



*Sara Bay (nee Whitfield Estates) Country Club...*

# Florida's Legendary Links

BY JOEL JACKSON, CGCS

**T**he Sara Bay Country Club was born during the The Florida Land Boom of the Roaring 20s like many of our vintage courses throughout state. Originally called the Whitfield Estates Country Club, the Donald Ross-designed course opened in 1926. The course rose to rapid prominence in the golf world thanks in no small part to the presence of golfing legend Bobby Jones.

Jones lived and worked in Sarasota as the assistant sales manager for the Adair Realty Company which helped develop the property. When it came time to open up the new golf course and country club, the all-time amateur champion Jones took on Walter Hagen, golf's reigning professional champion in a 72-hole match. The first 36 holes were





The green on the 391-yard, par-4 11th hole is a good example of the famous Donald Ross "dome-shaped" greens. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

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played at the Whitfield Estates Country Club and the final two rounds across the bay at the Pasadena Yacht & Country Club.

The match was won rather handily by Hagen with a 12-up victory and gave rise many years later to the famed fictional "grudge match" between Hagen and Jones in the 2000 movie, "The Legend of Bagger Vance." Four years later in 1930 at the age of 28 Jones completed the fabled "Grand Slam" and then retired from competitive golf to practice law. Sports writer Mike Mersch of *The Herald* wrote in a Jan. 4 article on Sara Bay's 75th anniversary that in his autobiography Jones said, "I regard the Whitfield Estates course as one of the best in America."

Jones was not the only golfing legend to grace the greens and fairways of the old Sara Bay course. Photographs in the clubhouse document Sara Bay's lineage as a hallowed place of golf lore with pictures of such notables as Tommy

Armour, its first head golf professional and Joe Turnesa, former teaching pro at the club who won 34 PGA events and played on the first Ryder Cup team.

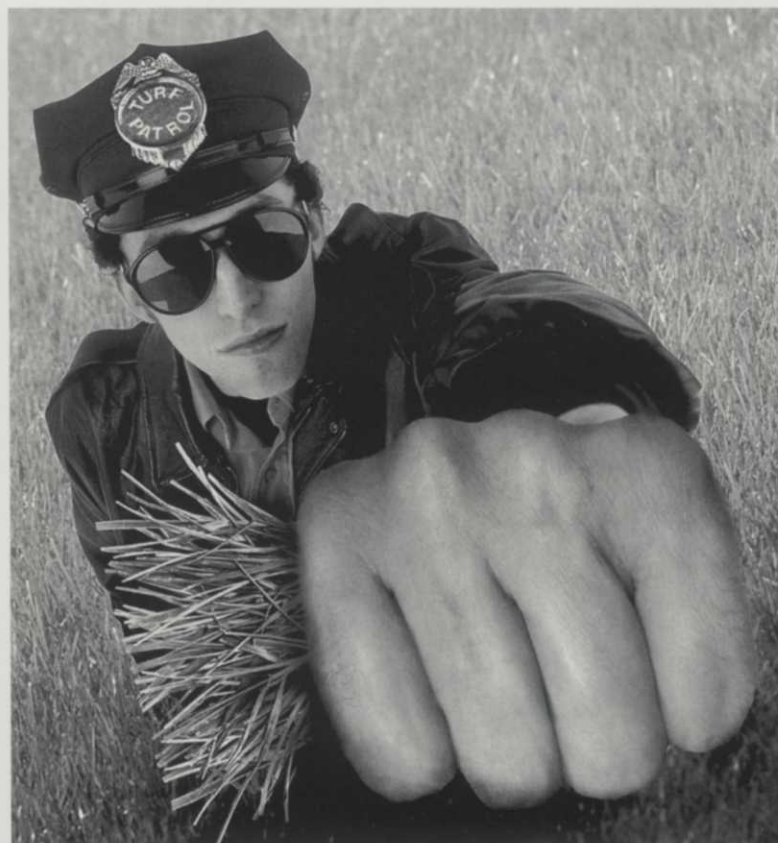
Other golf notables memorialized on the walls are Gene Sarazen, Joe Turnesa, Jug McSpadden, Johnny Ferrell, Leo Diegel, Jimmy Demaret, Jake Burke, Jr, Dr. Cary Middlecoff, Babe Didrikson Zaharias, Patty Berg, the Bauer sisters, Alice and Marlene Hagge, Louise Suggs and Kathy Whitworth.

Also according to the article by Mersch, Ross said in a televised interview in 1948 that Pinehurst No. 2 was his best course. When asked which was his next best, Ross replied, "The Whitfield Estates Country Club... that was before the members messed it up."

