

Natural beauty, diverse

BY LARRY KIEFFER

Greg Plotner, CGCS, has worked at only two golf courses in his 11-year professional career — and he built one and grew in the other.

The 35-year-old environmentalist and superintendent at Tampa Palms CC began digging drainage ditches for Wadsworth Construction Co. at Sweetwater CC near Houston immediately after graduating from Southern Illinois University in 1981 with a B.S. degree in plant and soil science. Five years later, he was on his way to Tampa to supervise the construction and maintenance of Tampa Palms.

“I had a good background and training, but I just happened to get a few very good breaks,” says Plotner, who took up golf at age 5 and landscape maintenance not much later, both under the tutelage of his father, an elementary school superintendent.

“I started by taking care of the grounds at my Dad’s school and that worked into a summer job with a landscape company through high school and college,” he recalls.

The 14 months of construction experience with Wadsworth at Sweetwater gave Plotner a taste to manage a golf course so, when the contractor pulled up stakes in Houston and headed to Phoenix, Plotner stayed on as an irrigation technician at the course built specifically as the centerpiece for LPGA headquarters.

“I had no idea that one of the assistant superintendents would be leaving in a few months and that I would get his job,” says Plotner with just a touch of wonder. “And a little later, the senior assistant left and I moved up.”

During his stint at Sweetwater, which was managed by Kindred &



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habitat, golfing pleasure



Co., Plotner helped set up and maintain the course for several LPGA qualifying schools and two tour events. In the summer of 1986, Kindred offered Plotner the superintendent's post at a new course that was to be built by the Deltona corporation on a 1,000-acre tract in the floodplain of the Hillsborough River.

Fortunately, Deltona also had a set of plans by Art Hills, an architect well known for sensitively and sensibly transforming southwest Florida wetlands into wonderful golf courses.

"Art did a great job keeping the natural beauty of the property intact while creating lots of eye appeal," says Plotner.

"Most of the surrounding land is designated a nature preserve, adding a lot of pressure to be extremely careful when applying pesticides.

"We have a tremendous amount of wetlands and upland forest areas that leads to a diverse habitat for a wide variety of plant and animal communities, which allows the golfer not only to enjoy a round of golf, but also to enjoy nature and all of its wonderful inhabitants.

"This is a great place to exemplify that golf courses and nature can coexist to their mutual benefit."

To bolster that assertion, Plotner signed up Tampa Palms for the USGA/Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program (*See story page 36*) in March of 1991 and it was accepted last October.

"We hope to be certified as a sanctuary soon," says Plotner, pointing out that the Audubon Society must approve plans in seven different areas before Tampa Palms can be certified: public

involvement, environmental plan, wildlife cover projects, wildlife food enhancement projects, water conservation, and water enhancement.

The same features that give Tampa Palms its beauty also create maintenance problems. For instance the high water table on the floodplain of the Hillsborough River — a major source of drinking water for much of the Tampa Bay area — keeps Plotner and his crew on the chemical edge.

“Water quality is very important. We have to be very careful about pollutants,” he says. “We do an extensive soil sampling program to monitor what’s going on as best we can. We even have a small kit to do some testing ourselves.”

Plotner uses the soil testing services provided by his various suppliers but would like some day to have a complete lab of his own right in his maintenance complex.

“I’ve heard that somebody is coming out with a small self-contained lab that

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might cost about \$20,000, but I think it would pay for itself in the long run,” he says.

Another problem is created by the dense uplands forest from which many of the holes were carved.

Air circulation is far from ideal. Combined with heavy rains and the high water table, the poor circulation continually challenges the Tampa Palms crew’s ability to keep the Tifdwarf greens alive — let alone playable — in summer’s high tem-

perature and humidity.

“But it’s all part of our job,” says Plotner, who is responsible for the clubhouse grounds and common areas as well as the golf course. He has a staff of 15 fulltime employees and five part-time laborers.

That’s a good-sized staff for an 18-hole golf course that plays 28,000 rounds a year, but Tampa Palms members get their money’s worth.

It’s not a hacker-friendly facility.

From the red tees, the course measures 4883 yards with a rating of 69.7 and a slope of 118. From the tips, it measures 7004 with a rating of 74.2 and a slope of 137.

The Senior PGA Tour, whose players contributed 230± rounds to the annual total during the GTE Suncoast Classic from 1988-91, played it at 6631 yards and par 72. Nine of 78 entrants in last year’s fourth annual Classic managed par or better through 54 holes.

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Tampa Palms Golf and Country Club

Property: 7500 acres (originally 10,000) on floodplain of Hillsborough River near Tampa.

Ownership: Originally developed by Deltona Corp.; then Gulfstream Homes and Tampa Palms Development Co.

Management: Simanco Management Co., Tampa. John Vest, general manager; Ron McCormick, golf chairman; Jim Jones, greens chairman.

