

Wright's pursuit: perfection at Pulpit, Paintbrush

By MARK LESLIE

CALEDON, Ontario, Canada — Maintaining two of Canada's premier golf courses is no "trivial pursuit" for Ken Wright, even if his bosses are the inventors of the successful board game.

The challenge is twofold — since the Devil's Pulpit and Devil's Paintbrush courses are opposites in design and care — and it is Wright's lifeblood.

"I love what I do, am very dedicated, and have worked extremely hard at it," he said. "I look forward to coming to work. I'm 50 and still come in at 5:30 in the morning. I'm here before the staff every day. If you like what you're doing, you will do a better job."

The draw to come to Caledon had to be extraordinary. Wright was head superintendent for 10 years at The National, the top-ranked course in Canada, when offered this job in 1989. Dana Fry, who with Michael Hurdzan co-designed the Paintbrush and Pulpit courses, had known Wright from Fry's work with designer Tom Fazio at The National.

"They approached me about the job," Wright recalled. "I could see this being two spectacular golf courses and it was certainly a challenge. I had never grown



The 10th hole at the Pulpit — just another great view for superintendent Ken Wright, inset right, and his crew.



Photos by Doug Ball

in a course before and that was an incentive as well. I was at the National for 10 years, and it was the toughest decision I've made in my life."

Working for Trivial Pursuit developers Chris Haney and Scott Abbott, he said, "is great. Elsewhere, you have to satisfy all your members, but we don't have committees to deal with. The

National was owned by one person and we got good results there, too."

Situated across the top of the Niagara Escarpment here, the Paintbrush and Pulpit courses both offer golfers spectacular views but two very different styles. The Paintbrush is a links style layout despite its location and features fescue grasses and dry



conditions. The Pulpit is plush and highly manicured.

"The older members really like the Paintbrush because it's a walking course and it's rugged," Wright said. "Being a 12-handicapper, I like the fescue fairways on the Paintbrush. We cut the fairways at 3/4 inch and it's easier for the poorer golfer. The Pulpit's all bentgrass and we cut the fairways at 3/8 inch — sometimes shorter."

The maintenance regimes, he said, are very different.

"The Paintbrush really stands out because of the things you don't have to do that you do have to do at the Pulpit," Wright said. "At the Paintbrush the drier it gets the better it looks. The ball rolls much farther because we keep it dry."

"Our watering practices are totally different, with the exception of the greens. Bentgrass requires watering

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Wright

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pretty much every night. We water the fescues every two to three nights and don't use as much fertilizer."

Wright hasn't sprayed the fescues with fungicides since the Paintbrush opened five years ago. The fescues get a little disease in the spring when it's damp and cold, he said, "but that grows out when it warms up."

While the Pulpit features closely cut tees, greens and fairways and nicely trimmed bunkers, the Paintbrush is old-style, including sod bunkers. Those bunkers have to be rebuilt every once in awhile, Wright said, adding: "I've replaced some of them already, but others are perfect. There are some that will definitely have to be done every five or six years. At St. Andrews [Scotland] each year they rebuild one-third of the bunkers."

When fescues were planted at the Paintbrush it was an experiment, he said. It had been used at the Links at Spanish Bay on the Monterey Peninsula in California, but the weather conditions there caused major problems. "The site here is perfect for fescue, being open, windy and dry," he said. "We don't get much rain here, not compared to the East or West Coast."

Five years into the experiment it is a success.

Another factor that separates the two courses is the earth-moving involved. Hardly any ground was moved on the Paintbrush, while the 1st hole alone at the Pulpit cost \$1 million to build and involved building seven tee boxes, a pond and a fairway-length, 4-foot-high stone wall.

"The Pulpit is starting to look like the surrounding terrain again," Wright said. "A lot of the ridges and scrub trees are coming back. I would think in 10 years people will look at it and not be able to tell so much soil was moved here."

One attribute significant to the charm of the Paintbrush has also been significant to the work of the crew there: stone walls. "We add a half mile of stone wall each year," he said.

When the British-style clubhouse was built, they wanted herb gardens, roses and a stone wall around the clubhouse.

Once the wall was built, "we thought it looked pretty good, and it evolved from there," Wright said.

Wright's assistants, Scott Clayworth at the Paintbrush and Bob Rodrigue at the Pulpit, have crews of 21 and 24, respectively, to keep things in shape.

And they are doing so today with more sophisticated and technical tools than 1970 when he graduated from a teachers college in Nova Scotia and went to work for Gordon Witteveen, who was then at Northwood Golf and Country Club in Toronto.

