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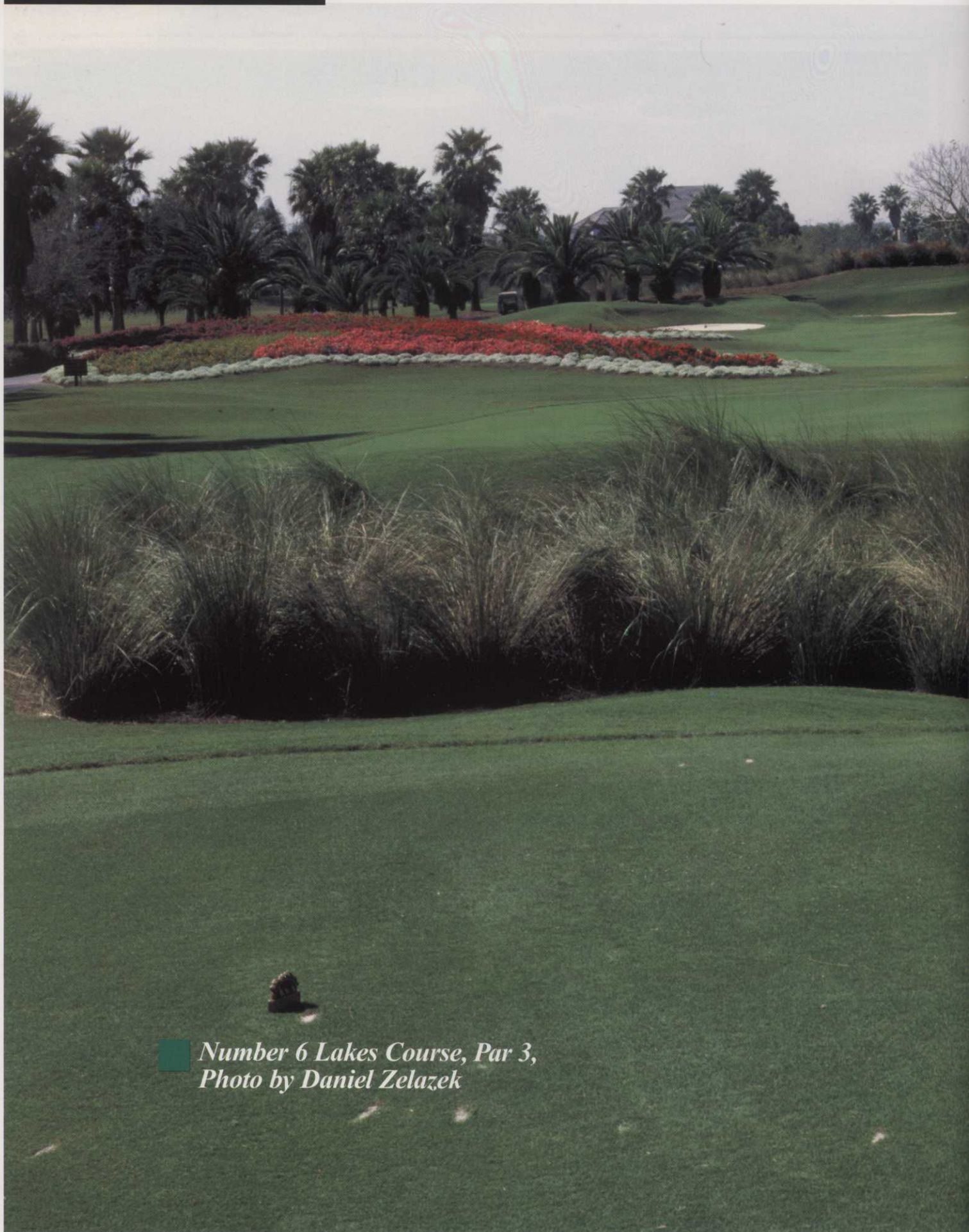
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■ *Number 6 Lakes Course, Par 3,
Photo by Daniel Zelazek*



QUAIL WEST GOLF AND COUNTRY CLUB

Spectacular Search for Excellence

By Joel Jackson, CGCS

Spring in Collier County brings a subtropical rainbow of flowering trees and shrubs bursting with blossoms of every color of the spectrum. No place was more spectacular this past April than the entrance road to the Quail West Golf and Country Club community in Naples located off of Bonita Beach Road just east of Interstate 75. The impatiens, bougainvilleas, and tabebuias were lit-

erally exploding the landscape in a breathtaking blaze of color.

