

Asked if a friend who was a superintendent has ever been terminated or left a position for personality/political reasons, 96 percent of those surveyed responded yes.

The arbitrary termination of a successful superintendent can be for a number of reasons:

- "He's a great person; he just can't communicate."
- "He doesn't do well in meetings."
- "He got buried in club politics."
- "He's competent but not well known by the members."

The GCSAA has attempted to quantify turnover among superintendents. Statistics the association compiled from January to June 2003 list the following reasons for superintendent job openings:

- 50 percent were voluntary resignations
- 31 percent were new openings
- 13 percent were terminations
- 6 percent were promotions

Reasons for termination included:

- 27 percent for technical performance
- 13 percent for poor communication
- 20 percent for lack of professionalism
- 40 percent for non-specified reasons

Grigg, now a vice president and agronomist with Grigg Brothers Corp., an Idaho-based fertilizer company, offers his insight into these statistics.

"I have to take issue that 50 percent of the resignations were voluntary," he says. "Like me, a good number of superintendents were offered that choice as opposed to being fired. As for the 40 percent figure for non-specified reasons, I believe most were let go for economic reasons, specifically salary."

With regard to being terminated for "professionalism," Griggs believes something as simple as appearance is a major factor.

"I know of one superintendent whose golf course was immaculate, but he was short and overweight," he says. "He was terminated because of his lack of a 'professional' image."

To counter image issues, Grigg advises superintendents to always have a fresh change of clothes in their office. "Don't go to meetings in your work clothes and dirty boots," he says. "Clean up your act."

Experienced superintendents cite seven pitfalls which can hinder a career or even result in loss of your job. It's important to be aware of these problem areas, and for superintendents to take action to improve their standing with management, golfers, workers, neighbors and your local community. The seven common pitfalls are:

Pitfall No. 1 — What we have is a failure to communicate

The GCSAA data shows that most superintendents don't lose their jobs because of poor course conditions. Most are fired or forced to resign because they can't or don't communicate with the owner, general manager, greens committee chairman or golfers.

Unfortunately, most agronomic educational programs do not adequately prepare superintendents for this aspect of their careers. The recent *Golf Course News* survey shows that 46 percent of the respondents considered their formal training inadequate in terms of people skills. Because they are not trained to deal effectively with people, these skills must be mastered on the job if superintendents are to succeed.

Bruce Williams, CGCS, superintendent of Los Angeles Country Club, Los Angeles, Calif., and a past president of the GCSAA, says a root problem is personality. The typical superintendent is introverted, he notes, while the typical golf pro is extroverted.

"Superintendents need to learn to be people persons," he explains. "They should take every opportunity to get in front of people. Give speeches, address boards and committees, coach a youth team. Golf courses are begging for superintendents with communication skills."

Tommy Witt, CGCS, and also a GCSAA past president, is superintendent of Northmoor Country Club, Highland Park, Ill. He says superintendents need to be the source of information about what's going on at the golf course.

"Superintendents need to attend board and committee meetings because you don't want someone else answering questions for you," Witt says.

Pitfall No. 2 — Perception is not always reality

Many superintendents don't understand the difference between perception and reality. They may be putting in 60-hour weeks, but nobody knows it. It's important to be seen in the right places at the right times, such as in the locker room, in the pro shop or on the first tee. Superintendents should write articles for their clubs' newsletters, make use of their clubs' Web sites and e-mail, and post photos on the progress of course projects. They must develop strategies to counteract a negative perception.

"In an appropriate way, remind management and golfers of what you do and how well you do it," Witt says. "It's amazing to me that everyone knows the golf pro, but many times, they do not know the

superintendent's name. How can we be valuable if no one knows who we are?"

There are other ways for superintendents to step out of their comfort levels and increase their visibility. If they are golfers, they should make an effort to play with all segments of the membership. If a superintendent negotiates a good deal on a greens mower, let the club know you've spent their money wisely. Make your employers aware of your financial management skills.

"It is imperative that your employer understands in a subtle but effective way that your skills and experience are key components to managing their most important asset — the golf course," Witt says. "They have to realize that they just can't hire anyone off the street to do your job."

Grigg adds, "your employer needs to understand the value an experienced superintendent brings to the operation in areas such as staff training, protection from potential lawsuits and safety compliance issues."

