

'I can't think of a better job'

Managing the Tournament Players Club at Sawgrass is one of the profession's most challenging jobs but Fred Klauk loves it.

BY LARRY KIEFFER

Fred Klauk arguably has the most demanding job in golf course management. And he loves it.

Consider any one of these assignments:

- Maintain one of only two courses in the world to be the permanent site of a world-class major golf tournament.
- Maintain the golf courses at one of the world's major destination resorts where golf is the principal attraction.
- Maintain a golf course whose layout is controversial... by design.
- Maintain a golf course that belongs to the world's best players, each of whom has very strong ideas about course conditions and all of whom, once a year, play it for extremely high stakes.

Klauk, superintendent of the Tournament Players Club at Sawgrass in Ponte

Vedra, has all four assignments.

"I really enjoy it here," he says. "I can't think of a better job for a golf course superintendent."

This from a man only a week after the conditions on his golf course had drawn severe criticism on national television by some of golf's biggest stars who, through their organization, own it.

"Frankly, the whole situation got blown out of proportion," said Klauk, referring to the well-publicized complaints from competitors in last month's annual Players Championship, now generally regarded as golfdom's fifth Major championship.

Of the other four "Majors" (British Open, U.S. Open, PGA and Masters), only the Masters is held annually on the same course: Augusta (Ga.) National Golf Club.

"Some of our greens weren't perfect — and most players knew why — but a few complained and the media picked up on it.

"Then, when rain stopped play on Saturday, they (NBC Television) had 20 minutes to put a show together to fill the time and naturally they had to talk about the course conditions and some of the players got a little emotional.

"I can understand that."

Although he didn't have to, Klauk agreed to appear on the show to try and explain what had led to the less-than-perfect greens.

"Nobody made me go on the show but the thought of refusing the invitation never entered my mind," he said.

"I was eager to appear. I don't think very many superintendents get the opportunity to explain how incredibly com-

The Island No. 17 is probably the world's most photographed golf hole.









Number Sixteen

The Tournament Players Club at Sawgrass

The TPC Stadium Course rewards the well-struck shot but penalizes poorly struck shots more severely than most golf courses.

We try to have the greens rolling at about 10 on the Stimpmeter for The Players Championship. When the tournament is over, we'll back that off a bit, perhaps a little above 9, but otherwise we try to keep the course in tournament condition through the end of June. We have another heavy tourist season in October and November, but that is overseeding time so it is difficult to maintain tournament-level firmness.

Agronomically, the TPC requires intensive hand labor because of the contours and plantings. We have a crew of 44 to maintain the Stadium and Valley courses, with one assistant for each course.

The tees and fairways are 419 bermudagrass overseeded with rye. The greens are Tifdwarf bermudagrass overseeded with a combination of Pennway bentgrass and poa trivialis.

The course was cut from the woods, which causes some shade problems, but it's beautiful. We have osprey and nesting bald eagles. My favorite view is Number 11.

The TPC Stadium Course was designed by Pete Dye and built in 1980. It measures 6,857 yards from the back tees, playing to par 72 with a USGA rating of 74.0 and a Slope of 135.



Fred Klauk



Number Eight



Number Four



TPC Maintenance Complex



Number Seventeen



Number Thirteen



PHOTOS BY
DANIEL ZALEZEK



Number Seven



Klauk and Chief Mechanic Mark Sanford check each piece of machinery as part of the pre-tournament set-up procedure.

DANIEL ZELAZEK

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plex our job is and I was grateful to have one.

"The only thing I regret about the whole affair is the extent to which it shifted the focus away from the golf. There was some fantastic golf being played out there," said Klauk who plays to a two handicap, was intramural champion at the University of Florida, and twice has been a member of a Florida team that has won the GCSAA national championship.

The less-than-ideal conditions on some of the TPC's shaded greens came as no surprise to Klauk or, for that matter, to PGA Tour Commissioner Deane Beman.

In an interview with *The Florida Green* a week before the Players Championship, Klauk reported, "Deane was here earlier this morning. He is concerned about stress to the greens because of traffic.

"We had 48,000 rounds on the Stadium Course last year. That's too much.

"Anything above 35,000 is trouble. And when you put heavy traffic on Pete Dye's small, shaded greens — this course was cut out of a heavily wooded area — you're just asking for it.

"We are going to recommend to the Tour Policy Board that they close the course one day a week during the heavy season and that they close it to resort guests earlier than the Saturday before the tournament."

Klauk and Beman could not have asked for better ammunition to take to the Tour Policy Board than the subsequent events.

"Deane has been very, very supportive of me and of the whole crew," said Klauk in the interview following the tournament. "He understands the agronomics."

Klauk said morale among his crew (44 regulars augmented by 16 tournament temporaries) was extremely low Saturday night of the tournament.

"But I told them that we all had a mission to prove to the players that the conditions were not nearly so bad as some of the players had been saying they were," Klauk said.

"And the scores the next day proved us right."

Jodie Mudd's winning 278 was one stroke better than last year's title-win-

ning 279 by Tom Kite.

