

# A Tale of Two Supers

Art Snyder and Chet Mendenhall have witnessed changes galore on America's golf courses



Chet Mendenhall, left, and Art Snyder are old pals.

BY VERN PUTNEY  
WITH WILL BARTLETT

Art Snyder and Chet Mendenhall, at ages 90 and 94, respectively, are two golf course superintendents and friends who, in their lifetimes, have witnessed almost every major change in golf course technology.

Art, a 61-year member of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, and a resident of Phoenix, Ariz., visits Skyline Country Club Course daily to enjoy either playing or observing the course where his son, Jim, is superintendent.

Chet is a Kansas native and in 1948 was elected president of the GCSAA. In Wichita he helped build the first municipal golf course west of Kansas City. After retiring from his superintendent's job he worked as a golf course architect, designing

## SUPER FOCUS

several golf courses in Missouri and Kansas. The last remaining charter member of the National Association of Greenkeepers of America, he understandably never got used to using modern-day PVC pipe.

### Changes a-plenty

Art Snyder's seen changes a-plenty since lugging his first golf bag in 1908 as a 9-year-old caddie at famed Oakmont Country Club in Pittsburgh.

How many superintendents now can recall coping daily with worm casts? Technology and insecticides have meant "no more worms."

Way back when, though, greens were covered with worm casts every morning. When mowing, greens had to be swept with long bamboo poles, then swept again to break up clods of mud.

That Snyder is tuning up for his 91st birthday Sept. 13 by playing twice weekly is remarkable, considering longtime Spartan working conditions.

Through most of Snyder's super days, there was no Environmental Protection Agency. Many dangerous materials such as mercury and lead arsenic were used without proper protective equipment. A handkerchief tied over your nose was the extent of protection.

"Insecticides" in those days were kerosene oil mixed with naphtha soap.

Having survived nicely these potentially disastrous pitfalls, as well as a stroke last year, Snyder revels in tee shots of at least 200 yards and an occasional nine-hole round under 40 at difficult Skyline.

During the Depression, Art added "Professional" to his "Greenkeeper" shingle. From 1932 to 1942 at Alcoma Country Club, just outside Pittsburgh, he spent long hours on the lesson tee. "Lucky we lived on the course," said Jim, "or we'd never have seen him."

In the early days of World War II, Snyder took over several area course jobs and in 1943 transferred to nearby Longue Vue as super.

He remained there until 1956, when he headed west to take the super's post at Paradise Valley Country Club in Phoenix. He continued in that capacity until 1974 and then "retired" to successor Jim.

In 1980 Jim moved to Skyline with Art as his consultant.

### Progress, reluctantly

Having played a close part in the evolution and revolution of the game, Snyder savors progress.

His biggest chuckle comes from the recall of veteran supers who asserted that "courses can never be operated without horses," as Worthington trotted in gasoline-driven fairway mowing equipment.

Old Ned and associates were put out to pasture in the Pittsburgh area about 1920. Less than a decade later they were but a memory nationwide as Worthington popularized the triplex mower in the 1930s.

New equipment, though often rejected at first, has been a lifesaver and a time-saver.

Where once fairways were fertilized twice weekly, using hand-pulled, 36-inch-wide distributors, one man now can do 18 fairways in four to five hours.

Cutting fairways also is a new game. Formerly, three-gang outfits went around fairways in tandem, walking all day long. Now a man on a tractor with triflex mowers makes short work of grass.

To the modern superintendent, "Scythe-men" sounds like a heavy metal rock band, but these workers, primarily Eastern Europeans back then, were masters of their trade. They swung a razor-sharp curved cutting blade attached to a stout handle. Their targets: golf course banks and ditches.

Weed-eaters and rotary mowers ended their precision-cutting practice, but their artistry remains vivid in the minds of Art and Chet.

Sand trap maintenance has changed markedly, too. Power rakes have all but replaced hand raking.

At Alcoma, Snyder and colleagues pushed two wheel-driven greens mowers. Because the mowers were big and heavy, only six greens might be cut daily. Tees were mowed twice weekly.

Back then, grasses on greens were mainly Southern German mixed bentgrass and seaside mixed bentgrass. No American greens then were in fescue. That was reserved for Great Britain.

At Westmoreland Country Club in Pittsburgh, Snyder planted the first Washington bentgrass put out by the USGA.

Throughout all of the changes, one golf course "anchor" has remained constant. Cups are changed the same way they were at the turn of the century, and that may never change. Snyder has missed no more than 10 area superintendents' sessions the past 70 years. He was prominent on a committee which induced involvement in turf research work of what now is Penn State University.

In 1973 Art became the only course super ever elected to the Arizona Golf Hall of Fame.

As he tours Skyline in comfort and style, the National Guard veteran whose division pursued the elusive Pancho Villa along the Mexican border can't help but contrast such pleasant living with early struggles. All the while he tells his three sons, Jack, Jim and Carl, as well as his grandsons — most of them course supers or designers themselves — how well they have it these days.

### Chet: Sand greens

Because water was a problem when Chet Mendenhall built that municipal golf course in

Kansas, they decided to build sand greens.

Horses pulled gang mowers over the fairways and rough until he acquired a Fordson tractor and converted it to a turf tractor by bolting an old set of rims to the outside of the wheels, thereby widening it for stability in the sandy soil.

In 1928 the former farmer chose greenkeeping as a profession and took a job at Wichita Country Club.

He kept his buffalograss fairways at one inch and greens at a quarter-inch with the help of gang mowers made by Gloria Mowers.

In 1934 many privately owned public courses were closing due to the Depression while country clubs remained open. So Chet took a greenkeeping position at Mission Hills Country Club in Kansas City.

Bluegrass and bentgrass fairways were being lost to drought and Chet's club decided to try bermudagrass fairways. Spring dead spot was a problem, so Chet installed the club's first fairway irrigation system, using cast-iron pipe and Buckner impact-type sprinklers.

He retired after 31 years at Mission Hills and,

**Horses pulled gang mowers over the fairways and and men cut the roughs with scythes. Weed-eaters and rotary trimmers did not exist.**

at 70, became an industry advisor, having established himself as an authority on topdressing and soil fertilization. He's written numerous articles on golf course maintenance, including a popular one entitled "Making Compost."

A member of the National Association of Greenkeepers of America since 1926, now called the GCSAA, Chet has helped the organization grow from 50 to 8,000 members.

None of those members, near as we can tell, employ horses for the mowing of fairways.

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