

# SHAWN OF THE DESERT

Arizona superintendent describes what makes him tick, what he thinks the future holds for golf in the West and how he balances work and family

BY PAT JONES

Photo by Chris Loomis

By his estimate, Shawn Emerson has participated in more than 60 overseedings. He's carefully managed the application of 13 billion gallons of irrigation water. About 15 of his former assistants and crew are superintendents throughout the country. He's been on staff for or hosted almost a dozen professional tour events. He oversees six courses, 200 employees and a \$13-million annual budget.

Yet, when we talked, his main goal was to make it to as many of his 7-year-old son's baseball games as possible this year.

Emerson isn't necessarily a name that immediately pops to mind when you think of marquee superintendents. That might be because he's based out West in an industry that tends to be East Coast-centric. Or possibly it's because he's more interested in doing his job well, mentoring and being mentored, and spending as much time as possible with his family.

Emerson, a second-generation superintendent, is director of agronomy for the Desert Mountain Co. courses in Scottsdale, Ariz. The facilities he and his team oversee include the famed

Cochise course – previously the home of The Tradition event on the Champions Tour – and the highly ranked Renegade course. Emerson is a sports nut who grew up in a baseball crazy family, thus, his passion for watching his youngest swing a bat and throw a ball.

Emerson has spent his life immersed in the golf course maintenance business. Born while his father, Bill, was a superintendent in Massachusetts, the family relocated to Maryland where Bill managed turf at several high-end clubs. He spent his teen years playing golf, working in the pro shop and toiling on his dad's maintenance staff. Thanks to a successful high-school baseball career, he did a stint at American University in Washington, D.C., on scholarship playing ball and studying finance – something that would pay off for him later in his career.

In 1983, Bill Emerson moved the family to Phoenix – specifically Paradise Valley Country Club – and Shawn decided to come along and finish his studies at the University of Arizona. He soon hooked up with another of his lifetime mentors, Cal Roth, as an irrigation crew member while Roth was building and managing the TPC at Scottsdale.

“That was key for me because I learned irrigation from the ground up,” he says. “That’s so critical in the West.”

With guidance from his dad and others, Emerson decided to take the leap and earn his bachelor's in agronomy from UA. In school, he continued to work at various courses and make contacts and develop friendships that continue to serve him today. After school, he worked his way up to his first superintendent job at Desert Mountain's Renegade course in 1992. Despite a side-trip to El Paso, Texas, to work at Coronado Country Club for a few years, he's been a fixture in the Arizona golf turf community ever since. He was promoted to the director of agronomy position at Desert Mountain in 1997 and never looked back.

But what makes him tick? What does he think the future holds for golf in the West? And, how does he balance a family that includes his wife of 13 years, Laura, little Jacob and 5-year-old Rebecca with one of the most demanding positions in corporate golf? Let's find out.

**WHAT'S YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE WHEN YOU WALK INTO YOUR OFFICE EVERY MORNING?**

My major concern is projecting the future for my company. Immigration is the biggest problem in the West. How can we adjust if we have a labor crunch? I've also spent a lot of time on effluent water issues. That's just a fact of life for us. Personally, my biggest challenge is always how to manage people. We have 200 people on staff, and I have to rely heavily on my two agronomists (Jim Key and Keith Hershberger) and seven superintendents.

**YOU'VE BEEN A MENTOR TO MANY. WHO DO YOU TURN TO FOR ADVICE?**

I've been extremely lucky because there are four people that I've looked at as mentors from the time I was a kid until today. Obviously, my father was first. As a superintendent, he was the best at (club) politics and how to manage up. Virgil Robinson (who preceded Shawn at Desert Mountain) taught me how to break golf course management down into a business. George Thompson (the legendary North Carolina superintendent) taught me to break it into a science. And Cal Roth (longtime head of agronomy for all the TPC courses) taught me how to put things on the ground and make them work. I'm a collage of dif-

ferent management styles and perspectives.

