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## MY NEW BROMANCE

Last month in this space, I wrote a love letter that described my bromance with Matt Shaffer. Here's the sequel...

Given the run-up to the Open and Matt's stature, I fully expected better-than-average coverage of the grounds staff and how they were instrumental in making the USGA's vision of a short-but-nasty Merion become a reality. After all, this major was meant to be a referendum on distance and a return to traditional set-up values, so the guy in charge of presenting the course would naturally be more of a focus than usual, right?

But I never saw Time magazine coming. I certainly didn't anticipate multiple packages about Matt, Aaron McCurdy and the crew on ESPN and NBC. I lost count of the times they mentioned them on Golf Channel. The social media coverage was off the hook (leading a few grumps to whine about overkill) and about a zillion photos of men and women pushing squeegees, pumping bunkers and rolling greens were published.

For a week, Matt was everywhere and the coverage was positive. Never has a super been given this sort of prominence at a golf event. Never.

When I say "given" prominence, I mean it. It was very clear that both the leadership at both USGA and Merion wanted Matt out front. I think they realized Matt's sincerity, his love for the course and the passion he had for the mission he'd been given ("give it teeth but keep it fair") would shine through in the media. And it did.

So what's it all mean to the average superintendent? Well, let me put it this way: For the past three decades, whenever a turfhead met some schmuck at a party and introduced himself as a golf course superinten-

dent, the schmuck would say, "Oh, like Carl Spackler!" Now they're more likely to say, "Wow, like Matt Shaffer?"

It didn't even matter that Mike Davis went out of his way to say that the superintendent is "the person that is most important to the success of a U.S. Open." For once, it was readily apparent to everyone watching that Matt was the man.

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Lots of host supers and their teams have incrementally raised the "respect" bar in the past. Now, that bar has "Property of Matt Shaffer" on it.

Which makes it even more interesting to watch the next stop in the USGA's "Changing Perceptions" Tour in 2014. If Matt's job was to send a message that great golf isn't just a bomb-and-gouge distance contest, Pinehurst's Bob Farren and Kevin Robinson are merely tasked with changing the paradigm of how players see courses.

The redesign and rebranding of the #2 course is well documented and you'll be hearing much more about it in the next 11 months so I'll spare you a rehash here. (I'm on record as saying that the notion of reinventing a great course by turning back the clock is a brilliant idea.) But, from a playability standpoint, it will be the polar opposite of Merion starting with the fact that they'll only be two heights of cut on the whole property: greens and everything else. So, newly naturalized

bunkers and Donald Ross's buried elephants will provide the defense instead of the six inches of clumpy rough at Merion.

At Pinehurst, playability will be the primary focus but the issue of appearance will be a close second. The question is how much the TV cameras will like the naturalized look of #2 in comparison to the pristine Augusta-like version they saw the last two times the Open came to the Sand Hills.

Bob and Kevin will be out front of that conversation as the people who executed the transformation plan that took the course from 2011 back to 1943. Fortunately, they'll have a little help talking with the media and the golfing public from a guy named Ben Crenshaw and his pal Bill Coore.

This will be a very different dynamic than what we saw a few weeks ago in Philly. The intensity of Merion will be replaced with Pinehurst's quiet, down-home approach. And we're likely to see far more of Ben Crenshaw than Bob Farren on TV (which I'm sure is just fine with Bob). But you couldn't ask for a better group of people to lead a discussion about how good golf should look.

This isn't going to be another "brown is beautiful" fumble. Pinehurst, with their world-class business approach and amazing agronomic team, will do things the right way to tell this story (and sell the hell out of their brand). In the same way I couldn't imagine a better spokesman for old-skool conditions than Matt, I couldn't dream up a better team than Bob, Kevin, Bill and Ben to tell the story of the naturalized look.

So, thanks again Matt, for all you just did for everyone in the profession. And good luck Bob and Kevin...let the new bromance begin! **GCI**