

SUPERINTENDENT PROFILE

This magazine's "How to" articles provide insights into the business of golf course maintenance and management. Throughout the year, we'll publish trends, news, opinions, and other information about your customers.



Photo: Dave Colt

Surviving and



By Pat Jones

Ironically, Steve Curry's father, a noted oncologist, was one of many who told him not to worry when he began to feel weird a couple years ago and fretted about the possibility of having cancer.

Unfortunately, the senior Curry was wrong on this occasion, and Steve found himself facing one of the most serious medical challenges imaginable – a brain tumor. Now, after facing down cancer, chemo and the prospect of his own mortality, the Berkshire Hills (Mass.) Country Club superintendent has a different outlook on his life, job and profession.

Steve Curry says he's vaguely from Connecticut, but his dad's career led the family from New York to North Carolina, Texas, Pennsylvania and other stops along the railway line of life in medicine.

But one constant along the way was his dad's love of golf, which quickly rubbed off on the young Curry. During the family's time in Hershey, Pa., he got his first glimpse of the big time.

"The old LPGA Keystone Open was played at Hershey Country Club, and my sister had a swim meet there during the week of the event," he says. "I wandered off from the pool, and there was this lady out on the putting green. She asked me if I wanted to join her, loaned me a putter and showed me some things. Pretty soon, my dad came looking for me. He was pretty irate and barked at me for bothering her. Turns out it was Joanne Carner."

Like many, Curry ended up in golf course management through a roundabout route. A

typical kid, he mowed many lawns and eventually got to know the greenkeeper at a little nine-hole facility in Litchfield, Conn., near his family's home. He worked there summers before heading off to college to study engineering. Then, at about the same time, a college friend changed majors to turfgrass management, and a hometown acquaintance, Rick Christian, landed the head superintendent job at the famed Pine Valley Golf Club in New Jersey.

"All of a sudden, I realized this could be a serious career option for me," he says.

Curry transferred to UMass and, in between undergraduate classes, worked with Rich Cooper, Ph.D., and Pat Vittum, Ph.D., on research projects. He received a coveted internship at Pine Valley for one summer and was torn between returning to do graduate research and staying in academia or continuing as a superintendent. Eventually, the lure of being at a course every day helped him make up his mind, and he began his career as an assistant at Hominy Hill Golf Course, the well-known rounds-factory course in Monmouth County, N.J.

"It was one of those places you hear about where guys would sleep in their cars overnight to get a tee time," he says. "I even had to do it once when a friend wanted to play there."

Curry had married and had a daughter at that point, but the union didn't work out, and his now ex-wife and child were moving to Massachusetts, so he decided to follow. He took his first superintendent job at Egremont Country Club, a small low-budget place Curry describes as kind of a home-brew course that needed some tender loving care.

"It was great because I got to do everything," he says. "At Pine Valley, we had professors flying in to consult and every resource at your disposal. Egremont required Yankee ingenuity. I loved working with my hands and taking stuff apart, so I was happy. It was management by trial and error."

Curry had learned an important credo along the way: Greens come first.

"The local county allied golf association had an outing at Egremont, and many people came because they'd heard about our greens. My trick there was an ancient, three-barrel greens roller filled with concrete. The greens could be cut at a ¼-inch, and after you were finished rolling with that thing, they were like pool tables."

Curry's success at Egremont earned him a shot at the job at Berkshire Hills, an area gem. He's been there since 1998 and has established a reputation for a running a high-quality facility

... they found a large brain tumor in my right frontal lobe. After surgery, radiation and chemo, I've been weed free – to put it in turf terms – for almost two years.

- STEVE CURRY

Thriving

Battling cancer changed Steve Curry's outlook on his life, job and profession

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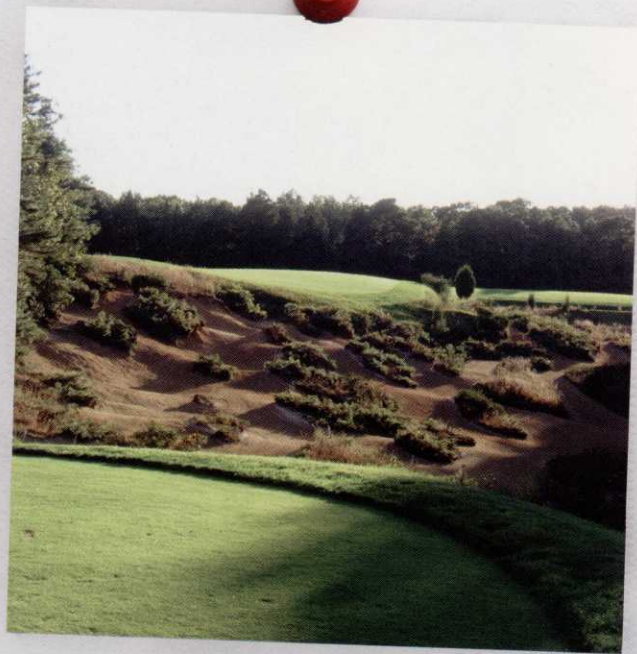
and having a no-nonsense attitude. That attitude – and the love of family and many friends throughout the industry – might have been one of the biggest factors in taking cancer head on and not only surviving, but thriving.

How's your season been?

Very busy and the wettest I've been through. The upside is that we've had less stress and hand-watering. But, we've lost rounds. Personally, my energy level is significantly higher than the past few years, which is great. Because of that, I'm working and playing more and sleeping less. That shows in the course. It sounds egocentric, but I was dragging last year. My guys did an outstanding job of keeping up because I was much more tentative than usual.

