

Business job kept him inside, so...

He looked to golf to get outdoors

BY KIT BRADSHAW

“I used to sit there in the credit offices of Maas Brothers in Tampa and go crazy seeing all the beautiful weather while I was indoors. I think that’s why I was so easily enticed when the opportunity came to work on a golf course.”

Back in 1952, Bob Sanderson was an eminently practical man. He earned a degree in economics, a nice, stable choice of majors, at Hobart College in Geneva, N.Y. He went into the Army for two years and was stationed at Fort Lewis, Washington, where, as he says, “it’s a beautiful three months of the year, and the rest of the time, it’s rainy and foggy and miserable.”

When his hitch was over, it didn’t take much for his parents to get him to visit them in Florida, and once here, he decided to stay. But because of his economics degree, he chose to work for Maas Brothers — inside.

“In 1960, my wife, Mary Ann and I went to visit her brother-in-law, Dave Wallace, who was working for General Development on the Sinners Course in Port St. Lucie,” Sanderson recalls.

“After showing us around, Dave said he might be calling me to work for him. I hadn’t thought about working on a golf course until that time, but when the call came two weeks later, it took me about five minutes to decide.

I was in Port St. Lucie in two weeks.”

Thirty years after joining Wallace in Port St. Lucie, the man who just wanted to work outdoors was awarded the FGCSA’s President’s Award for lifetime achievement in golf course management.

He learned the skills that merited the award the old-fashioned way — in the field.

“Two years after I went to Port St. Lucie, General Development and Mackle Brothers, who did the development work, had a disagreement. Everyone who was in Port St. Lucie was moved elsewhere. I was selected to be the superintendent at Port Charlotte, a 120,000-acre development where there was an 18-hole golf course.

“I was excited about the chance to be a golf course superintendent, but it was really tough on my wife. They were developing shopping malls in Port St. Lucie and she could hardly wait to do some serious shopping. But we moved to Port Charlotte and there was really nothing much there at the time.”

Sanderson said the isolation at Port Charlotte made it difficult to get the solid information on golf course management as well. He relied at that time on advice from fertilizer and chemical salesmen and a lot of trial and error.

“I made a lot of errors, but I learned a lot, too,” he said.

Despite good advice from sales reps, Sanderson still longed for more inter-



Bob Sanderson

Helped organize the FGCSA

Photo by Philip Pettus

*President’s Award
for
Lifetime Achievement
1991*

*Tom Mascaro
John Hayden
Carl Smith
Harvey Phillips
C.R. ‘Bud’ Pearson*

action among golf course superintendents. During the 1960s, more golf courses were being built in Fort Myers and Naples, and there was increased communication among the superintendents. But they still needed to travel to Tampa or Miami for educational courses.

To get this information on a local level, the superintendents formed the Everglades Golf Course Superintendents Association in 1968. Two years later, Sanderson was involved with the creation of the Florida Golf Course Superintendents Association.

"The organization (FGCSA) didn't get off the blocks as well as we wanted it to," Sanderson said. "It was more of a paper organization at that point. But in 1978, we met in Orlando — Tim Hiers, Bill Wagner and others — and we really went to town then. Tim was elected as the first president. He really did an outstanding job, particularly for a young fellow. And then Bill became president and did a great job, too.

"The organization has gotten bigger and the people and the talent that have come along since then are unbelievable. There are people in this state who are outstanding. They are interested in the organization; they have created great educational programs for the superintendents. I see the organization just getting better and better in the future."

Sanderson remained active with the FGCSA, serving as secretary/treasurer in 1982. He also stayed in Port Charlotte for 25 years, until he left in 1985 during a change in management. For a brief time, he worked with David Moote until he went with Del Tura in North Fort Myers in 1986.

As the golf course superintendent, Sanderson has the overall responsibility for two courses. Del Tura CC is a 27-hole executive course complex, complete with a large clubhouse, pro shop and recreational areas. When the manufactured home community sells out in the next few years, there will be approximately 1,500 families living at Del Tura.

Most recently, Sanderson has been involved with the creation of Del Vera CC, which opened nine regulation holes in January. Construction is scheduled to start on another nine holes in 1992. Ron Garl is the architect for Del Tura and Del Vera golf courses.

"There are definite differences between the two complexes," Sanderson said. "The Del Tura course has 419 bermuda on the fairway and tees and 328 bermuda on the greens. We've got about 25 acres of the 100 acres in lakes. The three courses get a

lot of play. At Del Vera, there is 419 Bermuda throughout the course with the greens in Tifdwarf. The course has huge greens — some of them as large as 8,000 square feet.

"We also have large sand traps and waste areas, and our tees are three to four times bigger than normal so that we can spread the wear on them in peak periods of play. We have water along the sides of the fairways which are a little narrower than usual. And, we even have an island green. I think this course is really going to be a test of golf for the members."

The courses share some of the same problems with nematodes, mole crickets and periodic fungus, but Sanderson says the older course has unique problems because of its age.

"As a golf course gets older, about the fourth year, you can develop problems with dry spots or you didn't get quite the right mixture on a green or tee and it starts to show. Then you have to make adjustments to the course, to keep it in good condition. I'm lucky, because I have two great assistant superintendents, Curt Conrad and Mike Sorrell. They've been a godsend to me. They do all the outside work and I've concentrated on the inside work, such as doing the budget and keeping up with the regulations."

These regulations, Sanderson said, are one of the challenges for today's golf course superintendents. "Particularly in the last 10 years, there have been so many regulations and so many governmental agencies involved with golf courses that it's difficult to stay on top of everything. I think that it's certainly different than

when I began in this business. I don't think a young superintendent could learn this business just by working on a course. The young person coming along now really has to know a mind-boggling amount of information to run a golf course."

"It was really a joy to be part of a new association that started out at the bottom and now is one of the most respected in the nation," Sanderson said.

The responsibilities of a golf course superintendent have changed over the years, and there are more to come, Sanderson said. "As a result of the increased use of computers at courses, I think the high tech is really going to be a great part of the future for golf course superintendents. We may even find that it's possible to do a lot of work at night with radio controlled equipment or with robots cutting greens. There'll never be a day when you can completely replace people on a course, but there may come a day when we are automated much more than we are now."

Bob Sanderson

Current Position: Golf Course Superintendent, Del Tura CC and Del Vera CC, North Fort Myers

Age: 63

Education: B.A. Economics, Hobart College, Geneva, NY

Previous Employment: Golf course superintendent at Port Charlotte CC for 23 years. Before that he was employed at Port St. Lucie during its golf course development.

Other Employment: U.S. Army, Maas Brothers

Professional growth: Helped start the Everglades GCSA and was its first president. He later helped organize the Florida GCSA, and served as one of its first directors. He later served as Secretary/Treasurer of FGCSA. He has also served as Secretary/Treasurer of the Florida Turfgrass Association.

Personal: Married to Mary Ann since 1955. Has a daughter, Pamela, who is a graduate of the University of South Florida with a B.S. in marketing.