Pitfall No. 3 — The customer is always right

Failure to build strong relationships can be a job killer.

"Rarely do superintendents lose their jobs for bad greens," Williams says. "More often, it's because they're not skilled in customer service disciplines. You have to find out what governing bodies or golfers want. If you close the course for minor situations, you have to be visible and be prepared to defend your decision. For example, make sure everyone knows your aeration schedule. Publicize it in the club newsletter, post it in the locker room."

Pitfall No. 4 — I never saw it coming

"You have to know when to hold, and know when to fold," Williams says. A superintendent may think he's doing a good job, but he has to be able to read the attitudes of the governing boards, whether it's a public or private course. A bad performance review, a change in board personnel or grumblings golfers should cause him to look for possible issues that are developing.

"Many superintendents have told me they saw the signs but didn't do anything about it," Williams says. "It's not hard to see the red flags when you hear griping and complaining. If you find out something is not working, be proactive. The negativity is tough to take, but you have to effect change."

While club politics are unavoidable, superintendents must be careful not to be drawn into the web of private agendas. For

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How to know how you're doing:

With golfers and club members:

1. Survey visiting, active and previously active golfers about course conditions.
2. Learn who the opinion leaders are and their agendas for the course.
3. Be visible at major golf and non-golf events.
4. Suggest creation of a master plan for your course.
5. Write a column for your course's newsletter and invite feedback.

With owners, management and the pro:

1. Meet for lunch just to talk.
2. Attend board meetings and respond to any issues.
3. Communicate your continuing education achievements.
4. Get an annual personnel review that includes goals for the coming year.

With employees:

1. Ask your crews what golfers are saying about the course and what they think.

With residents and the community:

1. Attend meetings and invite questions.
2. Visit residents and neighbors periodically.
3. Ask local police to call you about any emergencies on or near your course.
4. Be sensitive about the environmental impact of planned actions.
5. Join professional golf organizations to stay on top of legislative and legal issues.

example, if a club is disorganized and the green chairman has a pet project, not all board members will agree with his direction. But if the chairman is dominant and does all the talking, he may position the superintendent on one side on the issue, sometimes even without the superintendent being aware of the situation at all.

"Superintendents can often find themselves in no-win situations," Witt says. "But in the end, honesty is always the best policy. My advice is to give the pertinent information factually and professionally, and never give an ultimatum. Usually this strategy leads to wise decisions."

Pitfall No. 5 — I'm OK, you're OK

Complacency can result in superintendents losing their jobs. When a club makes a change in the general manager or director of golf operations positions, superintendents need to be sensitive to what this can mean to their job standing.

"What superintendents need to recognize quickly is that this is the new person's kingdom, and he or she is king. They are the boss and things will run their way. Be prepared to embrace change," Witt advises.

On average general managers change jobs every three years and they often bring in their own managers, associates they have worked with from previous operations, and people they trust and with whom they have personal relationships.

"A friend of mine was superintendent at a high-end club in Atlanta for 29 years and had an impeccable reputation," Witt says. "The club hired a new general manager, and the superintendent was gone — replaced by a friend of the new manager. The lesson is to embrace change in the management structure. You have to be able to adapt."

At private clubs, turnover among staff and boards of directors can be a huge factor in the political scene. Compounding the issue is that turnover reduces opportunities for superintendents to build trust and confidence with management. In response, superintendents need to ask themselves what has to be done to meet this person's

expectations this year?

Pitfall No. 6 — Check your ego at the door

There is a growing trend in the industry for golf professionals to name themselves directors of operations. Trying to emulate that, some superintendents have taken on the title of "director of golf course maintenance," and then name an assistant as the superintendent.

While this strategy to increase professional stature may work at a multiple course operation, it may backfire at an 18-hole course if the general manager eventually comes to the conclusion that he has two superintendents, eliminating the \$90,000 per year director of golf course maintenance, and retaining the superintendent who is making \$50,000.

"Some general managers and owners are intimidated by competent, experienced superintendents," Witt says. "The superintendent may be better educated and confident, and this can strike fear in some people. Remember that and tone it down."

Pitfall No. 7 — You don't own the course

Beware of an overbearing sense of ownership; it's not your course. In some cases, because the superintendent built and grew in the course, or has a long tenure, he views himself as the key person and considers the course to be his own. This can be a huge mistake.

