

When turf gets hot, Golden fires up his firetruck

Maine superintendent uses 1963 LaFrance to water his 18-hole course

By Mark Leslie

"I used to sell firetrucks. Now they're the heart and soul of my golf course," says Joey Golden.

Golden is the owner and superintendent at Springbrook Golf Club in Leeds, Maine, which uses a 1963 American LaFrance diesel engine firetruck to pump water to its 200-acre course. And Golden wouldn't do without the LaFrance, which, he said, is "the single most important piece of equipment we've got."

"We want to replace the piping but I'm not sure we'd part with the firetruck even if someone offered us a pumping station. We have good feelings about that firetruck."

Indeed, Golden declares a conventional pump would not work on Springbrook's bizarre irrigation design.

"You have to see the piping line to appreciate what the truck does," Golden said, showing blueprints with lines that go nowhere, or go straight up a hill rather than at a gradual angle. "That truck is working against odds you can't believe. An engineer would say it can't work. But it just overpowers all the piping deficiencies..."

"It's the same as a pumping station but has wheels and has more umph than anything else around."

The 1,250-gallon-per-minute LaFrance and its predecessor — a 1946 Buffalo 750-gpm gas firetruck — have provided the lifeblood, water, to Springbrook since 1969. That is when Shirley



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—Joey Golden

Hamel, Golden's father-in-law, bought the 3-year-old facility.

Hamel, then a Springbrook member, owned a fire equipment company and had taken the Buffalo in trade. He used it to replace a 500-gpm skid pump at the irri-

gation pond. He found the firetruck could water all 18 sets of tees and greens at the same time, something that has amazed visiting superintendents. (The clay-soiled fairways have never needed watering.)



Superintendent and owner Joey Golden, left, hooks up the 1963 American LaFrance fire truck that pumps water to the entire 200-acre Springbrook Golf Club course in Leeds, Maine. The 1946 Buffalo, above, which preceded the LaFrance, rests nearby.

As years went by, Hamel added more irrigation heads to the greens and tees, and still the firetruck was more than sufficient for the demand.

In fact, Golden said he has to hold back the pump to 90-pound pressure. "We have to be careful it doesn't get too high, or we'd blow the pipes right out of the ground, just like in *Caddy Shack*," he said.

"One spring we turned it on and lifted a few mainline pipes with a pressure surge. We respect its power."

When Hamel died six years ago, his daughter, Jeannine, and Golden took charge. Ironically, Golden was a fire engine salesman working for Blanchard Fire Apparatus in Hopkinton, Mass. He knew a lot about firetrucks but nothing about golf courses.

He has been on a high-intensity

learning campaign ever since. Yet the firetruck remains his pet love — and an attraction to his golf course.

In fact, the old Buffalo still resides on the premises. Passersby and golfers have offered to buy it. But his devotion to the old truck outweighs the money.

When the Buffalo's engine let go in July 1988, Golden called old friend Byron Brooks at Blanchard Fire Apparatus. Brooks gave Golden the LaFrance, saying he couldn't think of a better home for a firetruck than a golf course.

Golden is quick to fill in the blanks about both the truck's good and bad points.

Golden said besides overcoming the "nightmare piping system," it costs only \$300 to \$400 in diesel fuel to run each year. He also uses the siren to warn golfers

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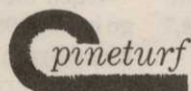


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when he has to cool down the course with water during a hot day.

It's also a point of interest for golfers who, like most everyone else, are fire engine buffs.

Golden tells of a company outing Springbrook hosted. He heard a noise out on the course, drove to it and found "a group of guys all over the firetruck. They had turned on the lights. The siren. And they were throwing dollar bills and quarters up onto the hose bed. They thought it was wonderful. They were just like kids. It was hard to be upset with them because a firetruck seems to bring that out, even in the oldest people..."

"People come up that 18th path, or 4th green, and can't resist going down and looking at it."

Golden said the firetruck's "negatives" are few.

Cutting off water to individual greens must be done mechanically. Isolating individual greens for watering is also difficult.

Once the pond flooded. When water reached the running boards, then-superintendent Kyle Evans had to make an emergency exit, driving the truck up a steep embankment.

Another time, dry grass under the LaFrance caught fire when the truck was started. Evans made "the fastest ride across this golf course in a Toro tractor that has ever been made," Golden laughed. "Our mechanic, Steve Beland, threw some dry chemicals up under the truck and managed to slow the fire down enough so that when Kyle got back they were able to put it out."

And the timing must be right moving the heavy LaFrance over fairways to the pond in the spring and back to its garage roost at the end of the season.

"We have to wait for the ground to firm up," he said. "Usually we get it set up the first or second week of May and pray we haven't had too much rain."

Are firetrucks a viable alternative for other courses?

Surprisingly, Golden thinks probably not. "Things have changed in the fire equipment business," he said. "Buying even a used firetruck in decent shape would probably cost too much..." Certainly more than the zero Springbrook paid for Brooks' present.

Yet, firetrucks will most likely be a permanent fixture at the pond in the center of Springbrook Golf Club — because of nostalgia if for no other reason.

"At night it's kind of nice," he said. "Steve (Beland) and I go down to the pond. He starts the truck up and stays with it and watches the pressure."

"I take a four-wheeler and check the sprinkler heads to make sure they're all working... After I make my tour, I come back (to wait out the 30- to 40-minute watering cycle).

"We get in the cab with a heater in the cold nights, a fan in the summer, windshield wipers when it's foggy. It gives us a place to get warm, out of the elements, the bad weather."

"It wouldn't seem quite as luxurious if we just had a pump house. We spend a lot of time down there."

Even Evans, who has installed a state-of-the-art irrigation system at his new course, Waterville (Maine) Country Club, reminisced about the firetruck.

"Do I miss it? Yes — and no. It was simpler. It's easier than trouble-shooting the computer. It's a pump rather than wires, three-phase power, gate valves..."

"But I remember the black flies being brutal at night out on the course."