"I think the superintendent has put a lot of pressure on himself," Wright said. "We cut greens shorter than ever, fairways shorter than ever. We've got a lot better tools to deal with it, but still we live on the edge. If you cut the greens another 1/16 inch higher you wouldn't put so much pressure on yourself."

"The green cut that short is under a lot of stress," he added. "Computerized irrigation has helped us a lot."

What new advance would help the most?

"Conditions at many courses are close to perfect ... I think research into controlling diseases better will help. And if they ever come up with a control for *poa annua* it would be tremendous. It has to happen. If they can prevent seed-head production, they can control *poa*."

And all these advances intensify the competition with colleagues.

"There are so many well-conditioned golf courses around, you're always striving to be better than your neighbor," Wright said. "That's a fact."

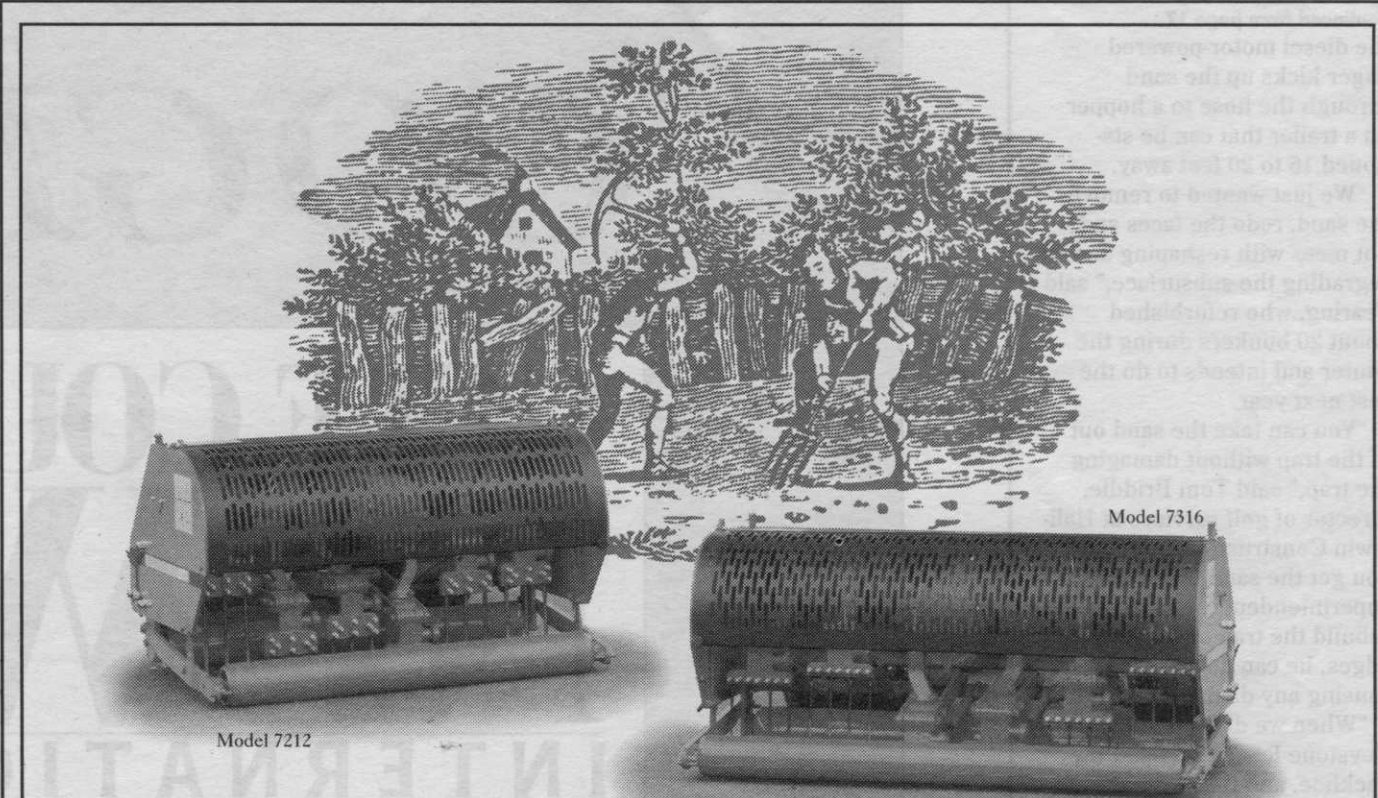
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Portland Country Club is the first in Maine and the 95th golf course in the nation to receive the honor.

"We are very proud to have achieved certification in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program and to have the Portland Country Club on the right course for the future," said former golf course superintendent and current independent turf consultant Patrick Lewis.

Lewis and his successor, James Christie, stressed the invaluable efforts of their crew, area volunteers and support from their club's membership as cornerstones of the project.



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