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The **FLORIDA**  
Green

FALL 2020



28



20

**CONTENTS**

- 12** In Memoriam  
**14** Government Relations Update  
**16** Seed Money for Weed Scientist  
**18** Push to Reinvigorate Turf Program  
**20** Neiswender is Association's New Leader  
**24** Meet the New Board Members  
**28** Presenting the New Pablo Creek  
**36** The Yards Made for a Good Time  
**40** Yoga Improves Life with Grass  
**44** This Knife Can Sharpen Your Game  
**46** Darby a Winner at Tampa Bay



36



**ON THE COVER:**  
Al Clements has  
just completed a  
comprehensive  
renovation at Pablo Creek  
Club and couldn't be  
happier.

- President's Message..... 4  
Executive's Summary..... 6  
Chapter Round Up..... 8  
In the News.....48  
News Briefs.....50  
Field Observations .....54

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# Waking Up to Virus Life Requires Adjustments

Hopefully, all of you and your families are staying safe. At times I almost feel like I'm in my own version of the movie "Groundhog Day." I keep expecting to wake up to no COVID-19, but it's not going away. Unfortunately, I think we'll be dealing with this for quite a while yet.

As golf course superintendents, we spend our careers conquering adversity. We combat adversity with some type of program cycle, written or otherwise, for most aspects of our operations. We start them off originated in science and education, we implement them, we evaluate the results and incorporate what we learn back into the program to keep improving it. I've added COVID-19 to one of my management program cycles.



Andy Neiswender

In late March, thanks to the flood of information we were getting from Jennifer Bryan at the Florida GCSA, Ralph Dain of GCSAA and the Southern Group, our government relations folks, we received science and education to inform operational adjustments to maintain social distances and avoid the spread.

We staggered start times so no more than 10 people gathered, we moved our time clock out of break room to a large equipment storage area, we reduced the number of tables and chairs in the break room, we had one crew member spend four to six hours a day cleaning doors and all equipment with bleach and water and we only allow single riders in utility vehicles. We tooled along for a couple months with no infections or illness. The program was implemented and working beautifully!

Then came June 15. We found out that one of our equipment technicians tested positive and had gotten it from his wife. Expletive! After a quick survey, we identified five employees had been relatively close to him within the previous few days, including my assistant superintendent and all three equipment technicians. More expletives!!

We had gotten a little lax and had a few instances of employees riding in carts together or just in close working proximity. If two of those guys came back positive, we were looking at having to send a majority of the staff to be tested. Running out of expletives!!!

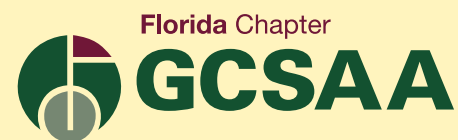
Fortunately, all came back negative. Any crisis was averted. However, it was clear the program needed significant improvement. We clearly needed a way to reduce the likelihood of having to send additional employees to be tested if, and when, another case emerged. We amended the program to require employees to wear masks, anywhere indoors, or when working within six feet of another person or riding in a cart together.

As of the early days of fall, it's worked. Since that first scare, we've had a few other instances of someone testing positive from outside, but we didn't have to panic and send half the crew out to be tested and have them offline while they waited for results.

What doesn't kill us makes us stronger, and it has. Just like managing our golf course programs, we're all going to have to stay on top of our COVID-19 BMPs. An amendment here, an adjustment there. There is an art to making the science work for you.

Be safe. ■

- Andy Neiswender, Belleair Country Club



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## ADVERTISER INDEX

Atlantic Site Services.....	37	Nu-Farm.....	42
Bayer.....	7	PC Drainage.....	9
Beard Equipment.....	55	Pike Creek Turf Farms.....	30
BMP.....	52	Plant Food Company.....	34
Bronsons Turf Solutions.....	12	PrimeSource.....	41
Burrows Turfgrass Service.....	31	Quali-Pro/Control Solutions.....	42
ClubProcure.....	24	Rainbird.....	22
Everglades Farm Equipment.....	55	Sanford Golf Design.....	19
FIS.....	22	South Florida Grassing/Supreme Paspalum..	23
Florida West Coast GCSA.....	17	South Florida Grassing/TifEagle.....	38
Geoponics.....	56	SOX.....	13
Golden Golf Services.....	15	Sustainable Aquatic Solutions.....	11
Golf Agronomics.....	25	Syngenta.....	11
Growing Solutions.....	50	Target Specialty.....	43
Harrell's Fertilizer.....	2	TBT Turf Services.....	47
Helena.....	49	The Andersons.....	19
Howard Fertilizer & Chemical Co.....	45	TifEagle/TifSport.....	Insert
Kelly Tractor Co.....	21	Tifton Physical Soil Testing Lab.....	33
Lake and Wetland Management.....	13	Toro Distributors of Florida.....	26
MRI Construction.....	51	Trigon Turf Sciences.....	5
MRI Udnerwater.....	39	Turf Control.....	53
Noble Turf.....	35	Turf Iron, LLC.....	11



## Golf Course Superintendents: They Would Get My Vote

Seems like there are so many elephants in the room these days that there's no room left for the rest of us. The virus, the election, the social justice movement. On the back of each of those huge "elephants," we seem to lurch from one new drama to the next. It's hard to find a clear space to have a clear thought.

Which is why I feel pretty darned fortunate to work for golf course superintendents in 2020. You all are problem solvers to your core. That's the reason that we as an association, and, indeed, as a profession, have been able to come up with as many answers as we have this year, despite the apparent chaos around us.

Sure, as individuals, you might have different opinions and perspectives on those topics mentioned above. But when it comes to the interests of your families, your facilities and your industry, I believe you are in lockstep. I see that every day and common goals always make the way forward a lot clearer.

From day one of COVID-19, your Florida GCSA has been able to present a clear and consistent voice to lawmakers, whether at state, county or municipal levels. We may not have been able to keep every golf course in the state open for business all along. But that was never for a lack of effort, nor was it because we fudged or failed on anything.

So, just as we earned credibility with our BMP efforts and water conservation before that, golf course superintendents will come out on the other side of this virus with our reputation enhanced.

There will always be opposition and detractors but it's hard to beat a reliance on science and common sense. Once again, I have been impressed by how superintendents can separate emotions from the nuts and bolts that matter. And so have others.

Obviously, we have been more than ably assisted by the expertise of The Southern Group in negotiating this maze. The investment

we make to have these folks serve as our eyes, ears and voice on a host of issues is money very well spent. There is an old saying in political circles that if you don't have a seat at the table, you're on the menu. Thanks to The Southern Group, it feels like we have a reserved seat.

There is another old saying, this one out of Africa, about elephants. That is, when the elephants fight, the grass gets trampled. As I said at the outset, we have more than our share of elephants going at it right now. But thanks to your efforts, as individuals, as local chapters and as a state association, the grass on Florida golf courses remains fit for play, despite it all.

The protocols you helped develop and put into practice have kept the grass, and therefore the game, viable. I know that hasn't always been easy. The virus has complicated day-to-day operations. In some cases, it has also interfered with staffing levels. But there has not been one instance I know of where a golf course had to shut down because the superintendent couldn't get the job done. And that is to your credit.

Believe me, this is not a partisan comment, but I feel like we could get an awful lot done if golf course superintendents were calling the shots at all levels of government. You live with the direct consequences of your actions every day, and your office is always within walking distance of the consumer. There's a high degree of accountability that comes with that. None of you have a customer service department deflecting complaints. No year-round apartment in D.C. to retreat to when the heat gets too much back home among the constituents.

There are no superintendents on any ballots that I know of this November, but wouldn't it be cool if the people that are went about their work the way you do? ■

- Jennifer Bryan, Executive Director

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## SEVEN RIVERS



President's Award winners Don Delaney, CGCS (1993), David Court, CGCS this year's winner, and Cary Lewis, CGCS (2014).

It was an honor and privilege recently to recognize and present David Court, CGCS with the Florida GCSA President's Award for Lifetime Service. David recently retired from his position as director of golf maintenance at World Woods Golf Club in Brooksville. Prior to that, David was director of golf maintenance at Black Diamond Ranch and as director of golf maintenance at Boca Lago for 27 years. He was Florida GCSA president in 2004, served on many committees and was instrumental in creating the Golf BMPs. His industry leadership also includes terms as Palm Beach GCSA president in 1988-1989 and 1999-2000. David's award is well-deserved.

The Seven Rivers GCSA ushered in a new president at our June meeting at Stone Creek Golf Club. Wes Pitts took over and quickly went to work. Unfortunately, he only presided over one meeting due to becoming superintendent at Dorado Beach Club in Puerto Rico in mid-September. I stepped back in until a new president can be elected. We wish Wes great luck in his new endeavor and thank him for his 78 days of service.

Our September meeting at Rainbow's End Golf Club in Dunnellon was well attended. We met outside under the new clubhouse patio. Dr. Travis Teuton from Sand Meadows Turfgrass Research provided some timely information on pre- and post-emergent control of Poa annua. A major topic of conversation was how much the course had improved since our last visit in 2019. Host superintendent Joel Fort and staff of 1.5 have done an excellent job cleaning up the golf course and making it better each year. Big thanks to Joel and

proprietors Don and Linda Delaney for an excellent day.

Our annual Toys for Tots fundraiser is at Juliette Falls on November 12 with other meetings at SummerGlen Golf Club on December 17 and a return to SkyView Golf Club on January 14.

- Andy Jorgensen, CGCS On Top of the World

## CALUSA



Kyle Sweet, CGCS from The Sanctuary Golf Club accepts the Joel Jackson Award for best superintendent-authored article in The Florida Green.



Fox 4 host Lee Pitts interviews Calusa GCSA past president Mark Thomas and Nadereh Salim from Children's Network of Southwest Florida.



Cornhole participants Andy Engelbrecht of BASF, Ralph Dain of GCSAA and Mitch Miller from Legends Golf and Country Club.

As the summer winds down and we shift gears toward season, I am happy to report many Calusa GCSA members have been

able to break the chains of confinement and quarantine. In July, we had our first event since January, with the Calusa Cornhole Tournament. Calusa GCSA buffs were distributed in accordance with Level 2 CDC guidelines and all in attendance had a great time. The winning two-man team consisted of Matt Carol, FMC and Chris Amrhein playing out of Legends Golf and Country Club.

Next on the docket was the Calusa vs. Everglades match play event held at Stoneybrook Golf Club. Host superintendent John Vuknic, CGCS allowed us out even after the heavy rains earlier in the week. I think "The Rock" - as it's nicknamed- won overall while the Everglades chapter retained the trophy, winning by a paltry half point, 10½ to 10.

Upon conclusion of the awesome catered lunch, Kyle Sweet, CGCS was awarded the esteemed Joel Jackson Award for The Florida Green's best superintendent authored article or in Kyle's case articles, aptly named "Sweet Talk." Congratulations and keep up the great work.

While not all were able to participate in the match play event, Calusa superintendent and past president Mark Thomas was busy on the set of Lee Pitts Live television show on Fox 4. Mr. Pitts interviewed Mark and Nadereh Salim, chief executive officer of Children's Network of Southwest Florida, Calusa's primary charity.

Coverage included the mission of Calusa as well as how the partnership with Children's Network has grown over the years. What a great opportunity to spread the word about the work of our chapter and thank you, Mark. Look for more information regarding the Calusa GCSA's annual Golf for the Children Christmas Classic charity event on December 10 at Verandah Club.

