



**Number 7
Wilderness C.C.
near Naples**

Outpost at the end of Alligator Alley

**Photos by
Brian
Everhart**

“We decided that in the long run the best use of the land was as a golf course...”

BY LARRY KIEFFER

Except for three years in college and two more in Germany with the U.S. Army, Paul Frank has spent his whole life on the site of the Wilderness Country Club in Naples.

“I was born and raised on this property,” says Frank, Wilderness golf course manager and a founding member of the Everglades GCSA.

In a lot of ways, the 57-year life of Paul Frank reflects the modern history of Collier County.

As a youngster, he learned the cattle business on his father’s 420-acre ranch east of Naples, then a backwater Florida community best known for its annual swamp buggy races.

When he returned from his stint in the Army in the mid-1950s, he foresaw the coming of civilization to this outpost at the end of Alligator Alley and the end of cracker-style cattle ranching.

“We decided that in the long run the best use of

the land was as a golf course,” says Frank, his booming voice more fitted to the wide open spaces of nearby Big Cypress Swamp than to the boardroom of Barnett Bank of Collier County, where a director’s chair has carried his name for the past 14 years.

“So we turned the north 200 acres into Hole-in-the-Wall Golf Club and tried to fence off the cattle on the other 220 acres,” Frank recalls.

Hole-in-the-Wall, designed by Dick Wilson, was the county’s second golf course.

Today there are 45 courses and, according to the National Golf Foundation, they are going in faster in Collier County than any other spot on the planet.

“Naples Beach Club’s golf course was getting crowded and the developer of Port Royal, a new upscale subdivision, needed another golf course in the community for his new property owners. So he approached my father and we decided to get into the golf business.”



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The younger Frank oversaw construction of Hole-in-the-Wall in 1957-58 and ran the golf club for 15 years until he and his father decided to quit chasing cattle altogether and develop Collier County's first PUD on their remaining property.

The Franks brought in the Downing and Frye development company, which packaged 300 condos around a generous, 160-acre Arthur Hills layout. Father and son retained about 10 acres for their own residences — the only single-family dwellings on the property.

“Our goal was to preserve the wilderness concept,” says Frank. “That’s why we named it Wilderness CC. We made a conscious effort to save every tree we could. Hills cut the course through cypress swamps, taking advantage of specimen trees whenever possible.”

Wadsworth Construction built the course which features 6,000-square-foot greens and 22 acres of water in 12 lakes.

The fairways and roughs are planted in Tifton 419 bermudagrass and the tees are 328, as are most of the greens. Three greens — 11, 14 and the practice green — are planted in PF11.

PF11? Never heard of it?

That’s because it exists only at Wilderness CC... so far.

“I found this darker, denser mutation of 328 on number 11 green, so I tried to propagate it in a nursery from one stolon,” says Frank. When he had established 300 square feet of his new grass, he planted it on the practice green. When problems developed on 11 and 14, he converted them to his proprietary grass, which he dubbed PF11 in honor of its birthplace.

“I may eventually put it on all my greens... or I may use one of the other grasses I’m working on with Phil Busey (UF turf breeding professor at the Fort Lauderdale Research Center),” Frank says.

PF11 is distinguished from other dwarf bermudagrasses not only by its darker color and denser growth but by its considerably more extensive root structure.

Frank does not oversee his greens.

“This far south, we only get about 12 days that are cold enough for the grass to go off color. And you know the adage — you putt texture, not color.”

He gets by with a surprisingly small maintenance crew of 12 for such a large operation. Paul’s mechanic also doubles as his

Wilderness Country Club

Overview: Occupies south 210 acres of the former 420-acre cattle ranch belonging to the Frank family. Designed by Arthur Hills and Associates; built by Wadsworth Construction Co.; opened in 1974.

Operating Format: Private; membership limited to 300 condominium owners on the property.

Greens: Average 6,000-7,000 square feet, all but two planted in Tifton 328 bermudagrass. Greens cut to 1/4 inch in summer, 7/32 in winter, 3/16 for winter tournaments. Two greens planted in PF11, a hybrid bermudagrass developed by Frank from a mutation of 328.

Fairways and Roughs: Tifton 419 bermudagrass; fairways cut to 1/2 inch; roughs to 1-1/2 inches.

Hazards: 38 sand bunkers, 12 lakes comprising 22 acres.

Crew: 12, including mechanic-assistant superintendent; each person is a "specialist" in at least one maintenance skill and has specific responsibilities on the golf course.

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assistant.

"We're very efficient," Frank says, warming to his subject. "Everybody has a specialty and specific jobs on the golf course that he's responsible for. And each person is backed up by two or three others to cover for sickness and vacation.

"You are much better off with a good, small crew than a big, mediocre crew. We offer good compensation and an outstanding benefit package.

"If you have a lot of good equipment, all it takes is a few good people and your efficiency factor goes up."

Like most superintendents, Frank is concerned about the growing pressure from golfers for top-quality golf courses under marginal conditions.

"We're the victim of desire. More people want more of it... and better. The pressure to use more chemicals is tremendous. We must develop better turfgrasses and maintenance procedures that avoid pollution.

"Of course, on a square-foot basis, almost any golf course is a lot better for the environment than a residential lot.

"If you were to take the 160 acres of this golf course and turn



Paul Frank

Age: 57

Employment: Hole-in-the-Wall Golf Club, Naples, manager 1958-1973; Wilderness Country Club, Naples, golf course manager, 1973-present.

Affiliations: GCSAA, Quarter Century member; Everglades GCSA, founding member; Florida Turfgrass Association, former director.

Outside Interests: Hunting and fishing, flying (private license with about 7,000 hours), golf, SCUBA diving, 11-year member of Collier County Planning Commission, director of Barnett Bank of Collier County for 14 years.

Family: Three children.

Education: Florida Southern College, University of Florida.

it into the typical tract housing development, you'd have an environmental disaster waiting to happen. Nobody else uses chemicals at the same rate as the average homeowner and then when you add in the runoff — a golf course creates a lot fewer problems."

Nearing his 58th birthday, Frank has no professional goals unachieved. A quarter-century member of the GCSAA and a former director of the FTGA, he says he might do a little consulting work... and develop his new grasses with Busey.

"I'd just like to give something back... help the game of golf make this a better world.

"And there's a lot of work still to be done."