



Photo by Mike Bailey

Cecil C. Johnston, CGCS

1991 FGCSA Distinguished Service Award

Personal: age 41; married 17 years to Melanie, no children.

Education: Lake City Community College, A.S. in golf course operations July 1977.

Employment: Green Valley Engineering Co., Ltd., Bangplee, Thailand; manager, golf course operations since May 1990. Avila G&CC, Tampa, superintendent, March 1987-April 1990; assistant superintendent July 1983-March 1984. Feather Sound CC, Clearwater, superintendent March 1984-March 1987. Reliable Rain systems, Apopka, co-owner, May 1980-June 1983. Pelican Bay Sports Resort, Daytona Beach, superintendent, Aug. 1979-May 1980. Sweetwater CC, Apopka, superintendent, Dec. 1978-Aug. 1979.

Professional Associations: FGCSA, president, 1987-88; Florida West Coast GCSA, president 1988-89; Florida Turfgrass Association, speaker 1987 Conference & Show, moderator 1988 Conference & Show. GCSAA member.

Back from Thailand —

Cecil Johnston receives his DSA award

BY KIT BRADSHAW

When Cecil Johnston, CGCS, accepted his FGCSA 1991 Distinguished Service Award during the GCSAA Convention and Show in New Orleans, he also should have received an award for traveling the farthest to be part of this event.

Johnston traversed to New Orleans from Thailand, where he is the manager of golf course operations of Green Valley Engineering Co., Ltd. and responsible for the maintenance of Green Valley CC, Rayong-Green Valley, Chiang Mai-Green Valley CC and Windmill Park CC. He and his wife Melanie have been in Thailand since May 1990.

At a special Feb. 14 reception given by the Florida Golf Course Superintendent's Association in his honor, Johnston was presented with the plaque he was awarded

last August but was unable to accept because he had already moved to Thailand.

Prior to taking this first overseas assignment, Johnston was the golf course superintendent at Avila G&CC in Tampa.

Rain Systems and was golf course superintendent at Pelican Bay Sports Resort in Daytona Beach and Sweetwater CC in Apopka.

Johnston said when he was growing up it wasn't his plan to be a golf course superintendent.

"Although I lived on a golf course for awhile during my high school years, and I played golf a few times, I never really considered a career in golf until much later in life. After attending Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, I dropped out and went to visit my parents in Vermont," he said.

During his stay in Vermont, Johnston decided he enjoyed working outdoors so he attended school to learn the basics of heavy equipment operations.

"I learned how to drive bulldozers, backhoes, loaders and other equipment well enough to find my first job in golf course construction in 1971, building the Quechee Club



Former Lake City Community College students now working in Thailand. Mike Stem, Winsan CC; Cecil Johnston, Green Valley Group; Roger Fink, Laem Chabang CC, Steve Wood, Bang Poo CC. Photo courtesy Cecil Johnston.

In recent years he has also been golf course superintendent at Feather Sound CC in Clearwater, was a part owner of Reliable



Compare the difference between traditional Thai houses and modern condominiums. Photo by Cecil Johnston.

‘At Pasadena, I met Bud Quandt...’

in Quechee, Vt. After the course was built, I stayed on as irrigation technician.”

Johnston said the other part of his job — running a ski lift in freezing cold winters — was not very pleasant, so he moved back to Florida where he went to work at Bardmoor CC.

But it was at his next position at Pasadena CC in St. Petersburg that Johnston made the decision to be a golf course superintendent.

“At Pasadena, I met Bud Quandt,” he says. “Bud loved being a golf course superintendent and it showed. He wanted me to learn not only about irrigation, but everything about golf course maintenance. He tried to show me how all of the pieces of the puzzle fit together. It was Bud’s enthusiasm and encouragement that helped me decide to attend Lake City Community College and become a golf course superintendent.”

Soon after graduating *summa cum laude* in 1977, Johnston began to be active in golf course superintendents associations.

“My involvement with our associations increased considerably in 1984 when I volunteered to be editor of *The West Coast Wind*, the newsletter of the Florida West Coast GCSA. My second big step was to be appointed external vice president of the FWCGCSA and represent them at the FGCSA meetings.

“**Little did I know** at the first meeting when I made a few comments with a shaky voice that some day I would be president of the FGCSA and also represent them as a candidate for director of the GCSAA.”

Johnston also served as president of the FWCGCSA from 1988-89. He sees tremendous value in his participation in these associations.

“**Being active in association affairs** and serving on committees does more than just help our associations,” he says. “It also helps those who participate function more effectively in their business and private lives. I think it is fascinating to watch how people grow as individuals as they get involved.

“In addition, these organizations give visible proof that being a golf course superintendent is truly a profession, and they provide a network for communication between association members and our suppliers and educational opportunities,” he said.

“For those golf course superintendents who get fully involved with these associations by serving on committees, serving as directors and newsletter editors, the rewards are considerable. The more time and effort a person is able to give to a professional association, the more they grow as an individual.”

