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Late afternoon view from behind the par 5, 14th green on the hole named "Ocala Trail." Photo by Brian Walters

The Juliette Falls Golf Course: TREASURE AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW

The Juliette Falls Golf Course is located in the rolling countryside near the city of Dunnellon in Marion County just off State Road 40 and very near the headsprings of the Rainbow River. While the course is relatively new on history's timeline (it opened in 2007), the land on which it sits began to write its recent history back in the 1880s when hard rock phosphate was discovered in the area.

The town of Juliette sprang up and, as a result of the phosphate mining, farming and the popularity of the springs and river, it became a booming community. However, archeological evidence indicates

that the waters of the Rainbow River have attracted and sustained human inhabitants for more than 10,000 years.

I have been to the Juliette Falls course a couple of times over the years, attending Seven Rivers Chapter meetings and their annual Toys for Tots Christmas Tournament. I can't think of the name Juliette without thinking of Shakespeare's play, "Romeo and Juliette!" Back in the 1880s they must have been thinking the same thing as a nearby cattle-raising community called Romeo was founded! Railroads from the two towns intersected at what is now the golf course's driving

range tee area, and Romeo and Juliette got together a couple of times a month to trade beef and vegetables.

In the 1930s Rainbow Springs began to develop as a tourist attraction and hit its prime time in the 1960s. During that era activity increased to include glass-bottomed boat rides, riverboat cruises, log raft rides, a gift shop and café, an aviary, gondola and monorail rides, a rodeo and submarine boat tours. The attraction closed in 1974 when tourists began using I-75 instead of U.S. Highway 41 and an attraction called Disney World opened. The state purchased the area that was

SUPERINTENDENT FACTS



Steve Keller and Samsom. Supplied by Steve Keller.

Meet Steve Keller

Originally from: Born in Cheboygan, MI. I grew up in Charlevoix, MI

Family: Wife Tina. Sons: Taylor (20) and John (19) and our dog Samson.

Education: 1985, graduated with an associate's degree in the two-year turf program at Michigan State University

Employment history: 1977-1983 Crewmember at Belvedere GC, Charlevoix, MI, 1984-1987. Florida: Assistant Superintendent Pine Tree GC, Boynton Beach; 1987-1989 Superintendent Deerfield Beach GC, Deerfield Beach; 1989-1995 Assistant at Seminole GC, Juno Beach; 1995-2000 Superintendent, The Moorings Club, Vero Beach. 2000-2003 Superintendent, Berkeley Hall GC, Bluffton, SC; 2003-2006 Superintendent, Isleworth G&CC, Windermere; 2006-present Superintendent, Juliette Falls, Dunnellon.

Professional affiliations: Member of the FTGA, GCSAA, FGCSA and Seven Rivers GCSA. Served as board member and vice president of the Treasure Coast GCSA in 2000.

Goals: To keep working to help brand and develop Juliette Falls as a golf destination and a successful residential community.

Personal philosophy of work: The golf course turf doesn't know about weekends or holidays. Be willing to invest the time and effort to present the best product at all times. Also, be very proactive in communicating up and down the chain of command to avoid any misunderstanding of conditions, challenges and needed support.

Personal memorable moments: Playing one of our rounds of golf in Scotland with Tony Jacklin. I have been most fortunate to be able to play most of the British Open venues.

Hobbies and Interests: Normal stuff – fishing, hunting and making golf trips to Top 100 courses.

formerly the attraction in 1990 and volunteers began clearing the overgrown park and the 1,459-acre Rainbow Springs State Park opened in 1995.

Today on the Juliette Falls course there are reminders of the area's past. To the right of the eighth green a huge daunting foliage-filled cavity (think small canyon) that is the vestige of the phosphate-mining days. It is an imposing hazard for wayward golf shots. In the woods to the left of the twelfth tee are the remnants of a cattle chute and corral fence that once housed bulls raised for the Rainbow Springs Rodeo attraction. That's a quick look at the history of the area, now let's talk about what's happening now!

The concept of Juliette Falls Golf and Spa Community was that of a leisure lifestyle near enough to conveniences but far enough away to be a tranquil and relaxing place to live and play. The only problem was that soon after opening its doors the bottom fell out of the economy and, like many developments of that time, it had to hunker down and move along at a slower pace than anticipated.

The property has a couple of things going for it. First, the



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owner, Ron Clapper is an avid golfer so he works with superintendent Steve Keller to provide enough resources to keep the course in good shape. Equally important is the John Sanford-designed course itself! *Golf Magazine* recognized the course as one of its "Top 10 New Golf Courses You Can Play" and *Golf Digest* named it among the "Top 5 New Courses in 2008." Additionally, the course is a certified Audubon International Silver Sanctuary.

That designation plays a large role in Keller's environmentally friendly maintenance practices.

As we toured the golf course, Keller spoke about specific challenges of the site and the budget-conscious modifications he has made to standard maintenance practices. He said, "The universal challenge we have here is the very sandy soil profile, which is great for drainage and playability after heavy rains, but can be a real challenge during dry spells. The soil here is called the "Candler Sand" which is a state geologic formation designation. As a result, we are on a constant "spot" or hand-watering program when it gets dry. We also have amended our greens with Profile® to help retain moisture in the rootzone.

"The sandy soils also are a haven for nematodes and, as they feed on the roots, it adds to the desiccation of the turf canopy. We apply Neotec® to control any serious nematode outbreaks, but we also found that the Profile® seemed to help reduce their populations."

Because Juliette Falls, like many courses – and the whole golf industry – is working its way through the nationwide economic slowdown, Keller shared some of the site-specific changes he's made to conventional maintenance practices.

