



Members were finally sold on changing from their standard Vesper Velvet for the health of the turf.

No small task

Charged to rebuild and restore 19 historic Donald Ross greens at Vesper Country Club, MacCurrach Golf Construction meets the challenges. BY TRENT BOUTS

able TV is rife with shows subjecting the cast or contestants to tyrannical deadlines designed to incite drama, conflict and, most gratifyingly for those of us watching, failure. To further fuel the potential fires, some throw in wildcard elements along the way. By those measures, you could excuse Alan MacCurrach for wondering if his work at Vesper Country Club was secretly filmed for an episode of *Extreme Makeover: Golf Course Edition*.

MacCurrach's charge was to rebuild to USGA specs and restore to the original Donald Ross contours 19 greens as well as rebuild 60 bunkers, some tees and a practice area – in 62 days. That's like asking for an archeologist's touch at NASCAR speed and in fading light.

Vesper Country Club sits in the heart of the Merrimack Valley in Tyngsboro, Mass., where the time

between sunup and sundown effectively halves from August to November. Temperatures also slip back and any rainfall sticks around longer too, all contributing to what MacCurrach describes as a “disintegrating window of opportunity.”

The site is bound on two sides by the Merrimack River, demanding an acute degree of environmental care. Silt fences in swales and run-off areas were installed and drain lines terminated in underground chambers instead of aboveground, which limited any surface drainage into the river.

A bridge serving half the course – on an island – could only shoulder light loads slowing what could be hauled to and from. Those “knowns” were so imposing that four of seven contractors that the club met with were “very concerned” and one declared point blank that the timeline

“couldn’t be done” as written. In fact, even Brian Silva, the golf course architect on the project, felt the same way.

Then there were the wildcards, including the fact that no fewer than four of the significant players in the day-to-day operations all shared the same first name. Getting your Chris’s crossed can cause serious issues when they include the construction superintendent, the golf course superintendent and two assistant superintendents. Sometimes there was even a fifth Chris, a tree man, on site.

The real shocker came when, without warning, the sod supplier disappeared and went out of business mid-way through grassing the new greens. After a day of no one picking up the phone, golf course superintendent, Chris Morris, drove through the night to New Jersey to find Vesper’s designated acreage bare and not a soul around. “Eventually the mechanic turned up and said the boss was gone and that he wasn’t coming back,” Morris recalls.

But MacCurrach is fond of saying that any construction job is “won or lost in the first 10 percent of the timeline.” So, true to his word, by the time the sod farm went belly-up and daylight shrank by half, the victory at Vesper Country Club had effectively been secured. “It was a huge issue at the time,” MacCurrach says of the sod debacle. “But no one went into a big panic mode. We were able to respond properly because we weren’t already strung out with four or fingers plugging other holes in the boat.”

Despite the hurdles, known and unknown, and a wafer-thin margin for error, the greens were completed ahead of schedule. Everything else was on time and the \$1.4-million final bill for the entire project came in more than \$80,000 under budget.

It may have been a race to meet the deadline but it was never a rush. “They were fast but

extremely efficient,” Silva says. “And the work was performed spectacularly well. When they were done, you couldn’t tell whether it took the 43 days it did or four months.” Vesper’s superintendent was face-to-face with the MacCurrach team every hour of every day. “I’ve got to say that, to me, it didn’t look like they were cracking a sweat at any point.”

“There was almost a surgical expertise,” says Dr. Paul Kaplan, club president at the time. In fact, more than meeting deadlines and saving money, Kaplan says that “most impressive” to members was the fact of “such minimal damage” to the rest of the course. He points out that MacCurrach also took care to blend renovated areas with existing turf by running sod lines to fixed edges such as cart paths or fairway lines.

Altogether, that is why MacCurrach Golf Construction is a winner in the legacy category of this year’s Builder Excellence Awards. “In our eyes they deserve any and all the accolades they receive. They were extremely talented, professional and delivered everything they promised

BUILDER: MacCurrach Golf Construction

PROJECT: Vesper Country Club, Tyngsboro, Mass.

COST: \$1.4 million

TERM: August 24, 2009 to November 6, 2009

ARCHITECT: Brian Silva

SUPERINTENDENT: Chris Morris

NOTABLE NOTES: Upgraded greens for the first time in the club’s 134-year history, yet met the challenge of rebuilding the greens precisely to Donald Ross’ original contours.

and more,” Kaplan says. “They needed to complete a green every three or four days. I mean, that’s a pretty aggressive schedule. And they were done early, which is crazy.”

Vesper Country Club has roots back as far as 1875 and was a charter member when the Massachusetts Golf Association organized in 1903. The club hosted the first Massachusetts Open Golf Championship two years later and it is a high point of pride for the club that the inaugural



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winner was Donald Ross. He would be back 14 years later to design nine new holes and redesign the existing nine on Tyngs Island.