- Mitch Miller, Legends Golf and Country Club

## PALM BEACH

The summer of 2020 has been one for the ages. It's safe to say we were hoping to put COVID-19 in the rearview by this time. However, the challenge remains, and we

are all forced to adapt to the ever-changing environment we are facing. My time as Palm Beach chapter president is not exactly how I envisioned it. That said, I am extremely proud of our board of directors and their commitment to pushing forward during these difficult times.

The Palm Beach GCSA hosted two events in the wake of the coronavirus earlier this year. I am proud to say, through careful planning, execution and member cooperation, they were all safe and successful. Most recently, we held our second annual Fall Education Symposium on October 1. This year's event was hosted virtually utilizing Zoom. Dr. J. Bryan Unruh was the moderator and organizer of the Zoom meeting. A very special thank you to Dr. Unruh for continuing to support our event and for aiding us in securing relevant educators.

This year's virtual symposium featured Dr. Jay McCurdy of Mississippi State University, Dr. Beth Guertal of Auburn University, and Dr. Mike Richardson of the University of Arkansas. The education covered Program Approaches to Weed Control, Phosphite Versus Phosphate, and Can I Grow Grass in this Much Shade, respectively. Thank you to everyone who participated and supported the event through sponsorships. All of the proceeds from the event are being donated to the Florida GCSA to fund research and government affairs needs.

The 40th annual Future of Golf Tournament was scheduled for October 30 at Palm Beach Par 3. Thank you to host superintendent, Tim Campbell, and the entire staff at the Palm Beach Par 3 for what we were sure was going to be a great day. We had a great golf format planned with exciting prizes, auction items, and giveaways that day. A special thanks to all of our sponsors who committed to supporting the event.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to us should you have any questions or concerns. We wish you all the best this season.

- Ryan L. Swilley, Gulf Stream Golf Club

## CENTRAL FLORIDA



Central Florida GCSA president Josh Kelley introduces Jason Mulcahy of FMC who presented a check to the chapter



Nick Cole of Harrell's, Dustin Anderson of Lake and Wetland, USA, Alan Lichter from Dubsdread Golf Course; Chad Bass of Lake and Wetland, USA were golf winners at the Country Club of Mount Dora.

We had our vendor appreciation tournament on September 4 at Country Club of Mount Dora. Pat Murphy was our host. It was a blistering hot Friday afternoon but we had a great time. We were provided a barbecue of ribs, chicken, baked beans, macaroni and cheese, coleslaw and brownies - out by the pool for social distancing.

Thanks to Jason Mulcahy of FMC who was on hand to present a check from money raised at the Golf Industry Show earlier in the year. FMC had a golf simulator in their booth and for each yard driven with a tee shot, they donated 50 cents to that superintendent's GCSAA chapter.

We had 60 players in the field for the golf tournament and the winning team consisted of Chad Bass, Dustin Anderson, Alan Lichter and Nick Cole. Runners-up after a scorecard playoff were Bryce Gibson, Cory Agar and Robert Kilduff. Thanks to Rob Torri who won \$240 in the split the pot drawing and then donated his winnings back to the chapter.



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We have had new members join our chapter this year. We are pleased to welcome platinum sponsors Nick Forest of Textron Golf and Jonathan S. Germeroth, Brian Malone and Dave Dymond of Lake Gem Farms. We are also grateful for the support of new silver sponsors including Chocky Warriner of Clark Construction, Marti Vytech of SOLitude Lake Management and John Kopack of Diamond R.

At press time, we were looking forward to our member-vendor golf outing to be hosted by board member Chris Zinna at Mayfair Country Club at the end of October. The Larry Kamphaus Crowfoot Open is at Orange County National for the second year running on December 4.

- Josh Kelley, Hawk's Landing Golf Club

## SOUTH FLORIDA

On July 23, the South Florida chapter had our annual meeting at Miami Shores Country Club, with host superintendent Seth Strickland. A special thank you goes out to all the staff at Miami Shores. The event went smoothly, while abiding by all the local regulations. The course was in great shape, and Seth of course had the greens rolling and putting like tournament greens.



Ricky Reeves presents Seth Strickland with the President's Cup.

With Seth having home field advantage, he was able to pull out the win for the President's Cup. Duane Cyr from FIS Outdoor won the Vice President's Cup. Congratulations to Seth and Duane for some great playing and thank you to everyone who was able to attend.

The annual voting in of the officers and board of directors occurred with a unanimous vote. Kenton Gamache was elected president, Chris Monserrate is vice president, Jason Bailey is secretary-treasurer and Rickey Reeves is external vice president. John Rowland, Walter Chavez and Dale Anderson round out the board of directors.

- Kenton Gamache, The Club at Boca Pointe

## EVERGLADES



T.J. Shine presented Wayne Kappauf, CGCS with a plaque and a new rod and reel to mark his retirement.



Immediate past president T.J. Shine accepts a plaque of appreciation from incoming president Cisco Navas.

Congratulations to Wayne Kappauf, CGCS who was a 25-year member of the Everglades GCSA who has retired from his position with the Island Country Club on Marco Island. Wayne was presented with a plaque of recognition for his service to the chapter and a new rod and reel to help make the most of his newly acquired spare time. Wayne plans on doing some fishing, projects around his home, and actually getting a chance to go out and play some golf, in addition to getting some much-needed rest and relaxation. Well done Wayne. Thank you for your service.

Past president T.J. Shine was presented with an Everglades GCSA flag mounted in an enclosed frame for his service on the board of directors. He will be succeeded as president by Francisco 'Cisco' Navas who presented T.J. with the flag. Thank you, T.J. for all you have done for our association and congratulations for a job well done.

On August 27, we had our first virtual

annual meeting using a Zoom format. More than 40 members logged in for the event. In accordance with the bylaws, members of the Everglades board of directors were in attendance at Royal Poinciana Golf Club during the meeting. All and all, it turned out as a great success and we're proud of the efforts involved to make it happen.

Best regards,

- Dan Brooks, Panther Run Golf Club



The 2020-21 Everglades GCSA board of directors.



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# IN MEMORIAM

## Paul Leonard Deets

The Florida GCSA mourns the passing of Paul Deets, a pioneer of chemical sales to the golf industry. Deets died September 29 at his home in Cramerton, NC. He was 78.

“Paul was one fantastic fellow,” says longtime friend and seed supply veteran Butch Gill. “I honestly believe you could not find a single person with anything negative to say about Paul. He was a great family man and a good Christian. He was one of the pioneers on the frontier when it came to chemical sales in golf.”

Deets began his career with Dow Chemical then moved to Woodbury Chemical to lead their golf and turf division in Florida. Woodbury was later bought by Van Waters and Rogers and eventually became Univar.

Paul Leonard Deets was born August 20, 1942 in Wellington, KS, son of the late Leonard and Katherine Deets. In addition to his parents, Deets was preceded in death by his brother, Phil Deets. He is survived by his wife of 55 years, Nancy Halverstadt Deets, daughter Kirstin Zeccola and husband, Joe; son, Derek Deets and wife, Argenis; sister Anne Thompson and husband, Gary; sister Jeannine Shook and husband Jeff; seven grandchildren Erika, Christian, Kaley, Megan, Valentina, Dominique, and Jenna.

After retiring, Deets moved to North Carolina to be closer to family and enjoy the Great Smoky Mountains. He loved to play golf and tennis, was an avid sports fan and enjoyed traveling with his wife, family and friends.

No memorial plans are scheduled for the public. The family will follow Paul’s wishes for an intimate service with immediate family members to celebrate his life. Donations in memory of Deets can be made to the following:

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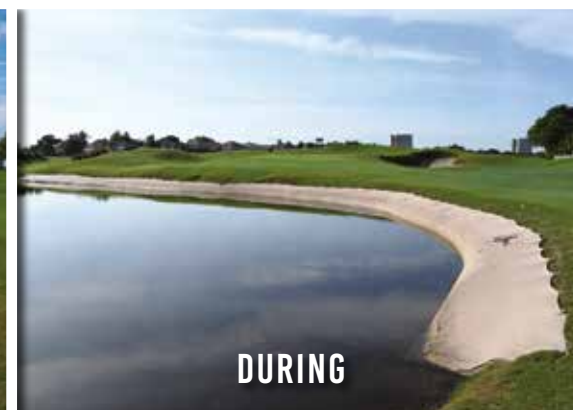
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## Pandemic Restrictions Ease AS ELECTION TUMULT RISES

Greetings from your team at The Southern Group. We hope that everyone has remained healthy and that your courses continue to stay busy. With the calendar turning to October, kids are back in school (traditional or virtual), days are a little bit cooler, Florida has moved to Phase 3 in business re-openings, and political incumbents and candidates are making their final, frantic pushes to November's Election Day.



Seth McKeel



David Shepp

By Seth McKeel and David Shepp

If the election holds true to form, the Senate President will be Senator Wilton Simpson (R-Trilby) and the House Speaker will be Representative Chris Sprowls (R-Clearwater). Sen. Simpson has been a major champion for agricultural and common-sense environmental issues during his time in the Senate, and also played a large role in the Florida GCSA's priority legislation this past year. Ag and the environment are in his DNA, so we anticipate he will continue to place a high priority on both during his

As you have heard, on September 25, Governor Ron DeSantis moved the State of Florida into Phase 3 of his re-opening plan. With that action, limits on businesses, such as restaurants and bars, were removed, as well as any local fines or fees for individuals failing to wear masks. Businesses may not be prohibited from operating by a local ordinance, and business owners also retain the ability to self-regulate the way they operate, such as requiring masks indoors, limiting indoor capacity, maintaining social distancing standards, etc.

Similarly, golf course superintendents can determine what standards work best for their courses and patrons when it comes to distancing (single cart or two to a cart) and contact with materials such as rakes and flagsticks. In a nutshell, the Governor is trying to move Florida into the position of being as back to normal as possible, given the circumstances.

On the political front, we are drawing ever closer to the end of a tumultuous election cycle, not only for the office of the President, but also for every member of Congress, state legislature and local officials. While the Presidential race has been ever-present on the airwaves, most local and state officials and candidates had a very 'non-election year' experience throughout the summer due to COVID-19.

Following the primary election at the end of August, that has changed significantly as candidates and incumbents are venturing out in public more and more to attend modified campaign events, walk door-to-door and raise the campaign funds necessary to get their messages out to the voters.

On the legislative front, no matter what happens at the top of the ticket with the Presidential race, the Republican Party is expected to maintain control of both the Florida House and Senate. Currently, Republicans enjoy a 23-17 advantage in the Senate and a 73-47 advantage in the House. Those numbers are not expected to change dramatically.

leadership.

Following the November election, the House and Senate will convene for an organizational session on November 17 to swear in the new members and formalize the leadership structure. There is a chance that a special session could be called during that time period by Gov. DeSantis to address legislation relating to civil unrest as well as COVID-19 liability protections for businesses. But a more likely scenario would be a special session taking place after the first of the year.

Once members are officially sworn in, they will receive their committee assignments and training. Committee meetings begin after the new year, with two weeks in January and three weeks in February. The 2021 session begins on March 2.

Without a doubt, the primary focus of the 2021 session will be Florida's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Florida's budget has taken a beating for the past six months, with the legislature's Office of Economic and Demographic Research predicting a budget shortfall that will stretch over the next three years.

