



Steve Cook says it's surprising how much time is spent on things other than turfgrass management during tournament preparing. Photo: Jim West

MOTOWN MAJOR MAN

STEVE COOK prepares for the PGA Championship, discusses his career, and offers advice for younger superintendents and assistants

The economy in Detroit isn't exactly humming along. The city is the epicenter of the sagging U.S. auto industry as well as ground zero for the subprime loan and foreclosure meltdown. The city is working diligently to make a comeback, but it's a slow and painful process. Yet, there are glimmers of hope that energize the Motor City and light the way for the future.

One of those bright spots is the 2008 PGA Championship. This August, the world's greatest players – and a hundred thousand or so of their closest friends – will convene at Oakland Hills Country Club to experience great golf on a fabulous old course. And Steve Cook will be there to welcome them.

Cook, one of a only a handful of superintendents who've earned both the CGCS and Master Greenkeeper designations, understands the challenges of hosting a major and the value of the event in his adopted hometown.

"Economically, if the rest of the country has a cold, Detroit has a bad case of the flu," Cook says. "Our club is in really good shape, but the PGA Championship is a much bigger deal than just our club."

Cook was raised in the Quad Cities area and eventually headed off to the University of Illinois in the early '80s with visions of becoming a forest ranger dancing in his head. The forestry program required summer classes, and he ended up at a tree farm in southern Illinois where he observed how telephone poles were produced.

"They had this huge, long machine that cut the tree, trimmed it, treated it and injected it with creosote to preserve it," he says. "The guy running the machine was completely black with creosote, which is nasty stuff, and he had a master's degree in forestry. That was the end of my interest in forestry."

Fortunately, Cook had a buddy, Dan Anderson, who was majoring in turf, and he soon discovered what would become his life's work.

"I thought, 'It's a job where you take your dog to work, you're required to play golf, and you get to be outdoors all the time – how bad could it be?'" he says.

Apparently, not too bad, since he secured a position as an assistant at Chicago's famed Medinah Country Club after college and later helped host the 1988 U.S. Open. From there, he took a bit of a detour and spent two years as the superintendent at Golf de Jovenval near Paris.

"I found the job through the GCSAA's job listings and thought, 'Why not?'" he says. "Best of all, I met my wife, Robin, while I was learn-

ing French before I went over. It was a great time. We still go back to France every couple of years."

Eventually, he returned to the U.S. to become superintendent at Wakonda Club in Des Moines, Iowa, for several years before securing his current position at Oakland Hills in 1997. In the decade since, he's hosted a U.S. Amateur Championship and, of course, the 2004 Ryder Cup.

We decided it was time to check in with Cook – who's a huge Chicago Cubs fan – as he goes into the stretch drive for the Championship and throw him a few curveball questions about his life, what he's learned along the way and what it takes to prepare for a Motown major.

How'd you end up with one of the best jobs in the industry?

I found out about Oakland Hills through the GCSAA. From my time at Medinah, I knew I liked the bigger operation and the tournaments. I applied and got the position. I was fortunate. I clicked with the general manager, Rick Bayliss. He was relatively new and wanted a younger guy in the position. I was shocked when he offered it to me.

What knowledge about hosting a major would surprise your colleagues?

It's surprising how much time is spent on things other than turfgrass management. All of the infrastructure that gets built, the member communication and an endless list of issues that consume your time mean you need a good staff to attend to the golf course.

Most people think the superintendent is wrapped up in scheduling and fertilization and water. But, at this point, I only walk the course once a week – and I have to schedule that time. What keeps me busy is working with vendors and dealing with construction issues and nonagronomic stuff. We take 10 semi-trailer deliveries a day of flooring, bleachers, etc. I'm working closely with the construction superintendent, Ron Bentley, and the tournament director to make sure everything gets done. It's like a big ship. All you're doing as a superintendent is trying to get it steered in the right direction.

You have to have enormous trust in your staff. Superintendents at big events who try to do a lot themselves tend to face challenges. You have

By Pat Jones

to make decisions quickly. You have to know when to say no. You have to be good at picking your battles. Most importantly, you can't let the event go by without having some fun. You have to stop and smell the roses. I try to take pictures and keep a diary. You have to savor every moment, or else the event goes past so quickly. All of the sudden it's over, and you look back and say, 'What the hell did I do that for?'

What do you fear most as you prepare for an event?

I fear the things I can't control, such as the weather. We have a rain plan that covers everything, including a worst-case scenario such as six inches of rain in two hours on Wednesday night. It specifies a lot of detail about pumping, different kinds of pumps we'll use, squeegees, other equipment, etc., all on a color-coded list that's broken down by teams. One of the huge differences between now and '88 at the U.S. Open at Medinah is technology. It's a tremendous help when planning the details.

