

At Hamilton Farm Golf Club, superintendent Ray Viera faces challenges such as growing bentgrass in humid conditions and water management. Photo: Hamilton Farm



Exclusive ranks

Newly assembled managers at **HAMILTON FARM** aim to raise the profile of the New Jersey facility

By Mark Leslie

Dream teams. Think of them, and you envision Michael Jordan, Larry Bird and Magic Johnson. Or, perhaps, Johnnie Cochran, F. Lee Bailey, Alan Dershowitz and Robert Shapiro.

Hamilton Farm Golf Club in Gladstone, N.J., has assembled its own version of a dream team: the trio of “swing doctor” and author Mike Adams, longtime Oakmont (Pa.) Golf Club assistant pro Steve Archer, and notable bentgrass superintendent Ray Viera.

In one fell swoop, general manager Tim Bakels, newly on board with the mandate to put together one of the best management teams in the country, brought in these three industry professionals this past spring. Archer joined Hamilton Farm as director of golf in early April, Viera as superintendent in late April and Adams as director of instruction in early May. There was only one thing in mind.

“Our goal is to establish Hamilton Farm as the most exclusive, highly sought-after membership in America,” says Bakels, who joined the club last August after eight years at Desert Highlands in Scottsdale, Ariz. “And we’ve brought in three of the strongest names in the business to accomplish this goal.”



Hamilton Farm's management team: From left, Ray Viera, Steve Archer, Tim Bakels and Mike Adams.



The management team is focusing on providing the finest service and amenities in terms of overall experience. Photo: Hamilton Farm

From service to teaching to course conditioning, Viera's goal is to reach "Top 100 Modern Course" status quickly. It's a concerted effort to recruit the top pros and put Hamilton Farm in the bracket it belongs, he says.

"Basically, we're here to put Hamilton Farm on the map," says Adams, a former PGA Tour pro who's director of the PGA's National Academy of Golf at Palm Beach, Fla. "My job is to make everybody play better, and the rest of the staff's is to make their time here as enjoyable as possible. Ray's job is to make the golf course as beautiful as possible so people will enjoy playing it. Steve is a great player, merchandiser and teacher – the total package."

Archer, 36, deflects the praise of the club professional to his former mentor, Bob Ford of Oakmont Golf Club. But he believes he has learned how to attract members to private clubs of this stature.

"There are no secrets," Archer says. "It's a

warm greeting and a fond farewell, the traditional ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen. We want the finest service and amenities available in terms of the overall experience. Every need is taken care of as soon as you come on the property until you leave, whether it's with your golf game, fine dining or all the things that we offer. It's an atmosphere of service. We try to attend to every detail and need and to think ahead so members and their guests are overwhelmed with a 'wow' factor when they come through the gates."

THE LURE

The cornerstone of the club is the championship-length, 18-hole Highlands Course and its companion Hickory Course, the only USGA-rated par-3 track in the country. Both were designed by Michael Hurdzan, Ph.D., and Dana Fry. Sculpted bunkers with high sand flashing, a hardwood forest setting along highlands and vistas stretching toward the Hudson River dramatize golf at Hamilton Farm.

The golf course, Georgian mansion, lodge and clubhouse were enough to pull Adams and Archer away from other facilities.

"It's the total package, from the physical plant to the golf course," says the 53-year-old Adams. "Every golf hole offers a different challenge and plays differently every day, depending on the wind conditions. There are many changes in elevation, lots of trees and water, and it's in immaculate shape. After my visit and speaking with Steve, I realized this is the right place to be."

Adams' relationship with longtime friend Archer played a considerable role in his decision to teach at Hamilton Farm during the summer and return to Florida during the winter. Archer, who co-founded AMF Golf Management, a professional recruiting firm that hires professionals for top private clubs, was glad he made the move to Hamilton Farm.

"We have the facilities, and now we have the team to take Hamilton Farm to the next level and hit every facet of our operation," he says. "On the instruction side, we have Mike and Karen Noble, one of our assistant teaching professionals who played the LPGA Tour for 10 years. On the turf side, we have Ray and his assistant, Patrick Husby. From the professional side, we have me and Matt Freitag, our head golf professional who's here year round."



The Highlands Course is set amid a hardwood forest and offers vistas stretching toward the Hudson River. Photo: Hamilton Farm

THE RIGHT CHOICE

To find the right superintendent, Bakels called Phil Shoemaker Jr., the superintendent at his former club, Desert Highlands, and asked for a recommendation. The answer: Ray Viera. Shoemaker suggested Bakels call Rutgers University for a reference. So Bakels asked a professor who he would recommend for the job. The answer: Ray Viera.

