

By JIM McCABE

Tworig molding 'Ponky' to its original stature

As great a visionary as he was, it is doubtful Donald Ross could have seen the impact his Ponkapoag Golf Club would have on the sport of golf in the Boston area. Nor could he have imagined just what years of neglect would do to his layout. Ponkapoag has attracted golfers from throughout the state. Thanks to an abundance of challenging holes, inexpensive greens fees and ideal location, it seems as though all golfing avenues in Massachusetts lead to what is affectionately called Ponky.

But it's also a course that fell in disrepair, so much so that it became an embarrassment to even those who loved it.

"People used to ask me, 'How's the course?'" said Jack Neville, Ponkapoag's head pro, "and I'd tell them, 'Poor to fair.'"

That was before the two people Neville credits with breathing a second life into the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC)-run course came on the scene: Jane Connolly and Rich Tworig.

Connolly, said Neville, is the first person from MDC to take an active interest in the course. She was appointed director of recreation in May 1991, and one of her first duties was to go with Neville to area courses and talk to superintendents and club managers.

"The place was sadly neglected," said Connolly. "It was an embarrassment, and people were saying rotten things about it. I had some ideas in my head and was able to get some added revenue. We bought some equipment and hired a superintendent."

That was Tworig, a 31-year-old, third-generation golf course manager. At venerable Taconic in Williamstown, Mass., Tworig's grandfather and father served as superintendents for 50 and 38 years, respectively. When Rich graduated from the University of Massachusetts in 1982, having majored in plant and soil sciences, he felt the pull toward golf course management.

After seven years as assistant superintendent at Halifax Country Club, then three years as head superintendent at Cedar Hill, a nine-hole course in Stoughton, Tworig felt ready for a bigger challenge.

But Ponky?

"When I was thinking about the job here, I took my father down for a look," said Tworig. "He was bewildered by the shape it was in. He couldn't believe it."

What he saw was a course that had fallen on hard times since the original 18 Ross-designed holes opened in 1931. Ponkapoag expanded to 27 holes in 1939, and later to 36 holes.

The Metropolitan District Commission-run facility was not a priority. Ponky became almost legendary for its scruffy appearance. It was also cast in a less-than-flattering light in a *Sports Illustrated* piece.

What had caused the decline of this once-proud golf course? The almost unanimous answer: politics.

"The MDC neglected it," said Dick Haskell, executive director

of the Massachusetts Golf Association. "It generated money, but they never put the money back into the course."

Former Ponky pro Kenny Campbell tells a story that typifies the lack of care the course received. When the course's aerator was beyond repair, the superintendent put in a request for a new one. "The MDC said they had money in the budget to

repair, but not to buy," said Campbell. So the superintendent called the maintenance people at the other MDC course, Leo Martin Memorial in Weston, and asked if he could borrow their aerator.

"They laughed," he said. "Said theirs had broken three years earlier, so they hadn't aerated the greens in three years."

Then there was a February '91 fire, and the facility's 80-year-old

clubhouse was destroyed.

Despite the abuse heaped upon Ponky, the elder Tworig couldn't discourage his son from taking on the challenge.

Tworig accepted the job and went to work last Sept. 1. "I look at it this way: How many guys get the chance to work on a Donald Ross course? That's a thrill. To try and bring it back is a challenge."

