

Wright was heaven-sent at Ontario's Devil's Pulpit

BY MARK LESLIE

Ken Wright left his job at the National Golf Club in Woodbridge, Ontario, the No. 1-ranked course in Canada, with the reputation as the No. 1 superintendent in the country.

When he did so, he left the challenges of maintaining a course with a grand reputation for well-kept grounds to accept the obstacles of putting a brand new course into the kind of shape that would surpass the National.

Chris Haney, co-owner of Devil's Pulpit in Caledon, Ontario, wanted the best course in Canada and so he hired the man he had heard was the best superintendent.

"Dana Fry (project manager) knew him. I knew of him. I had heard (some) considered Ken the best in the world. Certainly he's the best in Canada and certainly one of the best three in the world," said Haney.

"I think he's (Wright) incredible," said director of golf Doug Ball. "He's great at organizing his crew and getting things done. The course is already gorgeous the way it's growing in. It's already better than the National."

Arguments aside about which course is better, the 43-year-old Wright gets plaudits from others who have seen his work.

Andy Banfield, a senior designer with architect Tom Fazio who with George Fazio created the National, said, "One of the reasons the National was so well liked was because of Ken's work."

Fry, a senior designer with Hurdzan Design Group, who oversaw construction of Devil's Pulpit and is in charge of work at its sister course, Devil's Links, claims

Wright "has the best reputation in Canada. The National had great conditioning under him."

The challenge was what lured Wright, who had been superintendent at the National for 10 years and at Northwood Golf and Country Club in Toronto from 1973-79.

"It's an awesome piece of property. It's out of sight," Wright said. "I went over to look at the courses two or three times and I could see potential. I wouldn't have taken it if I didn't think it could be a great golf course. I think this is going to be a dynamite place. It is out in the country, has no houses around it, and is peaceful."

One reason it will be such a challenge is the mere size of the property.

"The Pulpit has 315 acres and they've used about the whole property. From our point of view it's definitely going to cost more to maintain than your average 18-hole golf course just because of its size and the amount of sprinklers. I know we'll need 25 or 30 people here (Pulpit). Fewer at the Links, which is on 174 acres. You could put two golf courses in the Pulpit land..."

Describing the job as exciting, Wright said, "I'm spending 12 hours a day here, but I can't wait to get here in the morning."

The weather in the high regions of his course causes frustration at times. "Yesterday it was up in the high 80s, yet in the shady spots there's still frost on the ground. We're 1,500 feet in elevation above Toronto. Last Monday it didn't get up to freezing and today it's 80 degrees... Normal for this time of the year is 55 degrees," Wright said.



Ken Wright, right, with Trivial Pursuit king Chris Haney at Devil's Pulpit in Caledon, Ontario, Canada.

Photo by Doug Ball

"It's hard on turf," he said, adding that he had just started up the irrigation system in early May.

The Pulpit has bentgrass on tees, greens and fairways, bluegrass in the rough and fescue outside the rough.

Keeping poa annua out of the course will be difficult, but Wright got his reputation in part by conquering the pesky poa.

"It's definitely a problem in this part of the world, but I think we've learned to cope with it pretty well," he said.

Wright said poa can be eliminated by management practices — mainly through fertilization, irrigation (keeping it dry), light-weight mowing and picking up the clippings.

He believes he was the first superintendent in Canada to use triplex mowers on the entire course,

and he now uses triplex and fiveplex.

This program worked at the National, which had 50 percent poa when he arrived, he said. "In three to four years the poa population was down to 10 percent with no chemical treatment. And it's now about 5 percent," he said.

Wright is not a behind-the-desk superintendent.

"I like to be out on the golf course. I don't think you can grow grass from your desk, and a lot of people try to," he said.

He also feels it's important for the superintendent to play golf — "at least once a week in the summertime. You play around and see what other guys are doing."

Wright sees the job of the superintendent as evolving with more computer use and other high-tech advances.

While he studied at a teachers college in Nova Scotia and attended short courses on turf at the University of Guelph, he is not of the new generation of agronomists.

"When I started in the business, superintendents were more or less farmers," he said. "Those guys have mostly all been weeded out and now everybody's got university degrees. You have to go to every conference and show you can keep up, especially with the irrigation systems."

"It's a tool for us to do a better job. We're compared to so many golf courses; the next day you don't have a job if you don't keep up."

So important is that expertise that Wright brought his assistant superintendent at the National, Chris Andrejicka, with him to the Pulpit.

"I like to put as much confidence in my assistant as I can, but I'm there, too," he said.

