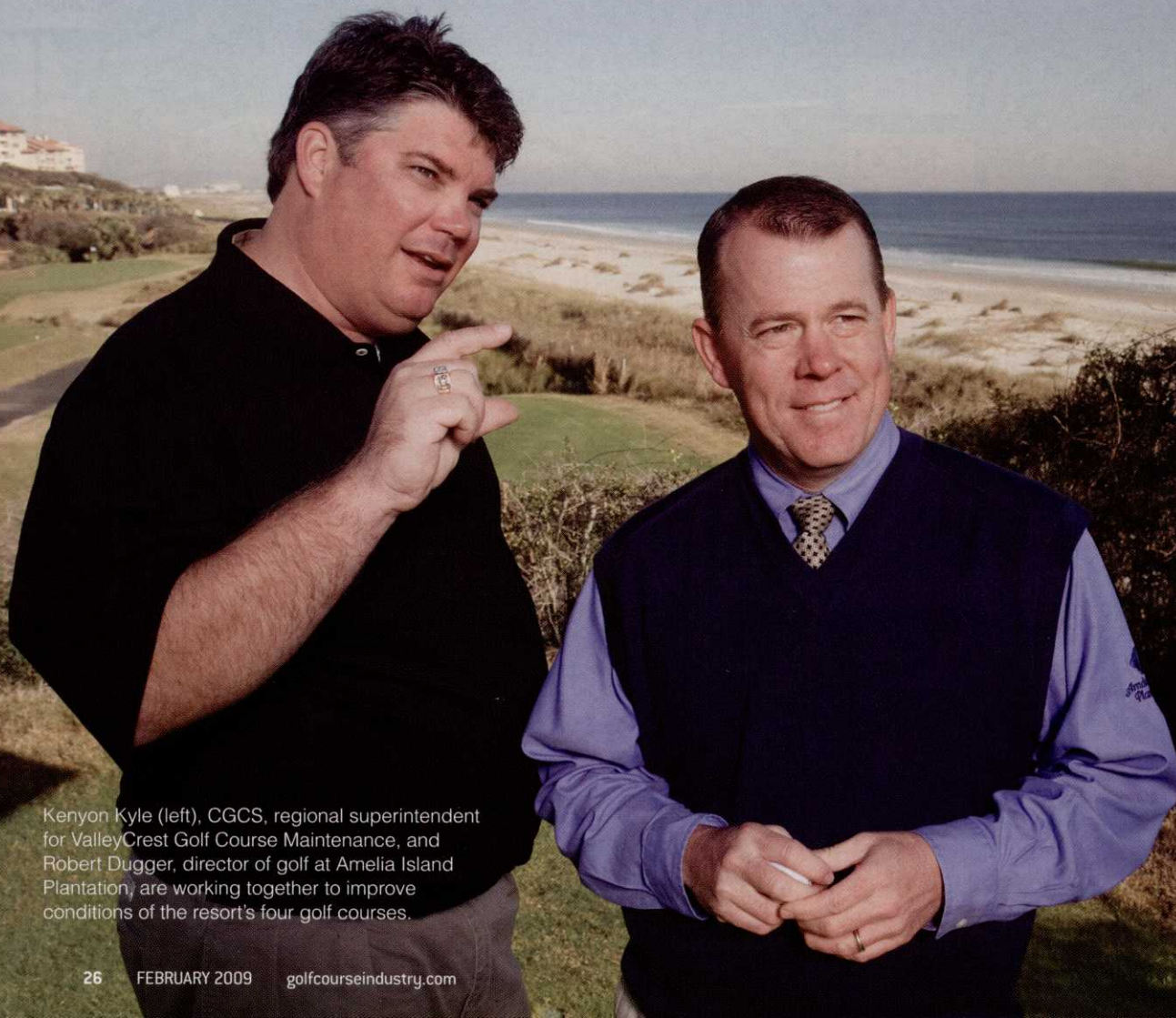


Amelia Island Plantation partners with
ValleyCrest to improve course conditions

BY JOHN WALSH

The right match



Kenyon Kyle (left), CGCS, regional superintendent for ValleyCrest Golf Course Maintenance, and Robert Dugger, director of golf at Amelia Island Plantation, are working together to improve conditions of the resort's four golf courses.

Amid stiff competition, Amelia Island Plantation wanted – and needed – to improve the conditions of its four golf courses. Years of focusing more on real estate took its toll on the playing conditions. “The *Poa annua* population, from years of overseeding, exceeded anything I’ve seen before,” says Kenyon Kyle, CGCS. “The *Poa* was everywhere. It was like Visa.”