Golf Course: Opened 1987; Arthur Hills, architect. 18 holes; par 36-36-72; 4883-7004 yards; rating 69.7-74.2; slope 118-137.

Playing Policy: Private, 28,000 rounds annually; hosted Senior PGA Tour GTE Suncoast Classic annually 1988-91.

Terrain: Wetlands and dense uplands forest. Certification pending as USGA/Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary.

Maintenance Staff: Greg Plotner, CGCS, superintendent; 2 assistants, 2 mechanics, 2 spray technicians, irrigation technician, landscape technician, 2 club groundskeepers, 5 fulltime laborers, 5 parttime laborers.

Greens: Tifdwarf bermudagrass overseeded with 50/50 Pennlinks bentgrass and poa trivialis; 5500 square feet cut to $\frac{5}{32}$.

Tees: Tifton 328 bermudagrass overseeded with perennial ryegrass; total 4 acres cut to $\frac{7}{16}$.

Fairways: Tifton 419 bermudagrass not overseeded; total 25 acres under high maintenance cut to $\frac{7}{16}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$.

Roughs: Tifton 419 bermudagrass overseeded with ryegrass at 350 pounds/acre and highly maintained. Cut to $1\frac{1}{4}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$.

Hazards: 13 lakes comprising 40 acres come into play on 12 holes; 42 white sand bunkers.

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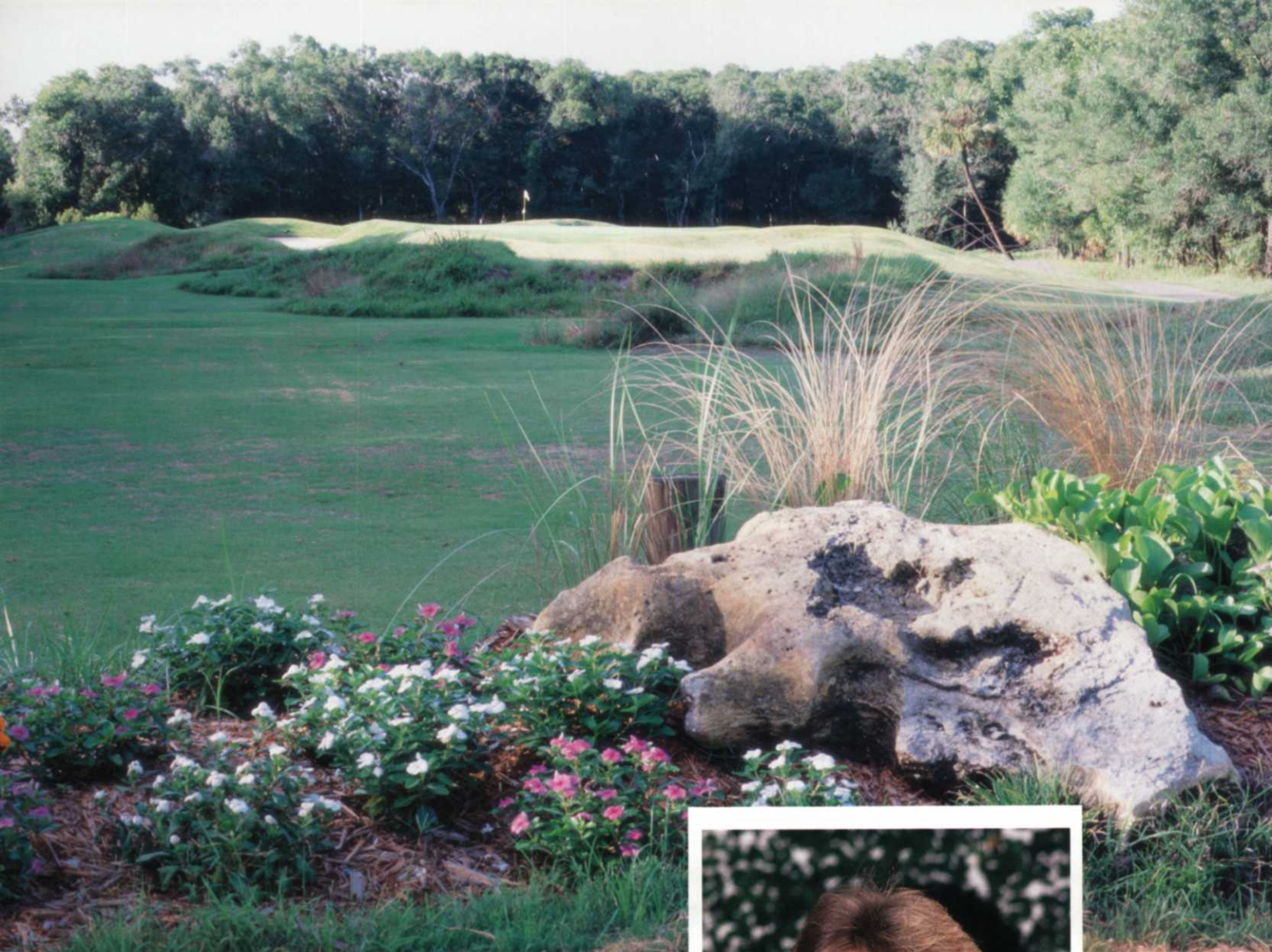
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Greg A. Plotner, CGCS

Age: 35

Education: B.S., Plant & Soil Science, Southern Illinois University, 1981.

