

# Bill Emerson: A pioneer in renovation

By Vern Putney

"Nationwide, golf course restoration and renovation is growing almost as fast as the game of golf itself. Bill Emerson of Paradise Valley Country Club is a pioneer in that effort."

Renowned golf course architect Geoffrey Cornish, Amherst, Mass., made that strong statement recently about William J. Emerson, who has been course superintendent at the testing 18-hole layout in Arizona the past eight years.

Emerson continues to work on

renovations with Cornish at Paradise Valley, a bedroom community between Scottsdale and Phoenix.

After many meetings with membership, decision was made in 1983 to renovate but maintain the existing "mystique" of the course.

Project highlights included moving 60,000 cubic yards of material to create strategic containment mounds on nine of 18 holes and the driving range; installing 7,000 linear feet of exposed aggregate cart paths; installing green/bank irrigation system on all 18

holes; relocating No. 2 and No. 17 championship tee boxes; recontouring and resurfacing No. 1 green; establishing permanent contour mowing patterns and, finally, planting more than 500 trees.

Said Emerson: "Should you think that the truly great courses never change, think again. I offer as an example St. Andrews in Scotland. Little or no change took place there over hundreds of years, yet The Royal and Ancient finally recognized the need for an irrigation system and had one installed.

"Reasons for change are many and varied. Changes in the game; the ball goes farther; the new clubs spin the ball more. Changes in maintenance equipment the past 25 years enable you to do more things better and changes the way maintenance is performed. Increase practice areas. Include water on the course to increase eye appeal, and a drainage reservoir for runoff or a holding pond for irrigation purposes. Add, recontour or remove bunkers to compensate for today's long hitters and to improve course aesthetics. Add a short course as pioneered by eminent golf course architect Alice Dye."

Emerson notes, "An increase in the number of rounds played has put more pressure on the course. The greens are of have become possibly undersized. Enlarge the tees to create a larger variety of shots from them.

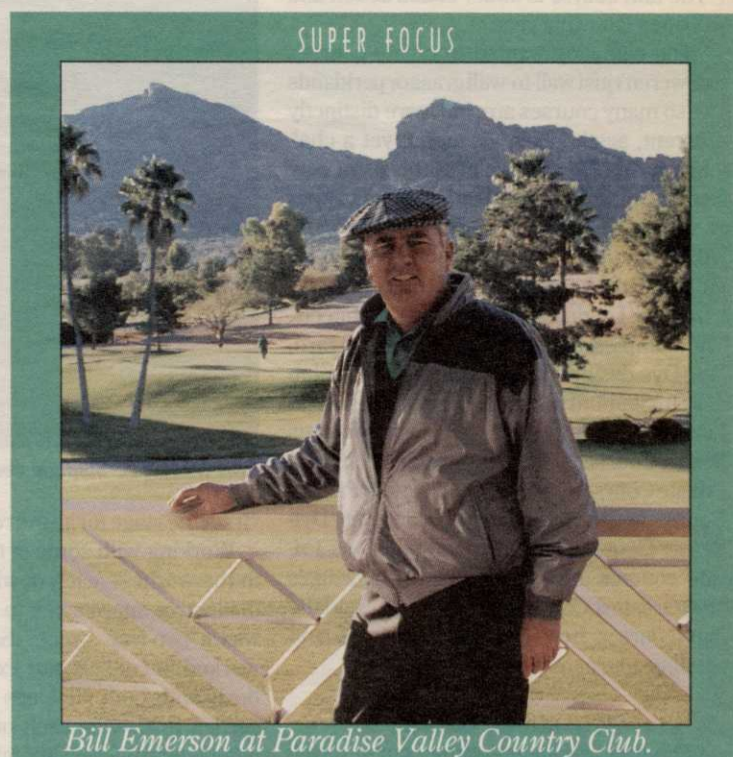
"The lower handicapper is the person we are most trying to impact. And we must improve course layout and shot-making values without influencing negatively the game of the mid-handicapper.

