

'You could have knocked me over with a feather when the votes were counted'

Superintendent convinces Country Club of Orlando's members to renovate their Donald Ross greens

Cary Lewis, CGCS, had a problem.

Somehow he had to convince the 700 members of the Country Club of Orlando to give up their 70-year-old Donald Ross golf course for nearly half a year... and pay more than half a million dollars for the privilege.

That's what it takes to completely rebuild 18 greens to USGA specifications, rebuild five tees, fix some poorly drained fairways and update part of an irrigation system.

"Cary did a magnificent job of selling the program," says Dan Ruffier, former CCO president currently serving his sec-

ond tour as greens chairman. "He ran a year-long education campaign with the members and when we finally did a dog-and-pony show for them, they bought it."

"I had a good feeling going into the membership meeting last May," said Don Estridge, CCO general manager and Lewis' boss. "But you could have knocked me over with a feather when the votes were counted."

Lewis, Ruffier and Estridge, with some help from USGA Green Section agronomist John Foy, received the approval of 97 percent of the members to proceed with the renovation project in the spring and summer of 1990.

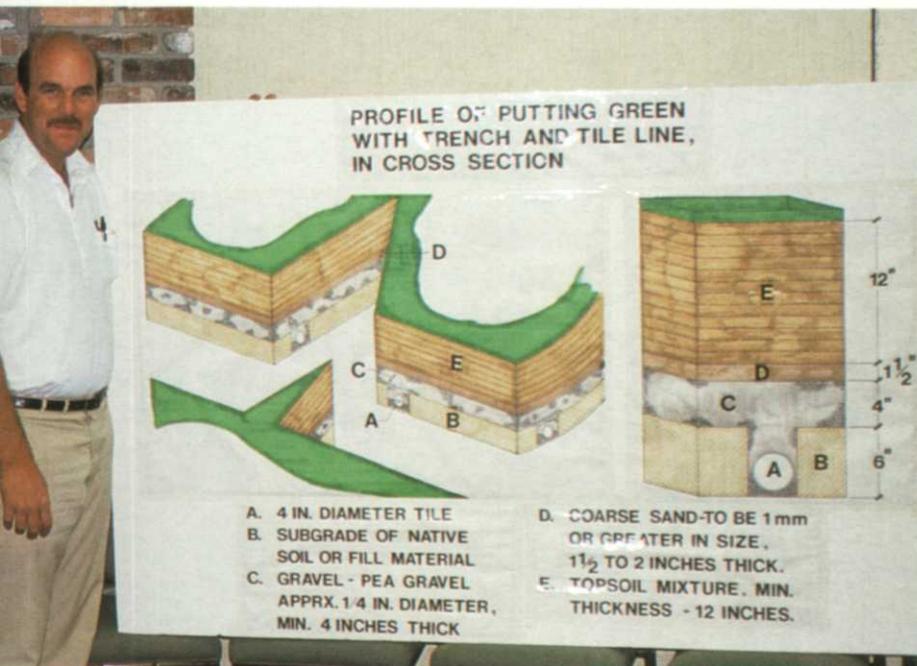
"By the time it actually came to a vote, the only real question was whether to do it all at once, or do nine holes at a time," Ruffier said. "The members decided to bite the bullet and get it over with, rather than be inconvenienced for 18 months."

But there's more.

Four months after the members approved the greens renovation, the architect selected for the project convinced first the selection committee, then the club's board of directors, and finally the entire membership to restore some Donald Ross character to the course by reworking the bunkers and surrounds.

That upped the ante to about \$800,000, including lost revenue to the club and head professional.

"I told them that they would not get the best value for their money if all they did was re-core the greens," said Brian Silva. "So many changes had been made over the years that there were only five or six greens that retained the Donald Ross character."



Cary Lewis, CGCS, explained the USGA greens construction method at several "dog-and-pony shows" for members of the Country Club of Orlando.

Silva, whose partner Geoff Cornish co-authored *The Golf Course*, the definitive history of golf-course architecture, was hired for the CCO job at least partly because of his emerging reputation as a major Donald Ross scholar. (Page 64)

"It's all right to talk about Donald Ross having designed your course, I said, but right now you don't have much Ross character on your golf course, and I think you should change the direction of your project to instill it.