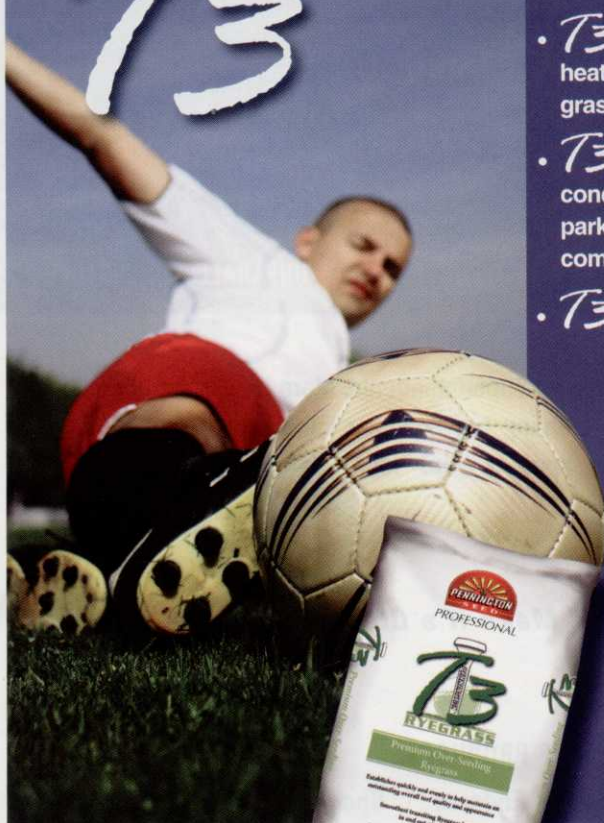
Tell me something new you've learned lately about the business.

I've been amazed firsthand and secondhand by the caring and generosity of the wonderful people in and around the game of golf. With my situation, there was a tremendous outpouring of



Steve Curry's personal passion is photography. It's his break from the golf business. Photo: Steve Curry

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prayers, well wishes and support. I recently attended the Bob Labbanca fund raiser (Labbanca succumbed to Lou Gehrig's disease late this summer) and experienced the same energy directed toward him and his family. I also followed along closely with Greg Rita's (a Tour caddy in Florida) progress and am amazed at the level of support he has experienced. I'm jealous he was invited to throw the first pitch at a recent Red Sox game, but I'm glad because it sounds like he did much better than I would have.

On the agronomic side, I'm always surprised about how much we think we know, but then years like this come along, and you find out new stuff. A year ago, anthracnose was believed to be brought on by topdressing. Joe Vargas, Ph.D., and Bruce Clarke, Ph.D., say light topdressing actually helps more than it hurts. You find out everything you thought was right yesterday is wrong today. The bottom line is you have to be dynamic and be able to flow with change.

How are clubs in your area defying the odds and being successful?

By staying as thrifty as possible and, at least from our perspective, having a vibrant banquet business. You have to be diversified. It's not a huge factor overall, but our banquet revenue has been consistent. Even in a bad economy, people still get married, have anniversaries and die.

Tell us about that big old scar on your noggin.

A few years ago, I started to notice my energy wasn't there. I told people for a long time, including my father, I had cancer, and they said I was full of crap. I finally went to the doctor just about two years ago, and they found a large brain tumor in my right frontal lobe. After surgery, radiation and chemo, I've been weed free – to put it in turf terms – for almost two years.

The scar is a small price I've paid. My hair is still quite thin from the radiation, which I pass off as having survived a nuclear attack. All told, I'm thankful for the experience. I had always told whining staff or children, "If it's tough, it's good for you." Well, I got a taste of my own medicine. As they say, what doesn't kill you only makes you stronger, and pain is fear leaving the body. I'm a much stronger and more driven person today than I was prior.

How else did it change you?

It definitely made me feel there's a God or a

higher power. Beyond that, the experience has greatly increased my connection with my family and my desire to focus on time with them.

What's your advice to young folks considering a career in the profession?

It's a tough business, and at the moment, it's extremely competitive. Unless you have common sense and drive, you might as well head in a different direction.

Also, think about taking a position at a club with unlimited resources then, at some point, one with very little. I've found my time at Pine Valley was invaluable as well as my time at Egremont. At Pine Valley, I was immersed in everything new and exciting. While at Egremont, I learned how to achieve as much with very little. Each of those experiences has been essential to my achievement.

Tell us about the consulting work you do outside the club.

It started a few years ago when I was called by a division of General Electric to consult on lawns they had remediated for PCBs, and they failed. I asked my green chairman and was given the go ahead with the caveat that it wasn't to interfere with my performance here at Berkshire Hills. I'm a workaholic, so this wasn't a challenge.

Another example was working at the estate of a wealthy couple who hired an architect and sizable construction company to build a three-hole course in the back lawn. It was an unusual job, to say the least.

When you're not working, what's your favorite thing to do?

At the top of the list is family time. I look forward to the times when I can get away and spend time with my wife and children. My oldest daughter is 15 and mostly with her mom, but she visits us. My stepson, Spencer, is 16, so my wife and I are enjoying his teenage years, too.

My personal passion is photography. It's my break from the golf business, even though I do most of it on the course. I'm kind of an accidental photographer. I always have a camera with me. I think I have a good eye about what has value and interest to the viewer, but most of it is just being in the right place at the right time.

Right now, we're getting geared up for the USGA Mid-Am. I get so excited about what goes into the preparation, and I love capturing that awe-inspiring feeling with a camera. **GCI**



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