

FEATURE II

Matt Kregel, *The Club at Strawberry Creek*



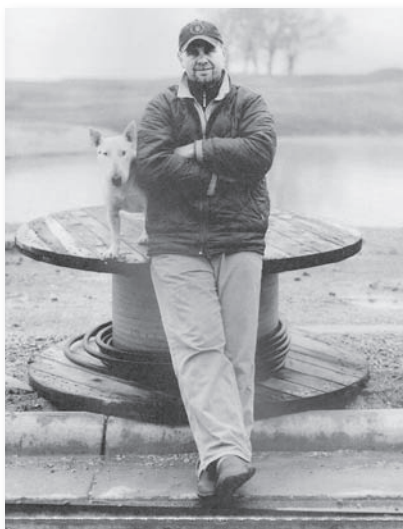
On Course with Hilgy, #63

It is hard to believe that I have been the superintendent with The Club at Strawberry Creek for seven years now. I remember the 2005 MAGCS hospitality room at the Golf Industry Show, in Orlando, when I first heard about the job opening. Tom Prichard and I were drinking a few cold ones with Rick Jacobson, who had designed the course. I had heard the rumors like everyone else. Former Chicago Bear, All-Pro Center, Jay Hilgenberg, was building a golf course just across the cheese curtain in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Rumors that Michael Jordan was involved were running wild, but those proved to be false. Who knows how those ever started? Jay and partner, Barry Shiffman, spearheaded the development along with two other silent partners.

It was incredible to meet Jay at my first interview. I must have done alright with the first interview and not have been too star-struck, because I was asked back for a second one. When the job was offered to me, I felt like I was on cloud nine. Not only had I landed my first superintendent's position, but my boss was a Super Bowl Champion Chicago Bear. Could it get any better than this? Do you remember 2005? It was a cool, wet spring followed by a hot, dry summer. Not the best of conditions for trying to grow in a brand new golf course as a rookie superintendent. I could write a book about that project, but we'll save it for another day. [ed note: I will hold him to that.]

The most common question that I get asked about my job is, "How it is working for Jay Hilgenberg?" I can honestly say that it has been a very humbling and rewarding experience. The golf course is set on what was once a strawberry farm. A number of years passed from the time Barry and Jay acquired the land until construction began. During that time Jay walked the land and enjoyed the property that would eventually turn into his baby.

Once construction began, Jay was on the property every day. He checked on progress and watched the course that Rick Jacobson had laid out on paper take shape. He took the time to talk with everyone involved in the construction process. He enjoyed being out and getting dirty. Jay even operated some equipment early on helping to stay on top of the mowing. Once I hired my seasonal crew I had to relieve him of his duties. No, I didn't fire the owner, I cut him.



Jay Hilgenberg and his dog Ed take a break after walking The Club at Strawberry Creek.

I have had many opportunities to showcase my golfing skills, or lack thereof, with Jay. He is a pretty good stick, maintaining a five handicap. It's never good to beat the boss, but I'll never have a problem with that. As he can see from my game, I am a good superintendent because I lack the skills it takes to be a golfer.

Like many superintendents, Jay possesses a very keen eye that the average golfer doesn't have. He notices the little things such as changes in mowing patterns, triplex lines on the greens when we walk mow, new flags that were recently put out. It makes it very difficult to slip something by him. He appreciates every effort that my crew makes on the course. He hates seeing divots. This is why he wouldn't allow

Richard Dent on the course for the longest time. Dent takes a small rug with every swing.

Many of you have met Hilgy, if you have been to Strawberry Creek. He also gave the keynote address at a Turf Clinic a few years back. He is a very personable and approachable. He loves talking turf with superintendents.

Here are two of many stories that Jay has shared with me:

When we went up to Lambeau and played the Packers, that was during the time where the quarterback didn't have to run a play if the crowd was too loud. We were on the one-yard line going in, and McMahon was taunting the Packer fans, being really brutal. They were too loud so he wasn't going to run the play. He was just taunting the Packer fans up.

(continued on page 11)



Now this is after the Monday night game, and they all know Fridge is going to get the ball. But this was the one where they faked the run to Fridge, and he went into the end zone and caught the pass for a touchdown. Just to hear Lambeau Field being so loud and McMahon being difficult, and then hearing the quiet after Fridge caught a touchdown pass, we were just laughing so hard out there.

Walter was the greatest. I remember the first play I was ever in on. We were going against a 3-4 defense. The nose guard threw me off, and Walter was running through the right tackle hole. I started getting back up on my feet, and I looked behind me. Remember watching as a kid the high step that Walter would do? It was just like I was a little kid watching him high-step right at me. I tried to get out of his way, but I just caught his knee with my shoulder, and he goes down. I thought, Man, my first play in the NFL, and I tackle Walter Payton. Walter says to me, "Next time, just lay on the ground."

Many of the former and current Bears players and coaches have played the Creek. We even got some to join instead of mooching rounds. I have had the privilege of meeting and getting to know many of them. And, yes, Jim McMahon is as crazy as the stories that you hear about him. He does golf barefoot and drinks plenty of cold beers during his multiple times around the course.

Some of the other former and current players that have tested the links of Strawberry Creek are Dan Hampton, Richard Dent, Otis Wilson, Tom Thayer, Keith Van Horne, Ron Rivera, Emery Moorehead, Mike Tomczak, Jim 'Robo' Thorton, Roberto Garza, Olin Kreutz, Robbie Gould, Patrick Mannelly, Chris Williams, Frank Omiyale, Coach Lovie Smith, Special Teams Coach Dave Toub, many position coaches, trainers, and scouts.

Jay is a very active owner. Most days you can find him on the grounds of the club. He enjoys inspecting the turf conditions as well as inspecting the numerous ponds on the course – golfing and fishing, in other words. Ed, a bull terrier dog, is Jay's longtime companion. Ed may very well know the property better than Jay. He is as much of a face of the club as good ol' #63. **-OC**