Thus far, he seems to be more than up for the challenge. "I've

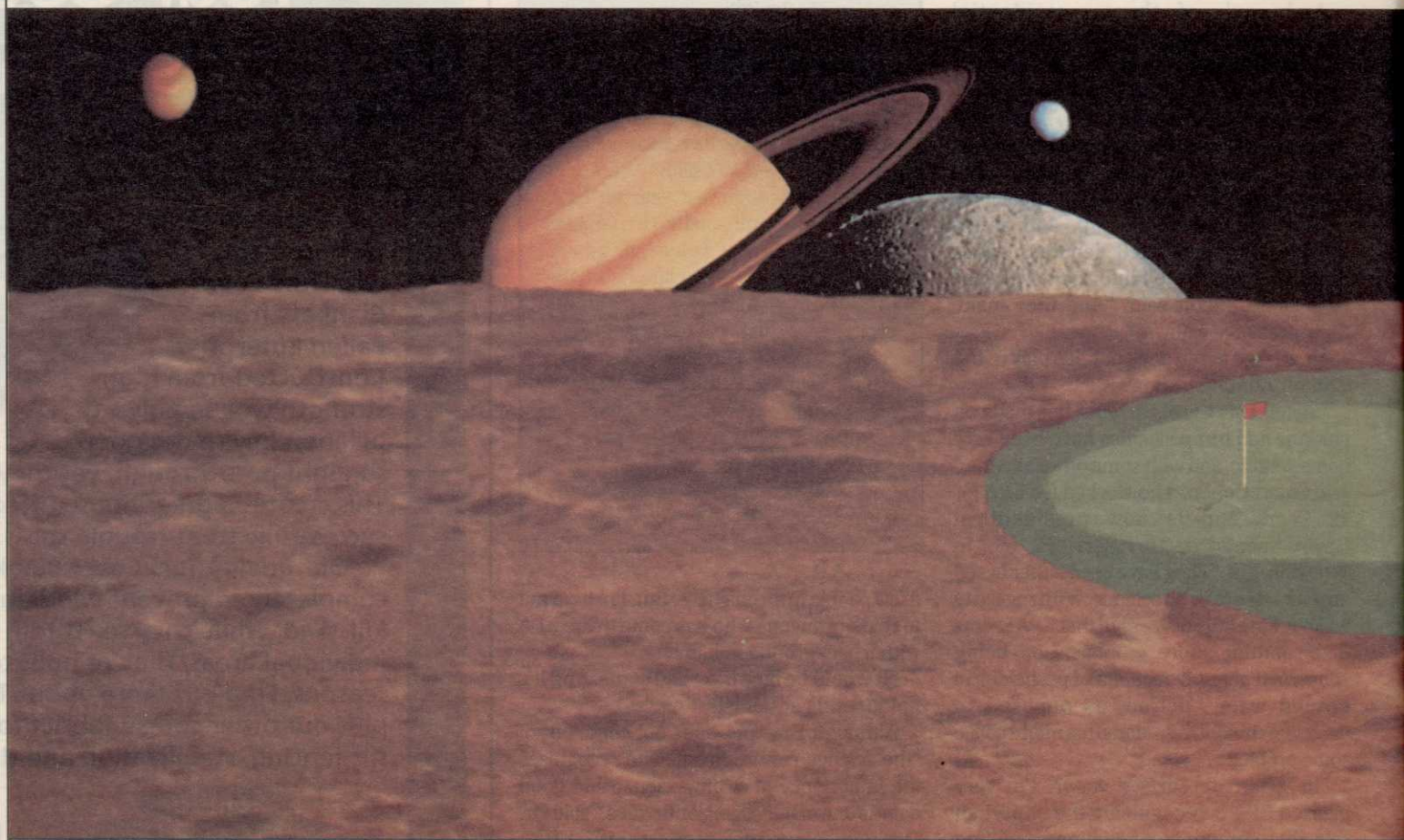
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Jim McCabe is a staff writer for *The Boston Globe*. This story appears with permission of the *Globe*.

On The Green

'Brooming' new grooming tool for bunker consistency at Grand Cypress

By MARK LESLIE

ORLANDO, Fla. — Want to put a nice "finish" on your sand bunkers? Check out the "broomed" traps at Grand Cypress Golf Club. But beware, warns superintendent Tom Alex, once golfers play out of them, they won't want to go back to hand-raked bunkers ever again.

Taking an idea from former assistant Steven Sorrell and

working with shop manager B.J. Spinks, Alex has modified a John Deere bunker rake, putting a weighted broom, that is hinged and floats, on the back. Voila! Sand bunkers that are consistent and without furrows.

"As a golfer you get real spoiled [by these bunkers]," Alex said. "You can really put a nice finish on them with the brooms."

The brooms, he said, "create

consistency."

The biggest problem with regular bunker rakes is the furrow they make, he said. "For one golfer, the ball might sit up and be perfect. For the next guy, the ball might be in the furrow. So you get inconsistency within each bunker."

"Also, the correct bunker is designed so balls get to the flat portion. Nobody wants an uphill lie on a steep face. So you want a

firm surface so when a ball lands in the bunker, it trickles all the way down and doesn't get hung up in a furrow."

When Grand Cypress used the brooms for the Chrysler tournament last fall, "it worked well," Alex said. "Now we've incorporated it into our maintenance practice."

The idea came about one day when Sorrell, who is now

superintendent at Colleton River Plantation in Bluffton, S.C., "was playing around with a little push broom in a bunker and said, 'Boy, that's a great finish.' We just took it one step further," Alex said.

