

# ALL ABOUT PERSPECTIVE

As host of this year's PGA Championship, Hazeltine National's Jim Nicol, CGCS, shares his realistic approach to life, tournament prep and the role of the superintendent.

Approximately a zillion years ago, when I worked for another industry magazine, we asked Jim Nicol, the longtime certified superintendent at Hazeltine National Golf Club, to be on the advisory panel that guided the editorial content. It was a love/hate relationship... he only had an opinion when he loved something or hated it. Otherwise, he kept things in perspective.

That's Nicol. He's all about perspective.

Now, with the perspective of 13 years at one of the world's great golf courses and with one major under his belt, he's on the hot seat for another one: the 2009 PGA Championship.

I got in touch with Jim and asked him if he'd do an interview. My precondition was we wouldn't do the usual "major prep" article talking about cutting heights, rolling schedules and fertilization programs. Instead, we'd talk about his perspective on all things about golf and life. He said yes.

Nicol is a Minnesotan through and through. He was born and raised in St. Cloud, about an hour northwest of Minneapolis. His dad was an insurance salesman and his mom stayed at home and took care of family business. Both were golf nuts – in fact his 94-year-old father is still the oldest golfing member of St. Cloud Country Club. Nicol was a club rat who grew up caddying, shagging balls, cleaning clubs and mowing greens for 50 cents each at the ripe old age of 14.

His inspiration for getting into the profession was the promise of warm weather: "I'd

graduated from high school and went to a local state school and didn't like it, so I went back to work at the club. At the end of one season, I saw the superintendent get in his big-ass Oldsmobile and head to Florida for the winter. I thought, 'This guy's got it figured out!' Thus, a superintendent was born.

After trying out a few turf schools, he hooked up with Gerry Murphy, the legendary superintendent at Somerset Country Club in St. Paul who was a key figure in the development of GCSAA's certification program, and worked his way into Penn State's two-year program. Like many of his Nittany Lion peers, a huge influence in his life was Dr. Joe Duich.

"He stressed stuff beyond turfgrass science," Nicol says. "On the last day of class, he talked about how superintendents need to lead more normal lives. He asked us, 'What if you get sick and miss a month? What would happen to your operation? Would it fall apart?' That really stuck with me. You have to structure your life to do more than maintain a golf course." Nicol has practiced and preached balance between work and life ever since and shoves his full-time crew out the door for a week of vacation every summer.

He graduated from PSU in '75 and went to work at the Lake Geneva (Wis.) Playboy Club where he was an intern, then served as a foreman of the Briar Patch course and assistant superintendent for three years. Next he moved to Bunker Hills Golf Course, a hidden gem in the sand prairie of Minnesota with a great reputation for hosting top-flight events

like high school championships, USGA qualifiers and local PGA tournaments. Then the job at Hazeltine opened in the fall of 1996.

