

## 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.