

GOLF COURSE GREENERY

by Vince Smith

It's one of those bright and brilliant days you go out to play your favorite golf course.

The tee-box grass is unscarred and trimmed to perfection. The fairways are lush and verdant where the ball sits up stoutly. The greens are soft and smooth and velvety; they're putting like a dream.

And all's right with the world. These are ideal conditions most golfers not only expect at their favorite golf course, they generally take them for granted.

But all this immaculate greensward did not just come about by accident. The ultra-fine shape your layout has been honed into has been brought about by a dedicated, highly trained technician who is probably the most invisible, most unrecognizable member of your club staff — the golf course superintendent.

In the old days these knowledgeable turf management specialists were known as "greenskeepers." Today, as more educational skills have furnished a higher level of turf management technicians, the golf course superintendent has become one of the most vital cogs in the present-day golf club operation machinery.

Today's superintendent's in many instances, are college-trained turf experts who have engaged in considerable "on-the-job-training" before reaching the prestigious level which now marks their profession.

Mark Hampton, golf superintendent at Wyndmere Country Club in Naples, is an excellent example of the breed of turf technicians who have supplanted the old greenskeepers of years gone by.

Wyndmere is a comparatively new 27-hole private complex, designed by Golf Architect Arthur Hills, which is part of a large residential development owned by Canadian industrialist and sportsman Gerry Livingston.

From Jacksonville he moved on to LaGorce Country Club at Miami Beach as a maintenance worker then procured the job as assistant superintendent at Valley Country Club in Denver, Colorado. After a year in the cool Colorado mountain air, Hampton decided to go back to school.

"At the time I was going to the University of South Florida in Tampa and received an AA Degree in speech pathology," he said. But while he had been in Colorado, Hampton became interested in pursuing his schooling in turf management and ended up at Lake City (Florida) Community College, one of the finest turf specialty schools in the nation.

The Lake City turf management course at that time was two years...it has now been expanded to three years. Hampton finished his schooling, which included an on-the-job training program at Countryside Golf Club in Clearwater.

Hampton then decided he wanted to come to Southwest Florida and so he took the position of golf superintendent at Cypress Lake Country Club in south Fort Myers. He stayed there a year and a half.

"Cypress Lake was the most enjoyable for me, getting to know Herb Graffis and doing a couple of things for Patty Berg, whether it was her Christmas show or whatever," Hampton said. "So the time there was very enjoyable because of those two people, along with the members that were there also."

(Herb Graffis is a World Hall of Fame member from Fort Myers Beach who is HOME & CONDO'S award-winning columnist. Patty Berg is a women's golf immortal who is a member of Cypress Lake.)

The young superintendent was given the post of golf

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course superintendent at Wyndemere where he started work February 1, 1980. "When I started here they had not even knocked a tree down," he recalls. "Evidently, Mr. Livingston likes to have his people in on the ground floor because I know it is kind of unusual to have a superintendent in on the job that early in the game. But to me, a lot of money was probably saved by having an expert on the job. And I would like to hope that will follow suit in a lot of other operations."

Livingston receives high marks from Hampton. "He knew the quality of operation he wanted to run," the superintendent says. "And, believe me, the freedom and the confidence that he's given us in our area has been tremendous."

Of his pre-development start at Wyndemere, Hampton says, "I think we're starting to see more of that now in many of them, (new development golf courses) because there's no question that the people that are there as far as the development part, they do not understand the golf course. And with the investment that you have on a golf course...to be run by layman, it does not hold true anymore."

"The architect in the past, I think, had been responsible for it (the golf course). But to come in on an every-two-week basis or a monthly basis to check progress is just not adequate enough. Somebody had to be the watchdog, or the eyes, for the owner and preferable, trained eyes."

Hampton agrees that his profession has come a long, long way since the bygone era of the greenskeepers. "Probably the biggest advances we've made is just in the equipment we use. And we are starting to use now the modern technology that is finally entering our business," he said. "When I first started on the golf course it was nothing more than a shovel and a handle."

"If you went out and were able to mow three greens and three tees in a day's time, and rake the traps, that was a day's work," he noted. "And we've progressed to doing that now just in a matter of a couple of hours."

The maintenance equipment inventory alone at Wyndemere today stands in excess of \$400,000, Hampton says. "And the knowledge you need to have on that — and that's not just doing the mechanics' work, that's just really understanding what a lot of the principles are in that area."

