

BY PAT JONES

Championing a cause

Roger Stewart's experience at prepping courses for senior events is second only to his reputation for environmental responsibility.

At first glance, Roger Stewart seems an unlikely poster boy for environmental golf course management. He hardly appears to be a granola eater and I suspect he does not own a pair of Birkenstocks. Rare steaks and well-shined Foot Joys are more his style.

Yet, Stewart has been persistent and consistent in his efforts to both improve the ecological performance of the facilities he's managed and to spread the gospel of eco-golf in the communities and states he's lived in during his career. All that done while smoothly preparing perfection for nearly a dozen Champions Tour events at three very different sites.

Stewart is a Midwesterner who's blended in like a chameleon into diverse environments in Chicago, New Jersey and, now, Minneapolis. Few top superintendents have had three successful tenures in three entirely different locales, but Stewart has pulled it off nicely.

He might have come by his peripatetic nature genetically: his dad was a career officer in the Marine Corps, the family bounced around and Stewart "grew up everywhere." He landed in Chicago as a teen where he started working at courses and getting to know superintendents, including the legendary Bob Williams at Bob O'Link. He was hooked and went to the University of Nebraska for his degree in agronomy.

He earned his first superintendent job at Midlane CC in Waukegan, Ill., in the mid-'70s before moving up to Chicago's venerated Riverside Golf Club for a decade. In 1988, he took the

job of opening Stonebridge CC, a high-end Fazio facility where he hosted six Ameritech Senior Tour events and cut his teeth on televised tournament golf. After eight years, he joined the TPC Network and left Chicago for Princeton, N.J., to oversee construction, grow-in and maintenance of TPC Jasna Polana. In New Jersey, his environmental interest came into full blossom as he led the facility to become one of the most prominent Certified Audubon Sanctuary courses in the nation. And again, he found himself hosting the seniors for the old Instinet Classic.

Two years ago, he rotated back west to take on management of the TPC Twin Cities in the Minneapolis suburbs. It's a new facility for Stewart, but his role is similar: host a Champions Tour event... the 3M Championship...and run an environmentally excellent operation in an ecologically aware community.

In his spare time, Stewart has presided over three (count 'em) different state and local chapter and, being a glutton for punishment, recently began a term on the board of his newly adopted home state's association. Oh, and he's taught turf seminars and even junior college classes for decades. And he's won more Environmental Leaders in Golf Awards than just about any other human on the planet.

YOU HAVE A COUPLE OF MINNEAPOLIS WINTERS UNDER YOUR BELT NOW. HOW HAS IT COMPARED TO YOUR PREVIOUS LOCATIONS?

In a word, the winters are long! But, it's not a whole lot different than the Chicago area. There are a lot of similari-

ties in the way you grow turf, but we're more sensitive to snow mold and winter dessication here. The golf course is built on 100-percent sand here at TPC Twin Cities, which helps a lot when it comes to growing bentgrass and hosting the 3M Championship. Paul Grogan (who preceded Stewart) did a great job. He used Trimmit to keep the Poa at bay, so we're still predominantly bentgrass.

SO YOU LIKE IT?

Winter is a little colder, there's more snow and it lasts longer, but the summers are beautiful. Culturally, it definitely differs from New Jersey. You're struck right away by the Midwestern values and the way people look at life. People are accommodating and there's a saying, "Minnesota Nice," that really tells the story.

The best thing is the outdoors stuff. You get just minutes outside the metro and it gets rural pretty fast. I've done some deer hunting and fishing and I want to get into snowmobiling. The fishing is great and it's been fun finding the places to go and the people to go fishing and hunting with. I've been ice fishing, but I haven't caught much of size or substance.

HOW'S THE LOCAL GOLF MARKET DOING?

I had no idea how much golf has grown here. There's a huge golfing presence with a pretty fair number of courses for a city of this size. People play early in spring and late into fall. Last year was amazing with Minneapolis hosting two majors – the Women's U.S. Open and the PGA Championship – plus our annual 3M Championship.



ANTONIO COLLODORO

Roger Stewart has been persistent and consistent in his efforts to improve the ecological performance of the facilities he's managed during his career.

I was also amazed at how many newer courses they've built in the past 20 years, particularly up north of Minneapolis in the "wilderness." And they're mostly stand-alone courses and casino resorts. Most seem to be doing OK, but there are a few that have been sold or are going out of business. Even the ones that are struggling can't sell and can't afford to close. The value gets upsidedown versus the debt, but you have to keep them running and maintained to make them worth anything in the market. They're in a pickle.

ARNOLD PALMER ONCE TOLD ME THAT THE CHAMPIONS TOUR "IS ALL ABOUT KIDS AND FUN." TRUE?

It really is focused on fun and entertainment. That doesn't mean it's not competitive – these guys can sure still play golf. But they've finished their time on the PGA Tour and people still want to see them. The PGA Tour can be hugely entertaining as well – just look at the Waste Management Open at TPC Scottsdale. But at the 3M and other Champions Tour events, it's competitive, but the players have more opportunity to interact and talk with people and they're more available.

HOW ABOUT CONDITIONING STANDARDS AND THE RUN-UP TO THE EVENT?