"In making these changes, it is important to remember that they must be maintained. This is the best reason for the golf course superintendent to be involved in the design process. He knows the capabilities of his staff and equipment. An over-zealous project may require a large investment in more staff and newer equipment, items not budgeted in the renovation process."

Of the seven golf courses worked at in a 30-year career in golf course management, Emerson assisted in construction of three and performed renovation work on the other four. His experience as a super has been with very old, established golf courses or new ones. All were private country club facilities. Whether new construction or renovation or restoration of an established course, Emerson found some things the same.

"At all the clubs at which I have worked," Emerson said, "average conditions never have been acceptable. Competitiveness exists in all aspects of the game. Members want to know that they have the best possible golf course to play on for their own games and for the sake of their guests from other clubs. They want to show off their golf course, to be proud of it.

"Very often the idea of change is met with skepticism. Convincing



Bill Emerson at Paradise Valley Country Club.

the membership that change is good can be very difficult. But it can be done. Based on the personality of the club and the personality of the architect, Emerson suggests who might best be suited to assist in making these changes to the golf course.

Working with the architect, a plan is devised. The club's short-term goals then are combined with some long-range ideas that can be developed and budgeted over several years. Emerson works with the architect to see that the club receives the most value for money spent. Long-range planning makes course maintenance more enjoyable, and lends a sense of accomplishment to the job.

"People generally are comfortable with what they have, resistant to change but finally accepting changes as improvements," Emerson noted. "They already have a nice golf course and you go in there and start running around backhoes, dump trucks, shaping tractors and bulldozers. All of a sudden you have a mess. To make matters worse, they usually are trying to play golf around this commotion.

"The principal force in accomplishing a task of this magnitude is the green committee chairman. This person must be of stout heart and strong character, because he is going to receive a lot of grief. Once the chairman is convinced of the benefits of change, and a plan to achieve that change is established, project favor generally continues over the years.

"At Chevy Chase CC (Md.), I helped initiate some course changes. There had been no modifications to that course that I am aware of for many decades. It was a fabulous golf course, but there were a few things we convinced the club to do that had dramatic impact on the course. The architect we selected to make the design changes, Ault, Clark and Associates, still is working with Chevy Chase.

"Communication is of paramount importance in accomplishing these goals. You must keep the green chairman updated and the membership involved in the process and informed of the progress. Being properly equipped and staffed will enable you to perform many of the smaller golf course restoration projects for which it is difficult to find qualified and experienced contractors."

Emerson can't remember summers other than on a golf course. He began his career in the Northeast, as a caddie in 1949. He first worked in golf course maintenance in 1957 for David Canavan, course super at Wahconah CC in his home town of Dalton, Mass.

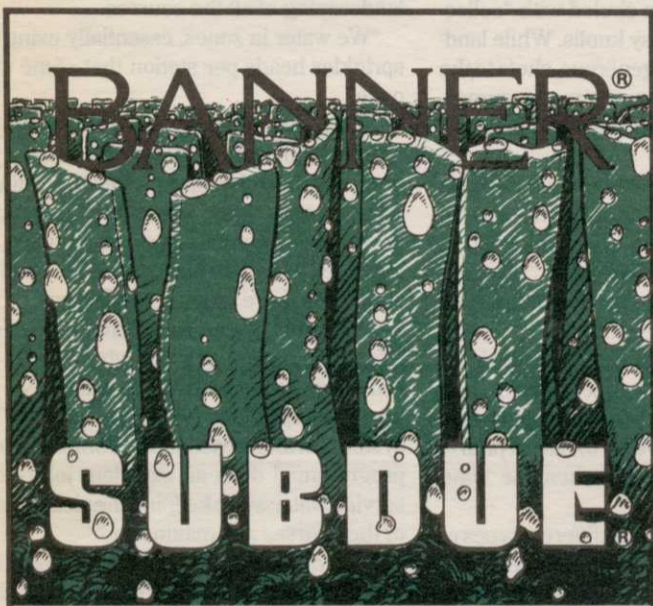
Canavan was most influential in Emerson's choosing golf course management as his life's work. Canavan went on to found Moore Golf Inc., a golf course construction company, and became the first president of The Golf Course Builders of America. He remains active in golf course construction.