After networking and researching, ownership and management decided to partner with ValleyCrest Golf Course Maintenance to achieve desired improvements. In 2007, Amelia Island signed a contract with ValleyCrest to manage its golf course maintenance operation. Halfway into a three-year contract, conditions are improving, although they haven’t reached their goals yet.

“We had brought Billy Fuller out before to consult on a side basis,” says Robert Dugger, director of golf for Amelia Island. “The fact Billy was associated with ValleyCrest helped.”

Fuller, a former golf course superintendent at Augusta National, launched Atlanta-based Billy Fuller Golf Course Design in 2003.

“We needed a cultural change, a new way of thinking,” Dugger adds. “Amelia Island will embark on a \$65- to \$70-million lodging expansion, and we need to make sure the golf product matches that. We’re an independent resort looking to take the golf courses to the next level.”

Dugger received approval to hire ValleyCrest from the privately owned resort’s executive team, which consists of the president, general manager and executive vice president.

“We’re going to be a flagship property for ValleyCrest,” he says. “We were one of the first resort courses for them. They wanted us, and we wanted to leverage the high profile they would give us.”

John Crowder, the director of business development and marketing for ValleyCrest, approached Amelia Island after he attended a conference there three years ago. He acknowledges the course conditions had a bearing on his introduction.

“Robert Dugger didn’t know contract maintenance was an option,” Crowder says. “He had an open mind and another way of doing things.”

“We look at people to see if there’s a match,” he adds. “We saw a fit. We saw potential. They were aware of who they were and their competitors. Amelia Island competes with the big boys (high-end courses from Hilton Head to Daytona Beach), and they wanted to step up their commitment to golf.”

During initial discussions, Dugger was impressed with ValleyCrest’s employees and clients.

“John Crowder and his team have impressive experience,” he says. “We have a core membership group who is vocal and was skeptical about the ValleyCrest move at first, but after communicating to them, it’s been nothing but positive. ValleyCrest has changed members’ expectations. The ValleyCrest move is out of the box, but I want the best thing for us.”

James Wathan, golf course superintendent at Amelia River Golf Course (formerly Royal Amelia) who has been there since November 1999 when the course was under construction, didn’t have a problem with ValleyCrest’s involvement.

“My first thought when I heard ValleyCrest was taking over the maintenance operation was that if they were like Kitson & Partners (a real estate company that managed the resort before), I’d have no problem because Kitson paid their bills,” Wathan says.

The 35-year-old property’s owners wanted to position it as a preferred golf destination.

“Amelia Island has been successful in the resort destination market and wanted to position itself up,” says Kyle, who’s a regional superintendent with ValleyCrest Golf Course Maintenance and serves as director of golf course maintenance at Amelia Island Plantation. “It was looking for a stronger correlation between the resort and golf courses. Twenty-five percent of the people who used the resort used the golf courses. Ownership wanted to increase that to 50 or 60 percent. The challenge to me was to develop consistency among the courses’ conditions, obtain the best value for products and services, and help refine and develop the staff.”

Crowder makes a distinction between ValleyCrest, which is a contract maintenance company, and a management company. The company has a portfolio of partners, not properties, he says.

“One difference between us and a management company is that we’re maintenance specialists,” he says. “We’re not responsible for driving rounds or marketing. We’re there to position the property so they can sell it. We’re part of the maintenance budget. We’re subject to budget changes. We’re not an outsourcing company. Amelia Island isn’t handing something off to a third party. We offer an intimate service.”

One of ValleyCrest’s significant challenges is to define control.

“We’re not branding our maintenance,” Crowder says. “If you feel like you’re branding the golf course, it’s the wrong idea. We get our partners to understand their properties better, allocate their resources better, understand their financial commitments and gain control of their operation. We have one person working on property with a point person from the club. All labor are our employees. Our intention is to hire all people that work there.”

A LITTLE HISTORY

For a while, Amelia Island, which has 1,700 members, focused more on real estate than the golf courses, says Dugger, who has been at Amelia Island for eight and a half years, starting as a head golf pro at two of the resort’s properties and then becoming director of golf in 2004 when the position was vacated. As a result of that focus, the conditions of the golf courses slipped.

"There's a lot of history here before me," he says. "The golf courses weren't the main focus – real estate was for a number of years. Golf got pushed to the side. It was an amenity. That was the culture. So we said, 'What's the carrot that brings people here?' The golf courses are the most valuable asset and need to be the asset that draws people here."

