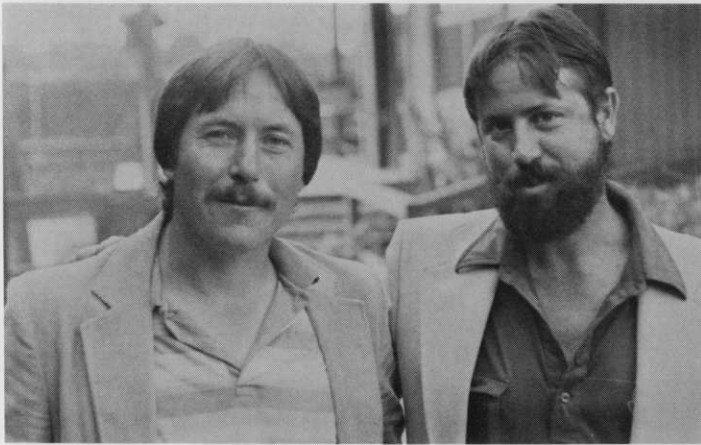


Treasure Coast "Tide"ings

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Sebastian Municipal & Island Dunes... Two Unique Operations

Newton Krages and John Cowan are two sharp Golf Course Superintendents. You have to be sharp in order to provide the playing conditions that they do with limited budgets, equipment and manpower.



John Cowan, left, and Newton Krages — two "unique" golf course superintendents.

After reading about much political controversy concerning the neighboring Sebastian golf course, I thought Newt Krages would be a good candidate for the FLORIDA GREEN. I must say that I was very impressed upon my arrival at the golf course. It was in very good condition.

The most unique fact about Sebastian Municipal is not really a problem. The city of Sebastian (pop. 3,500) is the second smallest city in the entire country that operates a municipal golf course! The course was designed by Chuck Ankrom (who designed Monte Carlo, Sandpiper Bay and Indian River Plantation) and was built on land leased from the Sebastian Municipal Airport. Sebastian Municipal is a very challenging golf course spread out over 155 acres. It is well-trapped, has lots of water hazards and boasts elevation changes that are not common to Florida golf courses.

Newt Krages was hired by the city of Sebastian shortly after the earthwork began. Newt stated, "I was rather fortunate to have been on the job from the beginning. It has made my job a lot easier since I know how the course was built from head to toe." He continued, "Sebastian must be given credit for making sure the first golf course superintendent was hired before the course was built."

The city of Sebastian has undertaken a tremendous responsibility. Shortcomings are unavoidable with a municipal operation. The city has to pay off a large bond issue that was secured to pay for the golf course. Since the golf course is chartered to be self-sustaining, there are times when correct procedures are not carried out.

The day that I visited the golf course and made plans to play golf, we were greeted by a heavy thunderstorm. After 1.2 inches of rain fell in less than thirty minutes, water stood in many places on the course. Most private courses would have been closed under the conditions that were present. Although I was delighted to be able to still play, I knew that the course really should have been closed. Municipal courses rely on the constant ring of the cash register and closing the golf course because of standing water isn't justified. With the constant flow of golf carts on wet fairways Sebastian Municipal now has a severe compaction problem. Since the course is to remain open whenever the elements are favorable, a program of extensive cart path construction has begun. This should help to alleviate the compaction created when conditions dictate restricted cart use.

Newt realizes that a municipal operation is different but he has been able to make the most of his operation. He maintains the golf course with a crew of 5 and is able to provide good playing conditions. He commented, "We can't groom as much and special projects put a strain on the operation, but we manage to give the golfer conditions expected in order for him to have an enjoyable round of golf."

Before the course was built, the city had the foresight to provide for an adequate maintenance facility and equipment. Newt's only reservation was that all the basic equipment was purchased before he came aboard and he would have made several substitutions.

The biggest headache for Newt has been poor fittings and some bad pipe in the irrigation system. Just about every 2" tee on the golf course has split along with several sections of various size pipe. Newt was on site when the system was installed and feels that this problem was due to faulty materials that couldn't be detected until they were in operation.

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Since Sebastian Municipal is still in its infancy, it's large financial obligation (\$1,600,000) is paramount. This fact hinders Newt's operation to some degree. Construction bonds are going to have to be refinanced shortly and higher interest rates will probably add another burden to the cash flow. Also, the lease between the Sebastian Airport and the golf course has not been approved by the FAA and substantial back-rent is owed the airport. These financial problems have shrouded the future outlook somewhat. It's difficult to plan budgets when you can't rely on available funds.

Over the years, politics have been most controversial in the small city of Sebastian. The original governing body for the golf course was a five-member committee that operated the golf course on a day to day basis. Now the new mayor has taken that authority away from the committee and the operation is in the hands of the golf professional who will now work in the capacity of general manager. Luckily for Newt, he has a good rapport with the golf professional.

Because of politics, uncertainty will always exist in a municipal operation. Newt Krages has mastered living with the aura of uncertainty hanging over his head and manages to provide the City of Sebastian with an excellent golfing facility.



This par 3 at Island Dunes, carved out of a mangrove swamp, is typical of the enhancing environment found throughout the golf course.

Down the road some forty miles, John Cowan has encountered similar problems at Island Dunes in Jensen Beach. Island Dunes is an oceanfront high-rise condominium project with a nine-hole (par 31) golf course designed by Joe Lee. John's time is split between the golf course and landscape operations at the condominium and clubhouse. Since the golf course is a selling point for condos, John has received adequate funding in order to keep the grounds in good condition. But John stated that uncertainty is lurking in the shadows. Because only a few sales have been made, the future will be hard to predict if the developer doesn't receive the return on the investment that's anticipated.

Although John's maintenance crew is the same size as Newt's (5), sometimes it's difficult to keep up especially when something goes wrong. He commented, "There are times when I have to shift all my employees to landscape detail and we fall behind on the golf course. When existing plant material is torn out to make repairs, we have to jump on restoration, It just takes awhile to catch up on our other chores." John tries to keep two employees on the golf course and two on landscape maintenance. The fifth man alternates duties as mechanic and filling in wherever needed. This structure works well except when someone is on vacation or out sick. "I'm lucky to have a very flexible crew, but whenever I'm a man short, we are predisposed for untimely surprises to take us a step backwards", John stated.



An efficient operation at Sebastian Municipal provides for excellent course conditions!

Having worked at Augusta National, Seminole and Mariner Sands, John has had a taste of large scale golf course operations. He laughs at the first predicament he encountered at Island Dunes when he took over last winter. Only one walking greensmower was in operation for the first Pro-Am. With 55,000 square feet of greens to be mowed by eight O'clock, the greensmower was out at 4:30 A.M. working by the light of a pickup truck! John put it all in a nutshell. He said "short courses don't have small problems - they have the same major problems as championship golf courses, and those problems are escalated by minimum labor and equipment. As much as a routine and preventative maintenance schedule is wanted (and much needed) it's almost impossible. All you can do is give it your best shot!"

Various limitations are by far the most difficult problems to overcome at many Executive, Municipal and Par 3 golf courses. Both Newton Krages and John Cowan feel that they have learned to deal with limitations effectively. And they both feel that their accomplishments are worth substantially more when compared to accomplishments that result from unlimited budgets. Overcoming unique problems have made them unique golf course superintendents!■