The current fiscal year is expected to come in \$2.7 billion below the \$92.2 billion budget that passed in March. Legislators will have to determine the best mix of CARES/federal funding, budget stabilization funds, and, potentially, other funds to ensure a balanced budget without dramatic cuts to programs. Legislation will focus on addressing issues that arose during the pandemic, as well as setting up Florida to be better prepared for future challenges.

One thing is certain, the 2021 session will be a unique challenge for all. We continue to wish the very best for all of you, your families, employees and customers. It is our privilege to work with you. Stay safe and healthy. ■

*-Seth McKeel and David Shepp are with The Southern Group which provides government relations services to the Florida GCSA.*

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## Support for New Weed Scientist TO ADVANCE RESEARCH EFFORTS

The Florida GCSA recently committed \$20,000 to help the University of Florida recruit a new weed scientist. The research money, granted over two years, is part of a wider golf and turf industry pledge to make the vacant position more attractive to potential candidates. The Florida Turfgrass Association (FTGA) and Turfgrass Producers of Florida (TPF) also committed money to the operating reserve.

University officials say the funds will be used for an operating reserve to help the new scientist “hit the ground running.” For several reasons, the position has been vacant since Dr. Ramon Leon left the university three years ago. But there is optimism the role can be filled early in the new year with a successful applicant starting work in the spring. University officials began reviewing applications early October.

“There are not a lot of graduate students that are turf weed scientists right now. So, we had a small group of applicants, but I think there are some desirable candidates in there. So, I am optimistic,” Dr. Kevin Kenworthy, of the UF Agronomy Department, says.

“We are very appreciative of the support from the golf course superintendents, the FTGA and the TPF. Because we were having trouble getting the position back on the board, we thought some industry support would help, and it absolutely did.”

The Florida GCSAs contribution comes out of the association’s research fund, which received another injection this summer from the annual Rounds4Research auction. In a year with little cause for celebration, the Florida GCSA netted just shy of \$30,000 in the auction, delayed until late July because of the coronavirus pandemic. That return fell short of the \$50,000 originally targeted but association leaders are still pleased given the circumstances.

“We were uncertain in the beginning how the pandemic was going to affect the auction, especially since the majority of the golf industry in Florida was shut down for a period of time,” Rounds4Research committee chair Parker Ferren, CGCS from The St. Andrews Club in Delray Beach, says.

“Fortunately, after a rescheduled auction date was announced, courses throughout the state really stepped up and we were able to secure more rounds than we had initially thought following the shutdown.”

All 103 items donated in Florida sold. There were also cash donations from three facilities totaling \$4,250 for an overall net return of \$29,597.20. In this pandemic year, that mark compares favor-



Rounds4Research funds help work on these research plots from the University of Florida’s Gainesville campus.

ably with the \$40,000 raised in 2019. Rounds at four facilities fetched in excess of \$2,000 each – Pine Tree Golf Club, Mountain Lake, Old Memorial Golf Club and Lake Nona Golf and Country Club.

“We’re grateful to every facility, large or small, that participated this year,” Ferren says. “And we’re grateful to everyone who helped drive donations at the local chapter level. Thankfully, the majority of superintendents and their clubs see the great benefit from turfgrass research and have the desire to help support the many research projects currently being funded in Florida. We are hopeful to continue our progress and have even more success next year.”

In the meantime, research continues at UF on a number of projects funded by Rounds4Research. Additionally, this summer, UF planted several more trials in a long-term project to screen and breed improved drought responses in warm-season grasses including St. Augustinegrass, zoysiagrass, bermudagrass and paspalum. That project is funded by the USDA and has been running since 2010 with allied research at Texas A&M, Oklahoma State, University of Georgia and North Carolina State University.

Dr. Kenworthy says this project has been integral in the release of TifTuf and Tahoma 31 bermudagrasses, and TamStar and Citra-Blue St. Augustinegrasses. “These new cultivars with improved drought tolerance serve as good examples of how research can impact end-users and benefit our industry,” he says. ■

## RESEARCH AND BENEFIT GOLF TOURNAMENT

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Andy Engelbrecht, Keith Lamb, Steve Harrison and Josh Kelley were among those enjoying the fun at Innisbrook’s Copperhead Course.





# Alumni Striving to Revitalize WHAT WAS LAKE CITY PROGRAM

It says plenty about the merits of what was Lake City Community College's golf course operations program that, decades after graduating, so many alumni are working for its future. Into the early 2000s, the program was among the most productive of its kind, churning out high caliber golf course superintendents year after year. Recent years were leaner, however.

A host of factors played into the program's decline but people like David Robinson, CGCS, a Lake City graduate now with Marriott Golf, believe better days ahead and are volunteering their best efforts to ensure that is true.

"There is this perception out there that once the program was no longer on campus that it didn't exist anymore," he says. "That's certainly not the case and we want to get that awareness back out into the psyche of the industry. We want superintendents to know this program can help find the next superstar on their crew."

Robinson is part of an advisory committee working to reinvigorate what is now the Florida Gateway College program, which has been offered online since the Great Recession of 2008 transformed the golfing landscape. The recession brought a screeching halt to what had been a boom period of industry growth. Hundreds of new courses a year fueled unprecedented demand for new superintendents but that ended almost overnight. As opportunities shrank, so did the number of applicants for the program.

That effect was felt by similar programs across the country and still is to this day.

Post-recession, it was no longer as feasible for young talent to leave paying jobs and take on the expense of moving to Lake City and studying for three years. In attempt to evolve along with the marketplace, the program was taken online. The college also changed its name to Florida Gateway in 2010, a move which Robinson believes cost some of the cachet the golf industry formerly associated with Lake City.

"I do think that hurt them a little bit," he says. "Whatever the reasons, the fact is a lot of superintendents out there now don't know the program exists."

All of that combines with a general labor shortage creating a troublesome scenario as a generation of superintendents age out



David Robinson, CGCS is working to boost Florida Gateway College's golf operations program.



Kevin Downing, CGCS

with few newcomers to fill their place. "Our industry is similar to the airline industry with pilots retiring and no one to step into their positions," Robinson says. "It's really, really difficult to find candidates today, even in the best markets. It's just dried up."

Kevin Downing, CGCS another Lake City graduate now with 3 Putt Services, says at least part of the answer may be for superintendents to encourage existing staff to reach higher.

"There is a need to find those special people who like the business but need some formal training to advance their game," says Downing, whose stake in the industry reaches back decades, including service as Florida GCSA president in 1982-'83. "We are hoping that a revitalized Florida Gateway program can satisfy that need. The ultimate goal is to provide realistic online learning experiences to create better staffs and develop key personnel."

To tap into some of that talent, there are moves to offer at least elements of the program in Spanish. "These most likely will be as non-credit continuing education and could be offered in more condensed versions," Downing says. "The college is committed to maintaining high quality educational standards and to offering options for obtaining either certificates or associate degrees."

Robinson says the Florida Gateway program can fill a niche between pure on-the-job experience and a four-year degree such as offered at Penn State University. "The program can really serve

people who want to go further in industry but need to keep working in the meantime," he says. "It is very inexpensive but still really solid content. You will get a great education with the convenience of not having to move and disrupt your life."

Downing says a recent survey of golf course superintendents was used to help tweak the program at Florida Gateway. He says the survey revealed strong support for keeping the program going with an emphasis on incorporating some "real world experience." The program both he and Robinson went through demanded a year of work experience as a pre-requisite for applying and also provided internships as part of the course.

"We are on the way to rebuilding the brand and the curriculum," Downing says. "The online format will be adjusted, promoted and our goal is to have things clicking on all cylinders in the next six months. Golf is still our base, but we want to be beneficial to all allied industries." ■

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# Setbacks and Steps Back Shape WAY AHEAD FOR NEW PRESIDENT

by Trent Bouts



New Florida GCSA president, Andy Neiswender. Photo: Cameron Darby

Some golf course superintendents get where they are by working their backsides off. Andy Neiswender had to be handed his, at least metaphorically, just to get started on the right track. Neiswender was on summer break before his sophomore year at college when a fun day and a few drinks led to a DUI. That ticket put him back home with his mother and in need of a job.

“Honestly, the DUI for me was a good reset,” he says. “It helped me finish doing some growing up that I needed to do, and that I wasn’t doing living away at college. It helped me mature. Without that happening, there’s no way I would have become a golf course superintendent. I don’t think I would have found it.”

That was more than 30 years ago and today, at 50, Neiswender is director of facilities and operations at historic 36-hole Belleair Country Club in Belleair just south of Clearwater. He is also the new Florida GCSA president, elected this summer, without fanfare via a Zoom call because of the coronavirus pandemic. Make no mistake, he’s worked his backside off along the way but the way itself wasn’t always clear and obvious.

As a kid, Neiswender’s passion was racing motorcycles. Golf was not even on the radar. But at 12, he lost his father to cancer and went to live with his grandparents for a few weeks while his mother negotiated the immediate aftermath.

Those grandparents were working at a golf course in Sebring that

Neiswender’s great uncle built. To keep him busy, they paid for six lessons and by the time he rejoined his mother in Zephyrhills, the youngster had developed a new interest.

He played through junior high and senior high, and like a lot of kids, got his access to the game by working on golf courses. There were two in town, and Neiswender was back and forth between them over summers and on Saturday mornings, “Raking bunkers, parking carts, whatever they needed me to do,” he says. “They were low budget. There wasn’t even a weed eater for some reason. I remember pushing a mower in circles around the trees.”

All for \$2.10 an hour and free golf. “Honestly, I can tell you I didn’t fall in love with that aspect of the game back then,” he says of working on the golf course.

But he was developing a decent game and so when, at 17, he went to St. Petersburg Junior College, he earned a place on the golf team. It was one of his buddies from that golf team, his roommate, that Neiswender was with that fateful day. On a day trip back to school to sit a summer school test, they visited a few parties that evening, and life changed course.

Effectively grounded in Zephyrhills, Neiswender found himself signing on at the local community college and looking for work. He landed some helping the former general manager from Zephyrhills Golf Course, where Neiswender odd-jobbed as a kid, start

up a new course nearby called Sundance, now Scotland Yards. It was low budget also and Neiswender did a lot of everything.

“At the end of summer, I asked could I stay on full-time because I still needed the money,” Neiswender recalls. “He looked at me and said, ‘Honestly, when you were a kid you weren’t worth a crap. But now all of a sudden, you’re busting your butt and you’re doing a great job. So, sure.’”

By that point, Neiswender already had his spray tech license, then the superintendent left. “He wasn’t really a superintendent, more like a foreman who worked really hard,” Neiswender says. “So, the owner said, ‘I can’t afford a real superintendent, will you be it?’ I said, ‘I don’t know what I’m doing.’ And he said, ‘Yeah, I don’t know either, but we’ll figure it out.’”

And so, at just 19, by way of chance, fate and some desperation on his part and that of his boss, Andy Neiswender became a golf course superintendent.

For two years, he worked and played golf during the day then went to school at night. One day, the boss asked what he wanted to do with his life. Did he want to be a superintendent? Neiswender said he really didn’t know but floated the idea of becoming a general manager one day. In the meantime, then, his boss suggested, he should become a member of the PGA of America.

“I basically went through entire program as an assistant professional, the whole program, the playing ability test, business school I and II,” Neiswender says. “The only thing I had left to do to get my card was a final interview. But by then, I wanted nothing more to do with that side of the business.

