

Keeper of the Green, Maples leaves lasting legacy

By MARK LESLIE

LAWRENCEVILLE, Ga. — Some know him for his SOS, or his SPOs with the GCSAA or USGA. But, the acronyms aside, Palmer Maples Jr. wears the mantle “Keeper of the Green” above all others.

The former president of the Golf Course Superintendents Association (GCSAA) and Carolinas GCSA, and director of education for the GCSAA from 1976-80, Maples retired on his birthday, June 22. The members at Summit Chase Country Club here, where he served as head superintendent for 16 years, honored him that day with a special celebration. They also planted a red sunset maple tree off the 6th fairway and unveiled a plaque on a 2- by 3-foot granite block declaring: “Palmer Maples Jr., Keeper of the Green, 1981-97.”

“I wear that label proudly,” Maples said. “I apprenticed with my father, who apprenticed with Donald Ross, who apprenticed with Old Tom Morris. And at St. Andrews, Old Tom was known as ‘Keeper of the Green.’”

In his semi-retirement (he will still consult), Maples said he will be known for his status as an SOS: Second Opinion Specialist. “I haven’t been bashful about giving an opinion,” he said. Indeed, his new business card gives him the SOS moniker.

As for his SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures), superintendents will recall how he brought order to GCSAA headquarters while president in 1975, with a number of SOPs covering such areas as education, membership, conferences and personnel matters.

But when that memorial maple tree grows and starts blocking shots into the green, Maples laughs, “people will start remembering me and it won’t be because of that plaque.”

His true legacy, Maples feels, is that: “I tried to share whatever I knew. I haven’t been bashful about giving an opinion. Since age 12 working for my father, I’ve learned. When you learn something, make application of it and pass it on.”

Indeed, communication has been the key improvement in the industry, he said.

“A lot more information is now available and being generated,” he said, “and that information has been communicated by the different associations to their members and from member to member. There is a tremendous opening in communications: e-mail, the Internet, print media, pictures, videos, field days ...”

Maples added superintendents today are making “a better presentation now.



Palmer Maples Jr. stands next to the maple tree dedicated to him and a plaque in honor of his years as ‘Keeper of the Green’ at Summit Chase Country Club.

“They’ve always been good people—entrusted with the care of the golf course—and have tried with the means of men, money, equipment and time to improve the condition of the golf course,” he said. “But now they are more informed and communicating better in front of an audience. They appear more of a professional rather than someone who happened to be farming in the area when the golf course was built.

“The profession has changed—from a golf course caretaker to someone who is superintending a reasonable amount of money and the property, plus protecting the environment.”

What does the future hold? “I see education and communications growing, and the business end perhaps outgrowing the agronomic end,” Maples said. “Today’s superintendent hasn’t faced situations of 40, 30, 20 years ago when there was a lack of information. There is a different set of problems today. Many products aren’t available now. The grasses are different. But people are speaking to those situations and when they find an answer they will announce it. The education community has played such a large part in collecting and distributing information as needed.”

After graduating from the University of Georgia 38 years ago, Maples worked as assistant and head superintendent at Charlotte

(N.C.) Country Club for 11 years, then took the superintendent post at The Standard Club in Duluth in 1970. It was during that tenure, in 1975, that he was elected GCSAA president.

A year later he accepted the job as GCSAA director of education, a position he held for four years.

He also served on the U.S. Golf Association (USGA) Green Section and the USGA Award Selection Committee, and is a member of the Donald Ross Society and GCSAA Historical Committee.

His return to green-keeping proved to Maples that he was “a lot more comfortable and more active working on a golf course than in an office situation. And the association was growing well at that time. I found a job here, that the Lord worked out ...”

And that job gave him the most satisfaction, he said, in providing “a pretty golf course for the golfers to enjoy. My greatest job has been satisfying the golfer’s desire for a well-conditioned course, so they could play the game according to the rules.

“That means keeping the fine sand edge, having the hazards marked, keeping trash out of the way, placing the cup correctly, and especially see the ball have that extra roll when the greens are fast.”

Membership here must have felt Maples did this all well. In 1988 they began an annual spring

“appreciation tournament” for their head superintendent.

Yet, awards, presidencies and jobs aside, the highlight of Maples’ career, he acknowledges, was when he played the home course of the original Keeper of the Green, Old Tom Morris’ Old Course at St. Andrews. “That,” he said, “now that was special.”

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