

# The icy odyssey of a Northwestern super

BY BOB SPIWAK

The Canadian province of British Columbia hunkers atop the state of Washington like a Foot-Joy over a ball marker. Hockey being the Canadian national sport, it's no surprise that Chris Becker aspired to be a hockey player. Now, at 35, he baldly states, "If it weren't for hockey, I'd never have become a golf course superintendent." What's this?

Becker, superintendent at Fairways Golf Course in Cheney, Wash., has been the number one greensman since the course opened in 1987. With a \$140,000 budget and a staff of seven, his course has earned plaudits throughout the Northwest for its reliably excellent condition.

He was one of the first in Washington to be "A" certified with the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America.

Growing up in Cranbrook, B.C., northeast of the Idaho-Montana border, Becker began playing organized hockey when he was 8. Ten years later, he'd played four years in Junior hockey, leading his team to two B.C. championships and one runner-up slot. He was chosen Most Valuable Player in the Junior playoffs for three years, and no wonder: 142 goals and 148 assists in 112 games. He was on his way — he thought.

Hockey, being a winter sport, left him with the need for summer employment. In 1974 he took work as a maintenance man at Cranbrook Golf and Country Club. He'd had no particular interest in golf courses. "It was just a job that opened up. I got it, and found I really enjoyed it."

Becker enjoyed it so much that a year later he joined GCSAA. A year after that, he became assistant superintendent.

The year he got serious about course maintenance, 1975, was the year he turned semi-pro in hockey. He was the Cranbrook Royals' top scorer in his rookie year. He was scouted by the National Hockey League's Edmonton Oilers and invited to their rookie camp.

But hard luck hit. He tore the ligaments in his thumb playing baseball and had to forego the pro camp. He remained with the Royals another year, then moved to the Kimberly (B.C.) Dynamiters as Center. He helped his team win the Allen Cup, semi-pro equivalent of the NHL's coveted Stanley Cup, in 1978 and 1979.

Meanwhile, he had moved to a summer job as course superintendent at Centennial Golf Club in Prince Rupert, B.C.

## Out of action

Hard luck struck again in 1981. With his team in the playoffs, and with two hat tricks in less than two games, he was checked hard into the boards during the second game. He lost 80 percent of a kidney — and any hope of a pro hockey career.

Fortunately, his luck worked both ways. He still had his superintendent's job, which he loved almost as much as hockey.

At Prince Rupert he began extending his knowledge by reading, attending seminars, and on-the-job training. He received his GCSAA certification in 1985.

When the superintendent's job opened at Fairways in 1987, Becker applied. The idea of developing a brand new course offered a challenge and promised his involvement in an old Spokane area tradition, the Lilac Invitational Tournament, Washington's only 72-hole event.

The Lilac was conceived by, among others,



Chris Becker and an assistant string barbed wire on the open range of their course.

Joe Durgan, who was for years head pro at Spokane's Downriver Golf Course. Its inaugural was in 1969. In 1986 Durgan and his family leased the under-construction Fairways track, and the Lilac Association opted to move the tournament to Fairways to join its founder. Durgan's son, John, was installed as manager and pro, and he hired Becker.

## Challenge of different sort

Becker got his challenge. The greens did not come in well in their first spring, and opening day was set for May 15, 1987. The Lilac was scheduled for July. It was crucial for the course to be in top shape, because tension, if not antipathy, had been created in Spokane's golf community by the change of venue for the Lilac. There was a substantial group of people hoping for failure at Fairways as a reason to move the tourney back to Downriver.

Becker attacked the problem. Consulting with the owners and tournament officials, he suggested reducing the size of some healthy greens and taking sod from their perimeters to repair the faulty ones. A thousand square feet of Penncross bentgrass sod were removed and placed on other greens.

Then, he took 15,000 plugs, cup-size and 8-inch diameter from the practice green and other green's perimeters.

He and his crew spread 250 yards of top dressing that first year, most of it applied in March and April. Four overseedings of Penncross at 3 pounds per thousand feet produced a "catch" between the plugs. Up to eight rollings per green smoothed the surface.

The course opened, the Lilac was a success. Becker has never let up on his quality control and one member of the Northern California Golf Association called the greens, "The best I have ever putted." This from a man from the land of giants like Pebble, Cypress and Olympic.

Becker puts in some 60 hours a week at the beginning of the season and cuts back to 40 to 50 later in the year. With assistant Mel Boehm and regulars Jim Jensen (a 5 handicapper) and Brian Sullivan, Becker guides the daily maintenance schedule. Fairways of pure Victa bluegrass are cut to

# SUPER FOCUS

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— Chris Becker

the mowers are done by the crew.

Likewise, all construction, from championship tee to new ponds are done by the Becker gang.

Becker plays to a 15 handicap — when he has time. Pro John Durgan notes, "We're really fortunate to have a superintendent and staff who are good golfers. It helps them to help (the course)."

He smiles and adds, "But don't say too many good things about Chris; we can't afford to lose him to another course."

Part of Airways' success lies in Becker's dedication. He checks the greens daily, "... down on my hands and knees with a magnifying glass."

He is currently working with agronomists from the University of Washington and Washington State University to develop a control for *Fusarium dimerum*, which blows in on the uninterrupted southwest wind. This disease, which ultimately causes turf loss, is his greatest problem.

Less serious, but more unsightly, is a lack of drainage of some parts of the fairways, where they lie on a clay base. "We're working on both problems," he says. "The biggest mistake (in disease control) is to mis-identify the disease. If I'm at all unsure, I send a sample to the university."

When it comes to the course, Becker is "The Main Man." He says, "What it all stems from is pride. If it doesn't look good, it doesn't play good. Pride in your work is the key to successful course maintenance."

If pride is one key and results are another, Chris Becker, ex-hockey star, has a large ring of keys indeed.

Bob Spiwak is a freelance golf writer from Winthrop, Wash.

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