"Anyone who thinks this way won't be around long," Grigg says. "The superintendent has been entrusted with the maintenance of the golf course, but it's not his course. It's good to have pride in your course, but remember, you're not indispensable."

Plan your future

In addition to his responsibilities at Los Angeles Country Club, Williams advises superintendents on career planning.

"The average tenure of a superintendent on a course is now about 6 1/2 years, according to GCSAA," he says. "Know that you're likely to change jobs several times in your career, and approach your present job like you're preparing for the next one. The more well-rounded and broad-based your experience, the better off you'll be."

"At the same time, work to develop a niche. Do you have construction experience? Have you hosted an important tournament? Look at your job as a career and take the steps to build your portfolio."

The reality is that there is an oversupply of superintendents. A bumper crop of young people with degrees and little experience are flooding the market, and they work for less

money. Those on the bubble are the established superintendents in the 45- to 50-year age range and having correspondingly higher salaries than younger superintendents.

"Concentrate on doing a good job and the word will spread about your reputation," Witt advises.

About 15 to 20 percent of superintendents change jobs every year. In considering your next job, try to find a position working for good owners and managers. Does the employer put a premium on character and substance? Are the expectations realistic? What is the organization's track record for how it treats people? What is the turnover ratio?

Interview potential employers as carefully as they interview you. That way, you won't accept a bad job and put yourself in a position to lose.

Professional training

With so many demands being made on superintendents, a key to career success is to identify your shortcomings and work on training and skills development to overcome them. For example, a superintendent might never learn to enjoy giving presentations, but he or she can learn to become an effective presenter and to be more comfortable giving them.

A number of career-building resources are available for superintendents. GCSAA offers a free booklet on communication — the "cornerstone of professional relationships" — and a free booklet on career development. GCSAA also offers kits on weathering economic downturns, effective employer/superintendent relations and employment resources.

For career development, the association offers educational seminars, workshops, and forums covering technical information and "softer" people and management skills. Workshop topics include: "How to Manage Your Relationship with Your Employer," "Recruitment and Retention Tips," "Public Speaking Strategies," and "Crisis Communication Strategies."

Williams urges superintendents to take advantage of seminars and workshops offered in their areas. "Attend local chapter meetings and browse the business sections of bookstores for self-help, motivational and management books," he advises. "Take charge of your career." GCN

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A CLEAR GOAL, COMMUNICATION AND ARCHITECT-SUPERINTENDENT COOPERATION DELIVER AN OUTSTANDING GRANDE PINES RENOVATION

by
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LESLIE

Robert Waller's first impression of the International Golf Club in Orlando, FL, was that the course was in a perfect location — on International Drive in the midst of vacation heaven. Waller, Marriott Golf's director of golf course grounds operations and construction, says the course itself was a mess.

"It needed to be blown up," Waller says.

"An overgrown mess with poor drainage," adds architect Steve Smyers, of Smyers Golf Design, Lakeland, FL, who worked with Waller in 2003 to recreate the 18-hole course as the centerpiece for Marriott Vacation Club International's new Grande Pines Resort.

Waller is a veteran of numerous course renovations. He was superintendent of Atlanta Athletic Club's Highlands Course when it was renovated by Rees Jones in 1995, and he has overseen four renovations since joining Marriott Golf seven years ago. Through that experience Waller says he has developed an approach

as the superintendent that makes a maximum contribution to the project's success:

- Serve as the owner's representative and consultant.
- Maintain ongoing communication — "the absolute key to success" — between the superintendent, architect, builder and club members.
- Stay focused on what it will take to maintain the new course for a 30-year period. "Don't get sidetracked into critiquing the design," Waller advises, "but as a superintendent I want to focus on maintenance issues that will help make the course successful and profitable in the long-term."

- Contribute to clearly defined goals of what the renovation is to accomplish. "A renovation is an opportunity to improve traffic flow, airflow, sunlight and other environmental factors," he says. "You're going to close your books and shut the course down in a renovation, so seize the chance to do the work that will keep that course open for many years to come."

- Get ahead of the curve on permitting. "Do not wait on permits. Also consider the value of hiring consultants knowledgeable about water management, zoning or any other specific issues you face," he recommends.

