Alonzi: Loss leaves 'void'

By MARK LESLIE

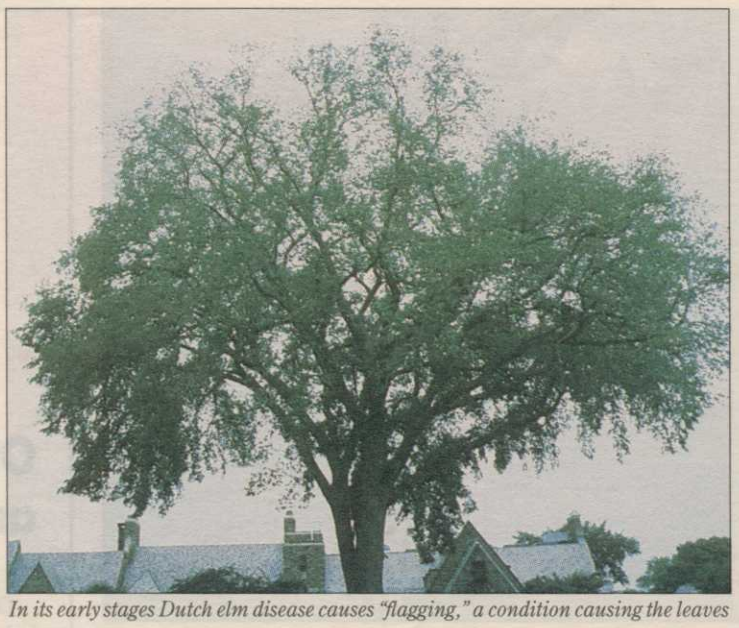
MAMARONECK, N.Y. — The biggest tree in the state of New York and the entire universe of golf, the landmark at Winged Foot Country Club had no nickname. But it was revered by golfers the world over. Today, it is remembered by them.

Bob Alonzi

"As you look at the hole, you just see a big void. It's very depressing for everybody," said Winged Foot superintendent Bob Alonzi. "Although you say it was only a tree, it was not just a tree."

Indeed, the elm — estimated to be more than 250 years old — perfectly framed the 10th hole on Winged Foot's East Course, turning "a sure par-4 into a magnificent par-4," Alonzi said.

It stood 110- feet high at greenside, it's 140-foot branch span intimidating even the bravest and best golfers. But a deadly enemy lurked unseen beneath its bark, plaguing the tree itself — until Alonzi's crews manned a crane, chain saws and chippers to cut it down in early February.



In its early stages Dutch elm disease causes "flagging," a condition causing the leaves to wilt and shrivel. If detected in its earliest stages, the tree can be saved by removing the infected limbs. Winged Foot crews did this successfully for years.

Alonzi, superintendent at Winged Foot for the last 10 years, said crews had monitored his elm at the 10th green since the 1960s.

He had kept the tree and three other "very, very valuable elm trees" on an annual preventive program using a fungicide.

"For the past four years we injected every year. Prior to that, we were injecting every two to three years," he said. "Even though it may seem a losing battle in the eyes of some people, we were able to keep it another 25 years. Hopefully, if we save them long enough, maybe the miracle chemical will come along. Maybe the American elm will not be completely eliminated from the landscape."

Alonzi said when his crews cut down the old elm, the most critical act was to burn or bury the bark to destroy the beetles and their larva.

Now, he and his crew will now devote their attention to saving their three remaining American elms — including one overtowering the 2nd green on the West Course. It is two-thirds the size of the other. It's about the same size in height and canopy, Alonzi said, but the size of the trunk on #10 East was huge — 6 feet in diameter. #2 West is about 4-1/2 feet.

Winged Foot's elm

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fungicide Banner formulated to be injected into elm and oak trees — has just received its Environmental Protection Agency registration to be used to fight Dutch elm disease (DED) as well as oak wilt in Texas. Both are caused by fungus in the same genus.

"It is an intravenous immunization," Stipes said, adding that while it effectively prevents Dutch elm disease, "there's a lot of injection technology that needs to be honed. We are always revising, updating and adjusting that technology."

