

Mich. super ascending corporate ladder at TimberStone Golf Club

By PETER BLAIS

IRON MOUNTAIN, Mich. — Superintendent David Van Auken's rise to general manager at TimberStone — a new golf resort scheduled to open next spring on Michigan's Upper Peninsula — was a "matter of taking the bull by the horns."

"I was always pro-active," said the 39-year-old executive, who was named TimberStone's chief executive in September. "I always offered my input and made myself available to my employer, and it's paid off."

Van Auken was named superintendent at TimberStone in April 1995 after stints in similar positions at Kohler Inc.-owned Blackwolf Run in Kohler, Wis., and Gaylord Inc.-owned Broadmoor Golf Club in Colorado Springs. An accountant by training and superintendent by choice, Van Auken learned as much as he could about the corporate environment of those two firms and applied those lessons at TimberStone.

"I came to appreciate how different departments intertwine," he said, "and the importance of being able to collect and disseminate information. For instance, I started to realize where the marketing guy is coming from when he says this might not be a good time to aerify, even if [agronomically] now might be the perfect time to do it...My job depends on golfers coming here."

"Management never asked me for information when I started at TimberStone. So one of the first things I did was ask for a computer and put a budget together. I went to them with a list of what I needed to run my part of the operation and asked

how that would fit into their expectations for the course. That floored them."

Van Auken took a non-traditional route to the superintendent's profession. He graduated with an accounting degree from the University of Wisconsin and was employed as an accountant in Colorado Springs, Colo., when the golf bug bit him.

"There I was working in a second-floor office with no windows in one of the most beautiful places in the world," Van Auken remembered. "I told my wife I couldn't stand it anymore, that I had to get a job outside. We didn't have any kids at the time, and she told me if I needed a change, this was the time to go for it."

Through a friend of his wife's, Van Auken met the head superintendent at Broadmoor and got a job on the grounds crew. "My first day I was out on the course with a rotary mower and a string trimmer," he recalled.

Over the next seven years, he took agronomy classes at Colorado State University and volunteered for various tasks to broaden his experience. He eventually became Broadmoor's irrigation foreman and advanced to construction superintendent during a greens reconstruction project.

In 1989, Van Auken moved to Blackwolf Run in his native Wisconsin, where he oversaw the grow in of the River Course's final nine holes. He was named assistant superintendent when the River course opened in 1990 and eventually head superintendent.

TimberStone's developers hired Van Auken in April 1995 shortly after the start of construction. Van Auken said he has enjoyed significant input into the course design and construction process with Matthews' on-site design associate Paul Albanese and builder Ryan Inc. That input, coupled with his own initiative, led TimberStone to give him additional responsibility for the entire course operation.

"I realized there was an opportunity to move up to the next level when I came here," he said. "I thought it would take five to eight years, which would have been just about right. I'd be around 45 and probably tired of chasing teenagers around the course. I'm not sure I'm ready to give up being a superintendent...My goal in five years is to just be happy doing what I'm doing here."

for the company to make a profit," said West. "However, studies have shown the biggest growth potential lies in the development and operation of affordable golf facilities (those with green fees of \$50 or less) because they are less expensive to build, require smaller management staffs and are less susceptible to economic fluctuations. The only trick is to run them efficiently enough to be profitable. We're confident our system will accomplish that."

During the next five years, ICGM plans to own, operate or manage up to 50 courses in selected markets across the country. Initial growth will be focused in and around Phoenix with expansion to other markets including California, the Northwest and the Midwest. ICGM's offices are within the In Celebration of Golf retail operation at the Scottsdale Seville, 7001 N. Scottsdale Road, Scottsdale, AZ 85250. For information, call 602-951-4444.



David Van Auken (center) discusses clubhouse design with Duane Santi (left) and Jim Blomquist.

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ICGM to eliminate redundancy and eliminate other inefficiencies at its courses without compromising management's effectiveness or the quality of the golf experience.

For example, instead of having a separate management team at each golf course, ICGM plans to have two managers supervise the operations in each geographic district. Each district will consist of four to eight courses. One of these managers will be in charge of merchandise sales, golf rounds, advertising and operational issues. The other will oversee the maintenance of the golf course facilities.

Additionally, ICGM will seek to further streamline its management functions by outsourcing. "Managed the traditional way, golf courses are very expensive to operate, and green fees have to be high