

## THE PRIDE AND THE PASSION

# It's a Family Affair

By Joel Jackson

I've heard of mom-and-pop businesses before, and even husband-and-wife medical and legal practices, but it is rare to find a husband-and-wife working at a golf course as superintendent and assistant superintendent. It would take a couple of very special people to pull that off, and Gary and Debbie Smither are two just such people.

Gary "Cutter" Smither has been the superintendent at the Misty Creek Country Club in Sarasota for the past six years. Debbie's role as assistant superintendent evolved from her work on the crew when Smither's former assistant Jim Baldwin left a few years ago. But we need to back up a little bit for some history.

Many of you may remember that "Cutter" was one of a handful of superintendents who were perennial contenders for the championships of our state events like the Poa Annuu Classic and Crowfoot Open, etc. Cutter's contemporaries for golf dominance were Joe Ondo, Fred Klauk and Mark Henderson back in the day. So Smither was a good competitive player.

Smither met Debbie, his wife-to-be, on a golf course. She was a top amateur golfer in her own right, qualifying twice for the USGA Ladies Amateur making it to the second round one year and the quarterfinals of the USGA MidAm another time. Carrying a scratch or better handicap in her prime, she entertained ideas of joining the LPGA tour.

After they began courting, Debbie got a job on Smither's crews when he worked at Bent Tree and at the TPC at Prestancia. She always wanted a family life which was a factor in not pursuing the rigorous travel demands of the lifestyle of a professional golfer. After marriage and their first child came along, Debbie "retired" from course

work for 13 years to be a fulltime mom to her three kids, Chris, Jackie and Michael.

Now Chris and Jackie are out making their own way and Michael is in his last years of high school, so Debbie went back to work part time at Misty Creek. The original intent was to work in the office, but she says that lasted one



*Gary and Debbie Smither make a hard working, passionate team as superintendent and assistant superintendent at the Misty Creek C.C. in Sarasota. Photo by Joel Jackson.*

day. She wanted back outdoors on the course.

Smither says, "As a good golfer, Debbie has a passion for the game and knows what a good course setup should look like. She respects what a superintendent must know and do to accomplish good playing conditions and I respect her golfing ability and love of the game."

Debbie said, "I love being outside. I'm a perfectionist and I have a good eye for what needs to be done or when the turf looks like it needs attention."

The two have parlayed that mutual respect for each other, the game and the club that they have forged a working relationship that Smither says the club recognizes at their annual meetings.

Smither explained, "The club recognizes and appreciates the hard work, passion and ultimate results we have achieved. That is very rewarding from our perspective."

Debbie has mastered all tasks on the crew from operating all the equipment to spraying and helping to manage the irrigation system. In fact, one of her key duties is to be the H-2-O manager right now during the dry conditions.

Debbie added, "When I'm on the fairway mower, it is amazing what you can see from just that slightly elevated viewpoint versus being at ground level." She is another critical pair of caring eyes to help make sure the course is looking its best.

They both commented, the whole crew has been on the job for over six years and everyone has his specialized jobs and knows what to do and how to do it very well, so the crew doesn't need any micro-managing.

Even though they "work together" they aren't literally together all day long. So when they go home they can enjoy family time and similar interests like their love of college football, basketball and golf together.

Perhaps the toughest part of this unique team is scheduling vacation time. Obviously the traditional role of the assistant is as the back up, go-to person when the superintendent is gone. That just doesn't fit in this scenario. Accordingly Debbie says, "Three-day weekend trips work best for us. Two-week trips aren't practical. I do go home to Ohio to see family and Gary joins me for only part of the time, so we stagger our away time."

Smither says, "I don't need much down time. If I can get away for a day or two that is enough to relax and enjoy the break in routine. We hope to get back into playing competitive golf again, perhaps in the Florida State Golf Association Mixed Team events."

For now, the biggest question from Misty Creek members about the unique husband-and-wife team seems to be "Does Debbie really have a better golf game than Gary?" We will leave that one for the 19th hole.

PHOTOS TO THE EDITOR

# Wildlife Abounds on the Naples National Golf Club

Superintendent Terry Woods was kind enough to share his drought

emergency management tips in Hands On for the Spring issue, and

his assistant, Bill Wiggins, sent some photos of wildlife on the course.



*Eagle Claw is a brand of fish hooks. Now you know why. Photo by Bill Wiggins.*



*Naples National Golf Club, where the deer and the “antelope” play. Well at least the deer.*



Earl Jones aka “the voice” had such a problem stuttering as a child he was basically mute until a teacher helped him overcome the problem by reciting poetry in class.

Robert Trent Jones Sr. designed golf courses – some of the most famous in the world. Robert De Niro drove a taxi and became a famous actor. Robert Fulton was always steaming until he built a boat to go up and down the Hudson. Robert E. Lee lost a war, rode a horse named Traveler, and surrendered at Appomattox. Robert Nesta Marley put Reggae on the map and lifted the genre from Jamaica and gave it to the world. Jah rastafari. Robert Shaw was a brilliant actor who got eaten in Jaws. Robert the Bruce was the most famous King of Scotland. He ruled from 1315 to 1329.

Johnny was always on the spot. When he was overseas during World War II, he got “Dear John” letters. John was a movie star who went on to be

a Rooster with “True Grit,” and was a “Duke” to his friends. There was a John who was the second president of the United States, and then his son John Quincy became a president too.