Wright advocates less use of chemicals on golf courses.

"All the superintendents now are quite knowledgeable and we don't use as many chemicals as we ever used to. We used three or four times as much 10 years ago. You can grow better turf without it. But you have to have some of it," he said.

Wright is content doing what he's doing where he's doing it.

"I like what I'm doing and have never looked at it as a stepping stone to another career," he said.

For now his only goal is to prepare for opening day: July 1. Reach that target and he can go on with business as usual, striving to keep one of the country's best courses in the country's very best condition.

Haney: A mind whizzing with innovative ideas

No extreme too extreme in his pursuit

BY MARK LESLIE

Perhaps drawing an expression from the movie "Top Gun," architect Michael Hurdzan said: "Chris Haney is the sort of person who thinks outside of the envelope."

Haney's character, his colleagues say, spills out into whatever project he's involved in. When one of those projects turned out to be a golf course, nothing changed.

The idea to build a course, in fact, was a lark.

Haney, a golfer for 29 of his 37 years who once played to a 1 handicap, plays golf with friends every Friday "come hell or high water," he said. But one Friday they couldn't get a tee time at any public course. They found themselves stewing at a pub when one buddy suggested Haney build his own course so he wouldn't have to worry about getting a tee time.

That was the only seed that

needed planting, and it led to Devil's Pulpit in Caledon, Ontario.

Haney kept three real-estate agents busy for two years exploring the countryside to find the ideal site for the Pulpit course, then laid down \$2 million for 315 acres — twice the necessary area for an 18-hole course.

"When Chris bragged that Devil's Pulpit would be considered for the Canadian Open in three years, we looked at it as an utterance from a great dreamer, which he is," said Hurdzan. "But now I think that the RCGA (Royal Canadian Golf Association) is seriously looking at it as a Canadian Open site."

Hurdzan's project manager, Dana Fry, said every hole can accommodate spectators.

Every hole certainly has its own personality — if only because each hole has its own name.

"All the holes' names are related to historical events or people nearby," Haney said.

The CN Tower Hole — No. 1 — looks directly at the CN Tower in Toronto 35 miles away.

The Memorial Hole is designed around the gravesite of two brothers buried there after they died 120 years ago. Haney has had special landscaping work done around the refurbished headstones and fencing.

A betting hole is named Jun's Hole after partner Jun Matsuura, who died in an automobile accident early this year.

When a 10-foot-high stone wall was built along a lake on the first hole, Haney joked that the course could hold the world diving championships.

When he discovered that seven miles of golf carts needed to be built, he wryly suggested hosting the world go-cart championships.

When he learned that his reported \$750,000 offer for the land for the sister Links course was turned down, he quickly responded, "Double it." And so the deal was made.

Haney, whose nearby estate has beautiful homes built for groundskeeping staff and visitors, ordered a swimming pool built for the maintenance staff at the Pulpit.

In order to ensure that they all understood what a links golf course is, Haney sent director of golf Doug Ball, superintendent Ken Wright, Fry and Hurdzan to Scotland.

"Chris wanted to make sure we all understand what he wants," Hurdzan explained.

Asked if the Pulpit project was an attempt to conquer the world of golf now that he has conquered the world of games, Haney said: "It didn't start out that way, but I guess it's turned into that now. It started out as a fun track for a bunch of buddies. Now it's almost turned into a search for the Holy Grail. It's been a nightmare, a lot of hassles. But it's worthwhile. I spend 30 to 40 hours a week here."

"Chris Haney," said Hurdzan, "is a great dreamer. He has a flair for life and that shows up in his work."

"We're just thankful that a guy like him had the confidence and patience and wisdom to trust us. Why did he pick us (to design the course)? Chris was an underdog. Until he invented Trivial Pursuit he was the consummate blue-col-

lar underdog. He felt we had the ability to perform and he gave us the freedom to do that. We welcomed his input; he was part of every decision we made. But he constantly said, 'You're the architect.'"

Ball, the director of golf, gave some insight into Haney when explaining how he came to the Pulpit. Ball and Haney had worked together and become friends when both were covering the 1973 Canadian Open as photographers for the Canadian Press, an affiliate of the Associated Press.

Years later Ball, then a 2-handicapper but now a scratch golfer, was photo editor for the Montreal Gazette.

"One day I answered the phone and Chris's voice on the other end said, 'Does today seem like a good day to quit?'"

"You're ... right it is," I said.

"I can even tell you the time and date," Ball added. "Eleven a.m. July 30, 1987."

And life hasn't been the same since — for either of the longtime buddies.