

Gary Bennett: Much can be forgiven with great greens

By VERN PUTNEY

Gary Bennett, a scratch player and current national golf course superintendents champion, is accustomed to building things from scratch.

The classy 18-hole Crickentree Golf Club he oversees at Blythewood, S.C., near Columbia, may be his construction pride, but he credits much of the 5-year-old course's success to father Grant and brother David. They've been a prominent part of the Crickentree team as golf teacher and professional, respectively.

Gary might be pardoned staking out the greens as his personal and maintenance crews' territory the greens, which he considers the most important part of a golf course and the key element in course survival and prosperity.

In 18 years as a superintendent, he's never had a complaint about the putting surfaces.

Bennett spends 20 percent of his budget on the greens. In his tournament and business travels, he's found "bad greens" the chief source of player and peer complaint.

At one facility, for instance, he noted that the course was in excellent condition from tees through fairways, but the greens were bad. Other players termed the course "terrible" and vowed never to

return.

Bennett has played courses whose designs were at best marginal but were fun to play because of presentable greens, and courses with great reputations but not as enjoyable because conditions were not the best and the greens a cut or two below expectations.

Proud dad Grant, honored last April as co-founder, builder and pro for 13 years at the Country Club of South Carolina at Florence, said he would stack up Crickentree's greens with any course on the Eastern Seaboard. He is an authority, having traveled and played extensively in 50 years as a pro.

In 1987, Gary supervised all phases of Crickentree golf course and real-estate construction. As construction progressed and with the architect's approval, he made numerous course design changes, coordinating all the crews.

The course was completed three days shy of six months and everything was planted. All that remained was to grow in the grasses. The results are evident.

In 1968, Gary and David helped Grant build the Country Club, and in the late 1970s Gary oversaw construction of the South Course at Deer Track Golf and Country Club in Myrtle Beach.

The "breaks of the game" can be an overworked term in sports, but some



Crickentree's Gary Bennett — the superintendents' champion.

early rough encounters shaped the Bennett family destiny.

Grant played basketball and baseball on a scholarship at Oak Ridge, N.C., Military Institute while also excelling at golf.

Since a broken arm confined his throwing abilities, Grant turned to golf and caddying as a way to make a buck. Surprisingly soon, he became a crack player and competent professional. He's a member of four South Carolina halls of fame, and Florence high school teams he coached compiled a 200-1 match play record.

Buddy Baker was national junior champion in 1968, edging in extra holes Florence high school teammate Billy Womack.

Though not a Rotary Club member, Grant in 1984 was named by Rotary International a Paul Harris Fellow.

David, at 45 two years older than Gary, followed in Grant's hardship footsteps. A

few years after receiving a full golf scholarship at the University of South Carolina in 1964, he was attempting to qualify for the North and South Amateur in Pinehurst, N.C., when the rains came. David ducked for cover, but a player in a golf car slammed him into a wall.

Later, working as superintendent-professional at the Country Club of South Carolina, he tried to manhandle a 300-pound fairway unit and re-injured his back, which remains bothersome.

Gary didn't escape family misfortune. He was a promising freshman player at the University of Houston when a car in which he was a passenger crashed into a tree.

Gary went through a painful 23-month recovery period marked by prolonged surgery.

That ended PGA Tour dreams.

He completed his education at Francis Marion College in Florence, S.C., where he was first-team All-American his senior year.

His next tree encounter, 25 years later, wasn't that damaging. Bennett was felling trees around his home Jan. 26 as the first step to building a swimming pool.

A felled limb landed on his right small finger, crushing bones and leaving the damaged digit held together only by loose skin.

Bennett drove 25 miles to the hospital and returned a week later for injury assessment.

He wangled physician permission to play in the national supers' tournament Feb. 10-11 at two formidable Sawgrass courses in Ponte Vedra, Fla., provided he take only token swings and settle for camaraderie rather than competition.

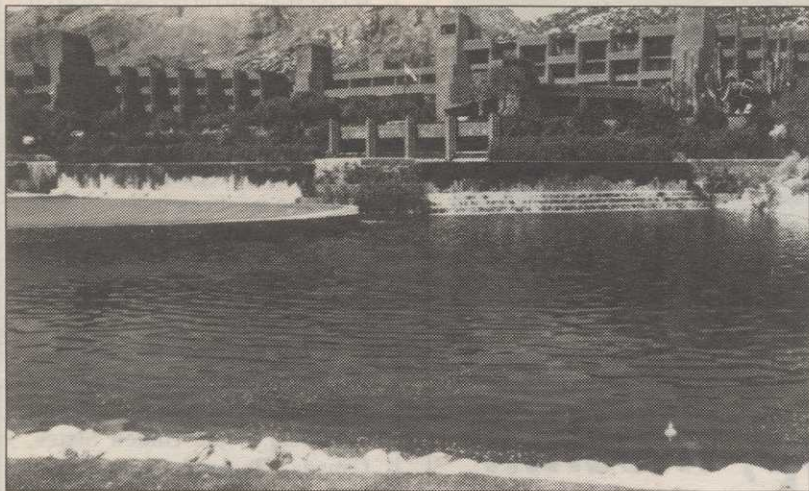
"Guess I caught a good break," philosophizes Bennett, who except for one year had participated in these tournaments since 1979 and had finished second, third and fourth.

Bennett closed with a one-over-par 73 at Sawgrass' demanding TPC layout to triumph by five strokes in the 36-hole medal play test.

While overcoming adversity made the win especially rewarding, Bennett hopes to be in reasonably good shape when he defends his title next February in San Diego.

Stay away from the gang mowers, Gary.

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