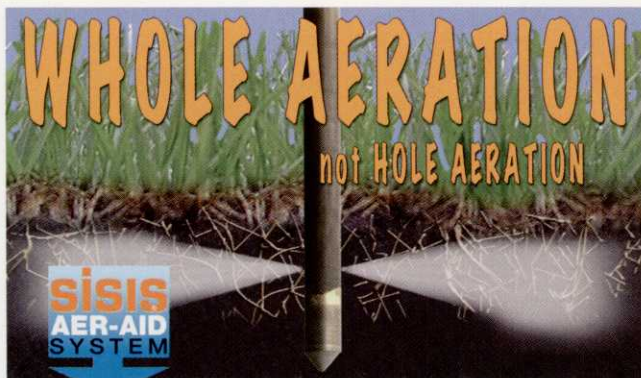
How has the club changed during your 10 years there?

Physically, we've renovated the golf course to add more 'teeth' by adding some length and narrowing the fairways. Rees Jones has done a lot of that work. Unlike some old clubs, Oakland Hills is still interested in hosting majors, which is more difficult to do because there are more good golf courses out there now than ever before.

From a business standpoint, we try to position ourselves as the best game in town. It's a tough market in Detroit, and everywhere else, I guess. We have become a little more cost conscious. Frankly, that's healthy for us and for golf in general. It's a difficult process, but I'm happy to see it. I'd rather be working in that kind of environment than one where people spend money foolishly on things that don't matter to the success of the club.

Who's the most superintendent-friendly player you've met?

It's funny – I don't know I've ever met a professional golfer. Within our club, I'd have to pick Steve Yzerman, the now-retired captain of the Detroit Red Wings. He's a member, and he's obviously a legend here in town. But any time



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SUPERINTENDENT PROFILE

he sees a staff person, he sits down and talks with him and buys him lunch. He's just a down-to-earth guy who treats people so well. He even brought the Stanley Cup over one day for everyone to check out. I'm not a big hockey fan, but that was pretty cool.

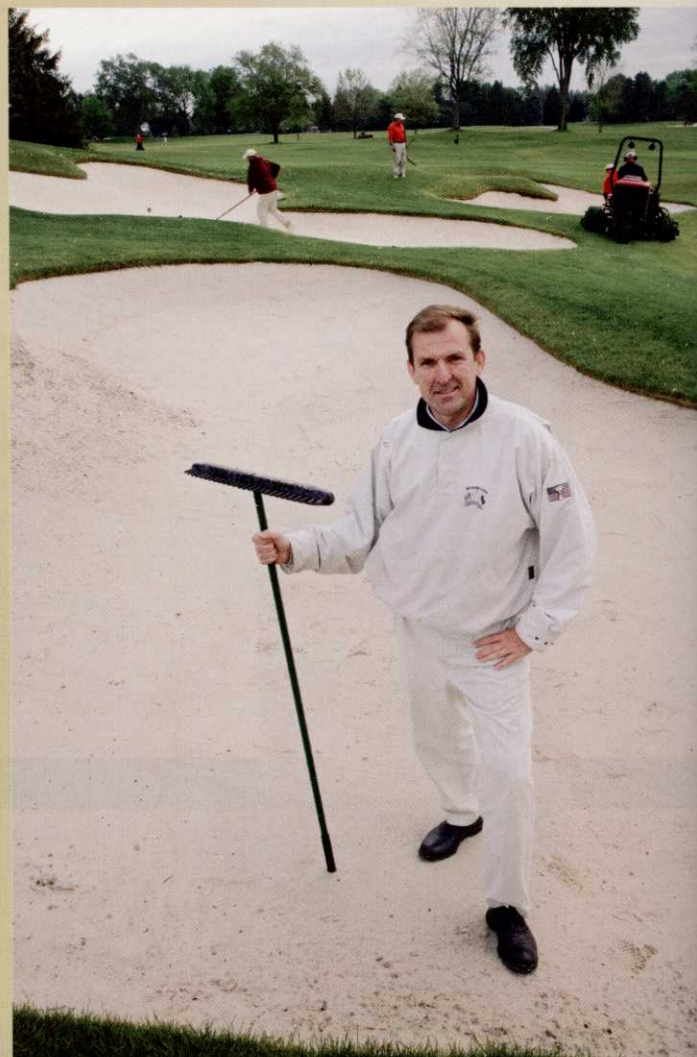
What key things do you try to teach the interns and other young people who work for you?

I try to teach that if you do your job, you get a paycheck. If you want something more, then you have to do something more than just your job. You have to go the extra mile.

If you want to stand out, you have two choices – you can be really good or really bad. Everything else is average, so make the right choice. I give the same speech every time we hire interns: How do you want to be remembered? The choice is up to you.

I'm always impressed with young guys who take work home at night

Two keys to success are hiring great people and focusing on the things you can control, says Steve Cook.
Photo: Jim West



and things like that. I had a guy who came up with a new spray program on his own time. He just showed up one day with a complete manual that had photos, step-by-step instructions and the whole works, all in a nice binder. If you want to get ahead, you have to do things like that and go the extra mile. The list of things you can do to succeed is endless, but the list of things you can do to fail is pretty short: be late, be disrespectful, don't get along with co-workers, etc.

