

COVER STORY

Photos by Daniel Zelazek

# Palm Beach Country

*An emerald jewel  
sea passes its*



View from the clubhouse overlooking  
Numbers 15, 16 and 18.



# Country Club

*Jewel by the azure  
diamond jubilee*



BY JOEL D. JACKSON, CGCS

In 1917, legendary golf course architect Donald Ross turned 88 acres of pineapple plantation on Palm Beach into the Palm Beach Country Club. Nestling greens and tees along a coral ridge that bisects the property north to south, he created a challenging 6200-yard golf course that traverses back and forth between the Atlantic Ocean and Lake Worth. That ridge running parallel to the beach provides some

unique elevation changes seldom found this far south in Florida.

This emerald jewel by the azure sea lies like a hidden treasure behind ancient hedges of lush, tropical vegetation like those of neighboring estates.

And it is the mature grounds of the golf course and the estates on Palm Beach that provide a remarkable green belt and habitat on this barrier island. The wildlife inventory on the golf course alone ranges from exotic birds like wild parrots, Peking ducks, and swans to

mammals like raccoons and red foxes.

It is summer now and the course is "officially" closed until November. A few of the year-round residents play occasionally during the summer, so the greens are mowed daily. But a lot of the detailed manicuring and grooming so prevalent and necessary in fall, winter and spring give way to major projects and renovations to the turf and infrastructure.

My visit this day found Paul Crawford, the superintendent, overseeing the



***From our wildlife populations, you can't tell me that golf courses aren't good for the environment, especially in urban settings.***

installation of a variable speed pump station to further maximize his irrigation efficiency.

In fact, the seasonal improvements accomplished over the past summers read like a veritable "How-To" manual on bringing a classic venerable course of the early 1900s up to modern standards with regard to turf quality and regulatory compliance. Before any major turf improvements were undertaken, Paul asked for and received the support of the board of directors in upgrading the maintenance facility. Paul wanted to provide a proper base of operations for the upcoming improvements to the course itself.

Besides a modern equipment building with ample space, other improvements included replacing the underground fuel tanks with above-ground Convault fuel bunkers. All chemical products are now stored in a stand-alone, self-contained Perm-A-Lock building.

"The board of directors wanted to reduce or eliminate the potential for exposure for the club and insure that our

operation was environmentally friendly," said Paul. "From our wildlife populations, you can't tell me that golf courses aren't good for the environment, especially in urban settings."

Once those key issues were settled, Paul set about to upgrade the turf.

"In 1988, we replanted all of the greens in Tifdwarf," he began, "and then in 1990 we tackled the chore of converting the old Ormond bermudagrass fairways to Tifway 419. The work was done by Rodney Davis and Central Florida Turf. They rototilled, de-mucked, regraded, fumigated, and replanted all of the fairways.

"Since we had to bury the muck we excavated, Rodney and I redesigned some of the water hazards to make them more functional and a little more esthetically pleasing. Next we added a Network 8000 irrigation control system, and as you can see, this year we are installing the Synchro-Flo VSP station.

"The combination of the computerized controllers and pump station will help us in two very important ways.

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*Green of number 14, a par-four cut into the ridge that gives Palm Beach Country Club unusual elevation changes for a South Florida course.*

***I sure envied those guys riding those mowers on the maintenance crew. It looked like a better job than carrying those bags!***

“First of all, being located on an coastal barrier island, we don’t have access to a natural source of water so we have to use city water. The VSP will allow the system to run at peak efficiency, which will reduce the necessary running time and save electricity.

“Secondly, the soil under the course does not percolate very well. The Network 8000 will allow me to refine my watering schedules so I can put precisely what I need, where I need it, and in the amounts that won’t cause wet spots or waste water.”

“We have accomplished quite a bit over the past few years, and I really appreciate the vision, patience, and support from the club. We were able to see and agree on the big picture and break it down into a series of projects to be completed one at a time. The one guiding principle was that we were to be always

moving in a positive forward direction.”