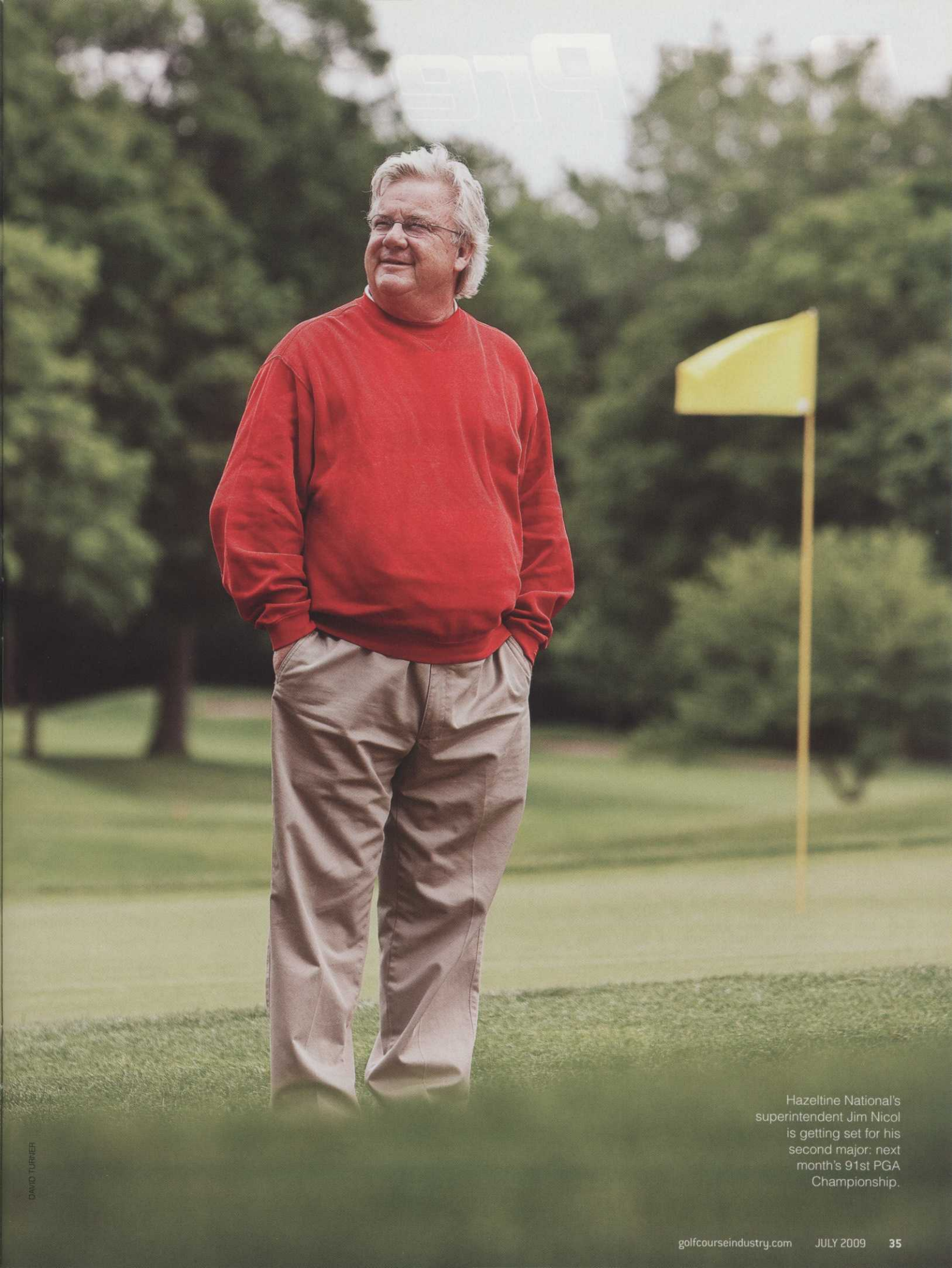
"I had an interview and they liked the fact that I'd hosted a bunch of tournaments," Nicol says. "Then, one day, they just showed up at the course (Bunker Hills) in the middle of an event and the place was chaos. But, apparently, my experience with all the tournaments really paid off. They knew they were getting the 2002 PGA Championship and I didn't. There were a ton of great candidates, but I suppose what did it was that I had the tournament experience and the fact that I was familiar with winter in Minnesota.

"To this day, I think my wife, Barbara, got me the job. They did a dinner interview with us and Barbara and a woman from the selection committee excused themselves for a minute and didn't come back for the longest time. A few minutes after they came back, they offered me the job. Once again, marrying well pays off."

## What's different this year vs. other events you've hosted?

The weather. In 2002, we had a good winter. This year we've had ice damage plus a rain storm in February that was really not fun. Now, it's so dry that we're watering areas to keep grass alive that we usually don't touch until July. It's challenging to get any growth going in those areas because it's cool and dry. I don't want to sod those spots because they're old bent/*Poa* which isn't widely available; plus, we're regrassing next season. I'm





PGA

Hazeltine National's superintendent Jim Nicol is getting set for his second major: next month's 91st PGA Championship.



taking a cue from the old guys up north who, when they got hammered (with winter kill), spiked 'em constantly. We're doing something weekly to get growth going. And we're going to have to do a lot more hand mowing around bunkers to let balls roll in. These bunker entryways are new to me.

#### How are the members holding up?

The members love the changes (done by Rees Jones). In addition to the championship stuff, we're also positioning new tees at 5,100 yards for anybody – ladies, seniors, whatever – and we'll grass them next year. Overall, they like the new bunkering and changes that Rees did. It's always stressful when the course isn't perfect and it's June 1 and things haven't come back yet. It's mostly self-imposed pressure, but our president and green chairman have been great and patient. I post on our Web site weekly and we do e-mail blasts to keep members posted.

#### How's the business side of the event considering the economic pressures?

We're doing pretty well on ticket sales, but we are being smart and curbing costs where we can. For example, in the corporate (tent) areas we used to excavate paths and roads down for several inches of gravel. Then, afterwards we had to remove it all, fill it with soil and regrass. Now, in some areas we just lay fabric or plastic out and build the road up on it. It's much easier to fix later and a lot less expensive. We're also not having sleeping trailers and things like that. We're just being wiser with spending overall. The experience will be every bit as good, though.

#### Who's the one person you rely on the most during prep?

It's not just one person, it's all our full-timers. Joe Maloney, my assistant is another Penn State guy who's been here 14 years. Blair Hawkins, my second assistant and another Penn Stater, who's actually been here longer than me. Steve Giesen, my foreman, has been here since 1991. Keith Conway, who's a University of Minnesota guy, is pretty good considering he didn't go to Penn State. I also

have two great equipment guys, Ralph Arnt and Tom Wheeler and a new guy, Ryan Moy, who'll be with us during the tournament.

All winter long we sit for about an hour in the morning going over "what ifs" – like the flooding last time – and they come up with terrific ideas. I let 'em talk because they've all been here as long or longer than me. Because of that, by Saturday morning last time (during intense flooding), everybody knew what they needed to do and did it. Plus, other superintendents and other people just showed up and helped. It was unbelievable.