With a history like that, it's hardly surprising that the idea of a full-scale greens renovation worried more than a few of the members, some of whom were also very attached to the grass itself. The Vesper Velvet bentgrass, developed at the club more than a half-century ago by longtime superintendent Manny Francis, who reportedly chewed grass blades to gauge acidity levels, commanded quite a reputation in the northeast in its day.

But times change and not even the old superintendent's elixir of topdressing with sawdust could help the Vesper Velvet keep pace with newer varieties. Poor drainage and compacted soils didn't help either. “When they were good they were great,” Kaplan says. “But we only had great greens three or four weeks of the season and the rest of time they were marginal at best.”

Even so, convincing members, particularly the older set, to make a switch was a project in and of itself. The prospect of a renovation was talked about for several years but always met with resistance. The turning point came, Kaplan says, when members were shown roots from their greens and from a chipping green converted to A1/A4 bentgrass several years earlier. The A1/A4 had roots four to five inches long while the Vesper Velvet was wheezing by on lifelines less than an inch deep. “After that it was easy sell,” Kaplan says.

At least until the economy collapsed just weeks later. Then the “easy sell” almost gave way to a potentially-crippling case of buyer's remorse. But key players at the club thought hard and decided that recessionary times could in fact help them, as Kaplan says, “get the most bang for the buck.” The thinking being that competition for work would attract more qualified contenders while pushing pricing in the opposite direction. That view and long-term aspirations prevailed and on August, 24, 2009 construction began.

Truth be known, MacCurrach stretched

the 62-day window. A construction superintendent had been on site daily for two weeks before anything was disturbed. Because of that aforementioned bridge's weight limitations, a lot of materials like greens mix, rock, bunker sand and sod were delivered in half-laden trucks ahead of time. In fact, most of the materials required for the entire project were on site and quality-tested before day one arrived. Equipment, too, was in place, checked over and ready to roll.

But perhaps nothing ensured the success of the project more than the collaboration between the club and the contractor.

“We were contracted something like four or five months ahead of the project start,” MacCurrach says. “With that sort of notice you can truly allocate your resources. The beautiful thing about that sort of notice is that there's no reacting. You can plan and make all your management decisions proactively.”

MacCurrach also pays tribute to Kaplan, who served in a bridging role between the contractors and the members. According to MacCurrach, there was no half-load on that bridge.

“It's a tough, tough job but he did it awfully well. Not good, not decent. He was fantastic,” MacCurrach says. “Having someone who does a good job in that role is a common denominator in all really successful projects. Don't get me wrong, [Kaplan] was no pushover. He held our feet to the fire. I didn't like him every day, I promise you.”

From Kaplan's point of view, his job was made easier because the MacCurrach team was so direct and upfront all along. “I remember them coming up to me and making it really clear that for the first two weeks it would look like a war-zone,” he says. “Their superintendent, Chris Kleinsmith, said, “For the first two weeks you can't say anything to us. You'll just have to trust us.””

One of the factors strengthening that trust was the tanking economy that had threatened to kill the project before it started. By the time work began, MacCurrach's workforce, which

topped 300 during the boom years, had been whittled to less than 100. But those who were left were all what MacCurrach describes as “sergeants, lieutenants and colonels.”

“We don't have as many soldiers now but everyone in the entire company is absolutely willing to play that role when it's needed,” he says, and Vesper Country Club was the beneficiary.

As much as the giving up the Vesper Velvet was an issue for members, their biggest concern was retaining the integrity of the contouring on the Ross greens. The club paid for the greens to be scanned with digital terrain modeling which uses a variant of laser technology to capture contours in data form. Armed with that data, MacCurrach was able to reproduce the green surfaces to within the order of 1/16th of an inch.

A similar miniscule margin for error was applied to the project budget and accounting. MacCurrach employed a GPS device on site every day to provide almost real-time tracking of progress. As items were built the master as-built was updated and quantities recorded so the club and the architect could make adjustments, effectively on the fly. Through weekly construction meetings, they knew how much was being achieved for what was being spent all along, and because some of the work turned out to be less expensive than projected those funds were able to go towards tweaks elsewhere.

There's a long-standing theory in business that the best way to attract new customers is to invest in marketing or improving your product when everyone else is sitting on their hands, something that tends to happen in a recession. Vesper Country Club's experience since the renovation bears that out.

Kaplan says membership, which had dropped below 300, was now on the edge of capacity at 350.

“When the golf course is bad it seems like everything else is bad,” Kaplan says. “You get more complaints about the dining room, the pro shop, you name it. But now everything is great. The golf course is spectacular.”

For the record, Silva steadfastly maintains that he was correct in his original declaration that a project of this scale just couldn't be done in the 62 days allowed.

“They got it done in far fewer than that so, you see, I was right,” Silva says. “They couldn't do it in 62!” **GCI**