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This is bog country! Come see one of the "best-kept secrets" in Chicago at the August meeting at Biltmore Country Club.
Photo by Jim Trzinski.

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The Midwest Association of Golf Course Superintendents (MAGCS), founded December 24, 1926, is a professional organization whose goals include preservation and dissemination of scientific and practical knowledge pertaining to golf turf maintenance.

We endeavor to increase efficiency and economic performance while improving and enhancing the individual and collective prestige of the members.

The MAGCS member is also an environmental steward. We strive to uphold and enhance our surroundings by promoting flora and fauna in every facet in a manner that is beneficial to the general public now and in the future.



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ON COURSE WITH THE PRESIDENT

Fred Behnke, CGCS Mount Prospect Golf Club

My Best Friend

I was recently rereading some past issues of On Course, to brush up on some midsummer turf-survival tips, and I happened along Peggy Czerkies' article from 1998 and Cheryl Maibusch's from 1999. Two MAGCS presidents, Kevin and Bob respectively, had asked their wives to offer the spouse's perspective on our profession. Both ladies responded with insightful and thought-provoking comments that I would encourage you, gentle reader, to revisit.

*Time for another
MAGCS First Lady
to offer up some
chicken soup for
the superintendent's
soul.*

Five years have passed since then and I was struck with the thought that perhaps it was time for another MAGCS First Lady to offer up some chicken soup for the superintendent's soul. After all, it's August, we're bone-tired and nearly as stressed as our greens. Certainly aid and comfort are just across the dinner table.

Wait a minute, it's August! The animals, I mean, the kids have been home all summer, I've been doing that summer work schedule thing, her job is as busy as ever, this may take some charm and persuasion.

Me: "Pleeease honey."

She: "Are you crazy?"

Me: "C'mon, it'll be fun."

She: "NO!"

Me: "Listen, I'm dying here. I'm running out of ideas for president's messages."

She: "Your problem—not mine! Anyway, what can I say to all those people except they need to spend more time with their families."

Me: "Okay, that's a start, I'll tell you what—let's go out to eat, you and me, and I'll interview you. You don't need to actually write anything, you can just tell me what to do." (This was particularly clever of me, I thought.)

She: "Well, I don't know . . ."

Me: "C'mon sweetie, you pick the restaurant, I'll get some paper and a pencil."

She: "Wait a minute, if I'm going to do this thing, I have some conditions."

Me: (Uh-oh.) "Sure baby, whatever you want."

She: "You really must be desperate. Alright, number one: there is to be NO editing of what I have to say, you have to promise to print it exactly the way I say it. I know you, you have a way of sugarcoating things. Condition number two . . ."

The Interview*

Me: "Oh Light Of My Life, we've been married for over 20 years. What observations can you share with a significant other who is, shall we say, less experienced in being involved with someone in this profession?"

SHE: "So, I'm old, huh. You're off to a good start, and it's been 22 years. Let's start by being frank; it's sports, so it's a boys club. Don't couch things in nongender-specific terms. You're not asking me to speak to the one or two guys out there who are married to female superintendents because there

(continued on page 4)

aren't many. You boys need to work harder at being inclusive. You are light years behind the rest of the world in embracing diversity. It's a game played by white boys, run by white boys and all the work is done by the wonderful Spanish-speaking workers you guys should be paying a lot more."

Me: "C'mon Nancy, I can't print that."

SHE: "Then we're done, and did you forget condition two already?"

Me: "No, Oh Pearl Beyond Price, but let's be reasonable, things are changing. There have never been more women in golf management positions, and the demographics show that more and more cultural diversity is finding its way into the workforce."

SHE: "Now you're talking like a politician. Do you think Tiger Woods is a magic eraser for years of elitism? My point is that you boys are slow off the mark here, and don't hand me that 'golf is steeped in tradition and by nature slow to change' crap, take off the blinders and wake up. Outreach initiatives like The First Tee and Sunshine Through Golf are great, but don't forget you're making up for lost time. These programs have to succeed and you boys need to do more to nurture them."

Me: "Okay, okay, back to my question about your observations..."

