

Francis clan makes impact on American golf

BY BOB LABBANCE

Necessity was the mother of invention for Manuel L. Francis, and his ingenuity became the father of innovations that have helped superintendents for decades.

Now retired and a spry 86, Francis first turned his progressive nature toward grasses — and invented the lustrous and hardy Vesper Velvet Bentgrass — and later built a machine that vertically sliced turf and has since become a universal piece of equipment.

Francis' intriguing story began in 1903 when he was born aboard a Brazilian steamship en route to Portugal. He would spend his first 16 years in Louzan, and work for his grandfather, Joe Lopes Carvalho, who prepared farms for cultivation and operated a construction business building houses.

"Manny" came to America in 1919 with many skills but little cash or knowledge of English. He worked skinning furs in Danbury, Conn., saved some money, and adjusted to the States, but he longed to return to outdoor work. He got his chance when a Mamaroneck, N.Y., developer was hiring workers to build a series of courses for Donald Ross. Manny turned his talents with plants, irrigation and heavy equipment into a foreman's job.

"I learned so much right away. I was lucky, I always seemed to hit the spot," Manny said, referring to his good luck in American golf. Manny is still fortunate, but remains very modest about his contributions to golf course maintenance.

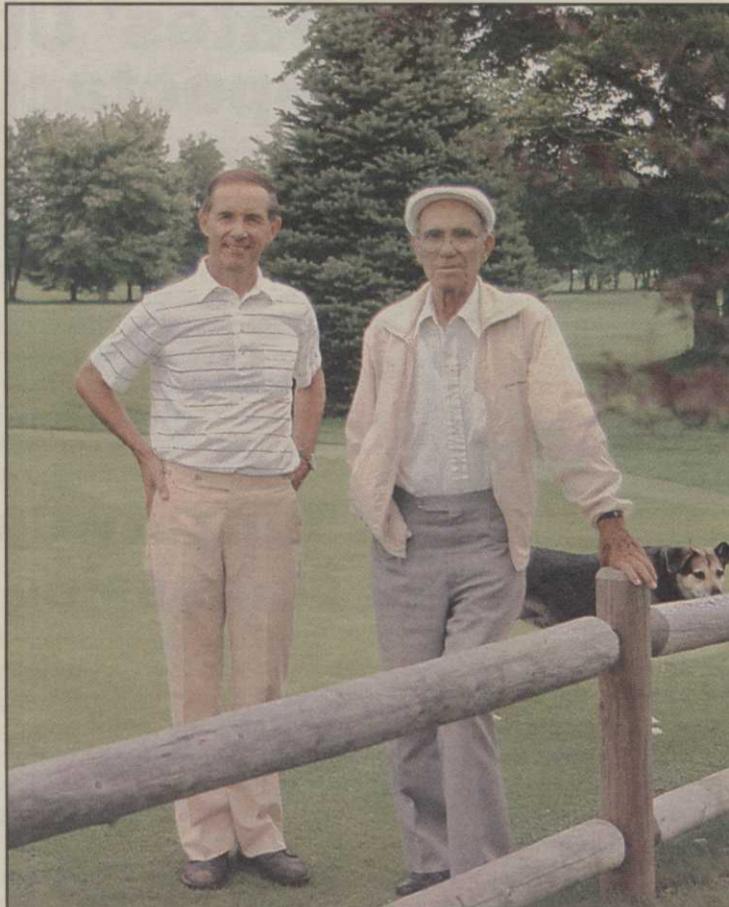
A pride in doing things right and his quiet modesty have been passed on to his son, Manuel N. Francis Sr., who is 53, a renown superintendent in his own right, and operates Green Harbor Golf Club, their successful public layout in Marshfield, Mass. Manny N. was superintendent at the prestigious Belmont Country Club and a national director of the GCSAA before he and his father bought their property on the south shore of Boston and started a turf nursery in 1965. Green Harbor's 18 holes opened in 1971. He and his wife, Judith, have a son, Manny Jr., and daughter, Kerry.