Emerson's first job out of school was as a construction supervisor, doing the finish grading, seeding and sodding of a nine-hole course in Saratoga Springs, N. Y., for David and Moore Golf Inc.

He studied turf grass management theory at the University of Massachusetts, where he received his associate's degree in turf management. His mentor was Dr. Joseph Troll, who Emerson recalls as tough but fair and who taught his students how to deal with life as well as turf.

Upon becoming a golf superintendent, in 1963 in Baltimore, Emerson was befriended by Angelo Cammarota, CGCS. Angie, as he is affectionately known, is recognized from coast to coast as a leader in promoting professionalism throughout the industry. Emerson attributes much of his success to the professional approach taught him by Cammarota.

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## Jackson: fungicides to remain important

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Pointing to the Alar scare with apples, Jackson noted that technology now permits measurement of as little as a few parts per billion of a chemical contaminant. But is that concentration harmful?

"Who knows?" asked Jackson. "Our technology to measure something has outstripped our capacity to determine whether it is harmful or not. The problem is that environmentalists can still make a case for possible long-term effects.

"Those calling for a return to the lower pesticide usage of yesteryear aren't considering the increased quality expectation, increased wear (number of rounds) and lower mowing heights at today's courses. Those conditions require efficient preventive means of insect and disease control."

*Those calling for a return to the lower pesticide usage of yesteryear aren't considering the increased quality expectation.'*

Among the turfgrass diseases Jackson addressed were fusarium patch, cool-season brown patch, necrotic ring spot, take-all patch, summer patch, pythium blight, cool-season pythium and gray snow mold.

"All respond to fungicides, but there is no universal fungicide,"

Jackson said. "One difficulty that can arise with chemical control is that you may solve one problem but create another. Non-target effects of a particular chemical can be important. Control efforts against one fungus may influence native populations of microorganisms that were effective in suppressing another potentially harmful fungus, allowing it to flourish and cause disease."

"You (superintendents) have little margin for error in your turf management decisions," Jackson said. "That's why they pay you \$80,000 a year to walk the knife edge and not stumble."



Ransomes America Corp. Executive Director Helmut Adam, left, congratulates Cape May (N.J.) National Golf Club superintendent Steve Malikowski for winning the use of a Ransomes Greens 3000 mower for a year.

## Emerson

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Emerson never quit learning. His office walls are lined with plaques indicating completion of courses and seminars offered by the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America. He knows many of the gurus of the golf course management industry, be they academics, architects, builders, suppliers, owners, golf professionals or superintendents.

Over the years, he has fielded many calls for assistance in the golf course management industry, and has presented seminars and classes on turf management and golf course renovation at universities.

To provide additional help to those whose solutions can not be provided over the phone, Emerson in May 1990 established the consulting firm of William J. Emerson CGCS & Associates, Turf Management Specialists. Clients have included a fertilizer company needing a marketing plan for the Mid-Atlantic region, a country club with a poa annual problem, and a country club whose maintenance staff required organizational and directional support.

"Within this framework," Emerson points out, "I can provide clients assistance at any level. I have at my disposal a number of extremely qualified persons who can aid in solving any turf management problem."

Emerson's declaration, "I love this work; I love golf, it's in my blood," has touched eldest son Shawn. A soon-to-be graduate of the University of Arizona with a degree in agronomy, he recently was recognized by Trans-Miss with a scholarship.

Other members of the Emerson clan are son Scott, daughter Sharen and wife Patsy.

Scott, 19, enjoys other sports. After becoming a high school All-Arizona first team choice in baseball and second team pick in basketball, the 6-5 southpaw was drafted in the 21st round by the San Diego Padres.

Sharen is a "terrific bowler and tennis player" and Patsy a "world class shopper."

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