

Meehan: Patience a key to survival in the Caribbean

By PETER BLAIS

Mike Meehan is living the dream of many a golf course superintendent, managing a golf course on a Caribbean island.

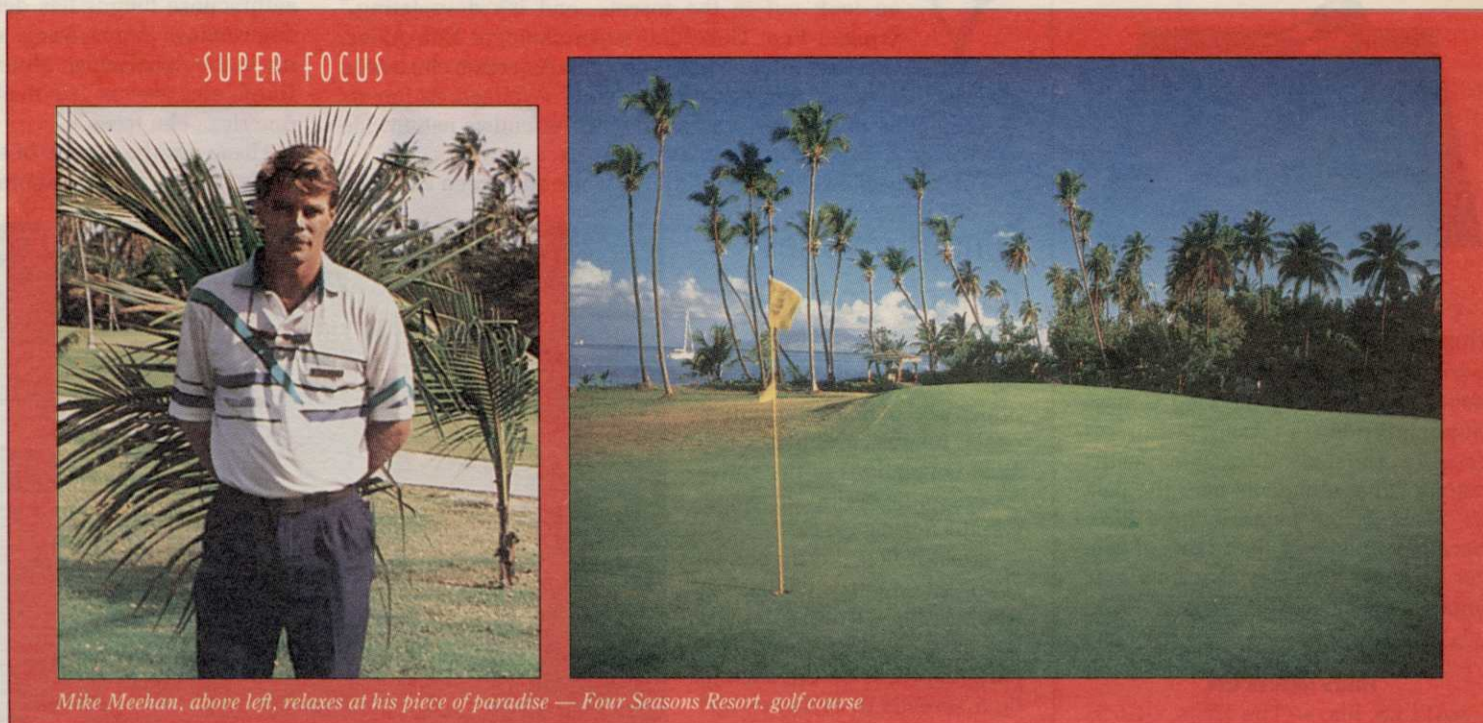
The superintendent of the Four Seasons Resort layout on Nevis admits he'd never trade in the island's gentle trade winds for the rigors of sloshing through a Northern mud season in his native New York.

But, he warns, there is more to operating a Caribbean course than directing others from a hammock slung between palm trees while sipping rum punch.

Uninterrupted electrical service, not having to teach new crew members simple skills like driving, next-day delivery, daily newspapers and indoor plumbing are the types of things superintendents take for granted in the states. Not so on Nevis, a 36-square-mile island of 8,000 citizens, a 25-minute boat ride from its sister isle of St. Kitts.

"Patience is the key to surviving down here," said the 36-year-old golf course veteran. "You have to make a lot of compromises with your course and staff."