“I would work on the course until about 2pm, take a power nap and get into golf shop about 3.30pm. I’d work until close at 9pm three or four days a week and then cash out and all of that. And I was still going to school. That period is when I learned I absolutely loved being out on the golf course and that I absolutely hated being stuck in the golf shop.

“It was so hard, when you’re also the superintendent and you’re just aerified, and you’re standing there in the pro shop and people come in bitching about the golf course, it’s just a direct assault on you. That solidified me knowing what I wanted to do.”

During this time, Neiswender got to know Tony Disano, a charter member of the Ridge GCSA, and now on his third stint at Lake Jovita Golf and Country Club. Disano was one of several Ridge members - “Big names in the area,” Neiswender says - who were generous with their time and their knowledge. They also included Alan Puckett, CGCS, Bobby Ellis and Ray Cuzzone.

“They were just a great group of guys and they were so open to helping me,” Neiswender says. “I was probably 22 or 23 and still didn’t really know what the heck I was doing. I felt like they were on a pedestal because they were all at great golf courses and knew so much about our business. I learned so much from them and the Harrell’s guys who would come by and help guide things for me.”



That’s Andy Neiswender, college golfer, on the left side of the back row.

When Disano moved to help build nearby Lake Jovita Golf and Country Club, he would call by Sundance for lunch now and then. One day, he asked Neiswender if he knew of anyone looking for an assistant superintendent position. Neiswender thought about it for a few days and decided that he did, him! Recently engaged, he wanted to provide more for a future family than he could staying at Scotland Yards.

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At first, Andy Neiswender thought his future in golf was as a club professional but the appeal of the outdoors made golf course maintenance the winner. Photo: Cameron Darby

"I told Tony, 'I need to work for someone at a high-end place who knows what they're doing. I need a place to learn everything that I know that I don't know now, and, of course, the stuff that I don't even know that I don't know.'"

If the DUI was one pivotal moment in a life, that conversation was another. By his own admission, Neiswender felt so underqualified, he might never have sought an interview for the kind of job he knew he needed. "The most we'd ever spent on a course where I worked was probably \$350,000 a year," he says. "For me to try and interview at the kind of place I wanted to go, I'd have been scared to death trying to convince people that I knew what I was doing."

But Disano knew enough of Neiswender to forego the formalities. "To be honest, I was kind of surprised when he told me he was willing to be an assistant," Disano says. "But that says a lot about Andy. He had enough sense and foresight to know that to really advance in his career, he had to get involved with something that was a little bit more upscale."

Neiswender spent four and a half years with Disano as Lake Jovita grew to 27 holes. "Andy was one of the better assistants I've ever had," Disano says. "Very likeable, hard worker, good golfer and no question, a high intellect. It doesn't surprise me how successful he's become."

That was the kind of rap Disano gave when he recommended Neiswender to Buddy Carmouche at Palma Ceia Golf and

Country Club. "I knew Buddy was looking and was actually about to pull the trigger on another guy," Disano says. "I said, 'Listen, if you decide not to hire Andy, okay, but at least it would be good for him to interview with someone like yourself. Well, Andy, ended up wowing Buddy, who hired him, and the rest is history.'"

With Carmouche in a director position, Neiswender was a superintendent again. He remembers the two years he spent at Palma Ceia as nothing short of "awesome." "Tony and Buddy were both very good to learn from with two completely different modes of attack," Neiswender says. "If Tony had an issue on the course, he would take every ounce of labor and we'd aerify it, topdress or sod cut it, whatever we could physically do to fix it. If Buddy saw an issue, he hit it with every labeled pesticide or fertilizer available. My take away; if you have a problem, don't just look at it, do something to try to fix it."

Then, out of the blue, Disano called one day to say he was moving on from Lake Jovita. He knew the club would ask for a recommendation and he knew Neiswender was the right man, if he wanted the job.

Returning to Lake Jovita, Neiswender put the finishing touches on a fourth and final nine. He stayed four and a half years again before the club moved towards new ownership. Around the same time, the opportunity opened up at Belleair, where he has been, and thrived, since the beginning of 2008.

For the record, Neiswender never quite completed the process to secure his PGA membership. He did however keep grinding at night school, earning an associate degree at Pasco Hernando Community College and then a bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of South Florida.

His golf game has given way to family, however. He and wife, Lela, have three daughters, Rachel, 14, Lindsay, 13, and Caitlin, 10. "I won't let them ride motorcycles and have not been successful getting them interested in golf," Neiswender laughs. "They are all interested in what we do on the golf course though, from growing things to balancing nature."

Neiswender has come a long way since he was a teenager with little focus. "Whether you believe in a higher power or that you're lucky or that you make your own luck, I've had several events along the way that may not have seemed great at the time but they turned out great," he says. "My father passing young opened me up to the golf world. Then working on the golf course, it took a while, but I realized I loved what I did. Being able to tweak the conditions and affect how it played, that was a lot of fun for me. And still is." ■

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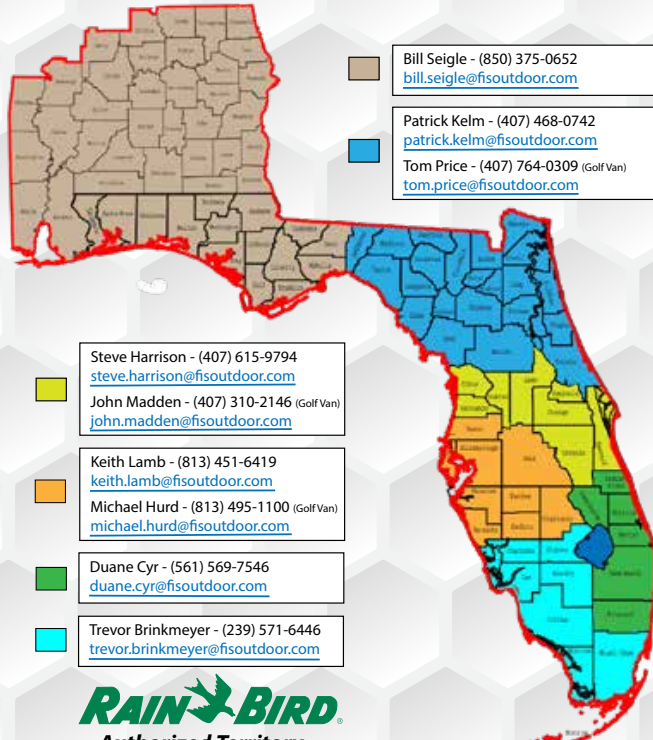
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Andy Neiswender's desk at Belleair Country Club is a long way from his first job in golf which earned him \$2.10 an hour and free golf.



# Four New Directors ARRIVE ON BOARD

There are four new faces on the Florida GCSA board of directors this year. Representing their local chapters as external vice presidents are Jason Zimmerman, CGCS from Pelican's Nest Golf Club in Bonita Springs (Everglades GCSA); Mike Gay from Eagle Dunes Golf Club in Sorrento (Central Florida GCSA); Parker Ferren, CGCS from The St. Andrews Club in Delray Beach (Palm Beach GCSA); and Eli Rahz from Cypress Creek Golf Club in Ruskin (Florida West Coast GCSA).

The board will support new president Andy Neiswender from Belleair Country Club in Belleair Florida West Coast GCSA); vice president Andy Jorgensen, CGCS from On Top of the World in Ocala (Seven Rivers GCSA); and Bryce Koch, CGCS from Cypress Lake Country Club in Fort Myers (Everglades GCSA).

Meet the new directors:



**Name: Parker L. Ferren, CGCS**  
**Facility:** St. Andrews Club  
**Position:** Golf and grounds superintendent  
**Years in the profession:** 15

**Other facilities worked at:** Polo Club of Boca Raton, Boca Woods Country Club, Pine Tree Golf Club, Golden Eagle Country Club

**Key mentors:** Too many to name. I'm extremely grateful for the many superintendents across the

industry who continuously share their experience and knowledge in helping to advance our profession.

**Years on local chapter board:** 6

**Hobbies and pastimes outside of work:** Golf, fishing, spending

time with family, especially my wife Amber and two beautiful daughters, Emily and Mackenzie.

**Why you are serving as a board member, what you hope to contribute:** I have been fortunate to have been given the opportunity to serve the industry in various roles throughout my career. These extremely rewarding service opportunities have greatly improved my skills as a communicator and superintendent. I look forward to working hard with the rest of the board in advancing the mission of the Florida GCSA.



**Name: Mike Gay**  
**Facility:** Eagle Dunes Golf Club, Sorrento  
**Position:** Golf course superintendent  
**Years in the profession:** 34 years overall, 26 as a superintendent

**Other facilities worked at:** Countryside Executive Golf Course, Stoneybrook East Golf Club, Stoneybrook West Golf Club, Hunter's Creek Golf Club,

Tuscawilla Country Club, Winter Pines Golf Club

**Key mentors:** My dad John Gay, Dave and Doug Hill, Dave Smith

**Years on local chapter board:** 10

**Hobbies and pastimes outside of work:** Running obstacle course races, working out. Spending time with my daughter, Meghan, coaching my son, Cody, in baseball. Fishing and enjoying a craft brew with Dee.

**Why you are serving as a board member, what you hope to contribute:** Have always enjoyed being a part of the inner workings behind the scenes of our profession. Like being able to spread

information out to members that we come across. Just enjoy representing our industry, in my opinion the greatest job there is, in any way possible.



**Name: Eli Rahz**  
**Facility:** Cypress Creek Golf Club

**Title:** Golf course superintendent  
**Years in the profession:** 20

**Other facilities worked at:** The Club at Mediterra, Avila Golf and Country Club, Saucon Valley Country Club, Kirtland Country Club

**Key mentors:** Tim Hiers, CGCS, Frank Heery, Mike Slack, Chad Mark

**Years on local chapter board:** 0

**Hobbies and pastimes outside of work:** Anything with my two daughters, fishing, golf

**Why you are serving as a board member, what you hope to contribute:** I hope to become more involved and meet more fellow superintendents. I tend to keep to myself, so I am trying to work on that while helping fellow superintendents.



**Name: Jason Zimmerman, CGCS**

**Facility:** Pelican's Nest Golf Club  
**Title:** Director of greens and grounds  
**Years in the profession:** 31

**Other facilities worked at:** Innisbrook Resort 1999-2006

**Key mentors:** Keith Einwag, CGCS

**Years on local chapter board:** 7

**Hobbies and pastimes outside of work:** Boating and spending time with family

**Why you are serving as a board member, what you hope to contribute:** To work with our local and state political leaders to educate the public on the positive aspects of the golf industry. I also plan to help raise funding for new research projects around the state. ■

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# PABLO CREEK REOPENS

## *After 10 Months of Adrenalin*

by Trent Bouts

It was with a tree removal project two and a half years ago that Al Clements struck the initial blows of a major renovation at Pablo Creek Club in Jacksonville. It was 16 months ago that he first sprayed out the golf course and 10 months ago that earth started moving.

So, you can appreciate his wry response when, on opening day itself, despite all that time, despite all the heart and spirit he'd poured into the project, despite the painstaking attention

to detail, that Clements discovered he wasn't quite as ready as he thought.

One member, so eager to see the results that he apparently couldn't sleep, was on the driving range in the dark, ready to hit balls the moment the sun broke the horizon.

"It meant we couldn't cut everything out there that we wanted to," Clements chuckles. "But that's okay. I should have known they would be that excited. I should have just come in at 4am and cut everything then."