If Klauk's job is demanding, at least he has lots of help.

He has two assistants, one for the Stadium Course and one for its lesser-known sister, The Valley. The crew normally works 90 hours over 12 straight days and then gets a weekend off. Half the crew is off each weekend.

Tournament preparations begin about 10 weeks beforehand. From two weeks before tournament week, through the end of the tournament, the work schedule shifts to 60-hour weeks.

"The crew loves it — it's an incentive for them — but I can't say the same for the salaried guys. My assistants and the chief mechanic and I each put in more than a hundred hours a week in that same period."

During tournament week, each assistant becomes responsible for one nine and one crew member is assigned responsibility for each hole.

"During pre-tournament set-up, we have a daily punch list for each hole that we expect the staff to take care of. By having one person responsible for

each hole, it is easy to go to one person and say, 'Here is the punch list on this hole. Please take care of it.'

"At a Tour event, they go off from both tees starting at 7:15 a.m., so it takes twice as many people to stay ahead of the players.


"Whereas you would normally start mowing greens at one and two and just flip-flop through 18 holes, for a Tour event, you have to start mowing at one, two, ten and eleven at the same time.

"That's one advantage to having a crew that normally takes care of 36 holes. You have enough to do the tournament.

"When I was at Eagle Trace (Klauk was superintendent at the TPC at Eagle Trace in Coral Springs from 1983 to 1986 before moving to Sawgrass), I had to get eight superintendents from other courses to volunteer to help mow greens and rake traps during the tournament (Honda Classic)."

Klauk doesn't need help from his fellow superintendents these days, but he gets help from other places — the PGA Tour's agronomists, the Tour

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staff, and from his contemporaries at the eight other Tournament Players Clubs and three licensed TPCs.

The Tour's agronomists, who are based at the organization's headquarters just down the road, make two official visits each year: the first about four months prior to the tournament and the second about a month before.

"They have checklists for everything from course condition to making sure I have the right equipment on hand," Klauk reports.

"On the second visit about a month before the tournament, they recommend a program to correct any turf problems that have shown up."

Other Tour officials also offer suggestions, including Beman and Klauk's two bosses: the club general manager and the Tour's director of golf course maintenance.

"About eight department heads normally have access to me," says Klauk who has learned to live with help and advice from all corners of the Tour. "But during tournament week, I

take orders and suggestions only from the tournament director. Otherwise we'd have complete chaos."

Superintendents from all TPC courses had been meeting informally during the annual GCSAA Conference & Show since 1987, but this year the group of 30 superintendents, builders and designers affiliated with the Tour had a formal agenda on the Thursday and Friday before the show opened.

And they met again late Monday to compare equipment notes after the show closed.

During the formal meetings before the show, the group discussed a variety of topics, especially budget preparation.

"At a lot of courses, the budget is just a guideline. With us, it is the rule," says Klauk, becoming noticeably more intense. "A TPC superintendent does *not* go over budget. And there are no contingencies. If you have to spend more than you planned in one area, then you are expected to make it up in another.

"A lot of people seem to think that

because we are part of the Tour, we don't have to worry about how much money we spend. Nothing could be further from the truth."

