



**15 years ago, he was wielding a shovel on a crew at Walt Disney World. Now he's president of the FGCSA and responsible for growing bentgrass year-around at Arnold Palmer's private playground in Florida. He says...**

# 'It's a joy to maintain'

**BY LARRY KIEFFER**

WINDERMERE — Most people begin their careers at the bottom of the ladder.

But if you don't count a brief stint as a golf course construction laborer during the summer between high school and college, Joel Jackson started on the golf course management ladder in the middle, and then deliberately stepped *down* to the bottom before working his way up.

To the top.

In the spring of 1988, the former Coast Guard officer, geologist, junior high school teacher, construction supervisor, maintenance crew foreman and ditch digger —

and he held those jobs in that order between 1965 and 1974 — was selected personally by Arnold Palmer to be head superintendent at Palmer's home course, Isleworth G&CC.

A year later, Joel D. Jackson, CGCS, became the ninth man to preside over the Florida Golf Course Superintendents Association.

He will be president this February when the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America brings its annual International Golf Course Conference and Show to Orlando for the organization's first Florida visit since 1969.

And in January, he will become the third superintendent to edit this publication, succeeding Dan Jones, who is retiring after 15 years.

"It's going to be an interesting year," says the taciturn Tampa native, a grin indicating he's aware of the understatement.

"But it's not going to be nearly as hairy as it might sound.

"In the first place, I have been through a full one-year cycle at Isleworth and I've got a very capable assistant. So I don't have to be there 24 hours a day. I no longer feel guilty about locking up and going home.

*(Continued on next page)*







DAN JONES/FGCSA

Among the tricks Jackson must use to keep bentgrass alive during Florida's hot summers is to shade certain hot spots. Surface temperature is a good 10 degrees cooler under the screen.

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"The FGCSA is pretty well organized now and a lot of things happen more or less automatically. I hope to have an impact on unifying the state, on improving communication among superintendents and with the general public, and I'd like to see more superintendents organize and become involved in our activities — particularly in the Panhandle and the north central area.

"But if I don't do any of those things,

the FGCSA will still be here a year from now, strong as ever. I'm not a politician.

"As for the show, I don't really have all that much to do except welcome my fellow superintendents to Florida. It's the GCSAA's show. We have several state officers on various GCSAA committees connected with the show. They're doing

*During Florida Green interview, Jackson interrupted a telephone conversation with GCSAA President Dennis Lyon to coordinate a helicopter landing for a television crew.*

the work, not me.

"And *The Florida Green*? Well, you can't call me an editor in the sense of Dan Jones. It's an entirely different job now. I agreed to take it because I was chairman of our publications committee last year when Dan announced his retirement and we decided to contract a professional company to produce the magazine for us.

"Since I do know something about publications (he founded and edited the Central Florida GCSA newsletter for eight years), I thought I could contribute to the transition. I decided to accept the job if the board followed Dan's suggestion and offered it to me."

Jackson reels off the analyses of his leadership positions with the same precise logic that led him through his series of unusual career moves.

In his own mind, he's only ever had two career ambitions.

"Up through my second year of graduate school, all I ever wanted to do was get

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## JOEL D. JACKSON, CGCS

**AGE:** 47

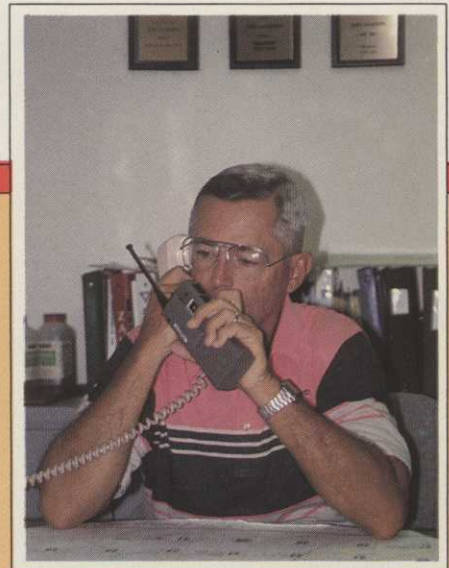
**EXPERIENCE:** Apollo Beach GC, Apollo Beach, 1960-61 construction laborer on summers and weekends during high school and college; Golf Course Architect William Dietsch, 1971-73 construction supervisor; Pembroke Lake GC, Pembroke Pines, foreman 1974; Lake Buena Vista GC, Walt Disney World, began as laborer (1974), promoted to foreman (1974), assistant superintendent (1976), superintendent 1980-88; Isleworth G&CC, Windermere, superintendent since June, 1988.