#### Does the PGA of America downplay or support the role of the superintendent in tournaments?

They're very good to me, but it's not their job to promote us. I don't need the attention. Look, when you're in this kind of position you have to take the arrows as well as the kudos. I'm recognized at the trophy presentation and other places, but it's not what it's about. We (superintendents) do enough stuff to promote ourselves. It's the

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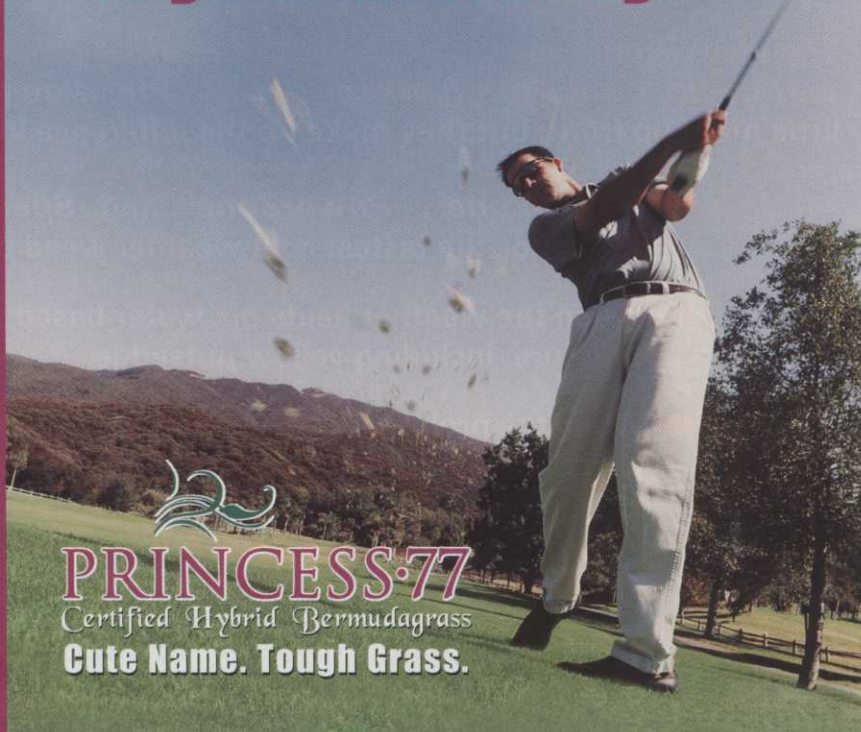
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**Speaking of being out of your mind, who's the craziest guy in the Minnesota GCSA?**

(Laughs.) John Steiner from White Bear Yacht Club. One of the smartest guys I know and I absolutely love being around him. We've been through a lot together. I always look forward to meetings and seminars just to sit next to him. I've learned loads from him.

**If you weren't a superintendent, what would you be doing?**

I have no idea. I don't think I'm wise enough to be a doctor, I don't think I'd be a good salesperson. I've never been around anything else. People seem to envy what I get to do.

**What did you think about the Ryder Cup where Mark Wilson worked so closely with Azinger to set Valhalla up favorably for the U.S.?**

My role (as host in 2016) will be determined by the captain. If the captain asks Mark or me

or any host super what he thinks, he should tell 'em. Mark's done an outstanding job there. Azinger knew that and turned to him. He used his experience. They actually set the course up pretty easy all things considered.

In big events, your role is what the big guy – whether it's Azinger or (PGA senior director of tournaments) Kerry Haigh or the USGA – deems it to be. That said, I've learned a lot from these set-up guys. You can't deny their experience, so you have to rely on that and respect it.

**Which part of prepping for a major really stinks?**

You miss things. I miss occasions like weddings, birthdays and stuff. That stinks. That and the self-imposed pressure. Right now it's work, eat and sleep. There's also the alarm going off at 4:20 in the a.m. It's tough on Barbara, too. I can't go out at night or be with her very much.

**What advice do you give to students/interns about the profession?**

Right now, I tell kids not to get in the business. If they still want to, I tell them to be very patient.

We have some students here that might have a chance to go on to big things, but there are no jobs. When a decent job does open up, there are 150 applicants and the guy who gets it is probably taking a pay cut. If kids are smart enough, they should go into academics or research. That never stops or slows down.

**Final thoughts?**

As far as the tournament, the biggest thing that's on my mind is the safety of our crew and people during the early morning hours. We'll get through it, no matter what happens. We proved that last time. I just want to do it without anyone getting hurt.

One last thing. The more I've been around, the more admiration I have for people at minimal budget courses around here. It's pretty damned impressive what they do with very little. We have more money, and I still try to spend it wisely, but what those superintendents do is really amazing. GCI

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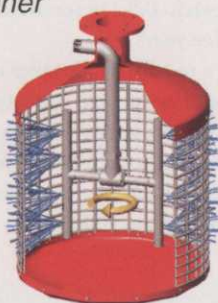
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