

Not resting on laurels, Bator tackles Merion

BY PETER BLAIS

The resume reads: Superintendent at Oak Hill, Pine Valley and now Merion. Also designed two golf courses.

Pretty impressive for a guy who had no idea what he wanted to do when he was 18.

"I didn't care for school, but I played a lot of sports," remembered Dick Bator of the summer following his senior year of high school. "I was taking golf lessons at Amherst (Mass.) Golf Course when I met (University of Massachusetts Professor) Joe Troll."

The recently retired head of the UMass turf management school encouraged Bator to enroll at UMass. A two-week stint on a local factory assembly-line convinced Bator a college education wasn't such a bad idea and he enrolled that fall.

Bator did an internship at Ludlow (Mass.) Country Club and, with associate degree in hand, became head superintendent at Mill River Country Club in Stratford, Conn., at the ripe old age of 20.

Mill River had some of the state's best golfers. But the course had been allowed to deteriorate to the point that the state golf association declared it would never again stage the state title there, said Bator. Within three years, he whipped the Tom Winton-designed course into shape and the Connecticut Open returned.

The Country Club of Pittsfield (Mass.), "the blue blood course in that area," according to Bator, was his next stop. He stayed there seven years before venturing out of New England in 1977 to Oak Hill which was preparing for the 1980 PGA Championship.

Bator was selected from among 100 applicants for the head post at the 36-hole, Rochester, N.Y. club, thereby accomplishing the second of his two career goals when he graduated from UMass — heading a Connecticut club and hosting a major tournament.

"There were a lot of trials and tribulations," said Bator. "The Fazio's (George and Tom) had just rebuilt four holes and we were waiting for those to grow in. Both courses were pretty run down. We spent the next



Dick Bator at his newest project, Merion Golf Course.

three years improving drainage, dealing with thatch and addressing the lack of turf on greens, tees and fairways. We had to rebuild from top to bottom. We made a lot of mistakes. But there was no comparison between the course when we took over and when the PGA took place."

Pine Valley was ranked among the top three courses in the world when Bator assumed the head superintendent's post in 1983. Poor turf conditions, particularly a thick thatch layer, were keeping the Clementon, N.J. facility from its rightful No. 1 spot, he said.

Bator's crews aerified the fairways 23 times over the next three years in preparation for the 1985 Walker Cup. He also used triplex mowers on fairways for the first time to get a 3/8-inch cut. The result was a successful Walker Cup and the No. 1 ranking among the world's courses, said Bator.

"We'd had some problems with the course before Dick came," said Pine Valley Chairman Ernest Ransome, who was president

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eyes is a thrill. Building a course is like an artist molding a piece of clay. I always wondered if I could build a course and I found out that I could. What I learned as a superintendent at Oak Hill and Pine Valley certainly helped."

But the lure of again managing a world-class course finally won out. While interviewing for the head post at Tom Fazio's exclusive Caves Valley Club in Baltimore last summer, Bator was approached by Merion Green Committee Chairman James Bradbeer and President W. Scott Smith.

"There was an instant chemistry between Mr. Bradbeer, Mr. Smith, the committee and myself," said Bator. "When I left Pine Valley, I said I'd never come back this way. But here I am again at a major league course trying to maintain major league conditions."

"The transition from designing to the daily battle of maintaining a course has been the most difficult aspect of the job. I'm still a little rusty."

"Maybe there were no challenges left in Rochester. Maybe I missed the big time. I don't know. All I do know is I've always loved this course and I'm glad I'm here."

Bator immediately set about trying to restore the Hugh Wilson-designed facility. Wilson, coincidentally, helped finish Pine Valley's final four holes after original-architect George Crump's death.

"The biggest thing was to get the greens up to speed," explained Bator. "It's a thinking man's course. If the speed is what it should be, then it's tough to break par. We want to bring the greens back to (U.S.) Open speed."

"We've started a massive aeration program; modified them with pure sand to harden them up; started an overseeding program with Penncross bent; top dressed them to smooth them out; improved the nutrient levels; checked for nematodes and diseases; and started a monthly newsletter outlining the steps we were taking to all members."

His crews have rebuilt seven tees and patched a dozen others. A two-year, drainage-improvement program is in place. Tree root pruning around greens is underway. The irrigation system is being refurbished and maintenance areas updated.

"We're trying to restore the ragged edges around what may be the best-designed bunkers in the world," said Bator, who is ahead of schedule at the close of the first year of his three-year restoration program. "We want to restore their Scottish appearance."

