



LAUREL OAK COUNTRY CLUB

A Real Community Asset

By Joel Jackson, CGCS Retired

Eighteen years ago, Laurel Oak opened the Gary Player-designed West Course just a few miles east of Interstate 75 in Sarasota north of Bee Ridge Road. Five years later, the East Course opened in 1994. It was also designed by Player. Then in 2006 Rees Jones and Southeastern Golf tackled a major renovation and redesign

of the West Course. The course is maturing nicely according to Director of Golf Course Operations Adam Wright, who has been at the helm of the 36-hole complex since 2002.

“We may have opened a tad early last year, putting a little more stress on the new turf initially than we would have liked, but time heals all wounds and the course has really shaped up and is performing well,” said

Wright. Ten years ago Wright was finishing up his degree in agronomy at Tennessee Tech University.

He said, “Like many college students I was seeking my path and had changed majors a couple of times including Engineering and secondary education. They are wonderful fields to major in, but neither made me happy. I was looking for a profession that would



View from the fairway bunker of the par-4, 15th hole on the East Course. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

'Our assistants also serve as irrigation and pest control technicians, so it is imperative that they learn how the different courses – and especially the different greens' grasses – perform and respond to pest and environmental stresses.'

allow me to be outdoors, be free and enjoy what I would be doing for a living. That type of career choice finally led me to golf course management.”

Now he finds himself leading a 40-person staff that maintains the 220 acres under his charge. Fortunately, Wright says, the roadways and common areas are maintained by an outside landscape firm, so he and his crew can concentrate on the golf courses and clubhouse grounds.

The renovation to the West Course introduced TifEagle greens to the list management responsibilities, while the East Course still has Tifdwarf greens. To make sure his superintendents, Adam Ellison and Zach Lane, and assistant superintendents Jimmy Barker, Matt Eichmann and Theo Evans get well-rounded experience and learn all the nuances of each course Wright is experimenting with a rotation system that will move his managers around every 3-6

months so they can become familiar with the required management practices.

Meanwhile at the maintenance operations center Equipment Manager Andrew Messina runs the shop and keeps the equipment tuned up and reels sharpened. In the office, Wright's indispensable administrative assistant, Lori Brown, keeps the paper work moving so he can spend as much time as possible on the golf course.

Wright said, “Our assistants also serve as irrigation and pest control technicians, so it is imperative that they learn how the different courses – and especially the different greens' grasses – perform and respond to pest and environmental stresses.”

Laurel Oak is fortunate to have an ample supply of reclaimed water as its irrigation source, so the current



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COURSE FACTS



Laurel Oak Maintenance Staff

Laurel Oak Country Club

Location: Sarasota

Ownership/Playing Policy: Private

Number of Holes: 36 - East (6,898 yds) and West (6,934) Courses; both Par 72

Designed by: Gary Player. Constructed by Wadsworth; West opened: 1989, East 1994. West redesigned by Rees Jones, rebuilt by Southeastern Golf and Cal-Golf in 2006.

Management Team: David Whalen, club manager; David Gale, club president; Ed Nettles, green chairman; Chris Brandt, head club professional; Adam Wright, CGCS, director of golf course operations.

Acreage under maintenance: 220

Greens: Tifdwarf (East), TifEagle (West); avg. size: 6,500 sq.ft.; total acres: 5.6; HOC .125 - .145 in.; green speeds: 8-9 ft. summer; 9-10 ft. in season. East greens only are overseeded with *Poa trivialis* at 8 lbs/1000 sq. ft.

Tees, Fairways and Roughs: Tifway 419; tees 6A, HOC .500 in., rye overseed tees only @ 20 lbs/1000 sq. ft.;

fairways 46 A; HOC .550 in.; roughs 140 A, HOC 1.75 in.

Bunkers: East 59, West 53. Sand type: GA26. hand- and machine raked with Toro Sand Pro 3040.

Natural areas: 12 crushed coquina waste areas under trees and with cordgrass in roughs

Waterways: 23 lakes and ponds. Outside contractor maintenance.

Irrigation: Effluent with supplemental well; East - Rainbird Hydraulic, West - Toro Site Pro; 1,900 heads, fertigation system.

Staff: 40 total including superintendent and 2 part time (student and retiree); weekly budgeted hours 40 straight time. Key team members: East Superintendent Adam Ellison, West Superintendent Zach Lane, assistant superintendents Matt Eichmann, Theo Evan and Jimmy Barker, administrative assistant Lori Brown.

Special events: The annual Laurel Oak Cup which benefits the Special Olympics. PGA Tour Pro Paul Azinger is heavily involved.

Environmental Laurels

The Florida Dept. of Environmental Protection, in conjunction with the Florida Golf Course Superintendents Association and other agencies and groups, has just released a manual for the *Best Management Practices for Enhancing Environmental Quality on Florida Golf Courses*. Of course many facilities like Laurel Oak have already been engaged in Best Management Practices. Here are just a few. Photos by Joel Jackson.



Some extreme rough areas have been converted to bahiagrass turf which requires less water and fertilizer.



Bulrushes line the shore and littoral zone along the second hole on the West Course. The plants provide food and shelter for fish and birds and help filter storm runoff.



A 30-foot buffer zone (left of the red stakes) was created around this wetland on hole No. 10 East. The height of cut is 4 inches and no chemicals or fertilizers are applied in the zone.



Hand watering of localized dry spots with wetting agents is more efficient than just turning on the a sprinkler head.

