

# Gary Hodge: Following good advice to reach goals

By Vern Putney

On April 10, 1991, Gary Hodge landed the job of his dreams — superintendent of Valle Grande Golf Course, a 27-hole championship layout on the Santa Ana Pueblo Indian Reservation in Bernalillo, N.M.

A year later, he can't contain his excitement about the promise for his and the course's future. He's now grateful for job rejections because of his youth and lack of schooling. At 31, he's poised for progress.

Valle Grande is just north of Albuquerque and a short drive from Santa Fe. It was designed by Killian Design Group of Chicago.

Ken Killian and staff carved the Scottish-style course through the desert, leaving numerous native shrubs, grasses and one-seed junipers. Rolling hills, undulating greens, eight lakes, 90 sand bunkers and numerous grass bunkers challenge players. Four sets of tees span from 2,500 yards to 3,500 yards per nine.

A spectacular view of the Sandia Mountains features three mountain ranges on the horizon.

Hodge wasn't that charmed by scenic splendor when breaking into golf as a pre-teenager. As with many future superintendents, he leaned to the competitive side. Summers were spent at Colonial Park Country Club and Golf Course in his hometown of Clovis.

General duties around the pro shop for brother Randy, a Class A golf professional, included cart maintenance and driving range duties. It kindled interest in all phases of golf business operations.

Superintendents hadn't gained prominence and stature. Golf pros were in charge of agronomic decisions as well as running the pro shop and snack bar.

Hodge's first job was on a walk-behind greens mower. He next learned triplex mowing on tees, eventually moving up to gang mowing behind a tractor. Summer employment continued through junior high and high school.

Hodge found time to work on his golf

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— Gary Hodge

game. Success in high school tournaments led to a golf scholarship at Texas Wesleyan College in Fort Worth. After one year, he transferred to Western Texas College in Snyder.

An excellent program, advanced instruction, intriguing tournament schedule and community support provided the finances to travel across the country and play many courses.

Hodge was medalist in two college tournaments and named to the all-regional top 10.

Graduating with an associate's degree in business, he faced the big question mark. Golf was his future. Should he play, or work on a golf course?

His first job after college was at the University of New Mexico course, under the supervision of certified golf course superintendent Al Kline. After one year as greenkeeper, he became an assistant. This led to head superintendent aspirations.

Kline encouraged Hodge either to try for a head position or return to school and get a turf degree.

Surprisingly, he was interviewed for three superintendent jobs locally. All shied away from Hodge because of age and the essential diploma.

Hodge got the message. He enrolled at Colorado State University, and soon came under the guidance of Dr. Anthony Koski in the laboratory and at the research farm.

Two years later, in December 1989, Hodge graduated with a bachelor of science degree in landscape horticulture, with a turf concentration.

He then became assistant superintendent

## SUPER FOCUS



Gary Hodge

at Cherry Hills Country Club in Denver, under Dan Pierson, CGCS. Skills acquired were quickly applied.

Fifteen months later, Lady Luck appeared, and Hodge was at Valle Grande.

Now came the challenge of growing in a golf course seeded in September and October 1990. Initial work on the greens began in April 1991. Many bare spots required filling. Sod was ordered, frequent seed and top-dressings applied. Fertilizer was spread over the entire course every three weeks.

Next came tees and fairways, which Hodge overseeded throughout the spring. While roughs were not a major concern, some overseeding was done on mounds. Fertilization seemed the key to obtaining quick results, a must because play was scheduled to begin in June.

This rigorous three-week schedule was maintained throughout the spring and continued until opening of play.

Heavy rains last summer caused drainage problems, but the grass thrived and very few dry spots appeared on the young turf. This took a major load off the irrigation system, maxed out each night before the rains.

Hodge believes preparing the course for daily

play is the most important aspect of his job. He meets each morning with his staff, emphasizing awareness of the dangers posed by golfers. Crew members had become accustomed to no play and no work interruptions.

Setting up the course daily consisted of mowing, changing cups and tees, raking bunkers and monitoring cart and foot traffic. Carts were restricted to cart paths the first two months. The 90-degree rule went into effect last September, permitting carts to cross fairways. Though aware of the wear damage the turf would incur, Hodge felt it was strong enough to recover. This would generate more revenue, speed play and reduce complaints.

Last fall produced a successful addition to Hodge's grow-in program. The weather was ideal, and the turf matured much faster than thought possible. Play was steady, and there were more tournaments because of continued course improvement.

Shelter houses were installed and drainage projects undertaken last winter. Bare root trees are being dug for spring planting to provide much-needed shade around the tee boxes.

Organization of personal record-keeping skills and organization of crews and duties for next year are Hodge priorities, as is certification.

Improving communication skills is a major concern. He noted, "This will enhance overall interest and improve individual expertise in the business."

"Climates, soils and turf adaptability differ throughout the country. Every golf course is different. There are no guidelines or standards that hold true in a given situation. Nobody has all the answers. That's what makes this business so interesting."

"I'm grateful to Kline for providing the insight to pursue a career with education in the golf business," said Hodge, "and I would like to thank Dr. Koski for the opportunity to work and learn from him."

As for Valle Grande, Hodge declares: "It will be recognized as one of the best new courses in the state. We hope to establish it as a premier tournament course to attract Tour events."

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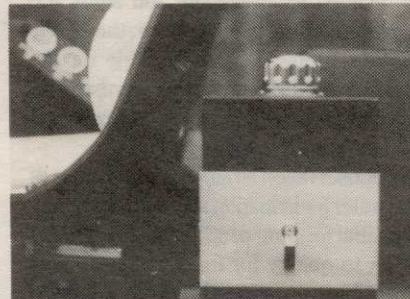
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