Meehan arrived on Nevis in September, 1990, a half year before the Robert Trent Jones II-designed track opened. His patience was tested right away when heavy rains wiped out three holes (9, 10 and 13) and caused power outages. This came on the heels of Hurricane Hugo, which struck a year earlier and set construction back eight months.



Mike Meehan, above left, relaxes at his piece of paradise — Four Seasons Resort, golf course

Four Seasons' own generators allowed construction to continue. The resort's self-contained power source has proved helpful on numerous occasions when one or both of the island's two power stations have shut down.

The contractor also complicated things during construction. The French majority owner of the resort (Four Seasons manages the facility and owns just 15 percent) insisted on using a French firm that had built athletic fields, but never a golf course.

The contractor made some interesting decisions, like removing 480 sprinkler heads from the original design, Meehan said. It soon became obvious they were needed and will be installed.

"We're waiting for controls for

the computerized pumping station now," Meehan said in early April. But with the help of Jones' on-site architect, Kyle Phillips, and a hard-working crew, "We made it come off," Meehan noted. The 196-room resort, which doubled the island's total hotel beds, opened with nine holes on Feb. 14, 1991.

Meehan offers much praise for his 52-person staff. That includes the resort grounds employees he also oversees. The crew includes 21 for the golf course, 20 for the grounds, seven mechanics and four in the nursery.

Pay is lower than in the states, so crews are somewhat larger, Meehan said. Turnover is also much lower. "We've only lost four or five guys in the past year and a half," he noted.

Island-born personnel are hard workers. Many are well-educated, former teachers and government employees who can make more money mowing tees, changing bedsheets or waiting table than they could at their former jobs.

But none had ever worked on a golf course. So, training became a major priority.

"Things you take for granted in the states, like assuming a job applicant can drive, you can't just assume here," Meehan explained. "I'd send someone out on a riding mower and find out he had no idea how to operate it."

"More of my time is taken up with personnel issues than anything else. I try to speak with everyone on the staff every

day."

With utilities undependable and most supplies having to be shipped from Miami, Four Seasons has tried to be as self-sufficient as possible.

Bermudagrass sprigs to plant and repair the course are grown on a 20-acre nursery located behind the 7th hole.

The 350,000 gallons of irrigation water used daily comes from two sources. The Four Seasons' own treatment plant returns 55,000 of the 60,000 gallons of water used daily by employees and guests. Wells on nearby government land supply the rest. The course has a 1 million gallon storage capacity.