Wathan says conditions at Amelia River have been consistent since the course was built, although the resort has gone through some difficult economic times and two private owners. The property went into default, the previous owner went into Chapter 11 bankruptcy, and the Bank of South Carolina took over the property for one year during which time Kitson & Partners managed the property. Amelia Island Plantation, which leases the property from the city, took over the property in 2005.

Since 2004, Long Point Golf Course has improved, Dugger says. The Ocean Links Golf Course peaked and became OK, then it transitioned and deteriorated. The facility acquired a fourth course, Amelia River, which was in good shape and has been taken up a notch since ValleyCrest came on board.

GETTING BETTER

ValleyCrest approached Kyle, who has been involved with golf course construction and multicourse operations for more than a decade in the Naples, Fla., area, to take the position at Amelia Island. Dec. 26, 2007, was Kyle's first day.

"Anytime you walk into a golf operation that existed for two or three decades, you'll run into a lot of cobwebs," Kyle says. "There was *Poa annua* and other weeds that were problems, along with the density of the bermudagrass base. Our goal was to improve conditions and eradicate weeds. Right now, we're focused on the playing surface. Eventually, we'll move toward outlying



areas to improve aesthetics, but that depends on the economy."

One of the beauties of working for ValleyCrest is the depth and breadth of experience, Kyle says. For example, he sat down with Jeff Higgins, the company's agronomist, to address the improvements needed at Amelia Island. To do that, Kyle implemented a basic integrated pest management program that includes applying a postemergent herbicide followed by a calendar-based preemergent program.

"It will be two years before our goal is met," he says. "Before I came on board, the owners decided not to overseed two of the golf courses, which gave us time to work on the weed population. It was a bold move because people come down from the North and want to see green."

"We were brown and tan," Dugger says. "This year, we'll overseed. It's taking time, but we're seeing changes."

The overall age of the facilities was another issue. Kyle and his staff have done a lot of work to improve the pump station and repair the ir-

rigation system in the field. They've replaced or repaired a significant amount of the cart paths, too.

One significant challenge is the maturity of the live oaks, which create a lot of shade. The crew is making lists to remove and thin trees to open up the course without losing the ambiance.

"They started removing the trees before I got here," Kyle says. "It's ongoing, and I'm not sure we'll ever be done, but we need more sunlight on the turf."

Kyle dealt with members and golfers overreacting about tree removal, but the complaints about it have subsided.

"Once residents and members saw the improvement and look of the golf course, it was difficult to argue the results of tree removal," he says.

One of Kyle's goals is to develop more consistency among the golf courses via bunker maintenance and the height of cut on greens.

"Ideally, I want to rake all bunkers the same way every day, but it's difficult to achieve consistency with old and new bunkers," he says. "I want golfers to have a consistent, good experience throughout all the golf courses. We want to create the same experience whether it's the member course or resort courses."

Part of the goal to becoming a preferred golf property is expanding the facilities, Kyle says. In tune with that, ownership is planning to build a new golf lodge.

"Once the lodge is complete, expect the facility to be transformed and be equal to or better than facilities in the competing markets from Daytona Beach to Hilton Head," he says.

The golf courses of Amelia Island Plantation

Amelia Links, designed by Pete Dye and Bobby Weed, is a 36-hole configuration including two courses, [Oak Marsh](#) and [Ocean Links](#). Ocean Links is the primary resort course, and doesn't generate much member play. Oak Marsh is a resort course, and also generates a fair amount of member play. Most residents live around the Oak Marsh course.

[Long Point](#), a Tom Fazio design, is an 18-hole layout that serves as the private member-only club. It takes some resort play on occasion.

[Amelia River](#), formerly Royal Amelia, is a Tom Jackson-designed 18-hole layout that supports the resort, receives a significant amount of member play and some daily-fee traffic.

AN EFFICIENT OPERATION

Since ValleyCrest's involvement, there have been staff changes – at Kyle's discretion – from top to bottom, but they weren't necessarily widespread, Kyle says. At every position, from entry level to superintendent, changes were made. Some were voluntary and some involuntary.

"I have respect for all who work and have worked here," he says. "Change is difficult. I'm like a coach. I put the best players on the field, empower them and let 'em play."

Each crew is assigned to a specific course, but they share responsibilities when it comes to projects such as aerification, renovation, verticutting or broad-based applications of fertilizer and pesticides.

"We try to make those projects efficient as possible," Kyle says. "If each course has a sprayer, we'll use all three on one course to get a task done. We'll combine the staff and equipment to use economies of scale."

