





# History and tradition at Bradenton Country Club

By Joel Jackson, CGCS

Photography by Dan Zelazek



Number 16



## Jim Svabek and the Bradenton Country Club

**J**im Svabek and the Bradenton Country Club: A special blend of a man, a club, and a community that care about one another. Jim Svabek is an anomaly in this business. It is rare to find a superintendent with the kind of tenure that Jim has earned at the Bradenton Country Club. It is a 25-year-long association that has been forged by Jim's hard work, enthusiasm, professionalism, and patience.

**A**  
*25-year  
tradition*

"It has been and continues to be a rewarding challenge to maintain this venerable golf course over the years," he says. "The challenge lies in educating the members about the improvements in turf management and convincing them that these improvements will not change the style and character of the course.

"Sometimes it is a very hard sell to convince them that we only want to improve the health of the turf and make some of our operations more efficient. They are very protective of the history and traditions of the course, and I admire and respect that viewpoint. The reward comes from seeing the members derive more enjoyment from

playing the course when we have solved a problem or made improvements."

The history and traditions of the Bradenton C.C. began some 57 years ago when the club was built. Legend has it that it was a Donald Ross design, but subsequent changes to the course over the years have removed official recognition by the Donald Ross Society.

In the early days of golf in Bradenton, there were four major courses in the area: Bradenton C.C. and Sara Bay which were private; Desoto Lakes, which was the home of the PGA of America before moving to West Palm Beach; and the public Bobby Jones course. In those early days and even until 1967 when Jim came on board, the Bradenton C.C. was on the outskirts of town. Now the club is considered to be part of the inner city as growth has marched south and west to the beaches.

The old-style layout is evident with its parallel holes and short distances from the green to the next tee. Bunkering is conservative and most of the greens still permit the old "bump and run" style of shotmaking. ➔



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Number 5 Green

## *You have to pay attention when you play here*

In 1965, Dr. Archie Meekins, who was a standout amateur golfer and club leader, gained approval to rebuild the front nine greens. His resulting design provided a series of steeply pitched greens that tilt from back to front. In 1966 golf architect Mark Mahannah was hired to rebuild the back nine greens. These had a more modern, plateaued, elevated look and were more moderate in their elevation changes.

Jim commented, “You have to pay attention when you play here! On the front nine you can have some pretty severe uphill, downhill, and sidehill putts, and then you have a different challenge on the back nine. Another problem with the front nine greens is that all the rainfall runoff is directed to the front of the green. The back nine greens design did provide for alternate surface water runoff routes.”

That design difference aside, Jim has one regret about the rebuilding effort. “When they rebuilt

the greens, all they did was strip off the old sod, reshape, add some sand, and rototill it in. It didn’t take long for the organic material to come up and form a 1-1/2-inch thatch layer which I discovered in 1967 when I arrived. Managing these thick, thatchy surfaces is one of my greatest challenges. When we get into extremely wet or extremely hot and dry conditions, we can lose parts of the greens pretty quickly. In wet weather, the thatch holds the moisture too long and we often develop pythium root rot, which is my number-one enemy on the greens. We treat with Koban and Subdue. Since we aren’t solving the root zone problem which promotes the disease, it is a constant battle.”

After a long period of negotiations, Jim purchased an aerifier in 1978. “Aerification of the greens is a blessing and a curse. We are pulling out some of the thatch and adding soil and that really helps, but the spongy greens have tire marks for a





*'We have only closed four days this year even with the rainy winter we're experiencing.'*

month afterwards. Even the new greens rollers can't be used effectively without leaving obvious marks. Consequently, we only aerify once a year. We have developed a winter-long, light topdressing program to try to promote some consistency and reduce the thatch."

*[Author's Note: While I did see some of the thin runoff areas Jim referred to, I also saw some of the greenest, densest Tifdwarf I have ever seen on unseeded winter greens in Florida! He applies 1.0 pound of Nitrogen (quick release) every two weeks during the winter and 1.0-1.5 pounds of Nitrogen (SCU or IBDU) in the summer, weather permitting].*

"Maybe Dr. Meekins wasn't the best architect in the world, but I admire his foresight when he negotiated a 40-year contract with Manatee County to supply us with a million gallons of effluent water a day. We paid for the pipe and the county provided the labor to install the 5-mile-long connection. The county does a great job of tertiary treatment of the effluent.

We have no odor in our holding pond and we only experience an occasional increase in the algae population."

Jim's other big management problem is drainage. The terrain is basically flat. When the course receives a torrential rain, 80 of the 127 acres must be directed to one 36-inch drain swale. There is only a maximum of 6 inches of elevation change over the affected area.