Of course, it's highly likely that as golf course superintendent, Clements was the only one aware that on some small part of the sweeping 20-acre practice facility, there were a few more millimeters of leaf tissue than he'd planned.





Pablo Creek Club just days before reopening after a 10-month renovation.

Extensive renovations can be like that. They take so long that incremental progress from day to day can seem like no progress at all. Memories of the way things were get lost in the dust behind the box blade. Before you know it, the tiniest things matter to you again. Only a week or two earlier, Clements was riding the golf course wondering, “Did we actually change anything?”

Of course, they had.

The entire hydraulic irrigation system and pump station were upgraded to HDPE pipe and a Rain Bird two-wire system. All 11 acres of bunkers were redone with Bunker Solutions liners installed on the faces. Some bunkers were relocated as a counter to increased driving lengths since the course, a Tom Fazio design, opened in 1996.

Greens were taken all the way down and rebuilt from the gravel layer with new drainage installed. Some were expanded. A six-foot crest at the start of the fairway on the opening hole was shaved down to open sight to the fairway beyond and similar steps were taken on the closing hole. Fairway slopes on some other holes were also adjusted and vistas of the waterway were opened up.

Trinity zoysiagrass was installed on tees and approaches, TifTuf bermudagrass on fairways and rough, and TifEagle bermudagrass replaced Jones Dwarf on the greens. Naturally, Clements is enthusiastic about what he might be able to do with the new grasses. But he farewells the Jones Dwarf like an old friend.

“We got some crazy fast green speeds out of it,” he says. “The only thing I didn’t like too much was when it got warm in winter time after being semi-dormant and it started to grow again, the

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leaves would be much bigger than a TifEagle or something and they would lose a lot of speed. But if the weather was consistent, performance-wise they were great.”

During one of the last tournaments before the renovation, Clements measured his greens running above 15 on the stimpmeter. That would get you fired at some clubs but many of Pablo Creek’s roughly 275 members are excellent players. “They love their greens fast,” Clements says. “They’ll laugh their way right through a four-putt sometimes. If you ever see my greens looking really green, you know something’s not right.”

Similarly, Clements favors firm and fast conditions across the rest of the course. “I think we can push the TifTuf allowing us to get the playability we want without thinning out the turf and having it take a while to come back,” he says. “And we should be able to use even less water than we did before.”

Set on 450 acres against the Intracoastal Waterway, Pablo Creek Club is a sublimely beautiful landscape with a serenity belying its proximity to metropolitan life. The Mayo Clinic is barely a half mile away as the crow flies. But much of the property is committed to conservation easements and there is not a house to be seen. The only reminder of the outside world is from occasional traffic on the private landing strip abutting the western boundary.

As relaxed and calming as the setting is, the members look for some fight in their golf course. Which explains why slopes on some of the 11 acres of bunkering, filled with a custom G-Angle blend, are as severe as they are now, at 35 percent. “We tried as much as 42 percent,” Clements says. “But the first one they did like that, once the sand dried out, it eventually just slid back down to the bottom.”

Clements is not afraid to tinker with limits. The ability to effect change was a prospect that first piqued his interest back in turf school at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College in Tifton, GA, where he grew up.

Working summers at his father’s landscaping and irrigation business, he developed an appreciation for labor and what it could do. “Even if it’s just pressure washing,” he says. “When you get through



A practice paradise over 20 acres

a project and you can see the results, really see what you’ve done, that’s satisfying to me.”

Clements started school on an engineering track but “really didn’t have a passion for it.” So, he worked another stint with his dad before signing on to the turf program at ABAC. “Soon after I started, I knew that the golf course was going to be the way for me to go,” he says. “I loved playing golf. I played a lot with my dad growing up.”

His fate was sealed listening to a couple of friends who worked on golf courses. “Hearing the way that they talked about the work and how much they enjoyed it was fascinating,” Clements says. “The prospect of doing a project like this at some point and creating the fast greens that I like to play on, everything about that really appealed to me.”



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With a crest on the front left portion of the fairway removed, golfers can now see far more the challenge ahead on the opening hole at Pablo Creek Club.

To that point though, Clements had only played golf. He'd never gotten his hands dirty getting one ready. That didn't happen until an internship, at PGA National in Palm Beach Gardens, as his very last course requirement. He never went back to campus. "Not even for graduation," he says. "We were working a lot and I loved it."

Soon, Clements was on staff at PGA National and stayed for a couple of years before moving to Old Marsh as second assistant, first under Steve Ehrbar, CGCS, then Jim Colo. His next move was to Calusa Pines, where again, he had two bosses, Eric von Hofen, then Jim Whalen. By the time he took his first superintendent position at Golden Ocala in 2006, he'd been exposed to some of the finest golfing terrain in the state and some of the smartest minds managing it.

"Golden Ocala was a great place for me to go and put together all the stuff that I had learned from other superintendents, and kind of come up with who I was as a superintendent," he says. "Because you don't really know that until you become the superintendent."

It's one of the great truths of the profession, that the moment you go from assistant standing in front of the desk to being the person sitting behind it, can only be imagined. Perhaps the nearest parallel, is like becoming a parent – which Clements is to two "awesome" kids – son, Ry, 11, and daughter, Sawyer, 10. People can tell you, but you simply can't know what it's like until it happens.

"You can't explain it really," Clements says. "For the longest time, while I was an assistant and looking at superintendent jobs, I thought that I was ready, I got this. And you have to have that attitude. You can't go into it scared, or you're probably going to fail. But once you get in the seat and you start making up a spray program or something like that, it has more weight. When you're

looking at it and realizing, 'Okay, if this doesn't go well, there's only one person they are coming to ...'"

That's where he drew heavily on something that he learned from Ehrbar. Clements says Ehrbar frequently invited new eyes to look at his bentgrass greens at Old Marsh – researchers, consultants, university professors and more. One day, Clements asked his boss why he kept bringing people in when their opinions sometimes conflicted with each other and often with what Ehrbar would do subsequently.

Ehrbar told him: "I listen to what they have to say and then do what seems right." "And I tell people that to this day," Clements says. But it was Whalen who helped Clements go from thinking he was ready to believing.

"An amazing guy. The hardest working person you'll ever meet and extremely intelligent," Clements says of Whalen. "He was really the guy who probably helped my career the most, because he gave me a lot of latitude. He allowed me to really grow and be ready for my first superintendent job. We got to do so many cool projects there because the place was only maybe two years old when he came on board."

Call it latitude, or call it trust, whatever the label, it's at the heart of a successful superintendent-assistant relationship and Clements enjoys precisely that with senior assistant Joey Flinchbaugh.

"He's somebody that can probably do whatever he wants in this business. Just a fantastic talent," Clements says. "I was with the designer a lot during this project and going around checking on different contractors. So, being able to sit with Joey and go over a plan and just know that he could handle it, without me continually

looking over his shoulder was massive."

Clements also has high praise for assistants Brett Hudson, who has been at the club more than 20 years, and Ricky Finlayson, who came from Jupiter Island Club, just three weeks before the renovation began. "We've got just a fantastic core group of guys on the crew too," Clements says. "And we're fortunate to have a great equipment technician in David Green. None of us can do our jobs if we don't have the equipment and David is top class, that's for sure."

There is another element to his gratitude. Clements went through a divorce during the renovation and being able to bank on his team at the golf course made working through things at home all the more manageable. He is also appreciative of the working relationship he enjoyed with the teams from Fazio Golf Course Designers and MacCurrach Golf Construction. "Just great people who are great at what they do," Clements says.

Of course, none of it would have happened without the support of the club itself.

"Our management, club president, green committee chair and

board of directors have always been really supportive of us," Clements says. "Like in the way we didn't specify an opening date until about month before. We always said it would be October, but we didn't want to nail down a date until we knew we would be ready. That makes such a difference because that one extra week of grow in and maintenance and not getting traffic on it when it's not ready can make all the difference. We're really lucky to have that level of support."

That patience on the part of the board of directors was a major reason why Clements enjoyed playing a round with them the day before opening. Of course, as a superintendent, he was critical. "We still have one or two areas that are a little thin. There's always something," he says. "But everybody was really happy and felt the course was playing great."

In the wake of opening day, Clements looked back on "10 months of adrenalin" and admits that can be "pretty stressful." "You don't always feel it, but it is there. You're doing whatever it takes, every single day, 110 percent," he says. "It really taxes you mentally, because you're always firing on all cylinders. As long as the adrenalin stays pumping, you're good. But once things slow down a bit, maybe in the next week or two, I might need a nap." ■



The view down the narrow 13th hole is now contrasted by the expanse of the scene behind the tee now after several trees were removed.

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## Clements “One of 10” Of a Kind in All U.S.

Over decades, first as a project manager with Medalist Golf and now with Fazio Golf Course Designers, Ron Smith has seen about as much dirt move on golf courses as anybody. So, when he takes the trouble to call from his latest project, near Lisbon in Portugal, to talk about Pablo Creek and Al Clements, he probably has some things he wants to say.

“The site at Pablo Creek is something special and the product is pretty awesome. I keep telling the other guys (at Fazio) they really need to go see it because there are not many like that anywhere,” Smith says. “And Al is one of maybe 10 guys in the entire U.S. that are that good to work with on a renovation. I mean, some of these guys are awesome at growing grass but when you get in the dirt, they don’t understand what we do. Fortunately, Al does. He’s top notch.”

Smith chuckles recalling how rare it was when he’d beat Clements on property during the renovation. “I am early. I’m used to being the first one there. But Al beat me all but maybe two or three days over the entire project,” he says.

“The one day I was for sure I was going to beat him, he met me coming in from the other direction! He’s the first one there and the last to leave. You don’t find too many superin-

tendents who can do that over six or seven months.

“I’ve been doing this long enough that you can tell pretty much as soon as you pull into a place how it’s going to go, what we’ve got to work with. Al is hands on and he is really good at what he does. Really, the Pablo Creek project was a great team effort from everyone involved.”



A quiet morning moment at Pablo Creek Club.  
(Photo: Al Clements)



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Superintendent Mike Wilson and general manager Mike Miles with some of the fun of the par three holes at The Yards in the background.

## Wilson Ready to Welcome Those Wanting to Play in The Yards

Mike Wilson's new job is "just across the street" from his old one, but it might as well be a world away.

Old job – assistant superintendent Sawgrass Country Club, former host of The Players Championship and a bastion of the best of the traditional game. New job - golf course superintendent at The Yards, a former and failing country club reimagined into nine regulation holes, a three-hole par three loop, and another of six par threes.

Old job – 75 bunkers, often steep and deep, hand-raked 365 days a year, a bear to maintain. New job – 10 bunkers, yawningly wide, shallow and welcoming to mechanical rakes, an affordable breeze by comparison.

Old job – Striving to present a product that made Sawgrass, as its website says: "the first choice for those seeking the best private club experience and value in our area."

New job – a unique experiment where fun is the goal and golf the vehicle. Wilson's new GM, a former Tour pro from Southern California, admits to business meetings featuring cold Coors Light and crazy ideas.

It's fair to say Wilson has gone from a cathedral to a carnival. But that is not to suggest The Yards is a joke. Indeed, time may reveal it to be closer to genius.

That GM, Mike Miles, who was paired with Bernhard Langer in the final round of last year's Senior PGA Championship, describes The Yards' owner as "a brilliant businessman willing to try anything." "He says we're going to be Topgolf meets TPC Sawgrass and has a love child," Miles laughs.