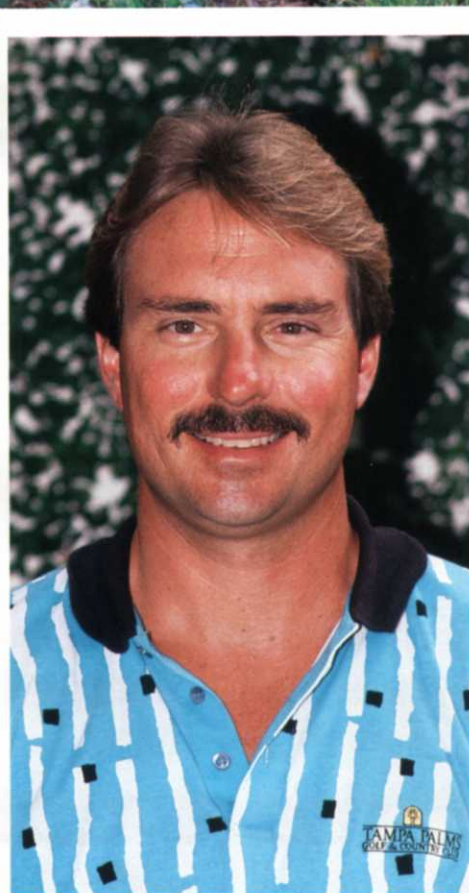
Professional Affiliations: Florida West Coast GCSA (president and external vice president), FTGA, GCSAA, Southwest Florida Water Management District (vice chairman, Green Industry Advisory Committee).

Previous Employment: Wadsworth Golf Construction Co., irrigation technician 1981-82; Sweetwater CC, Sugar Land, Tex., assistant superintendent, 1982-1986; Tampa Palms G&CC, Tampa, superintendent.

Hobbies: Fishing, softball, golf.

Family: Wife, Nadene; son David, 10.

Career Goal: "I've maintained a course for the LPGA and the Senior PGA Tour; I'd like to do a PGA Tour event sometime in my career."



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"It's very demanding, with little or no room for error," says Plotner, who plays to a 12 handicap. "You've got to think your way around and put each shot where it belongs. Complicating matters are the tall trees which shield or swirl the wind unpredictably, making club selection confusing."

If the wind doesn't get you, the water will. Or the sand. Thirteen lakes comprising 40 acres come into play on 12 holes and the 5500-square-foot greens are buttressed by 42 bunkers.

"This is an extremely difficult course for the high-handicap golfer," says Plotner, who is president and external vice president of the Florida West Coast GCSA and is a member of the FTGA. He also has one of 11 seats on the Southwest Florida Water Management District's Green Industry Advisory Committee, which he serves as vice chairman. (Chuck Rogers at Saddlebrook Resort in Wesley

"This is an extremely difficult course for the high-handicap golfer."

Chapel, representing the FTGA, is the only other golf course superintendent on the committee.)

He draws a parallel between the difficulty of his golf course and the complexity of his profession: the margin for error is slim... and diminishing.

"This is no longer a career for greenskeepers and grass cutters," he says. "A few people are capable of picking up the scientific background on their own or through continuing education, but I

strongly recommend that young people entering the field earn at least a B.S. degree before taking on this kind of responsibility.

"There are endless opportunities in golf course management, but tomorrow's manager is going to have to be smarter, faster and tougher to survive under the increasing weight of regulation and tightening noose of restrictions."

He sees water as the greatest challenge facing the industry.

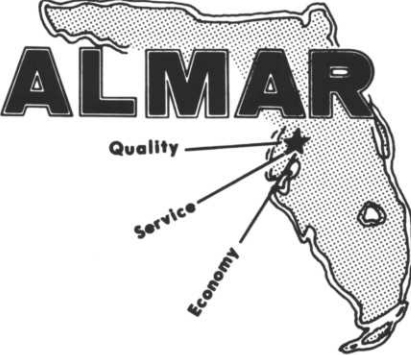
"We need to learn how to use less of it and use it smarter. For those who rely on groundwater (as does Tampa Palms), the regulators must put them on water budgets, not restrictions."

If the job is getting so tough, why stay in it?

"Look at this place," he says. "It's beautiful. And every day brings a new obstacle — a fresh challenge to overcome. How many people have an office like this?"

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