Who was your mentor, and what did he teach you that's stuck with you?

My dad was my mentor. He taught me hard work, loyalty and effort matter. He grew up in the country and was a farm guy. He never went to college, but he was successful because of his great work ethic. He moved up through his company and ended up being the right-hand man of the owner – all because the boss could trust him. Watching him, I learned that honesty, integrity and treating others with respect are the foundation of any successful career.

Why does integrity seem to come up a lot with you and other top-end superintendents I talk with?

None of us are perfect, but integrity means a lot. If you try to do the right thing all the time, you'll get there 99 percent of the time. Unfortunately, we're in a business that can potentially lend itself to inappropriate behavior. Superintendents, pros, club managers: We're all, for the most part, unsupervised. The average board usually stays out of things unless there are problems. If you don't have honest people, bad things can happen.

What do you do in your spare time?

I like to backpack, hike and work out, and I love to watch the Cubs.

Being a Cubs fan seems painful to me.

It's a great but strange life. We have a couple of other Cubbie fans on staff so we get to cheer and cry together. The worst thing that could ever happen would be if they won the World Series some year. It would change the whole dynamic.

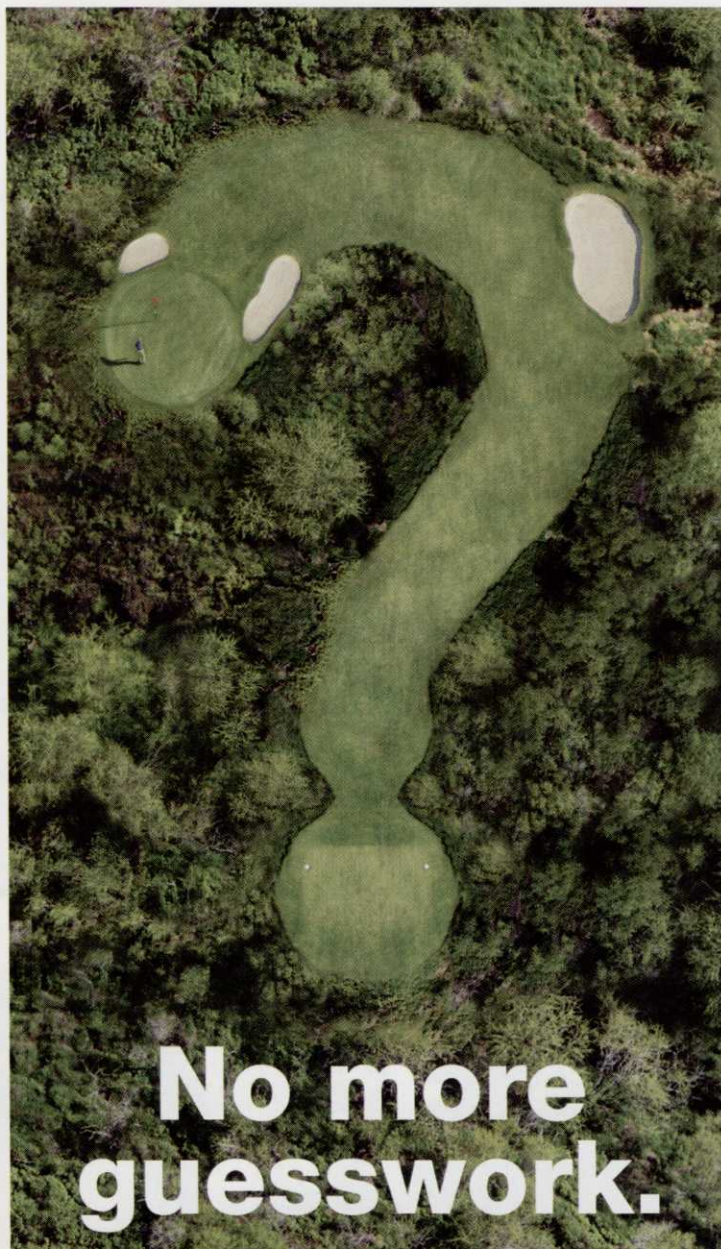
What can every superintendent do to be more successful in an environment like yours?

Understand you can't do it alone, and you have to hire great people. Also, focus on the things you can control and not worry about the things you can't.

You can't forget it's a team effort. Don't be the Lone Ranger. That's a pretty thankless thing to do, and it's not effective. Check your ego at the door, and you'll be better off for it. And be open to learning things from the people around you. I've learned from every assistant, superintendent and golf pro I've ever worked with.

What's your advice to a candidate for a job like yours?

At the end of the day, when it's down to the final five in the search process, they're going to hire the guy they think they can have a beer with after the round. They want to be comfortable with you. You have to be able to relate to the members on a personal level, but you can't forget you're still an employee. No matter how good you are, never start to believe that it's your golf course. It's the members' course. You work for them. The moment you forget that, you're dead. **GCI**



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