The events in the TPC Network are different. The ones I did in Chicago were challenging and you're kind of on your own. There's a lot more support in the network. We have regional agronomists working with us throughout the year. If you're not in the network, you might see a PGA Tour agronomist a couple times a year. Mark Johnson is our TPC Regional Agronomist and our 3M Championship guy, so he's here several times a year. The PGA Tour Agronomists have a busy schedule, so they rely on TPC Director of Golf Course Maintenance Operations

CHAMPION

Collier Miller and TPC Regional Agronomists like Mark Johnson and Dennis Ingram to handle events at TPC facilities, as well as a few other tour events each year.

Once you've done a few of these – if you've been paying attention – you know what they're looking for. Champions Tour player expectations are pretty much like the PGA Tour player expectations especially as more veterans of the PGA Tour come on to the Champions Tour. Firm and fast, so irrigation management is very important. Obviously, we do minimal watering during the tournament. Other than that, we strive for consistency from green to green – smoothness, true lines of putt, bunker consistency, consistently mowed rough at a consistent height. If we do that, then the players, rules, officials and agronomy team are all on the same page.

ANY WHINERS AMONG THE CHAMPIONS?

I'd be lying if I didn't say I hadn't had to deal with player complaints. I had a couple of them when I was at Stonebridge. Thankfully, it has been pretty good during my TPC events. It's

usually the odd comment to a rules official or Mark (Johnson) or Cal (Roth). I've never had anyone get in my grill (laughs).

YOU MENTIONED CAL ROTH, TPC'S LONGTIME AGRONOMY CHIEF. DOES HE EVER GET MAD?

Cal's pretty calm and collected most of the time. The only time he might show the other side is when things don't go how they're supposed to go during last-minute tournament prep. He doesn't like rain or lightning or other acts of God. He can steam a little when that stuff happens. He's a pretty firm guy. He'll let you know when you're outside the ropes and he needs you to be inside. But he's very fair and very knowledgeable, and that makes him a great guy to work for.

NAME THE BIG INFLUENCES ON YOUR CAREER?

Cal's certainly high on that list. He's taught me so much. I'd also say John Krutilla, who's retired now. I worked for him when I was a kid in high school, clear through college and as an assistant at the Elks Club course in Kankakee (Ill.). He got me interested in this as

a career. Then, of course, there was Bob Williams. I worked at Bob O'Link as a trainee out of college and I didn't know how important it was to have worked for Bob until I became a superintendent and I found his words coming out of my mouth about twice a day. And, of course, I got to know his son Bruce Williams. We were about the same age and we were heavily involved in the MAGCS and national political stuff together. We've been friends for all these years and we still teach (seminars) together. You have to have a lot of respect for Bruce and what he's accomplished in this business and I am fortunate to have him as a friend and as a mentor.

YOU'VE BECOME SOMETHING OF A POSTER BOY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL GOLF. WHY?

I'm not sure when the first seeds were planted, but I just gradually became more aware of our role as superintendents in protecting the environment and how easy it was for us to become leaders. It just doesn't take that much effort. I'm not a card-carrying environmental maniac by any means. When the whole

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environmental movement got started, I was like most superintendents and didn't know quite what to think about it. Then I did the construction at Stonebridge and had a lot of decisions to make on the maintenance facility and chemical storage, rinsing area, etc., and it started me thinking. My interest grew exponentially at TPC Jasna Polana in New Jersey because about that time the TPC Network really started emphasizing ecology and the Environmental Leaders in Golf Awards program got started.

At the time, I'm working in New Jersey, which may not have the greatest reputation, but their regulations are tough and you have to be on your toes. It usually takes lots of concessions to get permits. It was a little intimidating to do monthly water quality testing and follow some of the stringent rules, but you had to figure out a way to convince people that we were a positive, not a negative. I really bought into it and got interested in it.

WHAT KIND OF THINGS WORKED?

I met with a lot of environmental leaders in

the area and tried to get to know them. Then I went to see Dr. Roy Meyer, with the NJDEP, who was responsible for all the groundwater testing on golf courses in the state. I figured it was better to know your enemy, as they say. But he turned out to be anything but an enemy. He was a huge help and his role was to be an advocate and a source of information for people like us.

HAS IT BEEN A BURDEN TO BE GREEN?

I just haven't found it to be that difficult. It's a lot of common sense. You have to know a bit more about the products you use, but it's not too hard to find that information and tailor your agronomy plan around that information. There were a few things in New Jersey that we couldn't use because of the testing, but we knew that. The NJDEP told us. The one time we did experiment with something on the no-no list, it tested positive. They weren't lying to me.

HOW IMPORTANT HAVE YOUR INTERPERSONAL SKILLS BEEN IN YOUR SUCCESS?

It's a huge part of success in this business. People like Bob Williams told young graduates back in the late '60s, 'Mark my words, agronomy issues will be relatively small in your future – communications and fiscal management and personnel management will be critical.' That doesn't overshadow the agronomy, but it grows every year.

SO WHAT DO YOU TELL TODAY'S YOUNG BUCKS?

Like Mr. Williams said way back when, agronomy is not the biggest of your concerns once you become a superintendent. Do everything you can now, as an assistant, to become active in your local, do some speaking, get on a committee, learn how decisions get made and expose yourself to those kinds of non-turf experiences at every opportunity.

I also tell assistants to apply for as many jobs as possible and go to the interviews – even if you're not 100 percent interested in that job – to get the experience. That confidence is really important.

Finally, on the job, I coach them in their dealings with employees. It starts there. GCI

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