**OTHER JOBS:** U.S. Coast Guard officer 1965-68; University of South Florida, Tampa, graduate teaching assistant in geology 1968-70; Apopka Junior High School, science teacher 1970-71.

**EDUCATION:** Plant High School, Tampa; B.A. geology, University of South Florida, Tampa

**PROFESSIONAL:** Certified 1988; president FGCSA 1989-90; editor *Florida Green* effective Jan. 1, 1990; president Central Florida GCSA and editor of chapter newsletter.

**PERSONAL:** Married (Susan 1965) with one daughter (Jennifer 15).





## COVER STORY

*A fate worse than sand awaits the unlucky golfer whose approach to the 18th green is short. Mounding is typical of Isleworth, which lists six Fly-Mos on its equipment inventory.*

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my Ph.D. and become a geology professor," said Jackson, who served three years in the U.S. Coast Guard after graduating from the University of South Florida in Tampa with a B.A. in geology. On his final tour, he commanded a LORAN (Long Range Navigation) station on South Caicos in the British West Indies.

"It was an isolated post — no dependents — and it was time to go to grad school. That was my goal." So he left the Coast Guard.

He returned to USF but, after two years of study, Jackson's major professor was unable to help him complete his thesis.

"You only get an assistantship for two years. I had my two years and didn't have a thesis. It was time to move on," he says,



DANIEL ZELAZEK

dismissing the dissipation of a lifelong dream without so much as a philosophical sigh.

He taught general science in junior high school for one year and then, in 1971, he climbed onto the golf-course-management

ladder — at the middle.

He went to work with architect Bill Dietsch, helping to supervise construction of new golf courses. Jackson had worked for Dietsch on the construction of Apollo Beach GC during the summer between

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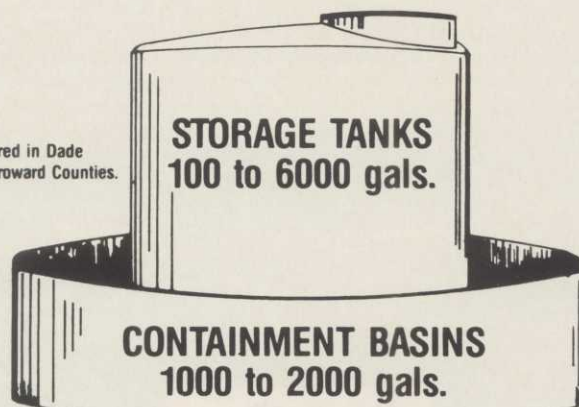
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high school and college and on weekends during his first year in college.

During the next two years, Jackson worked on a variety of projects, including the construction of Mariner Sands GC in Stuart (with architect Frank Duane) and the remodeling of Pasadena GC in St. Petersburg, site of one of the oldest events on the LPGA Tour.

"When the gas crunch hit in 1973, construction slowed, but I got a job at Pembroke Lakes (in Pembroke Pines) during the final phases of construction. I grew it in and stayed on as foreman."

A year later, Jackson heard that Walt Disney World had openings on the maintenance crew at Lake Buena Vista G.C.

"I had to go through 'Casting' and they told me that I was overqualified to start where nearly everybody starts at Disney — at the bottom. But they offered me a job and I took it. I had confidence in my ability and I thought Disney would be a good employer.

"I started as a crew laborer with a shovel in my hand. I left 14 years later as a certified golf course superintendent and, with their blessings and encouragement, an officer of the FGCSA."

For the record, Jackson made foreman in six months and assistant superintendent two years later. Four years after that, in 1980, he was named superintendent.

Then in June of 1988, six months after gaining certification, Jackson started over again. Only this time he started at the top.

After an extensive series of interviews, Arnold Palmer selected Jackson to succeed Dick Verbeten as superintendent at Isleworth, the posh playground behind the Bay Hill Club on Lake Butler, where the homes are easy to mistake for clubhouses.

Isleworth is not just any run-of-the-mill, first-class joint.

Palmer is building his home here. So is his Isleworth partner, Mark McCormack, the brilliant Brit who invented the profession of sports agent.

Verbeten, who had grown the course in and kept its bentgrass greens alive through an exceptionally hot, muggy Florida summer, had become so worn out from the effort that Palmer decided the struggle wasn't worth it. He decided to pull the the cool-season bentgrass out and replace it with turf more suited to Florida's climate — Tifdwarf bermudagrass.

Jackson was hired for his experience with bermudagrass and Verbeten moved over to maintaining the grounds and common areas.

