

Super Focus



Shannon Cook stands in front of an area on her course flooded by January's rains.

"Chance favors the prepared mind."
— Dr. Louis Pasteur

Shannon Cook silences doubters

By MARK LESLIE

A star search that found Shannon Kerr Cook in a college placement booth transformed a fledgling nurserywoman into a barrier-breaking professional in golf course maintenance.

Little did Aart deVos know that when he plucked a young, then-single Shannon Kerr out of a pool of Fullerton College graduates, a star was born.

"I did not know she was going to be a golf course superintendent," deVos said, but, "She was a very determined person. Part of my initial screening is to open the door but make it difficult. I gave her some jobs that required perseverance — really rotten jobs. I put challenges in front of her and she accepted them. That means the person has management capability."

A dozen years later, the married-and-divorced Cook is superintendent at Monterey Country Club in Palm Desert, Calif., managing an all-male, all-Hispanic 15-member crew, and fighting blistering summertime heat

and occasional floods like those in January and February that, first, carried away two bridges, then their two replacements.

"We take it all in stride," Cook said after the second flood. "That's what makes this job exciting and challenging."

Exciting and challenging for one of just three female superintendents in California and perhaps 100 in the entire country.

Cook's boss, Dennis Orsborn, said he was initially concerned about how Cook would handle the cultural barriers of her crew and being a superintendent in a male-dominated industry.

"But because of her abilities as a manager she downplayed any confrontations that might have occurred, or problems that might have developed... Therefore, it never became a problem," he said. "You have to earn their [a crew's] respect. She was able to do that rather quickly."

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Cook steps from her utility truck after passing over a flooded brook once spanned by a steel bridge.

Floods push superintendent Cook & crew to new heights

Superintendent Shannon Cook deals almost annually with minor flooding at Monterey Country Club in Palm Desert, Calif., but January and February 1993 was a time for the record books.

An area that receives three to five inches of rainfall annually got a dumping of five inches in the span of a two weeks in early January, causing major flooding. After a brief reprieve, more than 2-1/2 inches fell in one day Feb. 7-8, again flooding the region.

During the January rainfall, a wash that runs through 27-hole Monterey Country Club flooded more than 10 acres, affecting the 3rd and 7th holes on the West Course, and 2nd and 7th on the South Course. The third nine-hole East Course was unaffected.

The four-foot-wide wash flooded to 30-foot dimensions and carried away two of four heavy steel bridges.

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CIRCLE #114

Cook 'still here'

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Orsborn, vice president of golf course operations for Sunrise Co.'s three golf facilities and president of the California Golf Course Superintendents Association, added: "She's been a pleasure to work with. She continues to grow and expand her knowledge about the business. Today, she is at a lake management seminar."

"You have to be tough and determined and want to do it," Cook said. "I feel, because people are watching me as a woman and they want to see what kind of job I do, I can never let my guard down and I have to work twice as hard as somebody else just to prove that a woman can do it."

"I have found that [situation] everywhere, with the exception of Florida, where I was just an irrigator and one of four women on one course."

Cook added: "People have been saying all through my career, 'She won't last here a week.' Here it is 10 years later, and I'm still here."

Indeed, when she graduated from Fullerton with a degree in ornamental horticulture, Cook had never stepped foot on a golf course and anticipated working in a nursery.

"I didn't know anything about golf. But I had the ornamental horticulture background and that was enough to convince Aart that I was trainable and could learn how to do it," Cook said.

"Aart flew me up and showed me the golf course. Having grown up in the city, the open spaces were a beautiful setting and I knew that was where I wanted to work."

After running the irrigation system for a year at Los Altos Golf & Country Club, Cook went to The Plantations GC in Crystal River, Fla. She was married, had a baby and returned in 1984 to Del Paso CC in Sacramento, where she worked on the crew and was in charge of clubhouse landscaping.

She later moved to Mission Hills CC as the foreman under the superintendent at the Old Course. She worked there two years, helping prepare the course for two PGA Tour tournaments.

She left Mission Hills in 1988 to be the assistant superintendent at Monterey Country Club and was named superintendent in 1989. Sunrise Co. operates three facilities in the desert. Cook's is 27 holes. The others are 36-hole Palm Valley and Indian Ridge, which is under construction and will eventually have 36 holes.

"I work for a private course that holds no major tournaments and we don't bring it up to Tour standards. But it helped me in that I know what 'tournament conditions' means, and how it should look," Cook said.

At Monterey CC, Cook said, "I've never ever had trouble [gaining peoples' trust]. In fact, members recommended I get the position of superintendent when the previous one left. They've always been behind me and very, very

supportive. That's unusual and very surprising.

"I'm very, very happy where I am. It's like a big family."

Besides this winter's floods (see sidebar), Cook's biggest challenges have been the annual overseeding, keeping her older equipment operating and dealing with temperature extremes.

The overseeding time — in October and November — is "a pretty intense time," Cook said.

"We do 18 holes in October and nine in November."

"We only have four weeks to be closed. During that time, we have to get everything seeded and

mowed. And that includes the greens. To get the greens stripped down, seeded and ready for play in that short a time is a real challenge."

In the summer, temperatures reach 115 degrees in the Palm Desert area and Cook's crews are out there mowing.

"Trying to keep everybody healthy and keep the equipment going when it gets to those temperatures is difficult," she said. "Bermudagrass loves the heat, so it keeps on growing. The tourist season is slow in the summer. Our season is not. We never have an off-season."

One quasi-crew member Cook will never have to regain the trust of is her 10-year-old daughter Tina. Life as a superintendent was difficult at first, she said, especially finding a babysitter for 5 a.m.

"But I've always managed to get along. Now Tina's 10 and she loves to stay out on the golf course with me. She can't wait to be old enough to work there... She knows how to probe a green and use a Stimpmeter."

As for Cook hiring other women, "I've never had a woman apply," she said. "They're encouraged to enter the field, but very few actually go through the [college] program."

"Some women have gone to work

at other clubs but they don't survive past the first summer. They have to work from the ground up, and it's tough to be out there raking sand traps and things like that when it's 100 degrees. If they're not motivated enough, they don't stick around."

"Plus, they have to deal with the response from the male co-workers and some of the managers. It's tough. You have to put up with a lot. I put up with a lot but I'm a very easy-going person. I still get a lot of teasing and jokes, but it doesn't bother me. You have to have a very broad sense of humor."

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