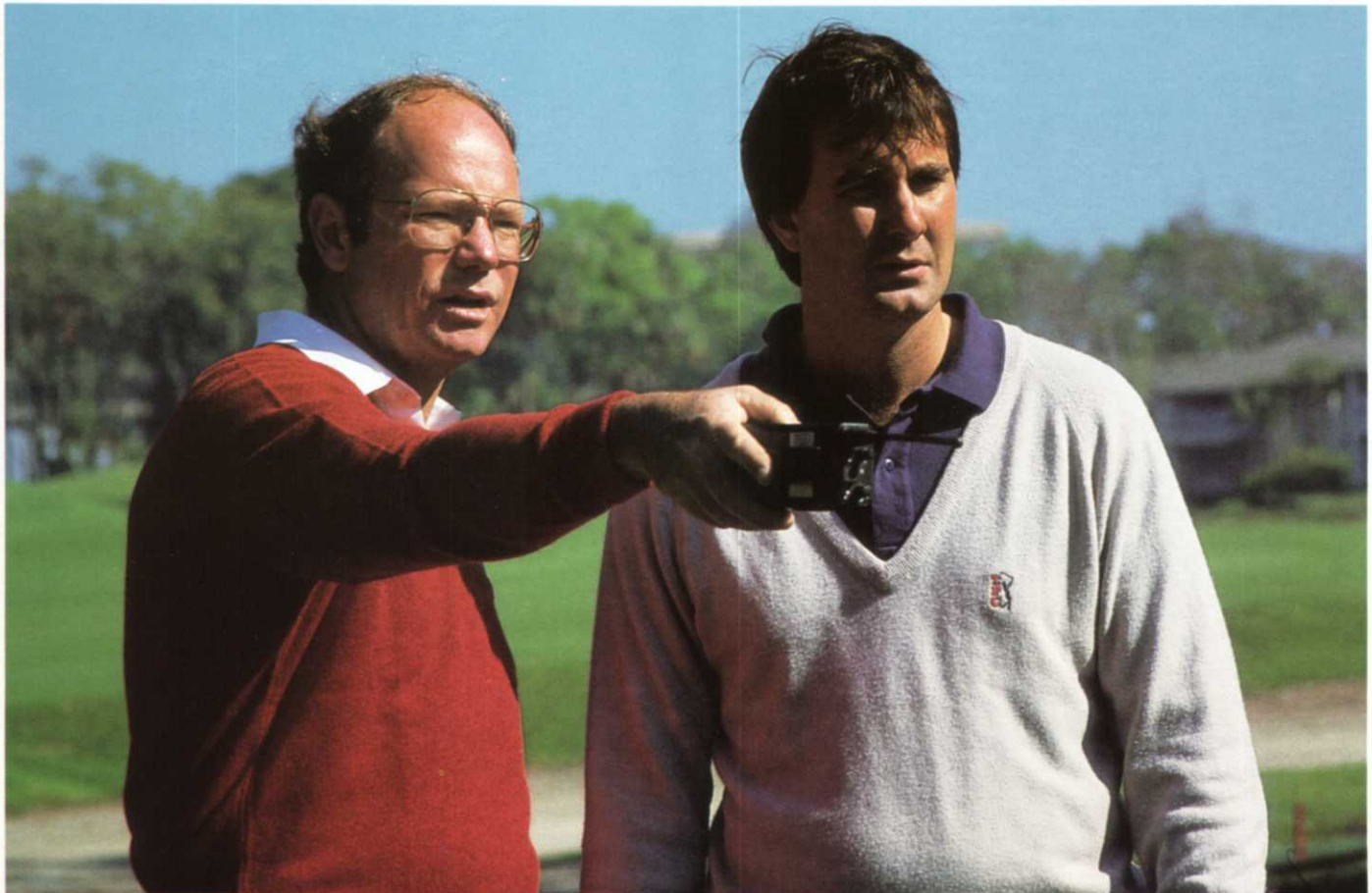
Budget presentation is one of two areas in which Klauk said he wished he could have received more formal training, either before he was graduated from the University of Florida in 1972, or at some point shortly thereafter.

"I knew how to *prepare* a budget, but I didn't know how to *present* it — how to justify every single item," said the man whose first job after graduation was with Pete Dye, building and growing in the North Course at the Johns Island Club in Vero Beach.

The other training he would have liked was in personnel management.

"I made too many mistakes early in my career that could have been avoided if I had had more experience in supervising a crew.

"Lake City has the right idea by requiring their applicants to work a year on a golf course before entering the program and then to do two summer



DANIEL ZELAZEK

Klauk and Bob Clarkson, assistant superintendent for the Stadium Course, discuss preparations for the Players Championship.

internships, but even that is not nearly enough to become an assistant superintendent.

"I think young graduates, whether it's Lake City or the University of Florida or anywhere, should work at every job on the golf course before becoming an assistant superintendent.

"And I mean really *be* the irrigation tech and spray tech and then crew foreman, not just play the role for a couple of weeks."

Public relations is another skill which Klauk says is vital for professional advancement.

"I have given more than a dozen press interviews this week alone," he said in the pre-tournament interview with *The Florida Green*.

"Our organization (GCSAA) has done an outstanding job in making the media aware of our profession. For years, we have been getting all the blame and none of the credit. That's beginning to change but a superintendent today has to know how to deal with the exposure we've been getting."

Maintaining a resort course is largely

a public relations job, Klauk maintains.

"It's communication. That's where it starts and that's where it ends.

"For instance, we have to notify the hotel far in advance when we plan to aerify or carry out other procedures that make playing conditions less than ideal.

"And the weather may not cooperate.

"Now if a player comes in expecting the greens to have been aerified a few hours before his round and they haven't been, he's happy.

"But not the guy who gets caught the other way.

"If you're at a private course and you inconvenience the members one day, you can make it up to them later when results of your program pay off. Not so for the resort guest.

"He's paid an awful lot of money for one or two rounds and if they're not enjoyable, he's not going to be very happy.

"And as a player I can relate to that."

One reason the TPC at Sawgrass attracts so many players willing to pay

so much for one round is its beauty.

"My favorite scene is number 11," he says.

"The most enjoyable part of my job is being outside. We have a real nature-oriented course. We have osprey flying around and during winter, we have nesting bald eagles.

"This is a beautiful place."

On April 2, after Klauk had recuperated from the tournament and attended a meeting with other TPC supers on the new computer program for golf course maintenance being written specifically for them, he and Beman flew up to Augusta for a pre-Masters view of the Augusta National.

"It's perfect," he said, a touch of awe in his voice. "You couldn't tell that a golf ball had ever been there. There's not a divot or a ballmark to be found.

"Of course, anybody can have a picture-perfect golf course if nobody plays it. I wonder what Augusta would look like if it got 48,000 rounds."

As Daniel Zelazek's photographs attest, the TPC at Sawgrass looks pretty good. ■



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