

A studio setting with a spotlight on a wall and a floor lamp in the foreground. The spotlight is a large, bright, circular light source mounted on a wall, casting a strong beam of light. In the foreground, a black floor lamp with a large, adjustable head is positioned on the left. The background is a plain, light-colored wall, and the floor is a dark, polished surface. The overall atmosphere is professional and focused on lighting.

# Supers *in the* spotlight

## When the situation calls to engage the general public, a stand-out superintendent makes all the difference as the game's representative.

by *Trent Bouts*

**A**t 6'3", dark-haired and with a jaw line as rigid as rebar, Darren Davis could be the next James Bond if he wasn't so happy growing grass instead. Those looks may be a factor in why Davis, golf course superintendent at Olde Florida Golf Club in Naples, Fla., is one of a handful of superintendents in the country whose profile extends beyond the far side of the driving range.

Last year, a poll by another magazine declared him among "the most famous living superintendents" in the country. His face and words have appeared in print and on screen for more than 20 years in outlets ranging from his local chapter magazine to the Golf Channel. Also in 2012, the same year he was elected to the board of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, this magazine, Golf Course Industry, gave him the Kaminski award for outstanding leadership in social media.

"He has a presence about him, definitely," explains Jeff Bollig, who spent nearly 20 years as GCSAA's senior communications director. He left GCSAA in November.

But for an inch or two, the same could be said of Bob Farren, CGCS from Pinehurst Resort in Pinehurst, NC who also made that list of the most famous. As one of the public faces of the golf course story for enormously successful U.S. Open Championships at No. 2 in 1999 and 2005, Farren saw the kind of ink never experienced by the previous generation. Never experienced, perhaps, but it's not like it was never imagined.

On the contrary, superintendents spending time in the spotlight was very much the vision of leaders like Randy Nichols, CGCS who helped steer GCSAA and, by extension, the profession it serves, into a new era while president in 1993. That impetus to raise the profile and improve the image of the golf course superintendent was central to the roles occupied first by Pat Jones, now editor of GCI, and until November by Bollig.

The directive was for GCSAA's communications department to build platforms for superintendents to be seen and heard. The thinking was that if their work was better understood, it would also be better appreciated and, ultimately, better rewarded. But theories often require modification once they leave the lab for the real world and there were hurdles from the outset.

For one, superintendents operate mostly out of sight. Invariably, their office is



Olde Florida Golf Club's  
Darren Davis



tucked deep on some pocket of the property where it's further by concealed behind fences or strategic plantings. They are busiest on the course when golfers are not, and, in fact, are often resented when exceptions occur. Further still, it didn't – and still doesn't – help that golf course stories can be difficult to sell to editors and tell to readers.

Most reporters don't know their dollar spot from a Dollar Tree. And even if they do, the pure turf stuff hardly makes for sexy copy. "I would tell any superintendent, 'If you even utter the words anthracnose or pythium, I'll shoot you!'" Bollig says. "You'll lose them (reporters)."

Then there's the question of the interviewees themselves.

Historically, and to this day, the vast majority of superintendents prefer to let their work do the talking. The very nature of that work reinforces a tendency towards caution and moderation. They are not encouraged to take risks, stick their necks out. The stakes are simply too high should things go wrong.

“You know what, everything I'm doing I'm doing because I enjoy it and I want to give back. Sure, it can be very comfortable behind the scenes. But if we want to get our profession out of the valley then we have to get out from behind our desks or we'll never get anywhere.”

– Darren Davis, Olde Florida Golf Club

Contrast that with the media's reputation for stirring the pot and you can see why the two groups are not exactly attracted to each other. No superintendents want to earn their facility a bad headline.

All of which goes to explain, or more accu-

rately, justify, Bollig's completely off-the-cuff and tongue-in-cheek response on the subject of generating publicity for golf course superintendents: "We want some attention, but we don't want it."

When he came on board at the national headquarters in Lawrence, Kan., the plaintive cry from the profession was constant: "People just don't understand and appreciate what we do!" It was true. Credit to the likes of Bollig and others stretching back 20 years now, including a string of volunteer leaders at GCSAA and paid administrators like Steve Mona, now at the World Golf Foundation, that the chorus of complaint has lost some volume.

Today the profession enjoys more time in the spotlight than ever before. Over the years GCSAA has invested big money buying airtime and column-inches. But it has earned plenty more by massaging relationships. As Bollig reflects, "What price tag do you put on a 45-second discussion about GCSAA and its members by David Feherty during the Sun-

# PENN STATE | ONLINE

The Industry is changing. Education is more important than ever.

