

With small crew and big ambitions, Ondo does it all

By LARRY KIEFFER

WINTER PARK, Fla. — Joe Ondo is a working man. He is just as likely to be found riding a mower, pushing a spreader, cutting a cup, grinding a reel, or shaping a rebuilt green at Winter Pines Golf Club here as he is sitting at a desk or riding a cart.

But if you find him at his desk, he may be working on business for the Florida Golf Course Superintendents Association, of which he is president, or maintaining his certification, writing a note of encouragement to a colleague, or fine-tuning the schedule for his staff of seven.

And if you find him riding a cart, he may be working on getting his handicap down from a 3. At another time he may be figuring out the details for the next in-house renovation project at this 5,400-yard, par-67, daily-fee course that hosts more than 80,000 rounds a year in one of Orlando's oldest upscale neighborhoods.

In case you missed it, Joe Ondo maintains a course that operates year round, seeing 80,000-plus rounds annually, with a staff of eight counting himself, and still finds time to maintain his certification and a 3-handicap, lead



Joe Ondo, the working superintendent, applies mole cricket bait to a hot spot.

one of the largest superintendent organizations in the nation ... and undertake major renovation projects with his own crew.

With a small crew and big ambitions, Ondo and understanding and visionary owner Ed McMillin have found a way to improve their course: They do things slowly and deliberately, one step at a time.

"All you can do is plan as best you

can, but take each day separately and deal with what it brings you to the best of your ability," Ondo said. "Don't be afraid to work hard and put in the hours it takes to get the job done. Good things will eventually happen and you'll be a better person for it."

Nobody knows who designed Winter Pines when it was built in 1962, but five new holes were designed by Gardner Dickinson and Bud Timbrook in 1977 when part of the original front nine was

sold for real-estate development. Two years later, Ondo arrived and renovation of the rest of the course began shortly thereafter.

Among the projects they have undertaken: installing an automatic irrigation system and two miles of drainage lines; constructing more than 6,000 linear feet of concrete cart paths; creating several new ponds and lakes; planting trees, including more than 100 cypress; rebuilding eight greens that had been "pushed up" out of muck with no underdrains and planted to Tifgreen, the venerable Tifton 328 Bermuda-grass.

While it was impractical and cost-prohibitive to core out the muck-based greens, the sod was stripped, herringbone drainfields were added to the base, and greens mix was added to the surface to prove a well-drained root zone for new Tifdwarf sod. Working at a pace of one green per season, seven of the greens have been completed.

Ondo had excellent training for the challenges of his long tenure at Winter Pines. A native of Kinsman, Ohio, he worked at the local Bronzewood Golf Course while in high school. He

Continued on page 19



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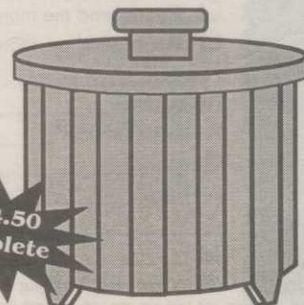
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Focus: Joe Ondo

Continued from page 17

entered Youngstown (Ohio) State University on a golf scholarship.

"I started out as an engineering major, but calculus and physics and I didn't get along. I switched majors to education, but didn't really like it. I visited my friend, Carl Bronson (son of Bronzwood GC owner Jim), who was in the golf course operations program at Lake City (Fla.) Community College.

"After one visit, I knew I had found a home."

Ondo graduated with an associate's degree in 1975 and immediately landed a job as assistant superintendent at Sharon (Pa.) Country Club. In 1978 he moved to Lost Tree Country Club in North Palm Beach with his boss and mentor, John Lapika, now superintendent at Annadale Golf Course in Mississippi. Six months later, Ondo took over at Winter Pines, thanks to an interview arranged by Lapika, who had been superintendent there in the early 1970s.

Ondo's management style stresses teamwork, a necessity for such a small staff.

"The crew came up with a unique path-edging system that works for them," he noted. "One guy edges and then a second person follows with a Flymo. The Flymo chops up the clipped-off runners, mows the turf and helps scatter the debris. They follow up with a blower, which scatters the remainder, leaving nothing to rake or shovel up."

Team building leads to longevity. One of the Winter Pines crew members has three years' seniority over Ondo; two others came on board shortly after him.

One of the latter, Bob Keeth, had been superintendent at Orlando's Rosemont Golf Course. "I first met Bob when I was a student on the Lake City summer bus tour," Ondo said. "He lives just down the street and after he left Rosemont, he came by one day looking for a job. He's been here 18 years.

"Having mature, responsible operators helps make the equipment last longer. We have a 1979 Toro HTM fairway mower that is still going strong."

Taking care of his equipment is a trait that goes back to his training at Lake City. Ondo still takes his turn at grinding reels.

A member of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) since 1980, and a certified superintendent since 1986, Ondo credits much of his

success to his professional affiliations. He has served the Central Florida GCSA as external vice president for 14 years and as president for two.

Despite professional accomplishments, he first gained statewide recognition in Florida golfing circles for his prowess with a different set of golf tools: He won the Florida Publinx championship in the early 1980s and has taken

several other amateur titles since.

He has represented Florida in several GCSAA championships, scoring a hole-in-one at Grand Cypress near Orlando in the 1990 event.

"If you want to know what kind of a person Joe is, just watch him play golf," wrote Joel Jackson, superintendent and editor of the Florida Green. "Thoughtful club and

shot selection ... smooth, unhurried, powerful swing ... precise accuracy ... consistent and determined execution ... appreciative but humble with the results ... relentless competitor."

In his spare time (he claims to have it!) Ondo plays golf, reads and spends time with Kathryn, his wife of 14 years.

"I try to play in as many amateur golf tournaments in

the state as time and money will allow. I like to read about golf — work-related subjects, the history of our profession and the history of the game itself — so I subscribe to a lot of magazines and collect books on those subjects," he said.

Editor's note: Adapted with permission from an article in The Florida Green by Joel Jackson.

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