John was part of this English rock group called “The Beatles.” They named a plaza in New York after a guy named John who made a lot of money. John Denver thanked God he was a country boy and later went to Colorado to get “high.” I heard tell of a man named John Henry who was a steel driving man and died with a hammer in his hand. Another famous John played tennis with some success despite his terrible temper. Another killed a President named Lincoln. A John named Belushi burst on the scene of Saturday Night Live, made a movie called Animal House, and went on to be a famous “Blues Brother.”

But the most famous name of all is Family. Love yours every day. They are your most precious possession.

## No More Choir Practice!



**GREEN SIDE UP  
BY JOEL JACKSON**

I’m tired of preaching to the choir. This is for the club managers, owners, golf professionals and influential golfers at all Florida golf courses. You folks must deal with marketing,

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revenue, customer satisfaction, lessons, social gatherings and events, taxes, insurance, etc. These are all important facets of the golf course business. I'm sure your associations deal with these topics at your meetings and conferences.

Are you also dealing with the "Green Movement" and how it affects your course?

I'm asking because I haven't heard too many questions coming to our group, the superintendents. We've been tackling the issues to come up with the solutions, but this is bigger than our group can handle alone. We need everyone in golf to come together and leverage our numbers, influence and contacts to stand up for the Florida golf industry.

If you use reclaimed water, you haven't been overly concerned about water restrictions, yet the cost for this water is rising, sometimes doubling, and in some cases, the permitted amount is being reduced. That affects the bottom line, even if you don't have brown spots on the course.

If you have a permit to use ground and/or surface water for irrigation, it allows you to pump about 40 percent of what your property needs. The rest must come from Mother Nature. When it doesn't rain, that 40 percent gets whacked another 30 - 45 percent by water restrictions.

Superintendents talk with the various districts about equitable allocations to keep their (your) business thriving, but talk is cheap and action sometimes comes very slowly. The wheels of government grind slowly while your grass burns up. Maybe a little more organized heat to create a louder squeaky wheel would get better results.

Currently there is also a wave of local fertilizer ordinances being drafted, discussed and enacted under the guise of protecting the local coastal water quality. Protecting the water quality is a good cause. Most of us like to recreate on our state waters and we want them as clean and safe as possible. But the focus of these local governments is on turf fertilizer use. While they have

mainly said golf courses should follow the new 2007 Golf BMP Manual when applying nutrients, it only takes one commissioner from one city or county to include all turf including golf under more stringent rules.

I could go into a long list of nutrient sources impacting the state's waters from agriculture, to wastewater treatment plants, septic tanks, ill-designed storm water systems that discharge directly into these waters, animal waste (migrating and indigenous waterfowl are prolific poopers of nitrogen and phosphorus), grass clippings blown into the gutters and storm drains, falling leaves, pollen, and blossoms along with the nitrogen in the air deposited by rainfall. But fertilizer used on turfgrass is the main bulls eye when it comes to regulations.

Golf courses are said to be easy targets because they are so visible. Because they are visible they are also a leading tourism and resident recreation venue which has around a \$5 billion impact to the state's economy. This includes local property tax rates, and consider the tens of millions of dollars raised for local charities by outings on our courses. Don't forget the jobs and careers among the 72,000 in the state. Golf courses are great green spaces and wildlife habitats in urban and rural areas.

There are a lot of things about the golf industry worth fighting for. They will best be served if we all sing long and loud together and to a new audience of legislators and regulators. The time for choir practice is over.

**THE CIRCLE OF LIFE**

Recently two acquaintances from the world of golf passed away. One was Obie Lawson, 20 years my senior at age 85. The other was Rick Tatum, 17 years my junior. So if you're doing the math, that makes me a ripe young 65... old enough to know better, but young enough to keep trying.

When you have lived to my age you have seen a lot and in some cases seen too much. I have the advantage of perspective when it comes to reconciling people passing away at a

***Our place on the circle of life isn't a guarantee of longevity, it is only our opportunity to maximize the quality of our lives and enjoy the company of others.***

ripe old age, but it is always a shock when a peer or one much younger is taken from us too soon.

Obie was one of the first suppliers I met once I became a superintendent in Central Florida. Obie was a sales rep for Woodbury Chemical and also did some work for Butch Gill and Innovative Turf Supply.

Obie went about his business with all the charm and demeanor of a southern gentleman always putting customer service first. He supported his clients individually, but he also was a steadfast supporter of the local chapters and the industry overall.

Rick had a very successful 20-year career in the Naples – Ft. Myers area. He was very competitive, but also very professional. He was outspoken and not shy at all about sharing or giving his opinion on any issue. But he was also not shy about helping others... from subordinates to his peers in the industry. As they say, he walked the talk. He helped me on several occasions by contributing to Hands On articles in The Florida Green.

Rick's personality was decried by many at his recent memorial service as "unique." He could be stubborn and demanding, and he gave no quarter in a debate. But he stepped up. He showed up. He rolled up his sleeves and got the job done, whatever it took. He didn't always win, but he was always going for the brass ring.

Our place on the circle of life isn't a guarantee of longevity, it is only our opportunity to maximize the quality of our lives and enjoy the company of others. Obie and Rick did just that and I am the better for knowing both of them. So long old friends til we meet again.