Whatever your career goals, the World Campus has a turfgrass program to set you apart from the rest:

- Master of Professional Studies in Turfgrass Science
- Bachelor of Science in Turfgrass Science
- Associate in Science in Turfgrass Science and Management
- Advanced Certificate in Turfgrass Management
- Basic Certificate in Turfgrass Management

For more information, visit  
[www.worldcampus.psu.edu/GCI](http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/GCI)

PENN STATE  
World Campus

14-0142/14-WC-0214ajw/smb



day afternoon telecast of the Masters?" The upshot, generally speaking, is that today's golfer has a far more sophisticated view of the golf course superintendent.

Whether that progress has fully delivered on the original premise is up for debate. GC-SAA's salary surveys might suggest so. But any picture has been muddied severely by events like the bursting of the tech bubble, 9/11 and, more recently, the recession. The accompanying contraction in golf and golf spending has few superintendents cheering about their professional outlook. Yet none are worse off because of the superintendent image campaign. They would be if Cad-dyshack was still the only thing out there.

For all of that, there is another significant aspect to the story that swirls about in the shadows outside the spotlight occupied by the likes of Davis, Farren and a small cadre of others. Recently, another of that band, Ken Mangum, CGCS, from Atlanta Athletic Club was inducted into the George Golf Course Superintendents Hall of Fame. He had al-



Pinehurst's Bob Farren

ready been on the cover of the association's magazine earlier in the year for winning GCSAA's Distinguished Service Award and was before that, in 2011, when hosting the PGA Championship.

"There was a point (around the PGA Championship) when I lost count of the number of magazine covers I was on," Mangum says. "And, you know, I did hear from some people

saying, 'I'm getting tired of seeing your face,' in a joking manner. I guess it's like complaints about your golf course. You don't get many directly but you hear about people saying things to each other."

Mangum is not alone in that experience. "Certainly, I've heard people criticize friends I have in the business who are the in the spotlight regularly," Davis says, in the same breath acknowledging the logical extension that others likely take similar pot shots at him.

Mark Esoda, CGCS, from Atlanta Country Club was inducted into the Georgia GCSA Hall of Fame at the same ceremony as Mangum. Perhaps in cart-before-the-horse fashion, he had already been inducted into the Georgia State Golf Hall of Fame two years earlier. His leadership on the frontlines of water issues and more has seen him quoted beneath many headlines and the winner of multiple awards.

He too has heard and felt the grumbling. "That sentiment is out there," he says. "There's been private stuff and stuff that has filtered back to people. It's not just in

# GEMPLER'S®

gemplers.com 1-800-382-8473

Visit [gemplers.com](http://gemplers.com) for our  
**755-pg Online Catalog**

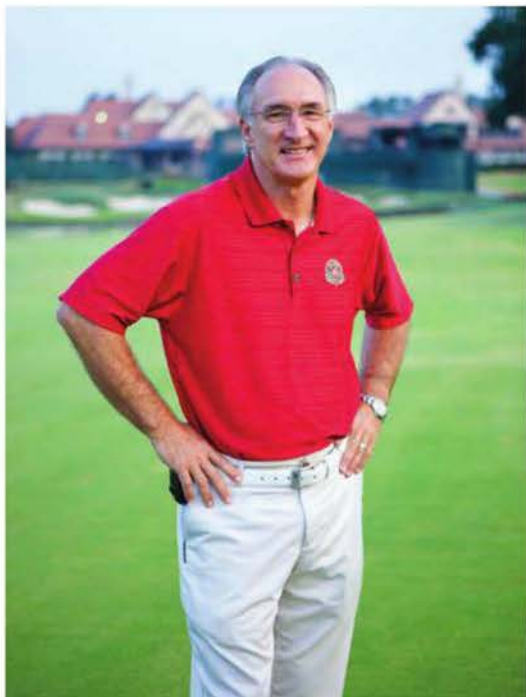
View our  
**40,000+**  
products

## WORKING OUTDOORS IS HARD - FINDING WHAT YOU NEED HERE IS EASY!

We supply  
commercial-grade  
products from  
brands you trust

and more ...





our profession. It's in everything, this tendency to be resentful of success. I don't know why it is but I think it's out there. I would be less than honest if I said I wasn't aware of it."

