

Prestigious climb continues for trailblazing superintendent Patty Knaggs

By HAL PHILLIPS

Patty Knaggs clearly didn't have time to sit down and discuss the last thing on her mind — namely, her recent hire as head superintendent at Hazeltine National Golf Club in Chaska, Minn. She graciously found time. But over the course of an hour-long interview, Knaggs was never afforded a moment to relax; duty never stopped calling... She advised crew members on which rain gear to buy; wrangled with an industry rep who couldn't find the solid tines she needed; excused herself to meet a new rep who had dropped by the maintenance compound; and answered a constant flow of phone and walky-talky calls.

Twelve days into her new job at Hazeltine and Patty Knaggs was definitely in the flow, under the gun — and loving every minute of it.

"This is a great operation," she explained in between phone calls. "You can tell it's been very well run for a long time — by the former superintendent and the members.

"There have been adjustments, but they've all been good adjustments."

Knaggs came to Minnesota by way of Westchester Country Club, where she was head superintendent for three years. Her experience at the Rye, N.Y., club — PGA Tour stops, a demanding membership — prepared her well for Hazeltine, site of two U.S. Opens including the 1991 affair.

She wasn't, however, prepared for the weather.

"It's milder here than where I came from," she observed. (Indeed, the mercury hovered uncharacteristically around 85 on this early-May morning.)

"It's been fun. You can't beat a climate where it's 80 degrees every other day, and the attitude of all the people here has made it so easy for me.

"They're constantly funding new projects here. It's nice to work for an organization that knows exactly what it wants. The prevailing attitude is, 'Golf is the reason we're here. We're not here for any other reason.'"

That feeling carries over to the grounds crew, including longtime Hazeltine assistant superintendent Dave Deem.

"That's one of the reasons I felt comfortable coming here. Dave went out of his way to be polite, and he didn't have to do that."

Coming in on top of an existing staff is never easy — for a woman in a predominantly male field, the situation might have been quite touchy. But Knaggs maintains the transition has been smoother than smooth — not that it keeps her awake nights.

"I honestly don't think about it. Other people bring it up. I'm just doing what I enjoy doing."

Born and reared near West

Point, in Cornwall-on-the-Hudson, Knaggs gravitated towards maintenance work from an early age, "because I always liked to be outside."

She parlayed that interest into a rapidly ascending career.

After graduating from the turf management program at the University of Massachusetts in 1983, Knaggs worked on grounds crews at West Point, Eastward Ho! in Chatham, Mass., and Mt. Kisco Country Club in suburban New York.

She served as assistant superintendent at Echo Lake Country Club in Westfield, N.J., and The Country Club in Brookline, Mass. before taking the Westchester job.

With her move to the Midwest, there can be little doubt that Knaggs, now 37, occupies the most prestigious position of any female superintendent in the nation. Yet she doesn't fancy herself a trailblazer.

"I meet more and more of them all the time," said Knaggs after ticking off the names of a

few female superintendents in the New York area.

"I'll tell you this: They're all survivors. And I would trust that they're pretty competent people. That's a gross generalization, but the competition is tough out there."

Do women have to go that extra mile to earn respect commensurate with their male peers?

"I don't know if women have to be better. But I think they have to make people think they're a little better.

"Perception can be reality."

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A month removed from that sweltering May morning, Knaggs' perception of Hazeltine hasn't wavered.

"Things are going really well," she said. "It's just a wonderful club because all they have is golf. They care about golf like it's a member of the family."

But reality has set in.

"It snowed on Memorial Day," she reported.

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