The Quail West community is about 10 years old. The Preserve Course opened in 1992 and Lakes course was completed in 1996. Two years later Managing Partner Sandra Hesse went looking for a director of golf courses and grounds to help rebuild and upgrade the golf courses. She offered the position to Mark Black, CGCS, who was heading up 90 holes of golf for the Bonita Bay Properties



Many holes on the Preserve Course wind through dense woods. Note the fans on the 190-yard, par-3, seventh hole that help provide extra air circulation. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

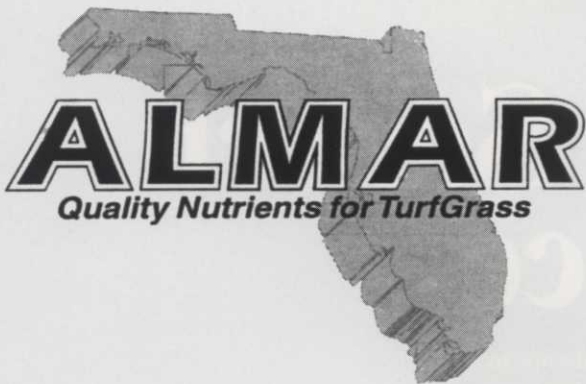
Group. Mark had been with Bonita Bay for 14 years and brought a lot of local experience and a great track record to the table.

The opportunity at Quail West would provide Black with more time to spend with his growing family when his wife and two young children could benefit from having dad around a little more. So with many thanks and fond memories of a great learning experience at Bonita Bay, Black made the move in 1998.

The first order of business for Black at Quail West was the complete rebuilding of the Preserve Course greens and bunkers, including some irrigation upgrades as well. Black chose to regrass the greens with Champion ultradwarf bermudagrass based on his experience and successes on the Bonita Bay courses.

"Some of the holes," according to superintendent Charles Riger, "look as if they were just punched out of the dense woods; they're very scenic, but also very shady and very little air movement." Noting the history of inconsistent playing conditions produced by the adverse growing conditions on several holes, Black consulted with Marsh Benson of Augusta National and Paul Latschaw, then at Congressional, on the use of fans and subsurface air handling systems to find some relief for the problem greens.

The result of this research was to install a Precision Air system with modified drainage lines under the problem greens with the lateral lines 12



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feet apart instead of the USGA-spec 15-foot separation, and to increase the diameter of the main drain line. An air conditioner was installed behind the second green to pump cool air during the dead of summer.

Black says, "We have found that the system works best by drawing or sucking air down through the root profile instead of blowing air into the drain line. It is very effective in keeping root zones drier and healthier during heavy periods of rain."

The success on the problem greens on the Preserve Course led Black to install all the needed hardware, connections and modifications to the drain lines on the Lakes Course in 2000 when they were rebuilt. Black has several gas-powered, portable air-handling units that he can hook up to any green if it needs a little help during adverse weather conditions.

Besides, the rebuilding of the greens and bunkers, the irrigation system was upgraded in 2000 to include a Flowtronex Variable Frequency Drive pump station and Toro Site Pro software for the Network 8000 control system. Like all new systems, there are always bugs to be worked out and Black praised his irrigation technician, Larry Lee, for his keen problem-solving skills and solid work ethic.

The Quail West courses share soil pH management challenges with many other courses in Collier County since the limestone bedrock is near the surface, and the irrigation water also tends to be



Close-up of the annual bed on No. 6 on the Lakes Course, a 215-yard par 3. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

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The Lakes Course ninth hole from the 150-yard marker on this 582-yard par five. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

alkaline. With readings averaging around 7.8, Riger says elemental sulfur is applied annually in a late spring or early summer fertilizer application, and a

pH airway acid-injection system is used to treat the irrigation water.