Jeffrey Connell, now superintendent at Fort Jackson Golf Club in Columbia, S.C., was on his way to becoming president of the Carolinas Golf Course Superintendents Association in 2010 when he became uncomfortable with the amount of publicity he was getting. The Carolinas GCSA was the first regional association in the country to employ a full-time communications director and as a rising star Connell was one focus of resultant media traction.

"It was all so new and I was getting some heat from other guys in the business who were tired of seeing my face," he recalls. "But then I realized I could refer media enquiries to some of those

same people. And that was always the goal, for everyone in the profession to benefit because it was finally a superintendent, not the golf pro, talking about the golf course."

"Not everybody sees you as a serial murderer," Esoda laughs. "Our families, our employers and the vast majority of our peers, they appreciate it. The few detractors out there are not going to get in the way of the good that comes out of it. Everybody in our industry has the obligation to step up and defend what we do. If you're not going to then you're doing yourself and the profession a disservice."

Mangum concurs. "I think we all have a responsibility to generate a positive impression," he says. "I guess some people could be jealous because I was on TV a lot during the PGA Championship but I felt like I had a

Atlanta Athletic Club's Ken Mangum



**Your ONE  
Tractor Solution**  
1-877-905-3580  
[www.ventrac.com/golf](http://www.ventrac.com/golf)



“It was all so new and I was getting some heat from other guys in the business who were tired of seeing my face. But then I realized I could refer media calls to some of those same people. And that was always the goal, for everyone in the profession to benefit because it was finally a superintendent, not the golf pro, talking about the golf course.”

– Jeffrey Connell, Fort Jackson Golf Club

huge responsibility for the whole profession. My job is to make my club, my profession and, I guess, me, to look good along the way.”

It may be easy for some people to forget that Mangum is 60 and has been in the business a very long time. It's not as if he fell into the role and status he now commands. Above all else he's had to be able to grow grass in order to survive so long, let alone thrive. He had to learn the other stuff on top of his “day job.” None of it came as a birthright.

Mangum was a rookie superintendent at a municipal course in Montgomery, AL when the director of the Department of Parks and Recreation called to say a camera crew was on its way to film a five-minute public service announcement promoting the golf course. He wanted Mangum to do the talking.

“We didn't go out onto the golf course,” Mangum says. “It was all shot in a room with a camera four feet away from my face and I had to talk for five whole minutes. I was maybe 25 and when it was done I said right there and then that I was not going to let myself feel like that again. I won't ever forget that moment staring into that camera. I hope that film doesn't exist anywhere. I'd hate to see it today.”

Mangum subsequently made good use of public relations and communications education provided by GCSAA, whether at the annual conference, now Golf Industry Show, or when he was on the national board of directors. “Those are the classes guys should be taking,” he says. “But what fills up first at every conference? The agronomics. You've got to get out of your comfort zone.”

At 46, Davis may be closer than Mangum in age to today's generation but it's not like he takes that proximity for granted. More than a decade after leaving Penn State with a turf degree in 1991, Davis went back to college at Florida Gulf Coast University, graduating summa cum laude with a bachelor of arts in communication in 2007.

“You know what, everything I'm doing I'm doing because I enjoy it and I want to give back,” he says. “Sure, it can be very comfortable behind the scenes. But if we want to get our profession out of the valley then we have to get out from behind our desks or we'll never get anywhere.”

Ultimately, it comes down to a simple question, whether it's Esoda speaking to government officials or the likes of Davis, Farren or Mangum speaking to the Golf Channel. “Who would you rather have the people go to for information about your golf course,” Mangum asks. “The general manager, the golf professional ... or you?” GCI

Trent Bouts is a Greer, S.C.-based writer and frequent GCI contributor.

# WHEN SPEED MATTERS SPEEDZONE® WINS.



## AND SPEED ALWAYS MATTERS.

The competition can talk all they want, but when the checkered flag drops, the winner is clear: **SpeedZone® Broadleaf Herbicide for Turf**. SpeedZone delivers broad-spectrum control of the toughest weeds fast. In fact, you can see visible results within 24 hours. That means more happy golfers, and it's one of the reasons SpeedZone is the #1 speed herbicide on the market.

**G** pbi / GORDON  
CORPORATION  
*An Employee-Owned Company*

800.884.3179

[GordonsProfessional.com/speedzone](http://GordonsProfessional.com/speedzone)

Checkered Flag Label Design®, Gordon's®, ProForm®, and SpeedZone® are registered trademarks of PBI-Gordon Corporation. Always read and follow label directions. 10/13 02927