Experimenting with brushes of different widths, Alex decided 24- or 18-inch are best. No wider, he said, "because as you work the faces, with too wide a broom you start bridges and you might be working the ends and not the middle."

It takes about the same time to groom a bunker as with a regular rake, Alex said.

The only drawback with the broom method, he said, is that some bunkers may firm up too hard because maintenance crews are working less than the top half inch of sand. "So wet bunkers, especially, can get hard," he said. "We just watch them. If they start to firm up, we go back to the regular tractor manufacturer's rake for awhile. And we hear gripes about it when we do."

Alex said the brooms can be used the majority, if not 100 percent, of the time.

"It works well in our sand. But it depends on different situations," he said. "It won't work so well in wet or powdery sand."

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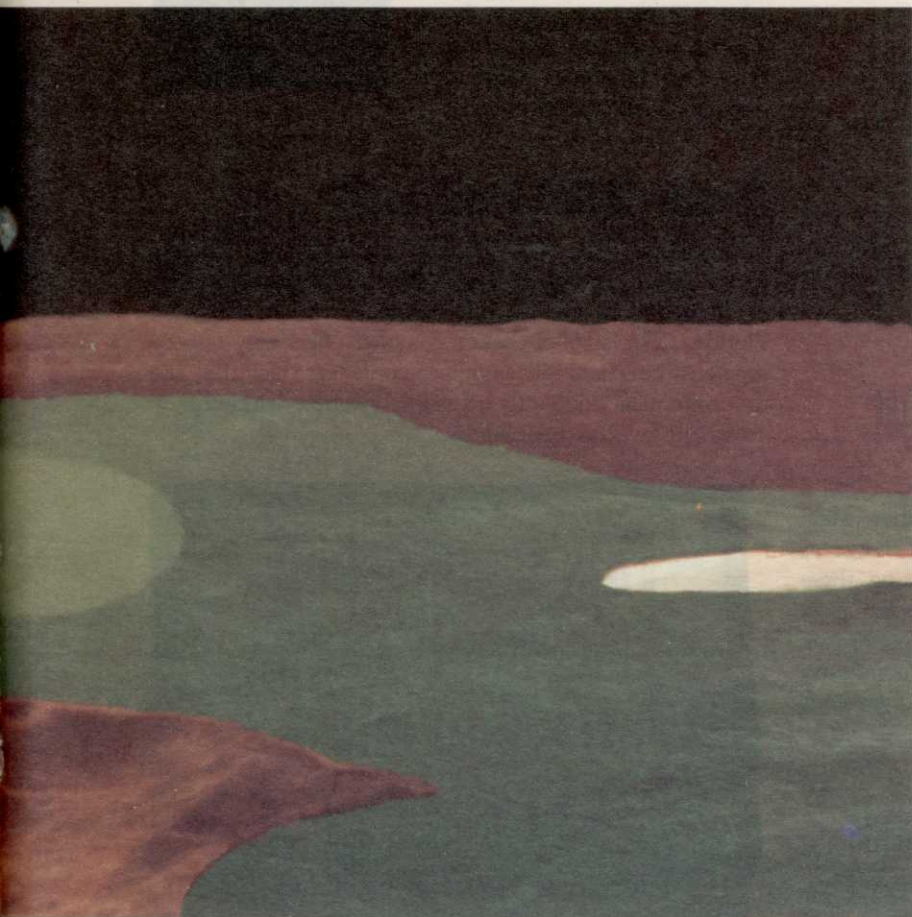
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Ponky's Tworig

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never seen the course in better shape," said one member.

"The greens are excellent," said Neville. "Rich has made it a great place to play again."

Tworig understands that money doesn't flow as freely when the state controls the purse strings as it would at a private course, where rich men will okay nearly any expenditure if it assures them pristine golfing conditions.

At Ponky, he has 11 full-time workers for 36 holes. The irrigation system needs replacing, and there's always equipment he'd like to have. His job would be easier if 700-800 rounds weren't played every day.

"It's a public course," he reasoned. "You just do the best you can. Jane has been great, and I've got no complaints."

"You don't turn around in one year and fix 20 years of neglect," said Connolly. "We want to put Ponkapoag on par with other good public golf courses, and fortunately we've been given the tools to do it."

Now, she said, 45 percent of the revenue generated by Ponkapoag will go back into the course, where before it went into the general fund — to be used for anything from pools and skating rinks to education and welfare.