Before we get too far, let’s go back to Rochester, Mich., where a young Paul Crawford was lugging golf bags as a caddy at Great Oaks Country Club.

“I sure envied those guys riding those mowers on the maintenance crew. It looked like a better job than carrying those bags,” Paul said wistfully. “When I got my first chance, it was only washing the clubhouse windows at the Wolverine Golf Club, but I got to move on to the crew soon after that. I think I was 16 or 17 at the time.

“When I expressed an interest in making it a career, the superintendent suggested that I should enroll in the turf management program at Michigan State University. I did, and boy there were a few eyebrows raised among my peers and family, ‘You want to go to school to learn to be a greenskeeper?’”



**Working with George was a unique experience... I mean, we would build a tee, grass it, and then George would say, 'Nope! Move it three feet to the left!'**

"During my OJT summers, I worked at Harbour Town Golf Links on Hilton Head, S.C. I was assigned as club liaison to work with the PGA Tour tournament, the Heritage Classic. This gave me great experience with tournament prep and TV and PGA operations.

"After I graduated, I returned to Hilton Head and worked a second time with the tournament. This time turned out to be a big turning point in my career. Pete Sesso, the senior advance man for the Tour asked me if I would be interested in taking a job with a friend of his in Florida.

"I said sure!

"Next thing I know he's calling George Fazio and I'm headed to Jupiter Hills Golf Club. Of course I didn't know that I was the 75th superintendent they had! Working with George was a unique experience and I tried to get into his head and see how he was looking at hole layouts. I mean, we would build a tee, grass it, and then, George would say, 'Nope! Move it three feet to the left!'

"While I was at Jupiter Hills, I met Carl Smith. Carl was the superintendent at Palm Beach Country Club at the time,

but he also consulted for George at Jupiter Hills. As our friendship grew, Carl asked me if I would be willing to become his assistant at Palm Beach Country Club.

"He said he would be retiring in a few years and he wanted someone he could groom for the position, if he was willing to serve this apprenticeship so to speak. I agreed, and in 1980 I began my association with the club.

"Carl did retire as planned, and in April, 1982, I became the head superintendent. Those two and a half years with Carl were like a father passing down the family history to a son. He taught me what I needed to know to serve the club. He didn't preach to me and just tell me everything. I had to ask the questions. And when he answered, his wealth of knowledge enlightened me to the real world of turf management."

Paul continued, "Working here has been great! I've had a lot of fun and satisfaction from helping to make improvements to the course, but it is the friendly atmosphere that keeps you really going and enjoying what you do.

"At the club, our pro is a 30-year



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*The 18th green, with the clubhouse in the background, presents a tranquil setting for a finishing hole from this vantage point.*

**...it may even  
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veteran, as is the bartender, the locker room attendant, the doorman, and on my crew I have 25- and 20-year veterans. There's a reason for that! It is the way everyone is treated and greeted, like a big family. We have problems that come up, but they are brought to my attention quickly and professionally and they are solved the same way.

"There are no hidden agendas here, and I really appreciate that fact.

"As for my staff, I can't say enough for their efforts and loyalty. I want to give special mention to some of my senior veterans; my assistant Paul Szlasa, Joe Kochis, a Penn State graduate, Alfred Mullins, and our equipment manager, Ron Payete. They make it happen and they allow me the freedom to be involved in the association. I know I can rely on them when I must be away.

"This is the time of year when all the guys start getting excited again. The sum-

mer is laid back. We have projects. It's hot. The routines are different. We mow with different equipment at different heights of cut. There's hardly anyone around to see their handiwork. Now, we're getting ready for the fall season."

As we returned to Paul's office, our conversation turned to his role as the current president of the Florida Golf Course Superintendents Association and his views on the industry in general.

"There is one thing that really bothers me and it may even become a crisis to the integrity of our profession. I think we may be pumping out too many turf students that are heading right into superintendent positions.