SHE: "You want me to give advice? Okay, here's my advice: girls, go to the course with them in the summer. You'll learn that they really aren't having an affair. They work hard and they truly love their work. A golf course is a beautiful place to be and deep down they want to show it off. In fact, they'll actually talk to you as you travel the course together. The course in the evening is magical, he might even get romantic and cuddle a bit."

Me: "Jeeze Nance..."

SHE: "Condition two!"

Me: "Oh, Flower of my Heart, you're killing me here. Let me see if I can get you to open up a little bit..."

SHE: "Sarcasm?!"

Me: "... and ask you to comment on what you've learned about my line of work over the years."

SHE: "You know that before we met I had never set foot on a golf

course in my life, so I really knew nothing about what you do for a living. Honestly, I was, and still am, amazed at the amount of knowledge in a wide variety of disciplines you need to keep a golf course maintained properly. The phrase 'jack of all trades' comes to mind, but I know you boys don't like that because you've been working at upgrading the image of your profession. Maybe you boys would achieve that better if you took a day off once in a while, like your boss does."

Me: "Nance!"

SHE: "I know, I know, but it's true. You're the one who keeps harping on mentoring and delegating and finding qualified people to share the load. Practice what you preach. I'll admit you're getting better, maybe by the time you've done this for 30 years you'll have figured out how to do your job in a 40-hour week—like a normal person."

Me: "Maybe. (But then I'd have to spend more time at home.)"

SHE: "I heard that."

Me: "Last question, Oh She Who Must Be Obeyed, do you have anything good to say about golf course management?"

SHE: "You're getting a little edgy and I'm not sure your last endearment met the spirit of condition two, but no matter since you're starting to pout. Darling, I know you work very hard to put on a good show. It's a lot like that, isn't it—a show. Each day is different and seemingly insurmountable obstacles come out of nowhere, but you pull it off—don't you? I know deep down you love to wade in there and be 'the guy' fixing, tweaking and holding it together. You've told me countless stories of near misses that used to make me wonder why you stayed with it. I know now that dodging the bullet is what makes you get up at 4:00 in the morning and despite your moaning and groaning it gets your blood pumping."

"You've also told me how hard it is to produce something that is judged by such subjective terms, how despite pristine conditions everywhere else, something like a poorly raked bunker can ruin a golfer's round, and depending on who that golfer is, ruin your day. I guess I'll

"... girls, go to the course with [your husbands] in the summer. They work hard and they truly love their work. A golf course is a beautiful place to be and deep down they want to show it off."

—Nancy Behnke

never truly understand all of the nuances, but what I do understand, and what I know you understand too is, it's a journey. Bad days will pass, they always do, but when they come it's good to have a friend to come home to."

End of Interview

Well, that went well.

Excuse me, I have a kitchen to remodel—condition eight.



**The views expressed in "On Course with the President" are solely those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Midwest Association of Golf Course Superintendents, its officers, Board of Directors or employees.*



Opportunity Knocks

It must have been four or five years ago when I and two other assistants, Greg Clark and Tony Frandria, were at the GCSAA conference and show talking after the day's activities. Part of that conversation took on the question of why assistants in the Chicagoland area did not get together more often to exchange ideas and talk shop. Somehow, through that conversation, we started getting assistants together for informal meetings and began to make new friends very quickly. There was no purpose to these gatherings other than just meeting fellow assistants and talking about anything—mostly shop. Little did I know then that in the future, I would be serving on the MAGCS Board as the assistant superintendent (Class C) advisor.

*I am the voice
for assistant
superintendents at
the Board level.
Any concerns,
questions or issues
from any assistants
can be brought
to my attention
for discussion in
front of the
MAGCS Board.*

With the creation of the class C advisor position, our early, casual meetings have become more formal and meaningful. For example, last February our committee put together a workshop geared toward assistants' interests. We had Jim McLoughlin give a presentation about career planning in the morning, while the afternoon consisted of a lively round-table discussion regarding expectations of the assistant superintendent as conceived in the minds of superintendents. We had a great turnout and received a lot of positive feedback from all attendees. We are planning for this to be an annual event (the MAGCS Annual Assistant Superintendents Winter Workshop), so if you missed the last one make sure to keep your eye out for the next one in February of 2005.