The Great Depression of the 1930's and misuse and abuse during the World War II years took their toll on the once-proud course. The original design was lost in a post-war renovation in an attempt to bring it back to life and the



Assistant Superintendent Scott Hoppe (left) and Bob Gwodz holding the original Donald Ross drawing of the 6th hole. The course has several of the original sketches on display in the pro shop. Photo by Joel Jackson.



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course did host several LPGA tournaments in the 1950's.

In 1990 Brian Silva, noted architect specializing in Ross course renovations, restored Sara Bay to the challenging links design with its domed, upside down, punch bowl-style greens made famous by Ross at Pinehurst No. 2. The course still has 17 of Ross's original sketches of the Whitfield Estates layout on display, and Silva's restoration was uncanny in recapturing the bump-and-run strategy depicted in the original drawings. The course has four winding creeks that snake across the holes, but the real test — as at all true Ross courses — is found on and around the greens.

The man charged with balancing modern golfers' expectations with a golf course designed to reflect the playing strategies of the 1920s is Sara Bay veteran superintendent Bob Gwodz. The task is made easier for Gwodz and his assistant Scott Hoppe because they truly honor and respect the historical significance of the course entrusted to their care.

Gwodz has been superintendent at Sara Bay for seven years and spent six years as the assistant under former superintendent Pat Sneed who left to take a job at the Mississippi State University course. Gwodz brings his own brand of golf tradition to the job as he has Scottish blood on one side of the family and says

## Bob Gwodz

**Originally from:** Whippany, N.J. Family: wife, Chris; Son, R. J. (age 9)

**Education:** Manatee Junior College

**Employment history:** 1983-85 assistant superintendent, Sunrise C.C., Sarasota; 1985-86 superintendent Sunrise C.C.; 1986-88 superintendent Hibiscus G.C., Naples; 1988-94 assistant superintendent, Sara Bay C.C., Sarasota; 1994 superintendent Groves and Highlands courses at the Meadows in Sarasota; 1994-present superintendent Sara Bay C.C.

**Professional affiliations and awards:** Secretary of the Suncoast GCSA and board member since 1998; Florida GCSA; Florida Turfgrass Association and GCSAA.

**Mentors:** Jamie Jackson Sr. gave me my first golf course maintenance job at age 13 mowing greens and raking bunkers. Jon Roxburgh was responsible for actually hiring me at Forest Lakes. It was either keep kicking me off the course for playing it on the sly or put me to work so I could really play golf. Also I am very fortunate enough to have worked with two very good superintendents, Mike Meehan, now a superintendent for Hyatt Hotels in Puerto Rico and Pat Sneed, CGCS, formerly at Sara Bay and now superintendent at Mississippi State University. Last but not least my dad, who taught me to also do a good job and never give up.

**Memorable moments:** I spent three summers in a row on renovating courses and after all the hard work, it was very satisfying to see all that was accomplished.

**Goals:** To become a certified golf course superintendent.

**Advice to prospective superintendents:** I believe in being a hands-on superintendent and to never be complacent. Always find ways to improve. Treat each member as though they are the president of the club.

**Hobbies and interests:** Family, fishing, football and Little League



*The Sara Bay topiary logo was transplanted letter by letter from the nursery area where they were grown in and shaped. According to the local extension agent, constant pruning of these Shillings hollies to one size can weaken the plants and make them susceptible to disease. The only cure is periodic replacement.*

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Bob Gwodz with his wife Chris and son R. J. and Putter, Bob's 2nd assistant and Canadian goose control expert.

## Fun Facts

Here are some things you might not know about our cover story superintendent.

1. Car: 1997 Chevy pickup
2. Last good movie I saw: The Green Mile
3. I stay home to watch: NASCAR and football
4. Book I've been reading: When I need a number, the phone book
5. Favorite meal: Porterhouse steak and potato
6. Favorite performers: Sam Elliot, Rolling Stones and Aerosmith
7. Prized possession: My boat
8. Personal heroes: Anyone who has served our country
9. Nobody knows that I: ...and they never will
10. I'm better than anyone else when it comes to: Saving money
11. If I could do it over: I'd be 15 years old again
12. My fantasy is: To live in the Tennessee mountains all summer and Florida all winter.
13. The one thing I can't stand: Two things - Liars and people who are late
14. If I could change one thing about myself: I'd be more patient
15. The words that best describe me: Works hard. Plays hard.
16. Gwodz is Ukranian for "Hard as nails"

## Suncoast Chapter

**History:** The growth and development of new communities and golf courses along Florida's southwest coast in the Bradenton and Sarasota area led to the formation of the Suncoast Chapter in 1976.