"It was an incredible decision that they decided to go along. How many clubs did you ever hear of that would close their course for five months? And to start with one goal and then have someone come in and tell them they should spend more money and do more work. . . well it's unique.

"They really deserve a great deal of credit."

Although it is not likely that many clubs ever will choose to shut down completely for five months or more, the CCO renovation project is a textbook case of effective communication.

The Problem.

There never was any doubt that CCO's greens were in trouble.

Contaminated turf often threw putts off line during the vigorous growing season, but the real problems occurred in winter when the bermudagrass went dormant.

"There were too many times that the overseeding just wouldn't take," said Ruffier. We would be putting on mud pies."

CCO members found their greens particularly irksome after playing at some of Orlando's newer private clubs, particularly Isleworth and Lake Nona.

"We have 700 active golfing members, only 18 holes and Donald Ross greens that started small and have grown even smaller over the years," says Ruffier. "We have more than twice as many rounds as the clubs to which our greens were being compared and our greens are much, much smaller. They simply were taking a beating."

In May 1987, for the first time in several years, the club asked the USGA Green Section for an official visit and

evaluation of the course and its management practices.

"The overseeding had been unsuccessful," recalls Foy, the USGA's chief agronomist for Florida. "I found very poor soil materials with contaminated bermudagrass.

"We sent several soil samples to the lab in Texas and the analysis confirmed that the greens had very little chance unless they were completely rebuilt."

But the members weren't convinced that renovation was the answer. They had renovated the greens twice in the past three decades and the problem persisted.

Many felt the solution lay in management, not structure.

Enter Cary Lewis.

The Campaign

Lewis, a 1977 graduate of Lake City Community College's School of Golf Course Operations, was one of a handful of golf course managers invited to CCO to discuss the golf course situation.

The year before, Lewis had left Fort

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Detailed plans for the project included haul routes, mixing sites and estimates of damage that will be caused by the construction project.

Myers, where he had been in charge of two clubs — The Vines and Fiddlesticks — to go into business for himself. Using infrared photography, he was able to spot drainage problems and the onset of many diseases long before they became evident to the naked eye.

"The invitation from the Country Club came at the right time," says Lewis. "My business was undercapitalized and I truly missed being a golf course superintendent. I had already decided that if an opportunity arose at a truly private club, I would look into it."

So Lewis, who broke into the business by building golf courses first for General Development Corp. and then Tom Fazio (Windstar in Naples), was given a copy of John Foy's report and told to drive around the course.

"They said that if I was invited back for a second interview, I was to bring my own analysis of everything that needed to be done to put the course in the best possible condition," Lewis recalls.

"I thought I wouldn't get the job because I came on too strong about the capital improvements that were needed," said Lewis, recalling his sec-

ond interview. "They asked if I would take the job without a commitment to the capital program and give it my best shot for one year."

Lewis' best shot did wonders in many areas, but he wasn't able to turn the greens around, despite five aerifications and some improvements to drainage and irrigation.

"During that year, I did everything I could to explain to the members that the problem was with the underlying structure," Lewis says.

"Invariably they'd say, 'But we just re-did the greens 10 years ago. If it didn't work then, why will it work now?'"

And then Lewis would go into high gear with a sales pitch for the USGA's specified method for greens construction.

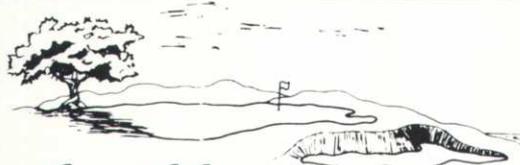
"I explained that the previous renovations had not followed USGA specifications because nobody in Florida paid too much attention to them until recently," Lewis says. "Architects and builders thought they weren't necessary because of our sandy soil."

[Ed. note — The first complete set of USGA-spec greens in Florida were installed at Atlantis GC in 1987.]

"If the greens had been reconstructed to USGA specifications, they would be doing fine now," he said.