Manuel N. Francis Jr., 22, is a business major at New England College in Henniker, N.H., and plays number one on its golf team. He has worked in all phases of operations at Green Harbor.

The elder Francis was forced to learn many of those same lessons when the Great Depression hit in the 1930s. New course construction dried up and Manny and Shirley moved to South Portland (Maine) Municipal Golf Course.

"My wife and I, we did everything there, just the two of us. Run the clubhouse, keep the course, manage the business. It was a rough time," he said.

A lifelong interest in plants started Manny experimenting with



Manuel L. Francis, right, and son Manuel N. at Green Harbor Golf Club in Marshfield, Mass.
Photo by Bob Labbance

German bentgrasses. "I always picked up plants as a kid. I'd take them apart, study them and learn about them.

"Back then, you couldn't read it in a book like today. Greenskeepers always have to read the plant, because the soils don't talk."

It wasn't until 1948, when he moved to Vesper Golf Club in Tyngsborough, Mass., that he named the grass he had cultivated. "Vesper Velvet Bent is a dwarf mini-creeper, a strain that I propagated through selection for its winter hardiness. No other grass will withstand the low cutting that my Vesper will. In comparison to other creeping bentgrasses ... it doubles and triples its stems and blades.

The result, is a luxurious carpet that accepts an incoming iron shot like a velvet pillow but putts lightning quick when shaved down. The deep green blades stand up straight even at low levels, unlike the creeping bentgrasses that lie flat and often produce grain on a putting surface.

From its start at the enchanting antique golfing grounds at Vesper, Manny's emerald green grass has found its way to more than 50 courses in New England from Val Halla in Cumberland, Maine, to The International (with its 7,400-yard tiger tees) in Bolton, Mass., to Cochecho, Manchester and Lake Sunapee, three of New Hampshire's finest private clubs.

Manny also brought the grass to Mexico during repeated visits there from 1954 to 1970, and Vesper Velvet is alive and well on courses from Alcapulco to Mexico City. It is kept growing in New England by Bert Frederick, the superintendent who learned from Manny at Vesper, and who still

cultures the grounds there.

Francis' innovations in turf care have naturally followed his desire to serve the golfing public with better facilities. His lack of patents or need for credit are a throwback to an earlier era when information was shared for the good of the game, not the individual. He consulted for more than 50 courses in New England, usually gratis.

When he watched ice and snow destroy putting surfaces during the Northeastern winters, Manny took heavy equipment on the greens and plowed them off in early March. At first this was considered crazy, but winterkill was cut drastically, and Vesper was in play before other nearby layouts. This was in the 1940s.

At a time when greens were top-dressed with loam if anything at all, Manny was experimenting with sand. He found the low-growing grasses spread more readily and the greens held up better to heavy traffic.

When he needed a machine to allow the fertilizer to assimilate into the surface he built one. He inserted flat, carbon steel blades into a round wheel that was sent spinning at high revolution; vertical slicing was born. In the post-World War II era this was revolutionary; today the practice and the equipment are universal.

His son tackles problems with the same forward-thinking independence and lack of restraint due to what is already available. He needed a driving range at Green Harbor but didn't have 3,000 square yards. The solution is an enclosed cage with 10 mats and a layered screen that drops the balls straight down into a trough. The floating Mac-Tec golf ball is used,

and a gush of water floods the depression every 10 minutes, whisking the balls away and into the building, where they are collected and fed back into the ball dispenser. Although interest has been aroused elsewhere, the range remains a practical solution to specific problem for the golfers at Green Harbor.

The Francis family designed and built every bit of this busy and beautiful public facility on a former cranberry bog on a piece of land once owned by Daniel Webster.

Riding carts are not permitted, and pesticides are seldom used. Not a blade of grass is out of place despite nearly 50,000 rounds a year — many by less proficient devotees toting mis-matched collections of clubs, and sporting t-shirts and dungarees.

When asked if his father had regrets about not doing more for himself over the years, Manny N. Sr. was quick to reply in the Francis style: "No, he's never been like that. Look at these people having fun out here. What he sees is satisfaction enough for him."

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