Jim says, "It does move, but boy is it slow!" While members might be discouraged to play after heavy rains, generally no one is turned away who wants to play. "We have only closed four days this year even with the rainy winter we're experiencing."

Jim doesn't dwell on these difficulties. He just acknowledges them as part of the job he must contend with in order to manage the course. "We are constantly adding ADS pipe drains to make improvements. Maybe one day we'll even rebuild those greens with good drainage too!"



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### Atlantic FEC

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Jim's affection for the club extends beyond managing the course and working with his crew. "Did you notice the sign on the road when you crossed the city limits," he asked? "It says, 'Welcome to Bradenton, The Friendly City!' I grew up in St. Petersburg and it was a friendly place too, but it seemed to lose some of that when it began to grow. All I know is that when we came here, doctors and businesses opened up their doors to me and my family and that feeling has never changed. The church steeple in the background on the second hole symbolizes for me the kind of hometown community the club is in and how we care about one another."

That caring extends to the members who volunteer their time to serve on such projects as: Adopt-a-hole, where members sign up to police trash and debris on their favorite holes and report any problems they see. The Distance-Yardage crew goes out every Monday to check the sprinklers and replace any missing yardage decals.

Then there is also the Fire Ant Patrol.

"We had a very unfortunate situation last year when a visitor from New York was playing the county course. He happened to be allergic to stings, and unknowingly got into an ant bed. He died from the shock. Members and local authorities requested that each course develop a plan or program to combat fire ants and the Fire Ant Patrol is a reflection of our members' concern to help control this potential problem. I supply the fire ant bait and they apply it while playing their rounds."

The members also pitched in for a few days back when a tornado touched down on the course on a Wednesday evening and uprooted 139 trees. Jim recalled, "I can sympathize with the courses in South Florida after Hurricane Andrew. After cutting a trail to the shop and getting organized, it took two and a half days to restore the golf course. I had to hire extra crews to cut and remove the trees. We rented extra chain saws and a chipper, and hired a company called Resource Recovery to grind up the trees into mulch. It was about a year's worth when they were through. We did sustain some turf



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18th Green

Golf Course Photography by Dan Zelazek

## Bradenton Country Club



Canada Geese spend  
winter at Bradenton  
Country Club



**‘Then I  
got the  
education  
of a  
lifetime.’**

damage from the heavy equipment, but it was necessary.

“I also have to take my hat off to the power company. When they finally got here to check out our problem it was almost 6 p.m. They worked through the night and we had power restored to the shop by 2 a.m. We were opened for business on noon Saturday.

The pride and commitment that the members have displayed over the years is only surpassed by the devotion and loyalty of the members of Jim’s staff. “I have a second-generation employee here whose father retired from the crew. Our most junior crew member has been here eight years and our most senior, one of three that were here when I came, just received his 30-year pin last year. One other crew member and myself received our 25-year pins. I am glad that the club takes the time to recognize our service. It really reflects the respect we have for each other. The club also just initiated an Employee Golf Day. I knew the crew took pride in their work and this was a great way for the club to show its appreciation for their service. They really had a great time.”

Jim also appreciates those in the turf industry who have helped him over the years. “One of the greatest things about this business is the people

you meet and work with. I had the distinct pleasure to work for Reuben Hines, Jr. at the Sunset C.C. in St. Pete. He helped me get started when I was 18 years old and needed a full time job to support my mother and sister when my father died. Two years later, Reuben made me his assistant.

“Then I got the education of a lifetime. His father, Reuben Sr., operated some turf nurseries up in Maryland. He also was a consultant for the Congressional and Georgetown Prep golf courses. He would spend the winters consulting in Florida, and he would take me around our course and show me the whys and hows of turf management.

“Beyond that early valuable experience, I credit the some of the original turfgrass pioneers in Florida with expanding my knowledge. People like G.C. Horn, Gene Nutter, Harry Myers, and Col. Frank Ward that spoke at our West Coast GCSA meetings and helped all of us become better superintendents. I continue to owe a debt of gratitude to the superintendent associations. Involvement with these groups has kept me on the leading edge of our business. It has continued to train and educate me. I really salute Jim Miller of our Suncoast Chapter for bringing in some quality speakers. He has done an outstanding job.”



# Communications is the key to success!

"I have to tell you two stories about Colonel Ward. First, he was a member here and even served as the superintendent for a short while. His work in turf and the founding of the FTGA are legendary. I was fortunate enough to be able to escort him to Fort Lauderdale to receive the Wreath of Grass award from the FTGA. He was getting on in years at that time, and I had to really sell his wife on the idea. Beyond seeing that he ate his meals and making sure he got to bed, I never saw him. He was so excited to see and talk to old friends he was always on the go. Well, the award was a surprise and it pleased me to be able to help bring this joy and pleasure to someone who had given so much to our industry."