Another great event that our committee currently is working on is the MAGCS Scholarship Fund/Class C Championship golf outing. We have just secured Glen Flora Country Club as the host site for this year's outing on Monday, September 27. This event will raise money to support the scholarships that MAGCS funds. These scholarships are open to the children of the Association's members. In 2003, MAGCS awarded three \$1,000 scholarships; in 2004, MAGCS will award the same three scholarships plus one more. We are hashing out the details for the Glen Flora outing, so save the date for a fun-filled event. As in the past, all will go home winners thanks to our generous sponsors and the many prizes that are donated. Also tied into this day is the Class C Championship. Any class C member can compete for the honor of taking home the trophy (new this year). Again, please mark your calendars; this is sure to be a great day.

What other things am I responsible for as the assistant superintendent advisor to the Board of Directors? Well, I am the voice for assistant superintendents at the Board level. Any concerns, questions or issues from any assistants can be brought to my attention for discussion in front of the MAGCS Board. I am responsible for getting assistants more involved with the MAGCS and its functions through writing articles for *On Course*, volunteering assistance at MAGCS functions, and providing education at an MAGCS event. Although these are the duties now outlined in the standard operating procedure (SOP) for my role, it is still an evolving position. Both the Board and I are continually

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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

(continued on page 8)



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.

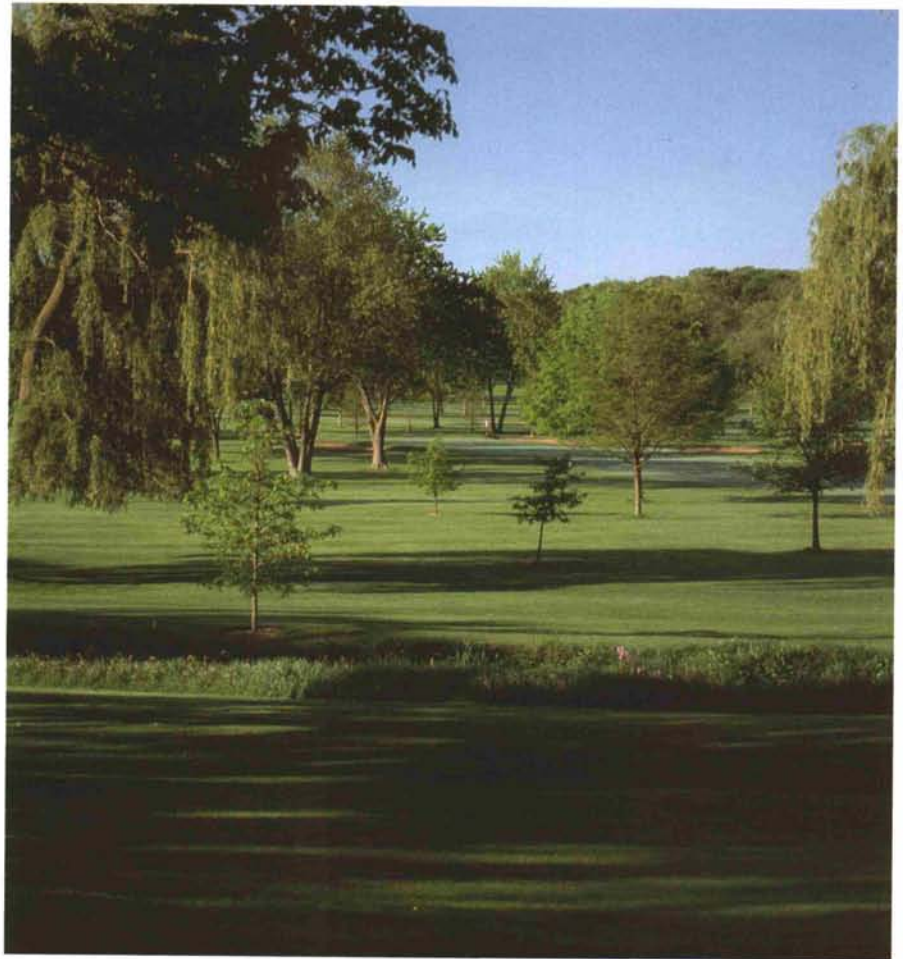
Brian is sincere in thanking the mentors he's had during his career, including Ted Woehrle, past superintendent at Oakland Hills; Lee Record, past superintendent at Long

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.

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