That owner, David Miller, also hails from Southern California and became a resident of Ponte Vedra Beach in the early 2000s. He bought what was then called Ponte Vedra Golf and Country Club in 2014. One of his first moves was to restore the facility's original name, Oak Bridge Club, to remedy constant confusion with nearby Ponte Vedra Inn and Club.

Oak Bridge was one of the earliest courses in the area with the first nine designed by Bill Amick in the early '70s. Arnold Palmer's design company oversaw a subsequent expansion to 18 holes and the club enjoyed significant success for a long time. But as competition grew – the area is now home to multiple high-end private

facilities - Oak Bridge's fortunes declined.

By the time Miller stepped in, there was no confusion about where Oak Bridge stood in the pecking order. "It was in disrepair," says Wilson, who came on board in April, two days before sprigging after comprehensive surgery by MacCurrach Golf Construction. The facility reopened in October. "It needed an influx of revenue to fix a lot of problems and create what we have now."

To generate that "influx," Miller sold off a portion of what was the back nine, now The Back Yard, after overcoming initial reticence from the surrounding community. Miller was open and frank in public meetings. The facility he described as "an absolute disaster" was based on an old business model that had seen courses across the country plowed under for brick and mortar development. "Golf just built too many courses that were too hard to play and too expensive to maintain," GM Miles says. It was either reinvent or disappear.

The antidote in mind at The Yards is appealing to superintendent Wilson. And not just because of the bunkers. The vast majority of mowing, away from tees and greens, is at the same height. The only areas left to grow higher are heavily shaded. Completely new drainage and new irrigation are also elements that can put a smile on a superintendent's face.

"I also like the idea of doing something a little bit different, because there are lots of 18-hole courses around here, lots of private country clubs," Wilson says. "There is always going to be a market for that, but in order to draw more people to the game, we're offering something more laid back, not so formal. A lot of people these days are not looking to spend five or six hours on a golf course. But they can come out here and spend as much or as little time as they want because of the options we have."

A full-service patio faces onto the par threes of The Back Yard. As Miles says, "That little loop is called The Beer Loop. You go in and grab a beer, get three clubs and your putter and off you go. We're going to give the resort player a totally different experience than they're getting next door (at TPC Sawgrass) or at the private clubs they might belong to."

Wilson is also getting a new maintenance facility as part of the overhaul. "That's great because our current shop is the original built back in the '70s ... and you can tell," he says. The new shop is being relocated adjacent to the front nine and the old site will become a cantina-style sports bar that "will look like it's been here 100 years," Miles says. There will also be tennis and pickle ball. "It will be like the ultimate person's backyard, but everyone will be able to come and enjoy it."

Miles and Miller, the owner, got their heads together early. "He asked what we should do, and I said golf is a slow-moving sport and it is a really slow-moving business," Miles says. "Most of my brethren are still in the position of selling what everybody has been trying to do since the '50s. I said, 'We're going to do something different. We're going to do everything opposite. And if we have the guts to go through with it, I think we're going to be just fine.'"



Mike Wilson expects green speeds on the new TifEagle greens to max out at nine or just above because of some "entertaining" green contours.

One of the keys to providing the fun is being flexible, Miles says, which is why The Yards has been redesigned to accommodate everything from a conventional member-guest tournament to, well, pretty much anything you can imagine. "If someone calls me and says, 'Hey Mike, we've got three foursomes and we're playing TPC today. Can we come over later and play the par three course as a twelvesome?' I'll say, 'Hell yeah. That's why we made it.'"

Miles rattles off a menu of potential customers for The Yards.

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With a nod to Riviera Country Club and ownership and management's Southern Californian roots, this hole on the front nine - The Front Yard - has a bunker in the middle of the green that will be filled with black sand and known as The Black Hole.

Some members, he expects, will come from the immediate community. "Some who will probably drive their own carts here," he says. For others, it might be a second or supplementary membership to one of the country clubs in the area. "People who might like the idea of pulling in any time for a quick nine and not having to worry about making a tee-time."

Miles says vacationers and resort golfers will be attracted to The Yards as a contrast to the "serious high-end" golf that attracts them in the first place. The easy blend of activity and hospitality will appeal to businesses and organizations hosting group outings. The ability to choose how many holes someone wants to play, including at championship or par three lengths, will be attractive to newcomers and also those closer to the other end of their playing days.

All of it is "pretty exciting," Wilson says, as well as a contrast to much of his career spent in the conventional country club realm. He grew up in Orlando and went to the University of Florida to study engineering but graduated with a horticulture degree. He worked some summers at Bay Hill Club during school before joining the staff when he was done.

After helping renovate nine of the holes used for the PGA Tour tournament, he moved with the construction team to build Orange County National. "That was two 18-hole courses, plus an executive course, plus a 45-acre driving range, and a 36-hole put-

ting course, that is gone now," he says. "That was three solid years of construction. Then their next job was either in Alabama, Oklahoma or New Zealand. I was like, 'I think I'll stick with Florida.'"

So, Wilson stayed put until he started visiting the Atlantic Beach area where his wife grew up. He became superintendent at Julington Creek Golf Club. In time, Julington Creek was in the "process of an ownership change and I wasn't going to fit in anymore," Wilson says. "I live here at the beach and Sawgrass (Country Club) was starting a renovation and I was fortunate enough to get hired on as one of the assistants. We did nine holes at a time, over three summers."

While all the construction was done by the time Wilson arrived at The Yards, he expects some challenge in formulating programs for his turf that fit with what could be unpredictable play and traffic patterns.

"I expect it to be a busy place," he says. "We'll have to make things up as we go along but the idea has been to limit the detail work and the hand work so we can provide really good conditions in a way that is sustainable for the business. There's a plan going in, but it might have to evolve depending on what people want. But so far, ownership and management has been spot on." ■

- Trent Bouts



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*Jason Gross says yoga has helped him be a happier, healthier and better superintendent.*

## Yoga Delivers a Breath of Fresh Air TO A SUPERINTENDENT AND HIS CAREER

One evening, when Jason Gross wasn't feeling well, his girlfriend, a cardiac nurse, measured his blood pressure. "Wow," she said. "You're 190 over 105. That's almost enough to admit you to hospital."

Still several years of his 40th birthday, Gross weighed 187lbs, itself no major burden, even for his 5' 9" frame. But he was a golf course superintendent which, for too many of his kind, meant there was more than numbers to those pounds.

"I had fallen into what a lot of stressed superintendents fall into. Drinking beer, drinking a lot of beer. Not eating correctly, things like that. Being a golf course superintendent, you're go, go, go, and you're stressed out constantly," Gross says.

"I'm not going to say that stress was the downfall of my marriage, but I'm sure it contributed to a lot of the strain. If I had yoga then, I wouldn't have brought so much of my work home each day."

It is the profession's great contradiction that people so drawn to the peace and pleasures of working outside can find the job stressing them so much that it compromises their health and their relationships.

Gross believes he found a solution in yoga, the ancient Indian practice that works body, breath and mind nearer to harmony. Yoga, he says, led him out of golf for six years, then returned him to the industry, healthier, happier and far better equipped to handle its challenges.

Today, Gross, 46, is golf course superintendent at La Cita Golf and Country Club in Titusville, just a few minutes from the Kennedy Space Center. He came back to the game in 2018 wiser than his "younger days when you're full of piss and vinegar and more apt to be a hard ass." That doesn't mean he's softer, just smarter.

"After going through everything I went through, I understand people have lives and people have things going on outside their job," he says. "Yoga helped me find compassion. Compassion for myself and for others."

Life might have been very different had his brother not played matchmaker.

With his recent divorce and The Preserve at Turnbull Bay, where he spent 10 years, under new ownership, Gross sensed he was nearing a crossroads. "A family bought the course to run as a family busi-

ness and I wasn't part of the family," he says. "One day my brother was like, 'I think you should come to this yoga class. I want you to meet this girl,'" he recalls. "I thought, 'Okay, yeah, I'll go for that.'"

Soon after, Gross's time at Turnbull Bay came to an end but by then he was a regular at the yoga studio and dating the "girl" who owned it. With the only two other courses in the area both with established superintendents and Gross reluctant to relocate, he joined the dots available to him and decided: "It looks like I'm teaching yoga."

He immersed himself in training to become certified and taught three or four classes a day of 45- or 90-minute durations. "I changed my eating habits and set alcohol down for three years, just walked away from it," he says. "I started eating super clean and I was totally leaned out. It felt good."

An avid – he says "crazy" – mountain biker as a kid and longtime surfer, Gross carried nagging injuries in addition to the aches and pains common to many nearing 40. "Because of my surfing career, my shoulders were pretty worn out," he says. "I had a dislocating shoulder that was pretty bad. Since I started yoga, it hasn't come back. I healed my body of old injuries from growing up in Maryland where we just beat ourselves up doing things you shouldn't do."

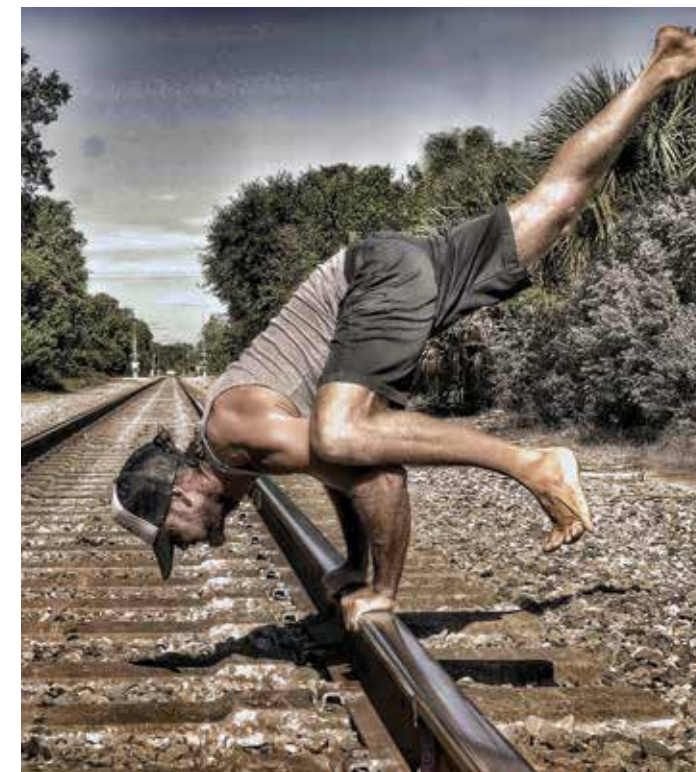
The physical rejuvenation was only part of it.

"If you've got a clear mind, it's way easier to deal with problems and managing your crew. If you don't have a clear mind and you're constantly stressed, that's when you're going to blow up. And the job can be tough. You're not just dealing with the grass," Gross says.

"You're dealing with your crew, your members and golfers, equipment, and so on. There's so much stuff that can go wrong. But there's so much that can go right, too. The meditation, the breath work and the movement in yoga helps keep you more on the positive side of that fence. When you're getting run down and burned out it's way too easy to be negative."

Gross feels that many of his colleagues, like people in general, are wary of yoga, daunted by everything from the terminology to the mystique they associate with meditation. Those elements are as foreign to their high-speed daily lives as the thought of slowly and silently moving through a series of postures.