Lewis has full membership privileges ("I even get to pay my bill, just like everyone else," he says sardonically) and tries to squeeze in rounds with other members once or twice a week.

During those rounds, instead of hoping his playing partners would not notice flaws in the greens, Lewis



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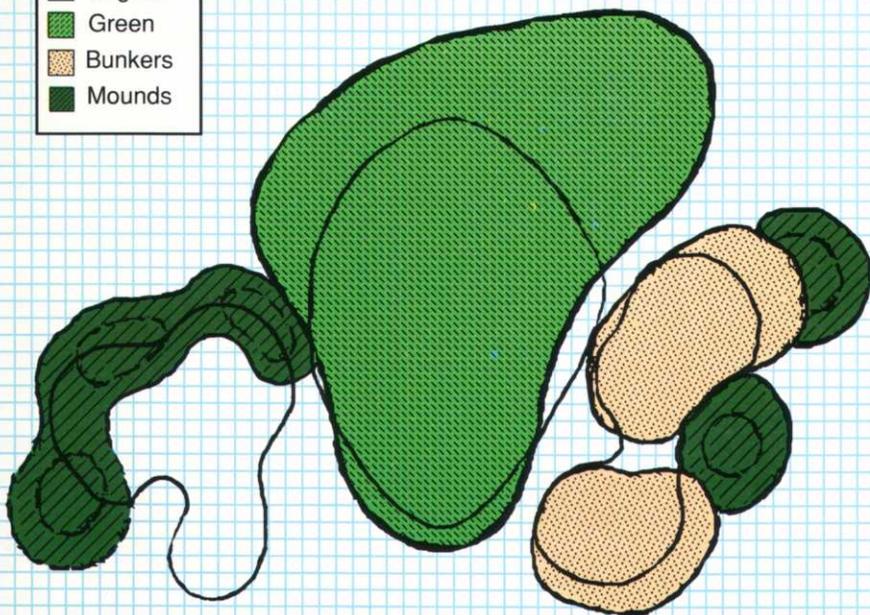


KIEFFER/JANLARK

No. 1 — Lots of Ross character left

"The current green is a good example of a Ross-style plateau green that bleeds off to the left and right rear. The proposed green would restore the green to its former size, extending the green to the left rear, rear and right rear. This would restore some very strategic pin positions. The right front bunker would be re-cut into a Ross pair that sets against the fill pad of the green so as not to restrict visibility of the putting surface. The left bunker would be re-worked into a Ross-style chipping area maintained at fairway or apron height — a good precursor to a classic Ross hazard that we want to repeat throughout the course."

-Brian Silva



pointed them out. . . and his recommended solution. "I had 18 sales opportunities on each round," Lewis says.

He also used his column in the monthly club bulletin to talk about the greens and to discuss the USGA construction method.

And he placed a huge artist's rendering of a cross-section of a USGA green where everybody could see it.

Last March he got a break. The board of directors authorized him to spend \$30,000 to rebuild the practice green to USGA specifications.

"I knew that was my chance, but I had to move quickly," Lewis recalls.

He asked Central Florida Turf, a construction firm with whom he had worked previously, to build a USGA-spec green on a turnkey basis. . . in 30 days.

"I made sure they realized that my ability to sell renovation of the other 18 greens hinged on the success of this project," Lewis said.

"I videotaped the whole process so I could actually show the members what a USGA green looked like, although I never had to use the tape. The practice green is right by the clubhouse so we had lots of sidewalk superintendents."

The green was completed just before the club's annual "Town Hall meeting," an open forum a week before the annual membership meeting to discuss items on the agenda.

That's where Lewis, Ruffier and Foy gave the first "dog-and-pony show," as general manager Estridge calls them. The trio discussed the history of the 70-year-old course's greens, the soil analyses and what they meant, and the USGA construction method.

A week later, they repeated the process at the meeting that counted and members responded with a 97 percent vote of confidence.

The bonus

A nine-member blue-ribbon committee including Lewis, Estridge and players of all ability levels was then appointed to find an architect to oversee the renovation.