The fertigation system is also used to

constantly manage nutrient levels for good turfgrass root development and to apply wetting agents during dry periods to increase irrigation efficiency.

Although Collier County is not currently under watering restrictions in the South Florida Water Management District, Black says that he feels the experimental permit applications of Curfew made to his courses made all the difference in the world during last year's drought conditions by reducing the nematode pressure on the roots. Black says, "The turf green-up and viability within two weeks of the Curfew application was remarkable. They weren't lush. After all, we were under drought conditions, but they were manageable and they could take up the water and nutrients they needed to survive."

Black's comments on Curfew prompted me to ask his opinion on the recent EPA decisions that affected Dursban and NemaCur.

"In every crisis, opportunities are born," He replied. "A lot of smart people out there are looking for ways to make a living. I don't know the final answer, but five or six years ago, I'd say our number-one nemesis was mole cricket damage. I hardly ever hear people talking about mole cricket problems with the advent of Chipco Choice. We've lost a lot of fine products but we've gained some better and safer ones developed in recent years."

As the "manual" on ultradwarf bermudagrass management continues to be written, Black had a couple of observations on Champion.

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This inventory created in large part from species identified in annual independent survey report on the wetland areas.

"This grass can get so dense during the winter season that even water has a hard time penetrating it," he said. "It is amazing when you consider that we grow it on top of a profile built with percolation rates of 15-20 inches per hour. We have found the most effective and least disruptive way to open them up so the water can perk is by spiking with a Toro triplex unit. Last year we aerified six times during the off-season and we have used a Hydroject on occasion. We also keep them on a steady diet of wetting agents to help moisture penetration.

"Like many private clubs in southwest Florida, the lion's share of our play is from late October to a little after Easter. We are in a reciprocal program in the off-season so that members from certain neighboring clubs can play each other's courses for cart fees only. While this is great for members, it can be tough on superintendents.

"People need to realize these ultradwarfs require a more aggressive cycle of maintenance practices, and clubs just need to ensure that superintendents have the time to accomplish those tasks for maximum performance and playability, especially during the warm growing season. If we are forced to wait until late June to do our aggressive and invasive renovation programs, it can be dangerous in terms of adequate recovery time when dealing with late-summer stressful weather conditions."

Minimizing stressful conditions of any kind was foremost in Black's mind when he took the Quail West position. He had learned at Bonita Bay that taking an organized, business-oriented approach to the golf maintenance operation yielded positive results from the bunker rakers to the board of directors. In his mind, they are all inextricably connected in a common cause.

The entire golf course and grounds management staff took a six-week Dale Carnegie Team Building and Leadership Course. One of the goals was to develop a strategic business plan for the department.

"I felt it was crucial that for us to give

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(The gamut of graphic pleasure.)



Quail West has several portable air handlers like this one that can be hooked up to each green's drainage system to move air through the root zone. Photo by Joel Jackson.

Quail West the quality they wanted, we needed to define who we are, why we're here, what are our objectives, and who is responsible for what. The process would pull people together as we answered those questions," he said.

Bringing people together got Black thinking about whom he considered some the best employees he had known in his lifetime.

"I made a list of traits commonly associated with good employees: trustworthy, consistent, reliable, dependable, etc. This was just the surface. I wanted to distill it down to the essence. Finally, the bottom line for me was good employees made my job easier. At the end of the day after all the soul searching, it was the simple selfish reason - they made my job easier

"From there I had to ask myself, 'What kind of employee am I?' Am I making my boss's job easier or my co-managers' jobs easier? If I'm not, then maybe there's a problem. Sometimes that report card on ourselves isn't as pretty as we'd like it," he said.

"I give GCSAA a lot of credit for producing the PDI self assessment program. If superintendents use it honestly, it can be a great self-improvement tool. If you don't use it, you can at least go to your GM and ask him or her for feedback on your performance.