Then, two days before the bentgrass was to come out, Palmer had a change of heart.

"Basically, the greens looked a lot better in May of 1988 than they had the first year and Mr. Palmer had promised the members bentgrass greens for at least three years, so he said, 'Let's give it another try,'" says Jackson, recalling

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(From page 29)

his first week on the job.

"So I suddenly found myself in the bentgrass business and I didn't know a thing about it.

"Dick Verbeten gave me a crash course in bentgrass and has been a tremendous resource ever since. I talked to a lot of other fellows, too. David Lowe at The Plantation at Ponte Vedra was particularly helpful.

"David gave me one piece of advice that has really stuck with me: 'You've got to learn how to manage bentgrass,' he said. 'You can't let it manage you.'"

Jackson did and Isleworth's greens have survived two more summers now. They were playable even in late August. Bentgrass is probably a permanent fixture.

"It's a year-to-year thing. If we have another summer like the first one, we may pull it out. Or if we start getting a lot of traffic in the summer, we will have to pull it out.

"But there is no doubt in my mind that bentgrass is a superior putting surface," says Jackson, an 18-handicapper who says he had seen bentgrass only once (at Pebble Beach) before being asked to grow it.

"It yields to the ball. With bermudagrass, the ball must yield to the turf."

In addition to weather, Jackson has had several other factors in his favor this past summer.

"We can start with my assistant and two OJT students (from Lake City Community College's School of Golf Course Operations).

"You have to have an adequate staff to keep this grass alive," he says. "From 10 a.m. until you put the course to bed, you have to be checking the greens constantly — at least one person for each nine holes and I heard that one place in Texas has two for each nine."

And Jackson is especially proud of his assistant, Bob Perez, who did his OJT under Paul Lattshaw at golfdom's national shrine, Augusta National GC.

"I was looking for somebody with supervisory experience and experience with bentgrass. I couldn't have done any better."

Pressures of maintaining the temperamental turf on his greens aside, Jackson is delighted with the layout routed by Palmer and designed by his architect-partner, Ed

Seay. It occupies 170 acres of the 850 which comprise the development.

"It's a real joy to maintain," he says. "We can do 98 percent of the maintenance with five-gang mowers. There are no gimmicks, no tricks... just an honest-to-goodness good golf course with outstanding vistas."

On a clear day, eight large lakes can be seen from various parts of the former orange grove. All are on the Butler chain (Lake Butler itself abuts the property), which has been designated a "Pristine Waterway."

Also enjoyable, according to Jackson, is the Palmer aura that covers the project.

"Everybody has a lot of affection for the man because of the way he conducts himself," Jackson says. "He is a very hard worker and nothing was ever given to him — he earned it all.

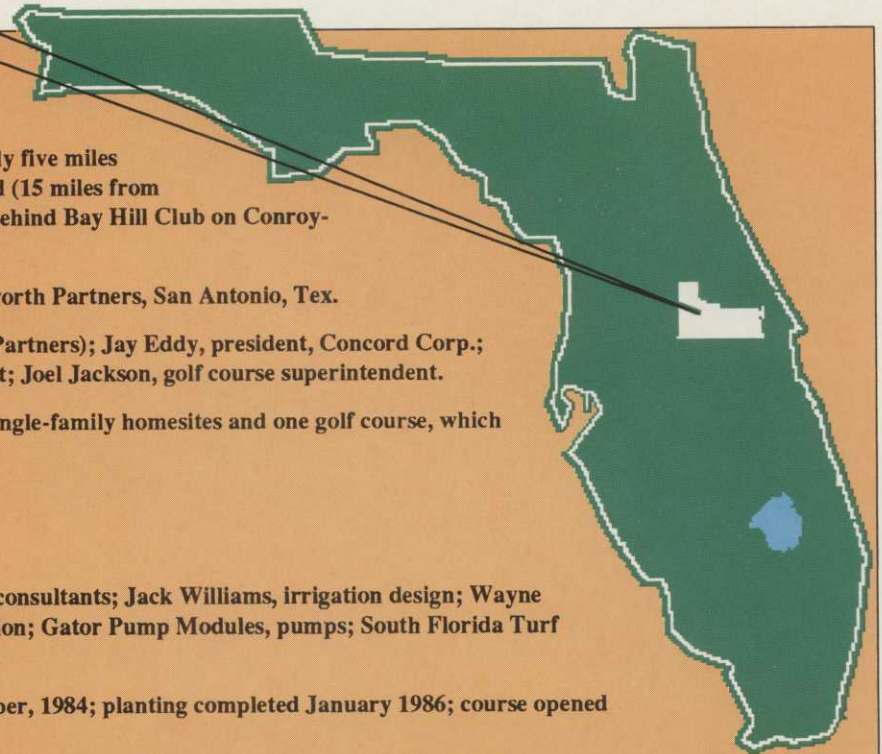
"For that reason he gets a lot of respect and loyalty from all of us. Loyalty is very big with him.

