

# Trumbull CC's Denning still making a difference

BY PETER BLAIS

Someone once asked Dwight Eisenhower what he considered his greatest contribution.

The United States chief of staff during World War II thought about his part in leading the Allies to victory over Hitler, and shook his head.

Then he leafed through his eight years of memories as the 34th president of the United States and again looked elsewhere.

"He felt his greatest contribution was the work he did on his Gettysburg (Pa.) farm because he always left it better than he found it," said Bruce Denning, superintendent of Trumbull Country Club in Warren, Ohio.

"Superintendents tend to look at things the same way. We like to make a difference. It's nice to know that a tree I planted here will provide shade for a golfer long after I'm gone. Being a superintendent has let me leave things a little better than I found them, too."

Golf found Denning 37 years ago. Drafted into the Navy during the Suez Canal Crisis in 1954, the Smethport, Pa. native was assigned to the golf course at the Patuxent, Md., flight test center as assistant superintendent. There he came under the tutelage of superintendent Bill Shriver.

"Bill took a real interest in me. He got me excited about the profession," remembered Denning.

Denning accompanied his mentor to monthly meetings where the apprentice was fascinated by speakers like Pennsylvania State University agronomist Fred Grau. Grau and H. Burton Musser established a turfgrass extension and research team at Pennsylvania State University in the 1930s that was continued in recent years by others like Joseph Duich.

The presence of such men attracted Denning to Penn State after his discharge. He graduated in 1960 with an associate's degree in turfgrass management.

His first head post took him to Frosty Valley Country Club in Danville, Pa., where he helped oversee construction of the William and David Gordon-designed course. He remained there four years.

While at Frosty Valley he first met longtime friend Paul Latshaw (see last month's Super Focus), the only superintendent to host three of the four majors (U.S. Open, PGA and Masters) and current head man at Wilmington (Del.) Country Club.

"Paul was a young kid right out of the Navy and had never been on a golf course before. He was planning on being a chicken farmer or something like that," said Denning, who hired Latshaw onto his grounds crew.

Latshaw was one of a dozen of his assistants Denning estimates went on to supervise their own courses



Bruce Denning out on the course he has babied for 26 years.

"I had to take Paul out and show him what a green was," chuckled Denning. "But he impressed me as a young man who wanted to do something with his life, and he did."

So did Denning who took the Trumbull post in 1964.

"I said when I started out that I'd never stay anyplace more than four or five years," said Denning, now in his 26th year at the Stanley Thompson-designed facility. "But you establish yourself in a community, marry, have a couple of kids, get to know your course."

"The nice thing about this profession, though, is that it's always a challenge. This is an old course (1916) so it always needs looking after. You put in a new irrigation system one year, change the landscaping another year, remodel another. It's always a challenge."

The 6,100-yard course plays to a par 70 from the white tees. Four holes were remodeled by William Newcomb in 1968, including changing the par 3 13th to a par 4.

"The course meets the needs of its members," said Denning of the diverse membership that has bounced back from the dismantling of the steel industry in this northeastern Ohio city. "We have members from three generations of the same family. We're strong with the women and the juniors. People just like the course. There are no unusual features. But it's well-groomed and challenging."

Actually, "well groomed" might be too mild, according to Denning, who believes the biggest change in the game over the past 30 years has been a turf technology that has given birth to a new age of mowers, irrigation equipment and various computer-assisted devices.

"The fairways today are better than the greens your grandfather used to putt on," said the 55-year-old. "Superintendents are striving for perfection."

Which is good and bad.

In their quest for excellence, superintendents are sometimes too quick to reach for chemicals or pesticides to solve a turf problem, said Denning.

"Sometimes what appears to be a problem is just Mother Nature's way of saying that a plant has to protect itself," he said.

But overall, superintendents are excellent stewards of the land, Denning said. They are in the forefront when it comes to knowledge about what will help or hurt the environment.

"I think there are bigger people for them (environmentalists) to go after," said Denning. "But we're under a microscope. There are a lot of homes near our course. If the people who live there see us out spraying, and we're wearing respirators and coveralls, they get upset. We don't have to wear those things. We just do it to be in compliance with the law. The stuff we use any homeowner can buy. In fact, we can't use things the homeowner can, like Diazinon."

Hurting the environment is the last thing Denning, as a superintendent, said he would want to do since "working with Mother Nature" is what he enjoys most about his field. "It's constantly changing. You can never know it all and that keeps you humble."

Being a superintendent has also provided very well for his family. "We have two children. One's in college and the other's a senior in high school who will be going. But we won't be starving."

Family has become increasingly important for Denning over the years. It used to be job first, family second. Now the two are reversed.

"It took awhile to get to where I'd take take four or five days off in the summer. But I did and my kids will always have memories of those trips we took together," said Denning.

"If the course can't survive a few days without me, then I've done something wrong. But somehow we get this idea our courses can't function unless we're there 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We've got to learn to delegate authority. Hire good assistants, give them an overview and then give them an opportunity."

As for the future, Denning is optimistic and troubled by what he

sees.

The game's growth should mean an increase in the professional status of superintendents, he said.

But he doesn't like the trend toward management companies taking over courses and putting a director of golf, who may know little about turf management, over a superintendent.

Nor is he happy with the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America Certified Golf Course Superintendent program.

Denning, who is not a CGCS, believes the program could exclude experienced superintendents because of the requirement they have three years of college or have completed Division I and half of Division II GCSAA seminars by 1999.

Also he is troubled by the attesting requirement that two certified superintendents, who may be less-qualified than a non-certified superintendent, favorably review the applicant's course.

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