



Superintendent Richard Christian checks out a green at Pine Valley.

Christian takes challenge to be the best at the best

BY PETER BLAIS

The next Eberhard Steiniger, that's who Richard Christian would like to be.

Steiniger was the superintendent for nearly 40 years at Pine Valley Country Club, recently voted the world's top course for an unprecedented third straight year by Golf Magazine. He retired in the mid-1970s.

Several superintendents succeeded Steiniger before Christian took over in 1988.

"I see myself staying here a long time, God willing," said the 24-year-old caretaker of the world's finest 18. "I would love to retire here. It's just beautiful. I've never seen better."

Neither have the 68 panelists — who included the likes of touring pros Ben Crenshaw, Raymond Floyd, Jack Nicklaus, Greg Norman, Arnold Palmer and Jan Stephenson — who comprised Golf Magazine's selection committee.

Being the best year after year brings its own set of problems — high expectations. Finish second in the world next year and the question Christian will hear most often is "What happened?"

That's a load for a superintendent with a quarter-century's experience to bear, let alone a young man just four years out of college. But Christian seems to have the confidence and philosophy to handle it.

"I'm never 100 percent happy with the condition of the course. If that wasn't my philosophy, I'd be in trouble. I strive for perfection in whatever I do," said Christian.

Christian credits his 28-man crew (18 in the winter) with keeping playable the oases of fairways and greens among the deserts of sand barrens that are Pine Valley. He and his troops battle thinning greens and crabgrass like everyone else. But the bunkers present a special challenge.

There are desert courses with more sand. But there the bunkers tend to run level and long, allowing for perfect grooming. At Pine Valley, sand runs up and over the side of hills making erosion control a problem. The vegetation

that grows in the sand must be pruned, but can't be removed because the roots hold the sand in place.

"I read recently that some architect wanted to develop a course just like Pine Valley because it would be easy to maintain. He obviously didn't know what he was talking about. These hillside bunkers require an incredible amount of maintenance. If he tried to copy it, it would probably be the last course that architect would ever design," said Christian.

But it is the presence of those very bunkers, and the overall design of the course that developer George Crump and architect H.S. Colt designed in the early 1900s, that are mainly responsible for the club's No. 1 ranking, according to Christian.

"It's the perfect golf course," said Christian. "We owe those two a lot of thanks."

Crump and Colt will never thank Christian for the compliment. They both went to whatever eternal place course designers and developers go long before Christian first appeared on the scene in his hometown of Litchfield, Conn.

Christian worked on the ground crews part-time and summers for five years at Litchfield's Stonybrook Golf Course before attending the University of Massachusetts. One of his professors, Joseph Troll, set him up with a summer placement at Pine Valley between the first and second year of his two-year associates of science in turf management program.

Christian reveled in the experience and, when he graduated in the summer of 1985, he applied for the assistant's post under then-superintendent Dick Bator. He worked for Bator 2 1/2 years before taking over the head position on Jan. 1, 1988.

"I wanted to go somewhere I could work a lot of hours and learn as much as I could," said Christian, adding that he wasn't intimidated by the prospect of eventually taking over one of the world's top courses.

Christian got his work wish. He often puts in 12-hour days. And he is learning, especially about the weather and how it can lay to waste the best-laid plans.

"The weather is one of the hardest things about this job," said Christian. "I joke with the members that it's the only thing I haven't gotten control of, yet. But fortunately this is one of the best courses in the area for drainage. We got two inches of rain the other night. It was still raining and the greens were underwater at 8 a.m. An hour-and-a-half after the rain stopped, people were playing. Being built on that native sand makes a big difference."

And what is the most satisfying part of his

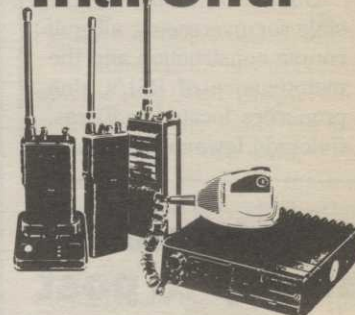
job? Simply seeing the enjoyment people get out of playing on one of the world's best courses.

If you know of a standout golf course superintendent who is long over due for peer recognition, please let us know. Golf Course News welcomes nominations for such accolade.

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