- Work with the architect and builder to set a realistic timeline that factors in rain or other unavoidable delays. Grande Pines was built during the fourth-wettest summer of the last 109 years in Florida, but Waller, architect Smyers and the contractor, Weitz Golf International of North Palm Beach, FL, anticipated such delays in their construction schedule.

- Pre-qualify to select the right contractor. "Open up projects to bids to give everybody a chance, but be wise in your final decision."

- Apply the old business success adage — location, location, location — even down to the placement of the putting greens. "Decisions made on the front end — re-routing the course and setting the greens in place — affect the long-term health of the course. As the superintendent you want to look at tree management, the tilt of the greens, drainage and traffic. Planning can avoid fighting endless environmental or traffic problems," Waller says.

Clear goal and vision

The keys to making everything work more efficiently are establishing a clear goal in the planning stage and ongoing communication throughout construction.

"Everybody has to understand the vision up front — what the property will

give," Waller says. "What you do with the golf course goes straight to the bottom line. We've all seen projects that ended up as maintenance nightmares. To avoid this, the superintendent must be empowered. The tendency early in the process is that the architect is the only voice and the long-term function of the golf course falls off their radar for a time. The superintendent's role is to bring that voice back."

Architect Smyers agrees. "Waller understood the goal — to create a dynamic, world-class course. He also wanted a course that could be maintained to world-class standards."

Ongoing communication

Living in nearby Lakeland, Smyers and his top landscape architect, Patrick Andrews, were constantly on site, which made ongoing communication easier.

"The cooperation between all parties and the high level of enthusiasm were ultimately reflected in the quality of the final product," Smyers says. "We had gone through the whole design with Waller before we started construction to make sure we were all on the same page. Then, whenever we were about to build something, Waller would come out and look at it and react. He has been through construction processes before and knew what to look for. He has a good set of eyes both as a superintendent and as an accomplished golfer. We worked together to address situations such as existing vegetation, what we had to clear out to get adequate sunlight, what type of plant materials might be invasive, those sort of questions."

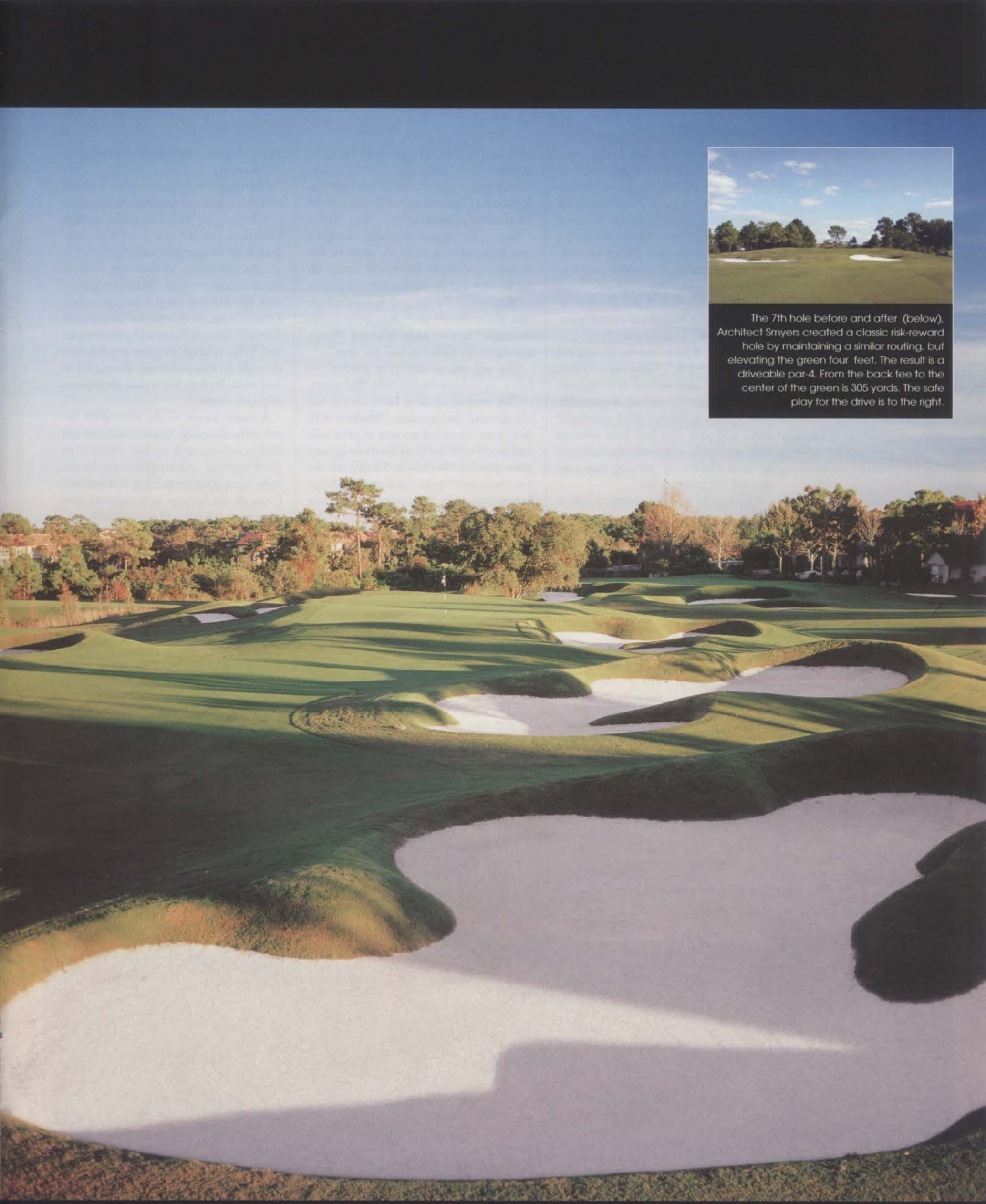
To be on board in time for the entire grow-in period, Waller hired Chuck Wagnmiller in March 2003 to serve as Grande Pines' superintendent.