Regardless of working for ValleyCrest or directly for Amelia Island, Kyle says the list of goals would be the same: improving customer service, safety, staff development, course conditioning and asset management.

There's no downside to having the agreement with ValleyCrest, Dugger says, citing the improved maintenance practices.

"It's the small things that don't cost much that make a difference," he says. "We used to talk about those type of things but never got around to doing them."

COST SAVINGS

Finances have changed a little since ValleyCrest took over course maintenance, but the company has been successful providing resource allocations. It has achieved cost savings by maximizing staffing levels and using its purchasing power. (Amelia Island declined to provide specific numbers.) Additionally, members voted for a dues increase, which passed by 85 percent.

"Everyone's excited by the progress," Kyle says. "But we didn't throw a million dollars at the problems. We try to find the best economies of scale."

Kyle, proud of the staff he has, says their development and performance have been outstanding.

"There are no egos, and that's rare," he says. "Empowerment is good when people can operate inside that bubble without going to either extreme."

Even in difficult economic times, ValleyCrest continues most cultural practices, Wathan says. They'll save labor, say by not edging along cart paths as frequently, and put that money toward a pesticide or fertilizer application. Then, when times improve, they can return to edging the cart path more frequently.

"ValleyCrest doesn't want to skip any cultural practices because it will come back to bite you later," Wathan says. "Their hearts are in the right place. These guys will lose some money to make sure some things are done right."

AVAILABLE RESOURCES

Wathan found ValleyCrest to be a good company with dedicated people that have 250 years of combined experience on the management team.

How ValleyCrest contract maintenance works

The history. Calabasas, Calif.-based ValleyCrest Cos. started its golf course division about four and a half years ago, but it has been providing course maintenance services for many years, says John Crowder, the director of business development and marketing for ValleyCrest. About two years ago, ValleyCrest had 40 golf course partners. Now there are 65.

The structure. Each regional superintendent, like Kenyon Kyle, has course superintendents reporting to him. The regional superintendents, who are responsible for about a half dozen properties each, report to one of two general managers – Terry McGuire on the East Coast and Dan McIntyre on the West Coast. "We're pyramidal in our approach," Crowder says. "Our company is extremely dependent on strong on-site leadership because we're decentralized."

The approach. As is the case with Amelia Island, ValleyCrest typically initiates the relationship with potential partners. "We won't ever go behind a superintendent's back," Crowder says. "Life is too short. We like going in the front door. If a club is uncomfortable, we don't go forward."

The contracts. The company's proposals are based on a three- to five-year plan or commitment that includes fixed costs. All of ValleyCrest's contracts have been renewed during the past three years, Crowder says.

"The consultants and advisors who work with ValleyCrest are top-notch guys," he says. "They go into depth, and they want your opinion. You can pull from a lot of resources, including regional superintendents. They're better than I expected. They're upfront with everything. There's accountability all the way up the chain."

The biggest difference Wathan sees working for ValleyCrest is the broad base of vendors the company works with.

"You get whatever you need whenever you need it," he says. "One of their pluses is that they can get discounts. They're just like Wal-Mart because they buy in such volume. Vendors are happy to bend over backward to help you because they get paid on time."

LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIP?

The maintenance staff will probably never achieve the expectations they have, Dugger says.

"In superintendents' eyes, there's always something to improve," he says. "A golf course is always evolving. Kenyon has only been here one year, so as we hit year three, we'll be pretty close to where we want to be."

ValleyCrest created tremendous respect and credibility among members, Dugger says, adding that members who are also members at St. Ives Country Club in Duluth, Ga., were instrumental in hiring ValleyCrest there.

A year and a half into a three-year contract, Dugger doesn't see any change.

"I see ValleyCrest as a long-term partner," he says. "They're vested."

Amelia Island, which pays ValleyCrest a monthly fee for its services, will evaluate extending the contract shortly before it's scheduled to expire.

Kyle and Dugger, who have a close relationship, have the same goals and objectives.

"He doesn't presume to be an agronomist and he supports us, and we support him," Kyle says about Dugger. "I meet with Robert once a week. We go through the up-and-coming schedule two weeks out and discuss any problems we might be experiencing."

Kyle does everything he can to make Amelia Island successful, and just because the current contract ends in three years doesn't mean he acts or thinks differently.

"We want the best of everything that we can provide," he says. "I have never looked at a job in terms of when the contract expires. There has never been a reason to look at it that way." GCI