"Every profession, from attorney to plumber, has a journeyman phase where the person serves an apprenticeship to really learn his trade. They spend long periods of time, not just a summer, at the elbow of the master craftsman learning

# Palm Beach Country Club

**Location:** Palm Beach Florida

**Ownership:** Membership

**Management:** General Manager, Roberto Milanese; Golf Professional, Bobby Benson; Club President, Sidney Jacobson; Greens Chairman, Mike Stein.

**Playing Policies:** Members and guests of members.

**Designed by:** Donald Ross

**Opened:** 1917

**Number of holes:** 18

**Turf:** 90 acres under maintenance.

**Greens:** 3 acres. Tifdwarf hybrid bermudagrass. Height of cut-1/8" to 3/16" with walking mowers. Overseeding-3# Pennlinks Bentgrass and 3# Cypress Poa trivialis per 1,000 sq. ft.

**Tees:** 2 acres in Tifway 419 hybrid bermudagrass. Height of cut-3/8" to 1/2". Overseeding - None

**Fairways:** 22 acres in Tifway 419 hybrid bermudagrass. Height of cut-1/2" to 5/8". Overseeding - None

**Roughs:** 63 acres in Tifway 419 hybrid bermudagrass. Height of cut-1 1/2". Overseeding-None

**Irrigation system:** Network 8000 with a Synchro-Flo Variable Speed Pump Station.

**Staff:** Assistant Superintendent, Paul Szlasa; Crew-10 November to May, 12 May through October.

**Turf equipment:** 6 John Deere walking mowers, 2 Toro Greensmasters, 1 Toro Parkmaster, 1 Toro 223-D, 1 Toro 450-D, 1 Toro 72" Groundskeeper, 1 Toro Hydroject aerifier, 2 Toro Rake-o-vacs, 1 Olathe riding sweeper, 3 Ford 3910 tractors, 1 300 gal. FMC-John Beam sprayer, 1 150 gal. Hahn Multi-pro sprayer, 5 Club Car Carryall utility vehicles, 3 Daihatsu Lift-tippers

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the trade. Over that span of time, they can learn how difficult problems and situations can be addressed and solved with planning, discipline and charity. They can learn how to communicate with superiors and subordinates in the chain of command.

Growing grass is the easiest part of our jobs most of the time. It's dealing with the curve balls that life throws at you that are the real challenges, and it takes time and experience to develop the finesse necessary to handle those challenges professionally. So I don't think it's too much to ask for a superintendent to spend years on a crew or as an assistant before he assumes the role as a superintendent. It helps keep the profession sound and the image intact.

"I must also express a concern over the direction some of the new golf management companies seem to be heading. I will say this: there are a few very good

companies that hold the superintendent in high regard and make him a key partner in the operation, but in general, I think that management companies are a backward step for the superintendent's profession. A superintendent working for those companies performs the work, takes the blame for mistakes, and doesn't get proper credit or compensation for his efforts and responsibilities.

"These companies are here. They are a sign of the economic times.

"A lot of people are getting into the golf business for the money alone and not for the love of the game and its traditions. It is fortunate that the money has come along, but now that it has, it can attract a whole different type of person.

"If a club is hiring a management company because they think it is absolving them of liability, they are sadly mistaken. And who really wins in this scenario? The club? The superintendent? No it is the



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*The strategic elements of a Donald Ross design are evident at the par-three number 12.*

**It continues to  
blow my mind  
that we only have  
750 A and B  
members out of  
more than a  
thousand golf  
courses in the  
state.**

management company. They are in it for a profit and that comes at someone else's expense!

"A superintendent with a strong foundation in the business who is continually mastering the new technologies, one who is involved, should be able to communicate with his club and prove to its members that he can do the job for the same cost in house."

"Anybody who manages golf turf for a living in the state of Florida should be a member of this association," Paul said. "It continues to blow my mind that we only have 750 A and B members out of more than a thousand golf courses in the state."

"Maybe they haven't heard about us or maybe they just need to be approached. I don't know, but I do know that in today's climate we need to be the united voice of Florida superintendents everywhere."

"I don't know exactly what our new membership chairman, Greg Plotner, is planning, but we will be putting on a big push to get everyone signed up."