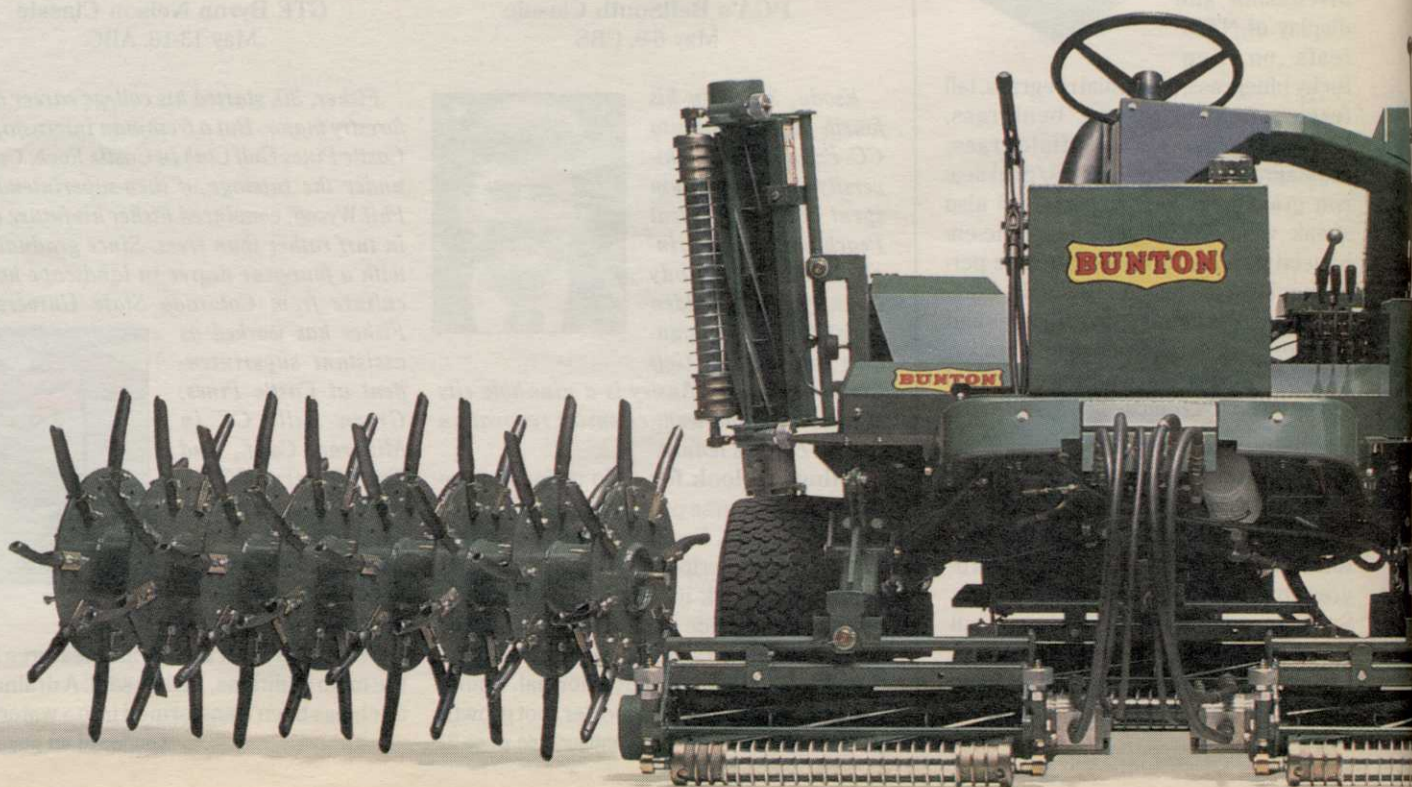
The hotel's generators have kept the resort operating at full

Continued on next page

Spray school added after successes

SAVANNAH, Ga. — Due to overwhelming requests, a third spray technician seminar is being planned for Monday, June 28, at The Landings here. Proclaimed by many as one of the best educational seminars ever, the sessions held on Feb. 15 at The Standard Club in Duluth and Doublegate Country Club in Albany hosted nearly 200 Georgia members and/or golf course employees. The program was so thorough it received five hours of pesticide recertification credit from the Georgia Department of Agriculture.

For further information, contact Karen White, GGCSA executive director, at 706-769-4076.



Focus on speed sometimes ludicrous, says Connolly

By MARK LESLIE

PORTLAND, Maine — Superintendents the country over are being plagued by the "original sin of golf course maintenance," according to a U.S. Golf Association Green Section official.

Jim Connolly, of the Green Section's Northeast office based in Willimantic, Conn., told superintendents at the Maine Turfgrass Conference and Show that the "upper echelon" of golfers has dictated that faster and smoother greens are best.

They "try to enforce upon you [superintendents] precise standards for putting green maintenance," he said, but this is "bad news

for the game of golf and maintenance of golf courses... I call this the original sin of golf course maintenance."

Connolly pointed out that many parts of the game have evolved immensely since the days of the axiom: "Play the ball where it lies."

The concept today, he said, is "Lay the ball where you can play it."

"Another concept of golf is to adjust your ability and strategy to the golf course," Connolly said, asking, "What's the saying now? It's 'Adjust the golf course to my strategy.' That has perverted maintenance today, resulting in a negative effect. And a lot of

individuals tend to exert their influence on you to conform the golf course to them."

He said there are too many variables — from contour to green size to length of the hole — to apply specific rules to every golf course.

"The reason there are no rules of maintenance is because you can't apply a standard to something that's constantly changing... Yet green speed is a benchmark in this industry," Connolly said. Although it was not meant for that purpose, the Stimpmeter is used to set the standard for green speed, he added.

"For instance, 10 feet on a Stimpmeter on an undulating green is almost unplayable. But 10 feet on an 8,000-square-foot green at Augusta National is playable. The comparison of golf courses based upon speed readings is ludicrous."

Saying that giving a number to green speed changed the way we look at greens in terms of good and bad. The quantitative rating made it possible to set "standards," Connolly said.