"Another key part of our plan was to create a comprehensive labor study. This document would define every single thing we do. Every superintendent should think about sitting down with key

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View from the tee of the par-4, 401-yard first hole on the Lakes Course. There are 50 acres of created, restored or preserved wetlands on the 36-hole layout.
 Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

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J. MARK BLACK, CGCS



J. Mark Black, CGCS

Originally from: Lake Wales. Fifth generation Floridian from Polk County. I grew up in Florida when it was still a southern state. Some folks call us "Ridge Rats." For those of us like Bobby Ellis, Alan Puckett and others, not only are we OK with that, we're proud of it.

Family: Married to Sue for 14 years. Son Teak (7) and daughter Kate (6). I would classify them as cool. Editor's note: A framed collection of Teak's and Kate's artwork occupies a prominent place in Mark's office.

Education: Proud Lake Wales HS Highlander. Pursued AA degree at Polk County Community College. 1980 Completed associate of arts and AS in Golf Course Operations at Lake City Community College. Thought I might get my bachelors degree in business, but this has not yet come to pass.

Employment history: Senior year in high school and four years after - wholesale nursery business. Worked on crew at Bay Hill Club where I fell in love with the golf business. Worked one year at Grenelife G&CC to qualify for Lake City program. Upon graduation worked as assistant superintendent under Dan Hall at Imperial Golf Club in Naples for four years. Became superintendent at Bonita Bay GC. After 14 wonderful years with the Bonita Bay Properties Group, I was offered the opportunity at Quail West G&CC. It has been marvelous change and I have enjoyed it here more than I can describe.

Professional affiliations: GCSAA and Everglades GCSA for 22 years. EGCSA board member 1987-88. Currently serving as EGCSA secretary. What a great group of professionals.

Hobbies and interests: Fishing and Naples is blessed with good fishing. Collecting things: Wooden tops, the kind with the string you wrap around and throw to spin; Old citrus packing labels mostly from Florida and some from California. With the coming of cardboard boxes the old orange crates and labels have gone by the wayside.

J. Mark Black, CGCS

staff and making a list of every task done, daily, weekly, monthly, and annually. Every aspect of golf maintenance takes time, labor and money, and you need to know exactly what those costs are. It's just good business.

"Our list came to 69 tasks. We spent a fair amount of time constructing that list so we could identify in meaningful terms of time and money every single thing we did. Our tasks take us roughly 124,000 man-hours a year to do what we think is needed to provide the quality expected at Quail West. This exercise also yielded some other interesting numbers. I would never believe that mowing the turf would be only 36 percent of our time. I expected it to be higher. While the 5.4 acres of greens is only 2 percent of the area we maintain, they take 22 percent of our labor budget to care for.

"Champion requires frequent verticutting for peak performance. We verticut and topdress greens every other week. With 36 holes, that means we're doing that task 52 times year, which takes 700 hours a year multiplied by the number of employees times the average labor rate. That information is crucial when discussing operating budgets. We know how much time and money it costs to do everything from aerifying the greens to cleaning up the crew's locker room."

Black's labor study can be overwhelming in the sheer weight of data it provides, but superintendent Charles Riger put it a different way, "When you are a professional and good at what you do, it looks easy. To an outsider if it looks easy it must not be expensive, but we know it isn't easy. It takes training, skill, preventative maintenance, gas, oil, lubricants, electricity, sand, soil, pipe and so on." Mark chimed in, "It's like the guy who says, 'I've got a Snapper mower I've had for ten years. How come you guys are always getting new mowers every three or four years?' He doesn't get it that we run our mowers four hours a day, four to five miles a day, seven days a week, year after year. This labor study puts it all down in black and white for discussion and decision making."

One recent decision has Black drooling with anticipation.

"We are rebuilding our entire maintenance facility, and it is a dream come true to be able to bring to bear all the latest innovations and technology to provide a workplace that will hopefully not only meet our needs today but will sustain us in the future. I have visited with other local superintendents and taken photos of the best of the best in terms of design and function. One aspect of the research on maintenance facilities really disappointed me was that GCSAA didn't have any comprehensive reference material on maintenance design or construction.

"I really get upset when I hear owners or architects talk about what does the average maintenance facility need. Why in the world would anyone want to repeat the antiquated, ineffective designs of the past? Local, state and federal regulations have forced the industry to make changes from how we did things in the past, and