**HOW DO YOU USE THAT COLLAGE DAILY?**

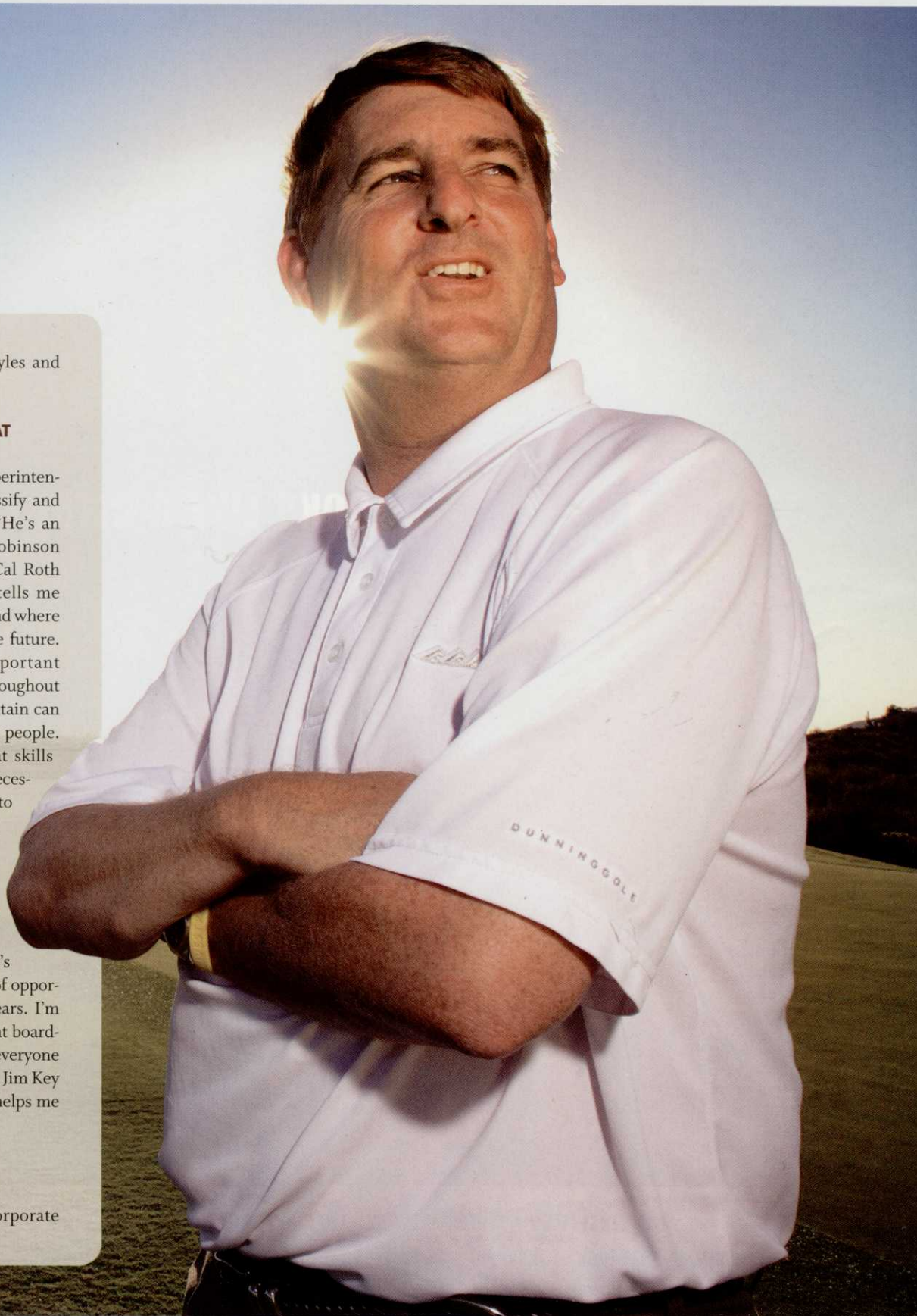
When I look at my superintendents, that's how I classify and rate them. I'll think, "He's an eight on the Virgil Robinson scale or a six on the Cal Roth scale," and so on. It tells me what kind of guy he is and where he might fit best in the future. That's one of the important things I've learned throughout the years. Desert Mountain can be too much for some people. Even people with great skills in certain areas don't necessarily fit here. You have to pick the right job that fits your skill set.

**WHAT ARE YOUR WEAKNESSES? WHAT NEEDS WORK?**

I'm not a good writer. It's probably cost me a lot of opportunities through the years. I'm a great talker and a great boardroom person, but I tell everyone they should write more. Jim Key is a great writer, so he helps me a lot with that.

**WHAT ARE YOUR STRENGTHS?**

I'm successful with corporate



people because I know what they want. That comes naturally to me thanks to my finance background. I got my job because of my technical skills, but I keep it because of my business sense.

#### HOW WILL THE PROFESSION EVOLVE?

This business is changing as we speak. The profession used to be a rural, blue-collar, grind-it-out field. You had to have an offensive-lineman-type mentality to succeed. Now it's a more skilled, white-collar position. We've become quarterbacks and specialty players. That's largely because of the approach the GCSAA and the chapters have taken to drive salaries, attract good people and spend as much time growing professional skills as we do the technical skills.

Another thing that's really changed is that guys don't want to be at work 18 hours a day. They want balance. My father worked 60 hours a week for 30 years. That's not what it's like today.

#### WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE FAIL IN THIS BUSINESS?

It's usually because of that commitment you still have to make putting in the time. Most young guys don't understand turf is nonstop. I was with Ken Mangum (of the Atlanta Athletic Club) in early August at a corporate event in Chicago. He was on his computer every day. Even though we were in Chicago, he was at work all the time. That's where the rubber hits the road with most guys. It's not growing grass that's the problem, it's committing to the time and pressures of life outside of work. I'm getting assistants now that are married with kids and mortgages. That balancing act is critical.

#### WHAT IMPACT WILL THAT HAVE ON THE BUSINESS?

For one thing, assistants' salaries are going to rise rapidly. That's already happened here and in other parts of the country as well.

#### WHAT ARE YOUR OTHER PREDICTIONS?

Wall-to-wall overseeding will largely go away because of labor and water. Golfers are going to have to understand this and adjust their attitudes. Also, construction costs will increase because of effluent water. The cost to pipe in the effluent, sand-capping fairways, adding more drainage, etc., will increase initial building costs.

Highly manicured golf courses won't be able to afford the labor we have now. Already, the cost of fuel drives more PGR usage and less mowing.

We've shifted to mowing fairways four days a week instead of six. You'll also see more electric mowers with fewer hydraulics. Anything that can reduce labor and water is going to be key.

#### HOW'S THE CURRENT GOLF ECONOMY IN YOUR AREA?

The top level courses in Phoenix are still spending more than \$2 million a year. But, some of the major turf supply companies are getting nervous because superintendents have to cut costs at some point. That's opened the door for generic chemicals and the like. The problem is that if we use generics now, we'll lose research and new technologies in the future.

We have to keep looking toward the future. That's part of the battle those of us in corporate golf have to fight every day. That's where my finance background comes in. I can show them that short-term savings might cost you in the long run.

One of the other problems in our area is that courses are being bought and sold so often. It puts pressure on superintendents because they're constantly faced with the challenge of changing hands. We're owned by Morgan Stanley, and I get asked to check out other courses for potential acquisitions. That's a process that needs to be done confidentially, so we're told not to tell anybody. It's a tough thing because I get paid by my ownership, but don't want to screw the other guy.

#### WHAT DID YOUR DAD TEACH YOU?

He always told me, "Persistence to purpose leads to success." You just have to be persistent, have a purpose and keep going. Each of my mentors had sayings like that. Virgil said, "You have to control the controllables." There are always some things you can't control – like the weather – but the rest of it is in your hands, and you need to focus on that stuff. George told me that science will always change – that's why you replicate things in trials. You have to constantly test new things. Cal preached that the superintendent is the backbone of the course. How you hold yourself is how the golf course will hold. If you stand strong, the golf course will stand strong.

My dad was never afraid to tell it the way he saw it. I was in a GCSAA committee meeting seven or eight years ago, and there were some of the older guys there. We were discussing some issue, and I was the only one who raised a hand to disagree. One of the old guys said, "You are your father's son." It was funny, but it's true. You

have to be able to stand your ground and support it. Sometimes it's just a gut feeling, but hopefully the facts will back you up.

#### HOW DO YOU BALANCE LIFE AND WORK?

I had a great example last week. I saw my son hit his first home run, took him to get ice cream after the game and went back to work. All I could think about was the big smile on his face after that homer. You can do this job, still have a great time and balance your life. There's no question it's a trade-off: You might not have quantity time with your family, so you have to make it quality time.

#### WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE ABOUT THE BUSINESS?

Wouldn't it be great if we could have consistent growing cycles from year to year to year? Weather patterns are so erratic. It would be so nice to have a cycle of consistency and implement our programs the way we want.

#### ANY PLANS TO RUN FOR THE NATIONAL BOARD?

I don't think so. Instead, I enjoy sitting on customer councils for companies like Bayer, John Deere and Rain Bird. That's a more interesting perspective. We expect so much from the manufacturers, and I'm a big believer in being on their side. We need more advocates for the industry. We need to work more diligently with the manufacturers and embrace their needs. It's also helped me be successful as well, because I'm able to learn much more about products and support.

#### WHAT DO YOU DO FOR FUN?

I don't play enough golf anymore, and I miss it. But, I'm a sports junkie, and if it involves a ball or a stick, I'm there.

#### IF YOU WEREN'T A SUPERINTENDENT, WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING?

I'd be an athletic coach. I'm a coach disguised as a superintendent right now. Unfortunately, if you ask my guys, I'm the old-style, disciplinarian-type coach like Tom Landry or Tom Coughlin. I believe in discipline and chain of command. People always say I'm more like Bobby Knight than Coach K (Mike Krzyzewski of Duke). And that's OK with me. **GCI**

*Shawn Emerson can be reached at [semerson@desertmt.com](mailto:semerson@desertmt.com).*