He said Dutch elm disease is "very manageable by sanitation. That is, if you keep the Typhoid Marys out of the community, you keep your disease down almost to nothing. The problem is, many municipalities and parks and highway departments do not have the money to do this. People who have the money will have their trees injected. Others won't."

Stipes gave Winged Foot superintendent Bob Alonzi "an A-plus in what he does. He is a very conscientious caretaker. He was doing as well as any superintendent anywhere could do. The immune system simply gave out.

"Trees are like people. When they get old, their defenses start to break down. They become susceptible to things they would not ordinarily be susceptible to."

Alonzi said the tree had fought off Dutch elm disease a half dozen times over the past 25 years.

He said other experts agree with Stipes that the immune system finally collapsed, or the tree may have died from old age. It was estimated to be 250 to 275 years old.

Stipes, whose "patients" included the elm at Winged Foot, said: "Dutch elm disease is a lot like human cancer. You have to get to it early. The external symptoms belie the extent of the infection inside. You'll see two or three yellow leaves and think it's only beginning, yet look inside and the disease might be clear into the roots."

THE DISEASE

Dutch elm disease has annihilated millions of the trees in the United States since it was first discovered in 1930 in Columbus, Ohio, by Dr. Curtis May.

The Elm Research Institute in Harrisville, N.H., says the disease is caused by the fungus Ceratocystis ulmi that is spread by the tiny elm bark beetle. When the beetle emerges from under the bark of dead or dying elms covered with the sticky spores of the fungus, it flies to the nearest healthy elm to feed in the crotches of the new growth. There it deposits the fungus in the healthy tree. The DED fungus quickly moves into the water-conducting vessels of the elm, clogging the flow of water and nutrients to the tree.

In the early years, Dutch elm disease destroyed millions of elms, many dating from the 1700s.

It took decades of research to develop treatments to help save the American elms.

In 1983 DuPont Co. designated Elm Research Institute as exclusive distributor of Elm Fungicide, which contains the same chemical used since 1975 and known as Lignasan BLP — methyl 2-benzimidazolecarbamate phosphate, a derivative and close relative of the famous Benlate fungicide.

Elm Research Assistant Director Yvonne Spalthoff said the product is not a cure for DED. In preventive programs, Elm Research Institute has had a 98-percent success rate, she said. That rates drops to less than 50 percent if the tree already has the fungus.

Institute's mission: Plant the country in Liberty elms

HARRISVILLE, N.H. — A special tree-planting program designed for golf courses is expected to introduce Liberty elms around the country.

The fledgling program, inaugurated by the Elm Research Institute here, has signed on golf courses from Massachusetts to Nebraska without any publicity or advertisement.

Liberty elms are resistant to Dutch elm disease and the institute hopes they will be planted to replace dead American elms. Golf courses are perfect sites, according to institute Assistant Director Yvonne Spalthoff.

"They've usually got the space to start nurseries," she said.

Spalthoff said Liberty elms branch at a young age, taking on the classic vase shape even as early as 12- and 15-foot heights.

The institute can provide courses with hundreds of one- and two-foot-high Liberty elms.

A limited number of 12-footers is available to the institute through the Boy Scouts of America.

"We are trying to leave a legacy," said Craig Ferguson, superintendent at Lochland Country Club in Hastings, Neb., who has bought 200 Liberty elms through the golf course program. "Outside of drought and ice storms and whatnot, the one thing that's going to hurt the tree is Dutch elm disease. If you have a tree that's immune to that, you have left something that will be here as long as the golf course is."

Ferguson, who has been at Lochland for 17 years, said the course has eight American elms that have escaped Dutch elm disease. But it lost 93 Siberian elms — "a trashy tree" — a year ago, and "that left quite a void in our golf course."

He will plant the 200 trees in his nursery and grow them for three or four years, until they are about three inches in diameter, before transplanting them to the course.

"We need them to get enough size to withstand punishment from the golf balls. Smaller trees wound up easily," Ferguson said.