“At that point, it seemed pretty obvious who our choice should be,” Bakels says.

When Bakels gave Viera the call, Viera was working at The Members Club at Four Streams in Beallsville, Md. The club’s members have

included Michael Jordan, Washington Capitals goalie Olaf Kolzig and various members of the U.S. Congress. Bakels convinced Viera, who cut his agronomic teeth as an assistant superintendent at Shinnecock Hills Golf Club in Southampton, N.Y., to visit.

Viera earned a reputation for conquering *Poa annua* at Four Streams – a significant achievement in the Mid-Atlantic. By July, using plant growth regulators, changing the fertility and reducing water use to create firm and fast conditions, he rid the course of *Poa annua*.

Viera’s reputation also included dealing with members ably and, as he says, understanding the mechanisms by which memberships work and what they desire at the higher level – a level that includes senators, professional athletes and others who guard their privacy. At Hamilton Farm, where the membership fee is \$300,000, that trait is a plus.

“Ray is equally talented with a balance sheet

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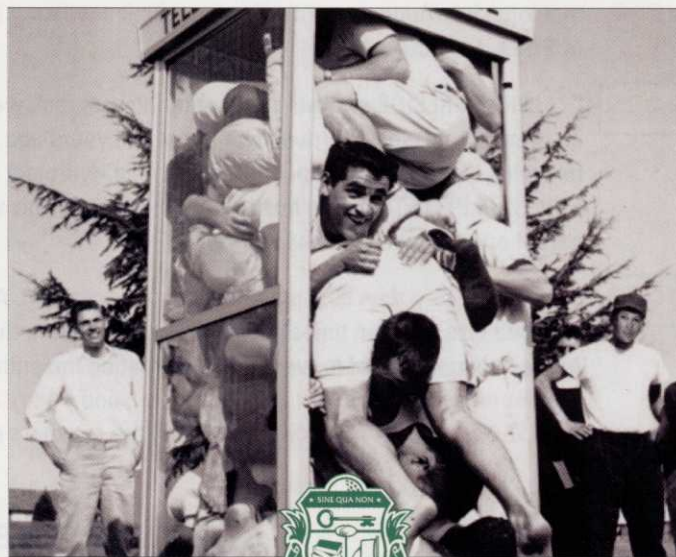



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as with bentgrass," Bakels says.

But Viera sees others issues as his greatest challenges. Viera, who's replacing Paul Ramina, a lifelong friend who has taken the position as director of grounds at Winged Foot Golf Club in Mamaroneck, N.Y., is stepping into big shoes. Besides that, there are water-management, agronomic and environmental challenges with which he has to deal.

"Going a couple hours north to New Jersey, you'd think you would have less pressure in the summer," Viera says. "But that's probably not true. I'm still going to experience some of the challenges such as growing bentgrass in humid conditions.

"Water management is probably going to be the No. 1 test," he adds. "My mantra has always been being able to understand the plant's needs in water use simply because I didn't have enough water to use at Four Streams. It forced me to learn how to do it. So I've brought that experience

along with me, as well as learning how to produce good grass on poor soils, how to get low mowing height on poor soils, issues of that nature."

Environmentally, Viera has dealt with tough laws in Maryland, so it shouldn't be a problem for him to deal with the stiff regulations in New Jersey.

In the human-resource area of the job, Viera has gone 10 years without having a single employee fired or quit. The list of his assistants who have gone on to superintendent positions include Jim Lynagh at Meadowlands Golf Club in Philadelphia; Dan Bastille at Spring Valley Golf Club in Sharon, Mass.; Brian Bupp at Bretton Woods Country Club in Potomac, Md.; and Tom Harshberger who will take over Viera's duties at Four Streams.

GETTING BETTER

With his team assembled and working tightly together, Bakels launched an effort to increase

membership and fill the club. Besides visits from PGA and LPGA Tour pros for their lessons from Adams, word-of-mouth about the service headed up by Archer and course conditions maintained by Viera could do the trick quickly.

"We're all like a family serving a family," Bakels says. "There's not one department that won't help another."

"We're definitely working toward the fine-tuned machine we want," says Archer, who is actually leaving Hamilton Farms in October to go to Frederica Golf Club in Saint Simons Island, Ga. "If you're standing still, you're getting passed. It's a fluid situation where we're striving to get better on a daily basis. By no means have we got everything figured out. That is a constant goal for each of us: How do we get better on a daily basis?" GCI

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