"If we hold him in awe, it's for what he has been able to do, not because he happens to be famous.

(Continued on page 32)

## ISLEWORTH G&CC

- LOCATION:** Windermere. Approximately five miles north of Walt Disney World (15 miles from entrance to theme parks) behind Bay Hill Club on Conroy-Windermere Road.
- DEVELOPER:** Concord Corporation/Isleworth Partners, San Antonio, Tex.
- MANAGEMENT:** Arnold Palmer (Isleworth Partners); Jay Eddy, president, Concord Corp.; Carter Speer, vice president; Joel Jackson, golf course superintendent.
- SIZE & SCOPE:** 850 acres comprising 391 single-family homesites and one golf course, which uses 170 acres.
- POLICY:** Members and guests only.
- ARCHITECT:** Ed Seay/Arnold Palmer
- CONTRACTORS:** Dave Harmon, golf course consultants; Jack Williams, irrigation design; Wayne DuBois, irrigation installation; Gator Pump Modules, pumps; South Florida Turf Nurseries, grassing.
- CHRONOLOGY:** First dirt moved in November, 1984; planting completed January 1986; course opened in October, 1986.







DANIEL ZELAZEK

The approach to No. 12 is one of only four shots on the course guaranteed to bring water into play.

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"If for no other reason than that, Arnold Palmer deserves a 'squared-away' crew," says Jackson, applying a naval term for well-disciplined to employees of the man known worldwide as "the general."

Although Jackson says his leadership values include a sense of humor, fairness, respect and dignity, he says he expects his staff to behave professionally at all times.

"Some of the people may be here only temporarily, but while they are here, this is what they do for a living and they ought to behave like it," he says. "Don't waste my time getting your act together."

## COVER STORY

### FACTS & FIGURES

**LENGTH:** 5,291 yards (rating 69.9) to 7,097 yards (rating 73.7)

**TEES:** Three or four on each hole. Turf: Tifway II cut to 3/8 inch; overseeded with Palmer ryegrass November through April.

**FAIRWAYS:** Rolling and undulated comprising about 50 acres. Turf: Tifway II cut to 1/2 inch. Not overseeded.

**GREENS:** Average 7,000 square feet. Stimpmeter goal in cool season: 9.5. Turf: bentgrass cut to 1/4 inch in summer, 5/32 in cool season, 3/16 in late spring.

**ROUGHES:** 120 acres. Turf: Tifway II cut 7/8 inch to 1-1/4 inch.

**WATER:** Two retention/irrigation ponds totaling 17.5 acres contained on property, which also abuts Lake Butler, one of Florida's larger lakes. Water comes into play on 10 holes, although six of them require bad tee shots to bring it into play.

**BUNKERS:** 25 bunkers filled with native sand which has been screened. Lips are Tifway II.

**VEGETATION:** Oak, raintree, cedar, crepe myrtle, oleander, azalea, iris, day lillies, juniper, dwarf oleander, heather; more than 10,000 annuals are planted in 150 beds around golf course, clubhouse and tennis clubhouse.

**IRRIGATION:** Toro Varitime II hydraulic 80 controllers, two 100-hp pumps, one 25 hp jockey. More than 2,000 sprinkler heads.

#### EQUIPMENT:

5 triplex greensmowers, 4 Toro 350D 5-gang hydraulic mowers, one Toro 450D 5-gang mower, 6 walking greensmowers, 1 power trap rake, 2 100-gal. spray rig, 1 300-gal. spray rig, 1 Toro vacuum sweeper, 1 blower, 2 Kubota utility tractors, 1 Kubota front-end loader, 8 Club Car CarryAll IIs, 3 Daihatsu utility vehicles, 1 3-wheel Cushman with Vicon spreader, 1 Ryan fairway aerifier, 1 Ryan greens aerifier, 1 bucket truck (not licensed for highway), 1 dump truck, 2 Toro 322D rotary mowers, 6 Flymos.

#### STAFF:

Total of 31 to maintain golf course and landscape, not counting entrances and common areas: 1 assistant for golf course, 1 assistant for landscape; 1 secretary, 2 mechanics, 1 irrigation technician, 1 spray technician, 1 greenhouse technician, 9 landscape crew and 13 golf course crew.