983, John followed the passion that started when he was 15 years old and worked at Cedardell Golf Club in his hometown of Plano, IL. His career began as an intern at Fox Bend Golf Club, in Oswego, IL, which was followed by a one-and-a-half year stint at Butler National under the tutelage of Oscar Miles, CGCS. This is where John got his first taste of professional tournament golf, while helping prepare the course for two Western Open Tournaments. He left Butler to join Al Fierst at Oak Park Country Club, where he spent five years as Al's assistant.

Then came a new challenge for John, warm-season grasses. He moved to Florida for a year and a half and worked at TPC at Eagle Trace where, again, he was involved in tournament prep at the host site of the PGA Tour's Honda Classic.

In the fall of 1989, the Getz family hired Oscar Miles to oversee a new course being built on their family farm in Lake County, IL. After coming back to Illinois from Florida, John went back to work for Oscar Miles. He was hired to work with Dave Schlagetter, Tony Kalina, and Scott Witte for the construction and grow-in at the Merit Club. This group was further enhanced with Enrique Valadez and Lorenzo Ramirez, both of whom had worked with Oscar at Butler National. They came to The Merit



*The Nelson Family, (l to r) Jack, Christina, Ben, Mitch and John.*

Club shortly after Oscar was hired. To this day, they still work for The Merit Club and John Nelson.

Built by architect Bob Lohmann, The Merit Club opened in 1992. The par 72, 7100 yard course is set on a beautiful piece of property featuring natural oak savannas, numerous ponds, a vast array of prairies, and a naturally sloping layout. The course was the host to the 2000 Women's U.S. Open. John joined The Merit Club in 1990. He took over the reins when Oscar retired in 2006. John has found a great assistant in Scott Verdun. Scott has been working with John for the past four years. He started as an intern

for Oscar. Once Scott finished school, John hired him as his assistant. Since John became superintendent, the course has continued to evolve along with the game of golf. Some of the changes include new bunkers, annual tree transplanting, rebuilding of a rock wall along a pond bank, and adding tees throughout the course where necessary to maintain the integrity of the golf hole's original design.

Supporting John at home is his wife of 18 years, Christina, and three sons: Mitch, 15; Jack, 12; and Ben, 5. John is very involved with his family and spends time with his sons by attending as many football, baseball, and basketball games as

*(continued on page 7)*



he can. He has also coached some of the teams the boys have been involved with. John and Christina have opened their home to their niece Maggie for the past eight months while she is attending the College of Lake County.

I have had the privilege of knowing John Nelson before I took the assignment of writing the Super-N-Site for The Merit Club. Needless to say, I have learned so much more about not only the course, but also the man who oversees the course. I learned that John has a great family that he truly makes time for. They, in turn, support his work and the long hours that are sometimes needed to get the job done. He is, and has been, devoted to The Merit Club since the course was opened in 1992. He has a great supporting staff that is equally devoted to the club. I am sure that he was able to accomplish all these things using the knowledge and experience of all the great people he has worked with over the years. -OC



Above right: The sixteenth green as seen from the 167 yard tee box.

Right: The twelfth green sporting the newly adopted Merit Club logo.

Below: The best seat in the house. Looking over the course from the highest point, the 13th tee.