"The other side of Colonel Ward was the golfer and club member. He could be a tough nut sometimes, but his advice and information certainly made up for any criticisms. But the clincher came when we finally got approval to close on Mondays to do maintenance. Here was a man who supported and promoted superintendents his whole life. When we closed on Mondays, he wrote a letter to the board of directors requesting one seventh of his dues back. When I questioned him about his position and reminded him how valuable that day was for us, he merely replied, 'But, I can't play that day!'"

Jim received a lot of advice in his career and he was asked what he would share with others. "Communications is the key to success!"

"You have to be able to talk to your crew, the pro, the members, the greens committee, the club manager. And, you must remain flexible to handle each day's surprises!"

And what does the future hold for our industry?

"Our industry will continue to grow, but with the increasing environmental concerns and restrictions, we will have to become even more creative and ingenious to maintain quality turf conditions.

Jim was asked about his accomplishments to date and future goals at BCC. "I feel we have made the course interesting and challenging yet still fun to play. We

have incorporated some new and modern methods without changing the old style and character of the original design. My goal is to someday rebuild the greens and continue to improve our course."

Twenty-two years ago Jim interviewed for another job. He was rejected because he had only been a superintendent for three years and they were looking for someone with a little more experience.

Jim never looked again. "When I think about how friendly the town is, how supportive the members are, and how much there remains to be done here, there was no reason to look elsewhere. My house and a club membership are provided, my daughter was married here. It's a hometown atmosphere that is rare in today's business world and I appreciate that aspect of this position very much." ➔



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# Bradenton Country Club

**Location:** 4646 9th Ave. West, Bradenton, Florida

**Ownership:** Member owned.

**Management:** General Manager, James Brand; Golf Professional, Jim Dargis; Club President, Dan Callahan; Greens Committee Chairman, Lonnie Pullen.

**Playing Policies:** Private. Occasional outside group invited to play on Mondays.

**Design & Construction:** Built 57 years ago. Originally listed as a Donald Ross course, but modifications over the years have removed it from the list of active Ross courses. Front nine greens were rebuilt in 1965 under the direction of member, Dr. Archie Meekins. Back nine greens rebuilt in 1966 by architect Mark Mahannah. Yardage: 6,590 yards, par 72.



Number 15 green.

Greens average 5,000 square feet in Tifdwarf bermudagrass. Tees and fairways are Ormond bermudagrass (72.5 acres). Since Ormond is no longer available, Tifway 419 has been introduced by necessity in some repaired or renovated areas. No overseeding has been done on the golf course in its history by member choice.

**Irrigation system:** Manual system converted to Toro Varitime II with 367 Toro heads: 320 Toro 670s. A few Toro 690s on the range, and

Toro 640 part circle heads around some greens near the property line. Water source: Tertiary treated effluent since 1975.

**Maintenance Staff:** 8 fulltime members. No assistant superintendent. Foreman, Larry Smith.

**Turf:** 127 acres under maintenance.

**Turf equipment:** 4 Toro Greens-



Photo by Philip Pettus

## Jim Svabek

**Education:** St. Petersburg Community College for basic botany and zoology courses; 32 years of turfgrass maintenance experience. Many of Jim's early years in the business were under the personal guidance of agronomist Reuben Hines, Sr.; superintendent Reuben Hines, Jr.; and FTGA founder Col. Frank Ward.

**Professional Affiliations:** GCSAA; FTGA; Past president and vice-president of the West Coast GCSA, co-founder and current newsletter editor (7 years) of the Suncoast GCSA. Recipient of 1992 FGCSA Presidents Award for over 20 years of service to the profession.

**Previous employment:** 7 years at Sunset C.C., St. Petersburg, Fla. 5 years as the assistant superintendent; 25 years as the superintendent of the Bradenton C.C..

**Family:** Wife, Carol; sons, Steven and Michael; daughter, Karen.

**Hobbies and interests:** Golf, fishing, coaching football, playing the guitar, and writing the Suncoast GCSA newsletter.



masters(greens and tees); 1 Toro 7-gang Parkmaster(fairways); 1 450-D Reelmaster(slopes and fair rough); 2 Toro Groundsmasters (deep rough); 2 spray rigs (100 and 500 gallon); 2 Cushman utility vehicles; 2 front-end loader tractors; 2 utility tractors; 1 Vermeer chipper; 1 pickup truck; 1 dump truck.

**Trees:** Over 7,000 planted since 1972. Oaks, pines, cypress, Chinese tallow, eucalyptus, rosewood, willow, palms.

**Lakes and ponds:** 9 covering about 8 acres.



Golf Course Photography by Dan Zelazek

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