"We also want to restore the old fescues and the native grasses for the contrasting colors. . . We'll begin gradually converting our fairways from poa to bentgrass Aug. 6. We'll overseed and by next June we'll have 90 to 95 percent bentgrass on the fairways. We did a similar thing at Pine Valley in 1983."

Bator credits his maintenance crew and Merion's administration for much of his success.

"It's to their (maintenance staff) credit that they've adapted to my high intensity and expectation level. The new and existing staff have blended well and are improving weekly. This first-year crew is as good as any I've had."

As for the green committee: "I've always been blessed with a free hand anywhere I've gone. It's the same here. I've never had an incompetent green committee, chairman or president anywhere I've been," he said.

Over the years, Bator has become known as a regional turfgrass expert.

"He's a dirt under the fingernails type of superintendent," said Jan Beljan, a senior designer in Fazio's office. "He's the grass guy

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BUSINESS NEWS

Continental buys bridge line from DeBourgh

Continental Manufacturing, Inc. of Alexandria, Minn., has acquired the Town & Country Bridge line from DeBourgh Manufacturing of Minneapolis.

Continental is a diversified manufacturer with divisions in prefabricated pedestrian, vehicular, and utility bridging systems, automotive collision repair, and custom-designed automated

equipment manufacturing.

Continental began as a prefabricated bridge manufacturer in 1972. Officials said this acquisition will enhance Continental's position as North America's largest manufacturer of custom-designed prefabricated bridges. Continental Bridge will continue to manufacture and market its bridges from its Alexandria headquarters.

Detroit society cites Hancor, Inc.

The Detroit Section of the Society of Plastics Engineers awarded Hancor, Inc. the Process Award and the Grand Award for its storm drainage product, Hancor Hi-Q pipe.

Hancor's marketing manager, Bill Altermatt, and project engineer, Matt Ankrom, received the awards at the society's annual awards banquet held in Troy, Mich., in April.

Hancor's Hi-Q pipe competed against other non-automotive plastic products manufactured in northwest Ohio, northeast Indiana, and southern Michigan for five awards — The Product, Process, Design, Application, and the Erik Erikson awards.

The five winners then competed for the Grand Award recognizing the best product among the five.

Hi-Q is a polyethylene pipe with

a corrugated exterior and smooth interior. Its smooth interior allows Hi-Q to carry more water than other pipes traditionally use for storm drainage. Its corrugated exterior makes Hi-Q strong enough to be installed under highways.

The Process Award honors the innovations and refinements Hancor has made to plastic processing equipment to make Hi-Q.

Jacobsen presents scholarship to turf student

Jacobsen Division of Textron has awarded a scholarship in golf course operations to Tom McAlister, a student at Lake City (Fla.) Com-

munity College.

McAlister is enrolled in the school's turfgrass program.

In announcing the award, Jacob-

sen Regional Sales Manager George Hollander praised the school for its service to the industry.

"We have a definite need for trained people in the turfgrass field," Hollander said. "Lake City is doing a great job of providing these skilled people, and Jacobsen is pleased to help advance the program."

The presentation was made during an awards banquet sponsored by Jacobsen and its Florida distributors.

Briefs...

Golfax, Ltd. of Ponte Vedra, Fla., announced it has appointed **Complete Golf Services Co.** of Phoenix, Ariz., to represent its products in Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada and Southern California.

Ciba-Geigy's Pennant liquid herbicide now has a 24(c) special local need label for use in commercial sod production in Florida. This is the first time Pennant applications have been allowed on turf. The herbicide was initially labeled for use on ornamental plants in 1987.

Currently, the pre-emergence herbicide can only be used in Florida on commercially grown St. Augustinegrass.

LABB Systems, the publisher of TRIMS Grounds Management Software, has signed international marketing agreements with Sadimato Materiel D'Irrigation in France and the British and International Golf Greenkeepers Association in the United Kingdom.

Bator

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in the Northeast I want to talk to if I have any questions."

Bator said designing and building courses has been the most enjoyable part of his 28 years in the business, "although my forte is probably restoring old Rembrandts (like Oak Hill, Pine Valley and Merion)," he said.

Asked to pick his favorite course, Bator said it was too close to call between Pine Valley and Merion. In both cases, he mentioned the free reign given him by Ransome at Pine Valley and the green committee at Merion.

There are no other U.S. courses where Bator would like to try his hand, although he mentioned a fascination for Scotland's Ballybunion.

"It would be a different experience to host a British Open," he said. "The superintendents over there care for courses the old-fashioned way. They have very little money. They rely on God and nature."

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