He said, "We have tried diligently to modify our practices to reduce costs without sacrificing overall quality and playability. When the recession hit in 2008, many courses cut back on fertilizer and chemical applications and labor hours out of necessity. We have tried to adjust those cutbacks to become standard operating procedure, which takes diligent monitoring of plant health, but it can be done. This is when you really need to understand your course's microclimate, soil and water content and chemistry, and the turf's response to changes."

"People may not realize how cold we get here. Last year we recorded 23 frosts, and we have had as many as 40 in past winters. We have seen freezing temperatures lasting five to six hours at a time. Fifteen degrees is the coldest I have recorded. When we first opened we mowed fairways three to four times per week like most courses with overseeding. Once we stopped overseeding fairways we found the extended "no-or-slow" growth conditions allowed us to reduce mowing frequency in the cool season by almost 75 percent."

"The same was true on the greens. We monitored clippings yield and noticed we cut very little turf. Greens

KELLER FUN FACTS

I stay home to watch:

I'm a channel surfer flipping among sports, news and sitcoms

Favorite performers:

I like all kinds. My first and best concert was The Police in the 80's

What I've been reading:

Florida history and sports psychology books

Favorite meal:

Cedarplank grilled salmon

Personal heroes: My parents. They taught me a solid work ethic and responsibility

Nobody knows that I: Have played 25 of *Golf Digest's* Top 100 courses

If I could do it over: I would have invested in Apple stock 20 years ago

My fantasy is: To bring Juliette Falls into the mainstream and see it become a hugely successful residential golf community

The one thing I can't stand: People I can't trust

If I could change one thing about myself:

Be more assertive

My most irrational act: It had to be something in my youth like taking my younger siblings on perhaps "unauthorized" car and motorcycle joy rides

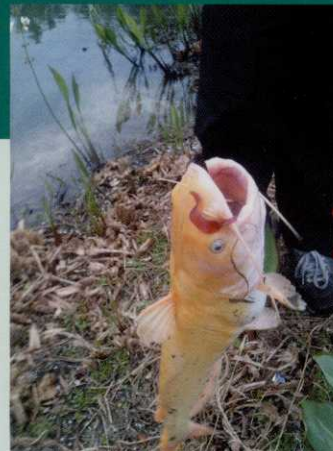
Most humbling experience: Loss of a close personal friend

The words that best describe me: Determined, serious, follows through

My dream foursome would be: Ron Clapper, George Elliott, Hal Hicks and Tom Watson

My best fish story: Caught a 24 lb. salmon on Lake Michigan when I was 11. My dad told everyone it was the largest one he had ever seen caught.

My most memorable golf shots: Two holes in one. Seminole GC 5th hole, 185 yards, 5-iron, and, Juliette Falls 3rd hole, 222 yards, 3-wood. The most nerve-wracking tee shot I ever faced was the par 3, 17th at TPC!



Raise your hand if you too have landed an albino catfish while fishing in a golf course lake. Photo by Steve Keller.



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Dawning of the day on the "Viking Challenge" 18th hole. Photo by Brian Walters

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mowers would often report only dumping once after mowing their six-green zone. So, we cut back on frequency during the cooler season. Beginning in November, rolled greens three to four times per week and only mowed two or three times, depending on the weather. If it's over 39 degrees and we need to clean up spike marks, we will mow.

"I took this reduced mowing frequency concept to the warm season as well, and by managing nutrients, irrigation and weather, we found we could back off overall mowing frequency. Less cutting means more leaf blade surface and more efficient nutrient use and overall plant health, enough to help the bottom line without affecting member expectations."

"Nutrient management was another area of significant savings. We now apply a little less than three pounds of nitrogen per year on the fairways and just a little over five pounds of nitrogen on the greens." Keller uses a spray program to apply most of the nutrients. He said that they have not made a bulk application in several years. He added, "For the past three years, I have been using the Pathway® program, which consists of spraying microbial products on our greens weekly and our fairways monthly as part of our nutrient spray program. And I feel that it has helped fix the nitrogen in the soil, making it available for longer periods of time, thus enabling us to reduce over totals and frequency.

"We have also recently reduced our overall water consumption. We have gone from 106 million gallons in 2010 down to 80 million in 2012. We have achieved this reduction by reducing turf area and

cutting off some heads in out-of-play areas and creating native areas. I also believe the fertilizer reductions have enabled us to cut back on overall run times by promoting deeper and healthier root systems. Keeping golfer expectations in mind to aid turf density and balance in loss in color, we apply Primo weekly on the greens and spray pigments on the greens weekly, tees biweekly and fairways monthly."

"Using this overall effective-but-conservative approach has created a few problems in high-traffic areas along cart paths. Turf damage along paths is normal wear and tear and sometimes difficult to control no matter what, but the effect can be magnified with reduced inputs. So, when the budget allows, we focus on these problem areas, giving them a little more TLC with extra fertilizer, soil amendments and installing some hardier Celebration® bermudagrass."

Keller's cultural programs are not so much different from most other courses. The course closes nine days during the slower summer season. They solid-tine and verticut greens, tees and fairways in three days in June and July and they core-aerify and verticut in August. They also do eight solid-tine aerifications the rest of the year when they are open.

In the pest-management department, Keller said, "Sean Plummer, my assistant, is spot-spraying almost daily including wood lines and out-of-play areas to control weeds. In May and June we apply Merit® and Talstar® to most areas. We get good control of worms, mole crickets and fire ants. We also spot-treat known fire ant hotspots with Award® fire ant bait.

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