**Founding members:** President Bud Pearson, Palma Sola GC; Mack Baugh, CGCS, Longboat Key Club; and Gary Smither, CGCS Sec/Treasurer, Sunrise National GC.

**Activities:** The Suncoast Scramble began in 1982 and brings together all the key players in the golf industry on one team for this annual fund raising event. Each team consists of the golf course superintendent, a golf pro, a course official form an area course and a local supplier. Over \$250,000 has been raised for turf research, scholarships and junior golf. In 1996 the Suncoast GCSA began partnering with the Sarasota County Cooperative Extension Service to provide a full day of education and fellowship for turf managers at the annual Suncoast Grounds Management Seminar.

**Honors and Awards:** FGCSA Presidents Award For Lifetime Service have gone to: Bud Pearson, Jim Svabek, Hugh Bebout, Royce Stewart and Mack Baugh, CGCS.

**Officers for 2000-2001:** President Tom Crawford; Internal Vice President Joe Sittinger; External Vice President John Van Vranken; Secretary Bob Gwodz, and Treasurer Andy Burmester.

**Members:** currently 72 Class A, B & C members of the Suncoast GCSA and 108 Affiliate and Retired members.

*'It's an incredible experience to be working every day on some of golf's most hallowed ground.'*

some branches of his family tree have common roots in the Tufts family name of Pinehurst fame. He wants to see if there might be some ancient golf DNA in his blood that led him to his current vocation.

Hoppe has worked with Gwodz for nine years and they have known each other for 15. In growing up across from the 14th hole, Hoppe used to camp out and fish in the creeks as a kid. Instead of a "range rat" he was more of a "rough rat." Says Hoppe, "It's an incredible experience to be working every day on some of golf's most hallowed ground. It adds an element of pride to the job knowing the history of the course. It's not just a job when you are responsible for caring for such a remarkable place in the golf world."

Historical landmark or not, Sara Bay is still a golf course that needs tending and incorporating modern and innovative practices is a mission that Gwodz and his staff undertake with a purpose.

"We live and die by the creeks that crisscross the golf course," Gwodz says. "During heavy rain events and storm surges from Sarasota Bay, the creeks can flood significant portions of the course. This presents a two-fold problem. First, the obvious wet conditions that we have to deal with and second, the chance of chemicals and fertilizers getting into the waterways.

"We are very sensitive to our location and interaction with the creeks and bay. Scott and I both have our pesticide applicator licenses and we are the only ones who treat near the creeks. We always make sure the weather forecast is favorable to avoid any problems. We must be





## Sara Bay Country Club

**Location:** Sarasota

**Ownership:** Member owned

**Playing Policy:** Private. Annually hosts Donald Ross Invitational for junior golfers. Has hosted Florida Men's and Senior State Amateur tournaments.

**18 holes:** Yardage: 6,686 yds from the back tees. Par 72. Slope rating 132.

**Designed by:** Donald Ross. Opened in 1926.

**Management Team:** Club President Eddie Morton; Greens Chairman Charles B. Johnson; Club Manager Brigitte A. Conklin, CDM; Head Golf Professional Gavin Darbyshire; Golf Course Superintendent Bob Gwodz.

**Major Renovations/Ongoing Projects:** In 1990-91 golf course architect Brian Silva and Central Florida Turf, Inc. restored the course back to its original Ross design. We have 17 of the original Ross drawings of the holes. This summer replacing pump station with a VFD pump station. Following year installing Rain Bird computer control system

**Total turf acreage under maintenance:** 129 acres.

**Greens:** Average size: 5,000 sq. ft. Total 3 acres; turf - Tifdwarf; height of cut: .150 in. in summer, .130 in. in season.

Interseeding: Sabre & Fuzzy Poa trivialis @ 6 lbs/M. Green Speed goal: 8.5 - 9 normal play, 10.0 for special events.

**Tees:** 3.0 acres of Tifway 419; HOC 5/8 in. year round. Overseeding: None

**Fairways:** 23 acres of Tifway 419; HOC 5/8 in. year round. Overseeding: None

**Roughs:** 100+ acres. Mixture of Tifway 419 and common bermuda; HOC 1.5 inches. Not overseeded.

**Bunkers:** 88 bunkers with Standard Sand #220. Mechanically rake all bunkers with Toro Sand Pro with standard tines & flaps.

**Waterways/Ponds:** Four creeks run through the property. Bowles Creek, the largest, supplies our irrigation water.

**Irrigation:** PSI pumping station. Toro VTII Controls. Approximately 600 heads. Fertigation system: Two tanks — one for fertilizer and one for wetting agent. Fertigation used for feeding turf as granular applications begin to wear off and applying wetting agents during the drought conditions has been very helpful.

