

Twelve's a charm for AGC's Owens

BY PETER BLAIS

Maintaining a single course is a hard enough job for one person. Two is a reach. Three is approaching the impossible. But 12?

"I couldn't go back to running a single course now," said American Golf Corp. regional superintendent Jerry Owens, who directly oversees a dozen Southeast courses and consults at five more.

"Maybe when I'm getting ready to retire and I want to slow down. But right now there doesn't seem to be a limit to what I could do."

Owens is responsible for an annual maintenance budget of \$4.5 million and 150 employees scattered around the 12 private and public facilities. He has a superintendent at every course and tries to visit each at least once a month.

"My main job is to audit each course to make sure they meet or exceed the standards the company expects," said Owens, who has been with American Golf since 1986. "I'm looking for things like green speed and turf quality."

"We want to be the MacDonal'd's of the golf industry. You go to Mac's because you know what you'll get when you walk through the door. We want that, too."

Making sure a dozen courses meet that goal requires a lot of time and effort. Owens puts 30,000 miles a year on his car visiting the five courses he manages in the Atlanta, Ga. area. Planes take him to single courses in Helen and Savannah, Ga., three in Charlotte, N.C., and two in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

"It hurts the family life occasionally. I have a 5-year-old daughter I know would like to see more of her daddy. But the company pays for my wife and daughter to travel with me. That makes it easier," he said.

Owens' family hails from the Smoky Mountain town of Graham in western North Carolina. His love of the game sprung from the area's junior program that allowed him to play any of 35 courses within a 50-mile radius of Graham for \$10 a month.

"I mowed a lot of lawns and saved my money for golf," he remembered.

Running a tractor on his grandfather's farm



American Golf Corp. regional superintendent Jerry Owens, right, and Bobby Jones Golf Course superintendent Steve Kovacs outside the Atlanta, Ga., club.

and working around his father's department store as a youth helped make him comfortable with the equipment he later found in the maintenance shed and pro shop as a fledgling superintendent.

He graduated with an associate degree in turfgrass management from North Carolina State University in 1974. He worked as assistant superintendent at Pine Needles Resort in Southern Pines, N.C., and Golden Horsehoe in Williamsburg, Va., where he helped design an 18-hole, par-3 course.

Pinehurst lured him back to North Carolina in 1979. He joined the famed resort as head superintendent of the No. 1 course and later helped open and manage No. 6.

But after seven years of the daily routine of maintaining a course, "I was ready to spread my wings," he recalled of his decision to accept the director of golf post for the city of Savannah, Ga., in 1981.

Owens worked with Gary Player and his

assistant, Ron Kirby (now with Jack Nicklaus' European office) to design and open a second nine holes at Bacon Park. He also made the money-losing course profitable by raising green fees an average of \$4 (the senior citizen rate had been \$2.50 a round), doubling the maintenance budget and upgrading the facilities.

"If you don't have a product people like, you can't expect them to pay for it," said Owens.

Knowing it was in the city's best interest, he also began looking for a management company to run Bacon Park "even though I knew it probably meant my job being eliminated."

American Golf, which eventually took over Bacon Park, was one of the companies Owens contacted regarding the city's course. The management firm was impressed with his ability and hired him in 1986.

As American Golf grew, so did Owens'

responsibilities. Not only is he responsible for turf management, but also for maintenance of the golf car fleets and assisting in acquisition decisions.

The biggest difference in managing multiple courses is the number of potential problems, Owens said. For instance, the different grasses at Owens' courses range from bentgrass to Bermuda to fescues to ryegrasses.

"Each has different growing conditions and requires different chemicals. Keeping them all straight is the biggest challenge," he said.

The increased sensitivity to chemical use is the biggest change Owens has seen in his 17 years in the business.

"It's really happened in just the past couple of years," he said. "We have our own restricted-chemicals list. And we're much more conscious of chemical-application training."

Owens considers training one of the most important aspects of his job. And he's good at it.

"He truly believes all American Golf personnel are part of the 'team' and does his best to make them feel they are ... through training, personal notes and words of advice," wrote LESCO accounts manager Buck Caldwell, who has had many business dealings with Owens.

Owens said ever-growing administrative duties make it increasingly difficult to find time for teaching.

"But I try to get on a piece of equipment at least once or twice a month. I can't teach someone something unless I know how to do it myself," he said.

As for his staff, Owens said: "I just try to hire good people. As they get better, it makes my job easier. I learn a lot from people in the field just by talking with them on a regular basis."

Owens supervises more facilities than any of the 15 regional superintendents in American Golf's 116-course empire. And his number is likely to grow.

"The company plans on taking on 10 to 20 new courses a year. It's exciting," Owens said.

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