Of three finalists, Silva "had instant rapport with the committee," recalls Estridge. "He seemed genuinely excited about the project and its pros-

pects.”

But, like Lewis before him, Silva feared he would not get the job because he pushed so strongly for expanding the project to include restoring the Ross character.

But also like Lewis, Silva is a good communicator. A scholar who frequently delivers a five-hour lecture on the history of golf architecture— with Ross as the centerpiece — he had his own dog-and-pony show ready for the membership.

By the time he was through, the members were as excited as he was. Go to it, they said. We’ll spend the money.

The plan

“This is a major project,” Silva says with emphasis. “I’ve never rebuilt 18 greens on any golf course before. There are not too many clubs that are able to make a decision of this magnitude and go ahead and do it.”

Having more than eight months to prepare for the project is an advantage, Silva said. In addition to getting all the

‘These people are giving up their course for five months. They have made a massive sacrifice. We owe it to them to have it ready for them when we said we would.’

permits, locking in the contractor, Silva and Lewis had time to work out a detailed schedule.

“Time is so critical. A day slips here and there and then a week slips away and it’s very easy to let that time pass by and not miss it. And then suddenly you realize it’s almost time to plant and you’ve still got nine greens that are not at subgrade.

“We need to compare our progress with the schedule at least once a week. These people are giving up their course for five months. They have made a massive sacrifice. We owe it to them to have it ready for them when we said we would.”

As it did with the practice green,

Central Florida Turf will provide a turnkey operation on the greens and surrounds. The company will work directly with Silva, who plans to visit the course one or two days every week.

“For me, this is an important job. I’m treating this just like a new course,” he says.

“Cary will be my quality-control engineer.”

The greens will be built in weekly stages, with four greens at a time in each stage.

By the third week, Silva should be able to look at the final float on the first four greens, the rough subgrade on the second four and the set-up staking on the third set.

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"The first two stages are critical," Silva says. "After the subgrade is shaped, the rest is pretty much mechanical. Either you do it right or you don't.

"But shaping the subgrade, that's where the art is."

"We're working with a contractor who has a history of doing outstanding work — quality work. That doesn't mean we won't disagree at times — and there probably will be a lot of arm-waving on the first two greens until the shaper understands exactly what I'm looking for, but I would like to think that our final goals are exactly alike: we want to do a good job.

Some things can get in the way of the most talented people in pursuit of the loftiest goals, however.

"We can't control the weather," says Silva. "Cary's abilities as God are limited."

"And we really don't know what we're going to find under five, six and seven," pipes in Lewis. "They were built over a cypress swamp. The story goes that the land was cleared, trees were dropped and they put fill on top of them."

"When we get to number five green, we may find that it's all muck held together by the grass," says Silva.

Lewis and his crew won't be idle while Central Florida Turf is rebuilding the greens.

In fact, he has augmented his staff by four in order to rebuild five tees, renovate parts of several fairways and upgrade part of the irrigation system.

And when they're all done, the greens will be sprigged in Tifdwarf and the tees and fairways will be planted in 419 bermudagrass.

The course should be ready for play by mid-October.

Will CCO's maintenance budget be much different once the renovation is completed?

"Not really," says Silva. "His maintenance program should be more predictable."

Something else that had better be predictable is the putting surface, says Ruffier. "Cary's butt's on the line on this one and he knows it."

"I'm ready," says Lewis.

Work begins April 23.



WIEFER/IANCARK

No. 5 — No Ross character here any more

"The goal here is a completely redesigned green that reflects a couple of Ross characteristics. (See below.) First of all, the left rear portion of the green plays up on a mound and this characteristic, combined with an exaggerated back-to-front pitch on the first half of the green, seeks to improve the shot-holding characteristics of the new green when compared to the old. A Ross-style chipping area, replete with a small area on the right side of the green that directs balls to the close-cut chipping area, adds interest to the green. Bunkers left are re-cut more in a Ross style with the final touch being a Ross approach bunker set some 75 feet short of the green. This bunker is detailed to appear as though it immediately fronts the green and will result in quite a few approach shots falling short as players try to just clear this 'fronting bunker.'"

-Brian Silva