"By the time my year is up, I hope to see our second FGCSA-IFAS research green well under way in Gainesville, hopefully next door to the Envirotron."

"It appears that the Fort Lauderdale Research Station will not have to relocate and that's good news. The statewide support for that effort has given us the capital reserve to implement the research green in Gainesville. This will give us a green in the northern half of the state which will provide good information for superintendents operating in that climate."

"I look for Jeff Hayden and the Seven Rivers Chapter to help spearhead that project. They did a super job in raising funds for the Envirotron the year, and that's the kind of leadership we need for our success."



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to the club.***

"Of course good education is the key for our continued professional growth and development. I want to keep up that tradition and make sure that remains one of the cornerstones of our association."

"And last but not least, I would like to see some new people get involved in state and local affairs.

"Maybe they just need to be nudged or encouraged a little to step forward. It concerns me that a lot of people are afraid to get involved because they perceive it as a big demand on their time. Certainly it does take some time and effort on their part, but with our executive secretary, Marie Roberts, as their right hand, it isn't as difficult as one might think.

"Her task is to assist everyone on the board, and she does a great job. We would be lost without her, because she does help relieve that time burden by doing most of the legwork for us. We provide the guidance and Marie cranks it out for us. She develops a super working rapport with you and gets to know your likes and dislikes and helps you get the job done quickly and professionally. If this sounds like a plug for Marie, it is!"

"When I was asked to come onto the board, I went to my greens chairman, Marvin Schur, and asked him how the club felt about the idea. I told him I wanted to run it by them before I accepted.

"He said that without a doubt they wanted me involved!

"In his profession, he was involved

with his associations and he knew very well that being involved meant I would be at the center of things and in contact with the latest information in the business and that would be an asset to the club. He also knew that it would be a personal asset to me, Paul Crawford.

"They were concerned that I might become overexposed and entertain offers to move, but I assured them that would not be the case. I merely wanted to give something back to my industry, my profession.

"The more you are involved the more you know. The more you know the further you go. It's like fuel. It's easy to sit back in your hole and say the members don't want me involved! That's short-term thinking. The successful members at your club are the ones who are involved in their professional associations. So, ask your members, your committee, your boss! You might be surprised at their answer.

"As for the future of the industry, we all know that environmental and regulatory issues are here to stay. But that's OK!

"Golf course superintendents are masters at making changes and reacting. We're the best at changing hats to accomplish the task at hand. I don't think you'll find a superintendent out there who doesn't support the principle of environmental stewardship. I think we do want laws and regulations based on common sense, good information, and practical application. And that's where we must

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## Paul Crawford

**Education:** Michigan State University

**Professional Affiliations:** Florida G.C.S.A. - Palm Beach Chapter; Florida Turfgrass Association; Golf Course Superintendents Association of America; Board of Directors Poinciana Day School

**Previous employment:** Michigan: Great Oaks C.C., Woverine G.C., and Stoney Creek G.C.; South Carolina: Harbour Town Links; Florida: Jupiter Hills Club and Palm Beach Country Club.

**Family:** Son, Chris (8 yrs.); daughter Kelli (6 yrs). "No matter what else I do, these guys come first!"

**Hobbies and interests:** Spending quality time with the kids. Fishing, lobster diving.



Paul Crawford

**'These are the guys who make it all happen,'**

says Crawford of his crew. From left, Byron Dennard, James Bland, Saul Gomez, Randy Mitchell, Sam McLeod, Ron Payette, Alfred Mullins, Tomas Navarro, Joe Kochis, Alberto Flores, Luis Echevarria, Dan Vazquez, Angel Negron. Kneeling in front is Paul Szlasa, assistant superintendent.

***I just want all the superintendents in Florida to come together so we can make it even better.***

take an active role and why a united voice is so important."

"Being a superintendent is one of the best professions in the world. The variety of challenges is stimulating. The number of people you meet from all phases of the industry and who play the game is unbelievable. I now have friends and contacts from coast to coast and around the world because of this business. I wouldn't trade this experience for anything. I just want all the superintendents in Florida to come together so we can make it even better."