"People can get a little scared because it's new," Gross says. "Because yoga comes from India, a lot of people associate it with religion. Yoga is not a religion. It's a way of living. It's guidelines for life. When we call



*On the right track: Jason Gross says balance postures in yoga can help promote a sense of balance elsewhere in life.*

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for people to chant “om” at the end of class, some will say, ‘Oh, we’re not doing that.’ But it’s not a prayer, it’s about breath and what the vibration does for you.”

Ironically, it could be argued that superintendents are more pre-qualified for yoga than most. Almost every superintendent has a favorite spot on their course that they go to, often when stressed or when looking to refocus. Wittingly or not, those superintendents see a value in stillness.

Similarly, they understand how nutrition dictates performance because that’s the very reason they have a program for their greens. “If your greens need potassium for stress, we need it to,” Gross says. “You’ve got to eat that banana instead of the donut. People walk into McDonalds every day probably knowing they should eat a salad instead of the French fries. But they don’t make the effort because they’re so busy, so busy racing to get to the next obstacle.”

That’s where people are ill-served by a culture that promises easy fixes, Gross says. Pills that relieve symptoms aren’t addressing the cause.

“Yoga can get circulation and energy into those areas and that’s when healing takes place,” he says. “We tell people that a baker wants to bake you cake like a surgeon is going to want to cut on you, because that’s what they know. We encourage people to try and get as far as they can themselves, then see where they are. Of course, there are times when people need surgery, but we’ve had people who have been able to delay or even put off surgeries be-



Aerial yoga was just one element that Jason Gross taught during a six-year break from golf course maintenance.

cause of the healing they’ve been able to do on their own.”

Gross says another hurdle people cite for their reticence to take on yoga or make meaningful changes in their lifestyle is the idea that it has to be all or nothing.

“I think people get overwhelmed thinking they have to eliminate things completely and do it all at once,” he says. “They don’t. They don’t need to give up this and give up that because that’s totally stressful for people. Just take steps towards it. If people just get to

yoga and start go get into their body and feel the awareness, things kind of happen. People start to feel a little better, and they decide themselves, ‘You know what, I’m going to steer away from so much red meat, so much alcohol.’”

Moderation is key, says Gross, who appreciates “a cold beer at the end of a long, hot day” as much as the next superintendent. “If you drink beer, you drink beer. That’s fine,” he says. “Just maybe not eight beers a night. Moderation. I don’t eat a lot of meat now. I’m not saying that I’m vegetarian, but I don’t eat red meat. I will eat some chicken and fish here and there, maybe once or twice a week, but I eat mainly a plant-based diet now.”

He laughs recalling his return to golf at La Cita, which he says, was in “distress.” Longtime members thrilled by the efforts of new leadership at the club, showed their appreciation with gifts of brownies and other baked goods. “It was super good stuff but soon I saw my weight climbing back up again,” he says. “I thought, ‘Oh, my god, I can’t be eating so much of this stuff.’”

Awareness and the ability to take pause like that is part of a mindfulness that Gross says yoga helps instill. It is underlined at the end of each class with the shavasana pose, which translates as the



Upside down with dog: Jason Gross takes an inversion while his dog mans the doorway.

corpse pose, where practitioners are still, on their back, for five or 10 minutes or more.

“It’s like meditation. But we see a lot of people have trouble with that because we are so stimulated as a society,” he says. “That’s why we wear the body out physically during class. To get all the energy and angst out, so you can sit quietly and be with yourself and let all of that outside stuff go.”

Like most superintendents, Gross works more than his fair share of hours at La Cita. But he still practices yoga daily, with that same girlfriend, Lisa. “She’s pretty much like my wife. We’ve been together 10 years,” he says. They also make a point of running most days, about two miles, “to get the heart rate up.”

“Yoga was breath of fresh air for me,” Gross says. “There are a lot of superintendents out there

who need to start doing something daily. It doesn’t have to be a lot. It could be as simple as six postures a day for three minutes, a forward bend, a back bend, a twist, a standing balance posture, an inversion, and some sort of full body dynamic, like a sun salute. That’s 18 minutes of your day. It takes a while, but your body will start to tell you what you need. But even stopping to do that for yourself is good. The pause is good.” ■

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# How a Pocket Knife MAKES YOU SHARPER

J. Mark Black, CGCS

A friend who visited me regularly when I was a superintendent, sent this picture and encouraged me to write an article on why a golf course superintendent still needs a pocket knife. In today's turf world, with all the sophisticated gadgets and hi-tech gizmos, they still haven't created an app to replace the art of greenkeeping.

My grandfather was born in 1908 in the panhandle town of Chipley, and I was very close to him until the day he died at 94 years of age. I'm guessing I was about 12 years old when he asked me if I had a pocket knife. I replied, "No sir, I don't." He said, "Well I don't know what to think of a feller that doesn't carry a pocket knife." I believe on my next birthday, I got my first knife and I have carried one ever since.

Pocket knives are a very personal possession and, as such, how you select one is influenced by your tastes. But, for the most part, the knife you choose depends on what you want to use it for. For most superintendents, we use them for removing crowfoot, opening a bag of fertilizer, cutting fishing line or cleaning our fingernails. For me personally, I also like to dig into greens, or any turf for that matter, and see what's taking place.

There is so much valuable information in that top half inch of the turf canopy. I remember one Thanksgiving holiday, when I was home from Lake City, working for Paul Hickman at Grenelefe Golf and Country Club. I saw Paul down on his hands and knees looking closely into the turf canopy of a green and wondering, "What is he looking for or at?"

When he left, I went up on the green to see for myself. The greens had been recently overseeded and the seeds were just starting to swell and germinate. It was fascinating for me to see the beginning stages of germination and imagine what the putting surface would soon look like. It may sound simple but I learned a great deal that day and looking closely at turfgrass became a career-long way of life for me.

Years later, while I was superintendent at Bonita Bay Club, we planted the first set of Champion bermudagrass greens, and



*J. Mark Black, CGCS takes a pocket knife to the turf for clues and answers to the balance between the art and the science of golf course maintenance.*

perhaps some of the first ultradwarf greens, in Florida at that time. Any superintendent that has planted a new grass, particularly on greens, knows there is an element of the unknown that can be nerve-racking. It didn't take long to realize that Champion does not behave like Tifdwarf and a very new management regime was going to be required, and quickly.

I spent more time on my hands and knees with my pocket knife, studying what was, and most particularly, was not taking place in that top half inch. It helped determine almost every agronomic decision we made prior to opening the course for play and still does to this day.

It will seem foreign at first but spend some time on your knees when you feel the grass is at your desired color, texture, density, etc. Pick apart some of the shoots and study the leaf color, stolon color, rhizome color, roots and root hairs. Look for new leaf development and its color. If anything looks off, from what you know to be healthy turf, you are in a much better position to evaluate your programs.

Being proactive by getting on your knees with a pocket knife can help you stay ahead of the curve.

Turf management will always be a blend of art and science. The truth is that the science can only take you so far. The art develops over years of pushing some limits and using what you see and touch through daily monitoring to "ground truth" where the lab and the real life come together. Anyone can spray a fungicide or spread a fertilizer but knowing if it's really necessary is what separates a good superintendent from a great superintendent.

If you don't carry a pocket knife, consider it. Get up close and personal with your turf and see what's taking place. Not only will you learn new things, it's exciting to know that your programs are working, your turfgrass is healthy and you can take that much needed family vacation and enjoy it. ■

*– J. Mark Black, CGCS is a longtime superintendent now consultant who received the Florida GCSA President's Award for Lifetime Service in 2008.*



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# Darby Follows Winding ROAD TO TAMPA BAY

by Todd Six



James Darby is working on delivering Tampa Bay Golf and Country Club to the "next level."

I met James Darby when he was a sales representative for a golf supplier. He was helpful, knowledgeable, engaged and relatable, all of which struck a chord with me. When I learned his background and then recently heard he was back as a fellow superintendent, I knew I wanted to feature his story. As with most of us, his begins with a love of golf.

During our conversation, I asked James, "What is it like to ride the golf course first thing in the morning after being away for a while?" He said, "It's obviously spectacular. You forget what it's like to ride a golf course and watch the sun come up over your work. Seeing the course with the morning dew, there's nothing like it. It's great. It's great to be back and see the nature and be silent on your product when no one is out there and just take in what you've done."

After his father won custody of James in a bitter divorce, the 10-year old spent a lot of time with his paternal grandfather playing golf at the Willowbrook Golf Club in Cortland, NY. After his grandfather played his morning round, James would stay at the course most times until 6pm, playing up to 72 holes of golf a day or until his dad picked him up after work. The course was a safe place for him to develop his skills, which were considerable. He was a scratch handicapper and eventually became a two-time high school sectional champion.

With golf squarely in his blood, James knew that he wanted a career in the game and began working at Cortland Country Club during his teen years. There, he developed a relationship with Casey Angle, the assistant superintendent, who encouraged him to pursue the turf industry. And when Casey moved to Florida for a job opportunity, he told James to join him in the golf capital of the world.

It was a difficult decision for James, who didn't want to leave his Dad as he had been at his Dad's side while he battled cancer and was still reeling with the death of his beloved grandfather in 1995. However, he realized that he had to move on and packed up his belongings and drove 24 hours south to Orlando, FL. He arrived to join Casey only to find out that Casey was moving again!

Still, James decided to stay in Florida and found an apartment next to a golf course and started working at the The Greens Golf and Country Club in Oak Ridge under the leadership of Vaughn Arbeiter. Vaughn became a mentor and father figure to James, who followed Vaughn to Bobby Jones Golf Club in Sarasota as his manager trainee and became a licensed spray tech.

While living in Sarasota, James met his future wife, Wendy, through a chance encounter after his car broke down. He pushed it to an automotive shop where she worked and they have been together since their first date, to the beach in July 1996. In

1998, James took an opportunity as an assistant superintendent at Cove Cay Golf Club in Clearwater, working with Paul Hickman, CGCS and Keith Kirchoffer.

In 1999, James then had an opportunity of a lifetime to be superintendent of a groundbreaking new golf course in Land O' Lakes, called The Groves. During the grow-in and design changes, James worked closely with the architect, Gary Koch, who won six times on the PGA Tour.

James successfully managed The Groves as superintendent and had a good rapport with head pro, Rick Weber. In 2008, family took priority and James resigned to return to Cortland, NY to care for his grandmother, who suffered from dementia. With no surviving family to care for her except for James, he and Wendy and their 5-year old son Cameron made the long journey.

Cortland was home for a little while until his grandmother passed away over Thanksgiving in 2009. They decided to move back to Florida after reaching out to Keith Kirchoffer. An opportunity opened as superintendent with his former management company at the Babe Zaharias Golf Club in Tampa, in May 2010.

While James and his team took the golf course conditions to a new level, constant differing opinions, decisions and management leadership forced James out of a job and out of the industry in 2016. This was a painful, miserable time and he was out of work for nearly six months until approached by Mark Henderson with Upstart Products, later Ewing Irrigation, for a sales position.

Upon accepting the position, James gained valuable knowledge from the many manufacturing reps he interacted with, something not many get a chance or have time to do during the day. James also met with many superintendents as a sales rep and saw what others were doing in the industry, shared his knowledge and formed new relationships with superintendents across his region. He found a new love of the golf industry through sales and build-



James Darby prepares to peek beneath the surface of his new G12 putting surfaces.

ing solid relationships with these superintendents. With Ewing as a stepping stone, James then moved on becoming a manufacturing rep with Green Edge.