Johnston is concerned, however, about those golf course superintendents who do not become involved with these professional associations. “I worry that golf course superintendents who are not association members might make mistakes that will discredit our profession and encourage unnecessary regulations,” he says.

“The right-to-know laws, hiring and firing procedures, underground fuel storage tank regulations, pesticide safety requirements, EPA regulations, water use regulations and many other laws and

regulations are all problems that responsible owners must consider,” Johnston says. “Many golf course owners still prefer to be involved with the business part of their operations and ignore the rest. This is one of the challenges that face today’s golf course superintendents — the education of the golf course owners about the full responsibilities of their operation. Few owners are willing to confront these very real problems that are ever increasing.”

This need to educate owners is not only important in the United States, but even more so in Thailand, where the industry is still young. For instance, owner opposition is one of the reasons why there is no Thai GCSA as of yet.

“There are three big barriers to overcome in the golf industry in Thailand before there can be an association,” Johnston says.

“First of all, Thai golf course superintendents do not make very much money and are not regarded as professionals. Secondly, if foreigners like myself are involved with organizing an association, there will be language barriers to overcome and some Thais may be resentful of foreign control. But the biggest barrier is that the golf course owners are very competitive and many do not want their golf course superintendents to share ‘secrets.’

“**Many owners would not allow** their superintendents to participate. However, I think when the business of golf matures in Thailand, we will have a Thai GCSA. There are about 60 courses open now and in five years, there will be 200-300 courses.”

Johnston says that in his nearly two



These Thai workers are picking stones before planting.

Photo by Cecil Johnston.

‘...you can have 40 people working for you for \$10 an hour...’

years of working in Thailand, he has put into practice lessons learned on the golf courses of Florida.

“The most frustrating thing that can happen to a golf course superintendent is that sometimes you have a problem with your turf and you may never find the answer to the problem. When I worked with Jeff Hayden at Gainesville CC, he taught me that with any difficult problem, there is almost always more than one cause and one solution.

“For instance, stressed grass on a green is probably due to a combination of things. Jeff taught me to look for many different solutions to a difficult problem and to use as many solutions as possible.

“At one of our courses in Thailand, we had an unusual problem with one of our greens. We had a mottled green with dark green spots, and fertilizers and micronutrients had no effect. We came to the conclusion we had two different kinds of Tifdwarf in the greens. The grass came from an unknown source in Australia.

“Although the green areas were getting larger,” Johnston says, “we couldn’t wait to see if the greens improved because the course was about to open. We definitely didn’t want to fumigate and replant the green. So we decided to interplant the greens with a known source of American Tifdwarf from one of our nurseries and hope for the best. Our crew of girls took over for one week to stuff the coring holes with the new grass and now every time I visit the course, the greens appear to be improving.”

Johnston says that using this large labor crew is one of the key differences

between operating a Thai golf course and an American one.

“An employee in the U.S. costs \$10 an hour, including unemployment compensation, Social Security, insurance and so on. In Thailand, you can have 40 people working for you for \$10 an hour. That’s right — 40 people in Thailand cost about \$10 an hour. I am beginning to understand how the Great Wall of China and the pyramids in Egypt may have been built!”

Johnston said his primary duty as manager of golf course operations is to encourage the Thai golf course superintendents and general managers to follow through with the programs and procedures he suggests. He also gives recommendations to the owner to improve their projects.

“My work is often frustrating when dealing with immediate problems, but when I look back over the time I have spent here, I can see that we have made considerable improvement,” Johnston says.

Despite frustrations, there are also challenges that Johnston considers to be part of the fun of his job. He and Melanie are learning to speak Thai and he has come to realize that in an international situation you have to expect the unexpected.

“What you may consider agreed upon may change at any moment,” Johnston says. “But I’ve learned that just a smile in a moment of difficulty can open many doors.”

Johnston has no plans to leave Thailand except for occasional trips to the US

for annual GCSAA meetings.

He and Melanie have adjusted to life as expatriates.

“We live in a large cottage next to the house of the owner’s mother, and the owner’s younger sister and her family.” The younger sister and her husband speak excellent English, according to Johnston, which has helped the Johnstons bridge the language barrier. But, he says, he and Melanie are becoming more proficient in Thai.

And conditions have improved over the past two years as well, making life more comfortable.

“When we first came here, there were no other Americans in the golf business. Now there are several, and more are coming every day. Recently we got cable television, which really brought the U.S back to us. We have two channels,” Johnston says. “One channel has CBS, NBC and CNN news broadcasts and also sports. The other channel has American, British and Australian movies and sitcoms.

“Melanie is also keeping busy here, teaching English to the office staff, restaurant staff, owners’ children and others. She sometimes gets homesick but although I love Florida and I miss all my friends, I’m not homesick because I feel very much at home here.”

Johnston said that the future is open.

“I think I would be willing to go wherever the weather is warm, the people are friendly, where bermudagrass thrives and where I can be reasonably happy making the most money possible. For me — right now — I am in that place.”