Personnel-management, too, is an integral portion of the superintendent's position. Hampton has a force of more than 20 maintenance workers at Wyndemere. "Probably in the older times, if you had three or four people, or up to six, you were very fortunate," he says. "Also, the type of people we have working on the golf course are different. We have retired people here now who are an excellent source of personnel. And, also we're getting more college type people. I have two men working for me now who will be off to Lake City in the fall."

"So, the more trained employee is what we're starting to get now. My assistant, Greg Dent, is also a graduate of Lake City."

Going back to the applying of pesticides, Hampton ob-

serves, "In the past the superintendent was probably the one that had all the knowledge as far as pesticides went. And in an operation of this size, for me personally, or for my assistant, this is just not possible. We do schedule what needs to be applied but we have five people on our staff that do have their commercial pesticide licenses."

Hampton has broken down the different areas of maintenance. "Whether it's the shop, with the mechanic and his assistant, our spray technicians, landscape technician or whatever it might be, they all have their own particular area of responsibility. And the ones that are in those areas are very well trained," he says.

Southwest Florida's maintenance overseers have blended their talents into one cohesive organization, The Everglades Golf Course Superintendents Association, one of nine groups within the Florida Golf Course Superintendent's Association.

Regular monthly meetings of the local chapter are held at various golf clubs throughout the area where a wide variety of issues are discussed in detail and a large amount of input is thrust into each gathering. The Everglades Chapter is made up of about 125 members.

Reviews of current problems facing all superintendents are delved into in great detail by the Chapter at these monthly meetings. One vital issue facing the maintenance technicians would appear to be the ever-increasing water shortages in Southwest Florida.

"We've gone through different periods — it's just part of our business," Hampton explains. "I think a lot of us have thick skins because of the problems we encounter; whether it's been environmental problems where we've been trying to convince the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) that what we're doing is positive and that we are watching what we're doing, whether it's the chemicals we're using that they are constantly taking off the market, and of course right now, the water situation is just another one that's on the horizon."

"We've known about the water situation for about five years but it's just now coming to the attention of the public," Hampton said. "Superintendents have been aware of this problem for quite some time."

Golf course superintendents are constantly faced with perplexities involving everything from weather conditions to outbreaks of turf disease and control of mole crickets.

"We were told at school, believe it or not, that the easiest thing we would have to do is grow grass. That sounds unbelievable because that's supposed to be our business. But there are so many things that enter into it," he said. "Whether it's the environmental people or whether it's the water management or the personnel problems, they all add up."

To compound the vexation, Hampton says, "When you're dealing with a variable like Mother Nature, she is constantly throwing you curves." But, he adds, this is a vari-

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able golf course superintendents are forced to work with. "Again, I think that makes our skin a little thicker than a lot of people. Plus the fact that it's going on seven days a week."

With water shortages looming on the horizon and with the immense increase in the price of chemicals needed to enable golf course greenery to survive, superintendents are also faced with a constant source of irritation at the local level—the replacement of divots and the repair of ballmarks on the greens by the players who enjoy the game at the courses.

"These are two headaches," Hampton admits. "To me, the way we handle divots here—this is our personal preference—we do ask the members to replace their divots. The chance of it probably ever growing back may be nil but it's a lot easier to hit off an old divot than out of a new one.

"Ballmarks, everywhere I've been have always been a problem. We do hope our players will repair ballmarks. But we go out and part of our early morning chores is repairing ballmarks. It's done on a daily basis.

"That is probably the biggest pet peeve that we do have. And during the months when the grass is not growing as fast as it is in the summer, they do not heal back as quickly and they're a lot more noticeable."

Golf course operations are supervised, as a rule, by what Hampton refers to as "The Triangle"—the superintendent, the club manager and the club professional.

"As far as the wage scale and the different responsibilities we all have, probably the superintendent is the least visible one among all of them," he says. "But I think now, back in the development-type operation, the developers or the owners themselves are starting to understand the large responsibility of their investment and I think the 'Triangle' is becoming more equal than it ever has been in the past."

Which leads to the inevitable conclusion that Southwest Florida's golf course superintendents have come a long, long way since those days when they bore the nondescript title, "Greenskeepers." ■

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