**Total staff including superintendent:** 13 full time & three part time budgeted. 13 full time currently on staff. Average weekly budgeted hours per person: Straight time 40 hrs. Overtime 3-6 hrs. Generally 3 hours OT weekly during cool season and 6-7 hours during warm season.

**Leadership:** Assistant Superintendent Scott Hoppe; mechanics James Suponc and Dick Ramon; pest control technicians Juan Sanchez and Anastacio Agapito; irrigation technician Doriteo Baltazar.

**Special circumstances:** When the creeks flood during storms and tidal surges, trash and silt can result in severe damage. Deep old-style Ross bunkers and the way the domed "punch bowl" greens slope halfway down the bunker faces requires constant maintenance especially after 1-2-inch thunderstorm downpours.

**Communications:** Monthly articles in the club's newsletter and monthly grounds and board meetings with members. Rainy days serve as training days for the crew with safety topic discussed.

**Cultural/Fertility/IPM Programs:** We have had good control of mole crickets using Chipco Choice. All herbicide spraying is done on a spot-treat-only basis. Nematodes are treated only when signs of stress cannot be controlled with water and fertilizer. We observe voluntary, common-sense setbacks from the creek banks when applying chemicals or fertilizers.

**Equipment Inventory:** Jacobsen walk mowers for greens; Toro Triplexes used when double-cutting greens. Toro Triplex for tees and chipping areas. Two Toro 6500's for fairways and two Toro 5-gangs for roughs.

**Wildlife Inventory:** We have a pair of nesting bald eagles on the course. We are also a release site for the Mote Marine Laboratory to release fingerling snook and redfish. We have all the common wading birds, ducks, song birds, owls and hawks as well as squirrels and an occasional fox.





## The Birthplace of Florida Golf

**D**id you know that Sarasota is reported to be the birthplace of golf in Florida? According to writer Kent Chetlain, the earliest golf in the North American colonies was probably played as early as the 17th or 18th century in New York or Pennsylvania. In a 1999 article titled "Our History of Golf on the Suncoast" for *Golf Scene* magazine, Chetlain reports that J. Hamilton Gillespie was probably the first person to tee it up in Florida in May 1886 as the manager of a Scottish colony that attempted to settle Sarasota.

After six months, most of the colonists returned home after failing to cope with the late-19th century conditions in southwest Florida. Gillespie stayed on to protect the interests of the English and Scottish investors and their 60,000 acres. In 1886 Gillespie built two greens and a fairway in what is now the downtown area near the Mira Mar Hotel, and forged forever Sarasota's legendary link to the game.

According to Chetlain's article, Gillespie eventually became the mayor of Sarasota and went on to develop his private nine-hole Sarasota Golf Club in 1904. He is also credited with helping to develop courses for the Bellaire-Biltmore Hotel in Clearwater, the Tampa Bay Hotel in Tampa and Cuba's first golf course in Havana. Gillespie was also hired to develop links in Winter Park, Kissimmee and in Jacksonville during the early Florida boom years. An avid golfer to the very end, Gillespie died of a heart attack while playing his course Sept. 7, 1923.

doing a pretty good job since the Mote Marine Laboratory on Lido Key uses Bowles Creek as a release site for fingerling snook and redfish. They regularly come by the course to check on the development of the fish."

"One way we have tried to minimize the impact of chemicals and fertilizers on the environment is to just use less material overall. But I have found this to be a trend in general talking to my peers at our chapter meetings. We have adopted a total spot-treatment approach to all pesticide treatments.

"I have found over the years that practically all nematode tests come back marked 'Treat!' However, by diligent monitoring and treating only those thin areas that don't respond to water and fertilizer, we save a lot of time, money and ecological impact. We only used six acres' worth of material to treat 27 acres of fairways.

"We did treat 88 acres with Chipco Choice this past year to control mole

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*With the front of the green wide open, the 387-yard 15th hole invites a classic bump-and-run approach shot. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.*

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## Sara Bay

### 'Inno-ventions'

Clockwise from upper left: **Mini Bulk Bag Hoist** Scott Hoppe, left, and head mechanic Jim Suponic show off the rig used to lift and load half-ton fertilizer containers. **Spray Rig:** Old Groundsmasters fitted with 25-gallon electric sprayers are highly maneuverable for spot-spraying, especially around trees and ornamental beds. **High Lift Cage:** Hoppe stands in the roomy cage that attaches securely to the front-end-loader bucket and is used to do all the in-house tree-trimming work. **Monster Drag:** Suponic assembled this tire drag for use after deep-tine aerification. Not shown are three loops of chain of different lengths which trail behind the tires to help break up the plugs and work the sand into the turf.