Fate had a different path for James, when he was approached by Rick Weber, the head pro he worked with years ago at The Groves. Although they hadn't worked together for almost two decades, Rick and James still kept in contact. Rick was now director of golf at The Tampa Bay Golf and Country Club in San Antonio, FL and the club was looking to take the golf course in a new direction. Rick set up a meeting for James with general manager Seth VanHall, to discuss and visualize the "next level of the course" and after the meeting, the rest is history.

James accepted a position in September 2019 and began growing-in new Champion G12 putting greens. To move forward, it was imperative to have the right team in place. This

started with the hiring of two "assistant" superintendents. Jed Dart and Todd Benortham, superintendents in their own right, joined James and formed an alliance to transform the golf course into something much more respectable.

This is only the beginning, never satisfied with just respectable, James has submitted a budget that will allow him to take the property to the next level. He and his team have developed a program to ensure the greens are contamination free, to have a good pre-emergent program in place, followed by a post-emergent program to get everything cleaned up and onto a good Primo regimen with foliar program to create definition.

James says his goal is to win the respect of the membership through the condition of the golf course and although he and his team have accomplished that in less than a year, I get the sense they are truly just getting warmed up. ■

-Todd Six is golf course superintendent at On Top of the World Clearwater.

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# IN THE NEWS

Excerpts from press coverage on people in the world of golf course maintenance in Florida.

**Tim Campbell**  
*Palm Beach Par 3 Golf Course*  
 WPTV5, September 16

The Palm Beach Par 3 golf course is bookended by the ocean and the intracoastal on the island of Palm Beach. Since February, the course has had beehives nestled on the back nine. Superintendent Tim Campbell started the effort with beekeeper Sierra Malnove as an opportunity to do better for the surrounding environment. The honey has been sold in the course's shop.



"The feedback has been really positive, we've sold out of every bit of honey that we've gotten in and everybody's excited, and people will call and ask about the program, some of the stores in town have asked about selling the honey, so everything has been really good," Campbell said.

Malnove tends to more than 100 hives on fifteen golf courses in the county. She says the honey from the island is spectacular so far. "Every honey harvest tastes different. It's really incredible. I try to tell everybody to keep a jar from each harvest because each harvest is going to taste different. Each year, that season's harvest is going to taste different," she said.

**Jason Rouk**  
*Seagate Country Club, Delray Beach*  
 Travel Daily News, October 15

The Seagate Country Club ... has announced the hiring of John Michael Phillips, the new director of rackets, Jason Rouk as director of agronomy, and Daniel Williams as assistant wellness director.

Rouk has diverse experience throughout the U.S., cultivating his skill set as a turf manager of both cool and warm season turfgrass. Most recently, he was employed by the La Gorce Country Club in Miami Beach as the golf course superintendent. He has worked with the USGA, PGA of America, and PGA Tour agronomists in developing and overseeing programs to ensure successful major golf events on the world stage. He received a B.S. in Horticulture and Landscape Architecture from Oklahoma State University and is a longstanding member of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America.

"In my new role at The Seagate Country Club, I look forward to

enriching members' golf experiences by combining my passion for golf course maintenance with my love of the game," said Rouk.

**Jason Zimmerman, CGCS**  
*Pelican's Nest Golf Club, Bonita Springs*  
 Gulfshore Business, August 30

In the early mornings, before the heat of the day has spread across the greens, Jason Zimmerman, director of greens and grounds at Pelican's Nest Golf Club in Bonita Springs, hops in his golf cart and tours the links. He stops to examine a place that needs an extra dose of fertilizer and takes careful notes for spoon-feeding the spot later in the day.



Though golf courses are exempt from the countywide fertilizer ban in the wet months, Zimmerman is careful to limit his usage; he doesn't want excess nutrients making their way into local lakes and streams. Depending on that day's weather predictions, he'll draw up a plan to adjust the nozzles and the output. Water is always on Zimmerman's mind.

Pelican's Nest is one of many local businesses that must balance the dual pressures of water quality and water scarcity with the demands of the area's economy - flawless golf courses, immaculate landscaping and a flawless coastline. For Zimmerman, like man golf course superintendents, striking the right balance is an exact science.

"We're not just people throwing it out there and hoping for the best," he says. "It's very science- and technology-based." Using less product is essential, Zimmerman knows, both for local water quality and for the private community's bottom line. "It's good business to be smart about water and fertilizer."

Golf courses are often in the crosshairs of environmentalists when it comes to water talks. But many courses go to great lengths to balance the needs of their communities and the local ecology. Zimmerman, for example, has advanced certifications and Pelican's Nest is an Audubon certified course. And although most agree that our natural resources are essential to this area's charm, it's hard to argue that Southwest Florida could survive without the very things many people come here for - golf, gated communities and green lawns year round.



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**Pheneger Honored For Grassroots Efforts**

Plenty of Florida GCSA members saw some irony in Greg Pheneger's prize as winner of GCSAA's 2020 Q1 Grassroots Ambassador Leadership Award. Pheneger, director golf course maintenance at Johns Island Club in Indian River Shores, won a trip to next year's National Golf Day in Washington, D.C. The irony is that he is always, well, almost always, at Golf Day anyhow.

In the 12-history of the golf industry delegation's visit to lawmakers in the nation's capital, Pheneger has only missed once, because the date clashed with an important tournament at John's Island. Of course, no one went this year in May because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Indeed, Pheneger has been the Florida GCSA's front man on government relations for as long as many can remember. He served as chairman of the association's government relations committee for well over a decade, stepping down only this summer. A previous grassroots leadership award winner, Ryan Swilley from Gulf Stream Golf Club in Delray Beach is the new committee chair.

"It wasn't because I was losing my passion for the work," Pheneger says. "But I did feel it was time to give someone else the opportunity. I will still be involved."

The Grassroots Ambassador Leadership Award is presented quarterly in partnership with The Toro Company. A 34-year member of GCSAA, Pheneger became an ambassador when the program was introduced in 2014. In his role as an ambassador, Pheneger is currently paired with Sen. Rick Scott (R-FL) and works closely with the Senator's southeast Florida district director, Ryan Hnatick.

"We are grateful for Greg's continuous activism for the industry over so many years," GCSAA chief executive officer Rhett Evans says. "His hard work is helping grow the game of golf and improve the perception of golf course management in Florida and around the country. Congratulations to him on this recognition."

After Scott was elected to the senate in 2016, Hnatick came to Vero Beach and toured the West Course at John's Island Club. "We discussed H-2B visas which our club uses to supplement our staff every winter, the great environmental benefits of golf and our capital spending on the course and facilities," Pheneger says. "I have spoken to Hnatick concerning H-2B visa issues and the President's Executive Order. Every issue that I have presented has been well received and he has passed up the ladder in D.C."

Pheneger's award adds to an impressive resume. He has served as president of both the Florida GCSA (2003-04) and the Florida Turfgrass Association (2009-10) and received the Distinguished Service Award from the Florida GCSA (2007) and the Florida Turfgrass Association's Wreath of Grass (2015).



Greg Pheneger speaks with Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis at last year's Florida Golf Day.

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## UF Online Research Forum

Features New Fellow Unruh

When Dr. Bryan Unruh appeared on the University of Florida Turfgrass Research Forum mid-October, it was in a newly and doubly distinguished capacity. It was Unruh's first time in front of Florida GCSA members as a Fellow of both the American Society of Agronomy and the Crop Science Society of America. Fellow is the highest designation bestowed by both organizations and is limited to no more than 0.3 percent of the membership of each society.



Dr. Bryan Unruh

In both instances, Fellows must be nominated and supported with written commendations from their peers. In the case of the larger American Society of Agronomy, Fellow recognizes "professional achievements and meritorious service." A Fellow of the Crop Science Society of America is honored for "outstanding contributions to agronomy through education, national and international service and research."

"It was kind of cool, you know, to get both in the same year. That doesn't happen very often," says Unruh, who learned the news via emails. "I got one then about four or five days later I got the second one. It's a neat thing to be recognized by your peers. I'd never really viewed myself as being among the company of those at the top of the field."

The Turfgrass Research Forum on October 14 was an alternative to the University of Florida's traditional in-person field days, cancelled this year as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Participation in the event was free. In addition to Unruh, the three-hour online event featured research updates from the UF turfgrass team including Dr. Kevin Kenworthy, Dr. Billy Crowe, Dr. Philip Harmon, Dr. Jason Kruse, Dr. Adam Dale and Dr. Marco Schiavon.

A significant portion of the forum focused on updates on research projects funded by the Florida GCSA and local chapters in the state from money raised in the annual Rounds4Research auction.



## Experience 2021 GIS in Your Space At Your Pace and All in One Place

As many of you are probably aware, the 2021 Golf Industry Show will be presented virtually with the same high-caliber education, networking and tradeshow opportunities. It may feel a little different taking this all in at your computer in your personal space, but rest assured the benefits will still be there.

As difficult as it was making this decision, there was really only one true option in 2021 to provide our members a safe way to enjoy what has always been viewed as the industry gold standard for education and networking. A virtual GIS was the logical decision. I believe there are as yet unknown opportunities in this format that will be useful when we are again able to enjoy a more traditional conference and show.

I hope that individuals who do not typically make it to GIS will see this as a great opportunity to experience the career enhancing education and networking with peers and exhibitors that occurs during the week. It will not just be three days of Zoom calls. The 2021 GIS will be presented on a virtual platform, which will be interactive, engaging and easy to use. The lineup will include education, networking, special events, and a trade show.

I want to share some of the thinking that went into pricing decisions for the 2021 GIS and assure you these were not arbitrary. Education has always been a key component of GIS. Whether delivered in-person or virtually, providing first-class specialized education that GIS is known for still carries considerable costs, which is reflected in the pricing.

However, we recognize that a virtual format doesn't offer the same number of opportunities, which is why individual packages for the virtual event start at \$350 for members versus the \$500 member price of the 2020 in-person event. An individual All-Access package is a value of \$3,230 for just \$600, which is on top of significant savings in no travel and hotel costs for the virtual show. The virtual show also offers the value and convenience of on-demand access for up to 30 days, depending on the package.

In a traditional in-person event, it is rare that a superintendent can bring their entire team for three days of education and networking. In the virtual world, the potential exists for everyone at the facility to benefit. Facility packages offer



excellent value because everyone on your team receives their own registration credentials for one price, plus every team member who registers gets the education points. With specific education tracks for assistants, equipment managers and more, we believe this is a great opportunity to elevate the learning at a facility.

I know the question is out there regarding GCSAA's free webinars that are always available for our members. We are proud of those webinars and the value they provide throughout the year. The advantages of GIS education include sessions exclusive to the event, new sessions offering the latest content, targeted education tracks for specific interest or roles, interaction with instructors and peers during the event, and the opportunity for more in-depth exploration of topics.

We at GCSAA are very excited about the potential of the virtual 2021 GIS and look forward to providing members with the exceptional opportunities for career enhancement that are routinely offered at our in-person event. In 2021, you will be able to enjoy it all in your space, at your pace, all in one place. Registration is now open and I hope you share our enthusiasm for what I am confident will be a beneficial learning and networking event. ■

- Ralph Dain is GCSAA regional representative in Florida. You can reach him at (785) 424-4306 or [rdain@gcsaa.org](mailto:rdain@gcsaa.org).

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