With its Tifdwarf greens, overseeding on the East Course is mandatory to have a consistent playing surface during winter, when 200 rounds per day are not uncommon. With a warmer and drier winter and spring than usual, the transition back to the bermuda base has been a challenge.

drought restrictions have not affected turf conditions as severely as courses on consumptive-use permits. The latter are being restricted more heavily as the current drought continues.

But even reclaimed water is not always available in the amount needed, so Laurel Oak has a supplemental well to refill the irrigation lakes when needed.

Wright said, "Relying on effluent irrigation water can be a double edged sword. On the one hand turf irrigation it is an excellent use of treated water. On the other hand the quantity and quality of the water can't always be guaranteed and sometimes if we have a super dry spring and summer and our winter visitors are gone back north, the amount of available treated water declines and supply shortfalls can occur affecting our ability to grow consistent quality turf."

The renovation of the West Course included several improvements to

enhance the turf quality and playing conditions. Improved drainage on the native heavy soils was accomplished by surface shaping and contouring which directs storm water runoff into swales and ultimate storage into the twenty-four lakes and ponds on the two courses.

Additionally, Wright says, subsurface drainage pipe is installed in critical areas at the rate of half a mile to a mile every year. A new Toro Osmac computer-controlled irrigation system improved coverage and watering scheduling. And last but not least, wall-to-wall cart paths will help prevent damage from cart traffic during rainy periods.

Renovations to the East Course have been mentioned but remain an item for the future.

"The East Course has a lot of character and we wouldn't need to do much," Wright says, "but it would be nice to upgrade the irrigation system to

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Judicious use of aquatic plants enhances playability and water quality on hole No.12 West. Photo by Daniel Zelazek.

'It's right and proper that we are critical of course conditions. That is our job, but I sometimes think we do it to ourselves when we become overcritical... Sometimes we push the turf and ourselves to the edge and that's not good for either.'

make it more efficient in an era where water conservation is a critical issue. If we tackle the East Course it would likely be in stages and not all at once like the West Course.”

With its older Tifdwarf greens, overseeding on the East Course is mandatory to have a consistent playing surface during the winter golf season where 200 rounds per day are not uncommon.

With a warmer and drier winter and spring than usual, the transition from the overseeding back to the bermuda base has been a challenge. Wright said he only had two frosts this winter and they were on back-to-back mornings.

Regarding this year's transition Wright explained, “We talked it over and rather than have a prolonged, indefinite period of transition with questionable quality putting surfaces, we decided to bite the bullet and spray

out the *Poa trivialis* and concentrate of growing them back in as quickly as possible. So far so good. They roll okay, but don't look great color-wise, but with the warm weather they will green up in a hurry.”

Another challenge that Laurel Oak shares with many other courses is dealing with off-type bermudagrass in the fairways. The renovation of the West course helped remove a lot of the patches of off-type grasses and has given Wright and company a foothold to fight the infestation with repeated coordinated applications of Round-up® and Fusilade® and eventual resodding of some areas. On the East Course Wright uses applications of Primo® in the spring to suppress the seedhead production phase of the off-types and, when kept mowed on schedule, they are virtually undetectable to all but the trained eye.



Perennial purple Plumbago plants are highlighted by just a few bright-colored impatiens.



Using colorful perennial plants like these Mexican Bluebells instead of short lived annuals saves labor hours and materials cost.



Aquatic plants like these Blue Flag Iris, above, filter runoff from the shoreline turf and provide food and cover for wildlife.



Landscapes ecological assets

Besides providing color and character, golf course landscapes can also be environmental assets. Photos by Joel Jackson.

Laurel Oak is using more native plant materials, left, to reduce maintenance costs and inputs like water, fertilizer and labor for excessive required pruning.

SUPERINTENDENT FACTS



"I have had two general managers since I have been here and both of them ... knew the value of having me engaged in continuing education to stay on top of the latest technology and the latest issues facing golf course management."

Adam Wright, CGCS has been at Laurel Oak C.C. for five years. Photo by Joel Jackson

Adam Wright, CGCS

From: Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Education: B.S. in agronomy, Tennessee Tech University, 1997

Employment: 2002-present, director of golf operations Laurel Oak C.C.; 1999-2002 superintendent Legacy Course, Greystone G & CC, Birmingham, Ala.; 1997-1999 assistant superintendent Pine Tree GC, Boynton Beach.

Professional Affiliations: GCSAA, FGCSA and Suncoast GCSA vice president 2005-07.

Work philosophy and advice: Work, play and laugh hard. Treat people the way you want to be treated and always remain professional when others are not.

Mentor: I owe a lot of credit to Tom Valch who hired me right out of college to be his assistant at the

Pine Tree Golf Club in Boynton Beach. Then he hired me to be a superintendent at the Greystone G&CC in Birmingham, Ala. He believed in my ability had taught me everything I know about the business.

Accomplishments/Goals: Attaining CGCS status at the age of 28. Begin work on an MBA degree.

Hobbies: I am a fantasy football junkie.

And as for that trained eye, Wright says, "It's right and proper that we are critical of course conditions. That is our job, but I sometimes think we do it to ourselves when we become overcritical. We need to discuss expectations and communicate freely and often with our managers and members, so we really know what they want and need. Then

we can provide the best conditions we can within the allotted resources. Sometimes we push the turf and ourselves to the edge and that's not good for either."

I asked Wright his thoughts on the future of superintendent associations and if job stresses and demands are depleting the ranks of potential

volunteers who are the lifeblood of the local and state chapters.

He commented, "There's no question that expectations are higher than ever and superintendents are very conscientious about their responsibilities. I'm sure some are not always comfortable being away from work. However, I feel like our chapter's