He likened those new standards to "playing a neighborhood ball game with the guy — the dominating player — who changes the rules halfway through the game.

"That's what makes your jobs so volatile. You are constantly trying to meet the set 'standards' of those in charge at that time. It is very difficult when those standards are unrealistic or harmful to the game and the turf."

Connolly quoted from a Green Section Record article on tournament preparation stating: "Green speed should be established according to the skills of the contestants."

But, he said, "This philosophy is geared to adjusting the course conditions to the players' ability. Right or wrong, this is the current thinking behind championship golf.

"My objective is to point out that championship maintenance is very different from the type of maintenance for regular membership play, which represents more than 90 percent of all golf. Seventy-nine percent of golfers are public golfers."

USGA official gives tips on coping with speed

Calling management practices "a balancing act," U.S. Golf Association Green Section agronomist Jim Connolly said: "When you mow too high, people complain on the playing side. If you mow too low for the benefit of the game, if the turf could complain, it would."

To get high green speeds, superintendents use a number of practices, including top dressing, frequent low cutting and, rolling, which is coming back.

While saying that in New England, rollers are usually not necessary to produce a good putting surface, Connolly said: "There is nothing wrong with top dressing for smoothness. It benefits microbial action, thatch reduction, and, done properly, is a total benefit.

"A side benefit is that the greens do drain better and have a firmer surface, and as a result are a half foot to a foot faster on the Stimpmeter."

He added that some superintendents are buying rollers with the idea of raising their cutting height and keeping their green speed the same.

"That's assuming the people are already happy with your green speed. If

they're not and you buy one of these, I don't care what you tell me, you're buying it to make your greens faster," he said. "Therein lies the difficulty with the concept of rolling greens as a part of putting green maintenance."

He urged superintendents to weigh the pluses and minuses of rolling and low-cutting their putting surfaces.

Going from a 3/16-inch to the accepted 1/8-inch cutting height means a 33-percent reduction in leaf surface, he said, "and, in many parts of the country that is devastating to turfgrass. You have a myriad of diseases — summer patch, brown patch, leaf spot — all types of stress-related diseases which require pesticide application.

"And although pesticides, when applied properly, don't appear to be affecting ground-water quality or wildlife quality, the question is, are these applications necessary to enjoy the game?"

"I believe you can have good, challenging, competitive and professional golf with higher cutting heights and healthier turf. There is no proof to say otherwise."

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Super Focus: Mike Meehan

Continued from previous page

throttle when the island's power plants have shut down.

Island living has forced Meehan to make some personal and philosophical adjustments. Daily papers arrive 24 hours late. An ardent Atlanta Braves fan while working in Florida from 1978-90, he has had to settle for next-day box scores and fewer games on the island's limited cable television service.

"I almost went nuts when the power went off in the middle of a playoff game last year," he remembered.

Cricket is the island's most popular sport, although basketball is gaining followers. Meehan plays for the Nevis national basketball team and is the only white player.

"I get harassed on some of the other islands, but they are very good here," he said.

Nevis is a former British colony and most of the residents speak English. There is an island dialect, which Meehan is beginning to understand. Sometimes crew members will fall into the island language when they don't want Meehan to understand what they are saying.

"I'll come up behind them and say something like 'Oh really.' It surprises them and they'll smile, a little embarrassed. It seems to be happening a lot less, though," Meehan said.

Meehan said the resort started with 105 expatriate managers. The number has dropped to 50 as residents have been trained to replace off-island managers. Four Seasons wants to turn as much management responsibility over to the resident population as possible.

The hard-packed terrain and generally dry conditions creates maintenance headaches. Tines break frequently while aerating the rock-hard native soil. As the ground underlying the volcanic island shifts, rocks suddenly thrust up through the earth to bedevil maintenance equipment.

Nevis has few environmental laws, leaving Meehan to his own devices and conscience in maintaining his course.

"We take it upon ourselves to treat the course as if we were in the United States," said Meehan, adding he has used no fungicides and few pesticides.

"Army worms are the only problem we've ever had. They'll move right through a course and take out everything in their path. They chewed up the 17th fairway in two days. We used a little Sevin and they were gone.

"We do little spraying. Granular pesticides are more effective. In Florida it seemed we were spraying something almost every day. I was told mole crickets could be a problem here. I've seen two in almost two years."