Communication was important in resolving challenges that included wetlands,

AT A GLANCE:

Marriott Grande Pines Golf Club

Location:	Orlando, Fla.
Course type:	Public
Course closed:	December 2002
Course re-opened:	January 2004
Yardage:	7,012; 6,593; 6,070; and 5,418
Par:	72
Number of bunkers:	70
Greens:	Tifeagle Bermudagrass
Fairways and tees:	TifSport Bermudagrass
Slope:	To be rated
Rating:	To be rated
Superintendent:	Chuck Wagnmiller
Golf Course architect:	Steve Smyers
Landscape architect:	Patrick Andrews
Builder:	Weitz Golf International



The 7th hole before and after (below). Architect Smyers created a classic risk-reward hole by maintaining a similar routing, but elevating the green four feet. The result is a driveable par-4. From the back tee to the center of the green is 305 yards. The safe play for the drive is to the right.

extreme overgrowth, too many trees, poor turfgrasses and outdated bunkers.

"Drainage was the key issue," Waller says. "The existing course had been built to different standards. By the time Marriott purchased the property the area around the course had taken on a life of its own. The corridors were so closed in with vegetation that it was claustrophobic."

The overgrowth had also clogged up waterways and fouled up storm water management.

"We spent a lot of money getting rid of the overgrowth," Waller says. "There was so much that we had to investigate what plant material we had. It was a discovery process. We had some wonderful pines and oaks that had been covered with vines and overgrowth. We went hole by hole, delicately picking our way through trash and debris."

Clearing the land gave the water a place to go.

Where drainage swells had become

wetlands, Smyers redesigned the layout to enhance those areas and turn them into functioning wetlands. "Even the State Department of Environmental Protection saw value in the reconstruction," says Waller.

Smyers designed five ponds, averaging two acres in area each, to improve the drainage and to provide the soil used to lift the fairways and elevate the tees and greens.

"Because of the flat and featureless nature of the site we paid close attention to drainage," Smyers adds. "Central Florida gets up to 50 inches of rain per year."

The soil was mostly "gray gumbo" — heavy silt and low-oxygen soils, Waller says.

"We worked hand-in-hand on the soil conditions," Smyers says. "Working with Waller we identified pockets of poor soils and modified those areas for drainage and grass-growing conditions. We dug out the poor soils and buried them to the sides or beneath mounds. We stockpiled good soil and capped the course with it."

Because the course had aged, Waller says it had 17 different cultivars of Bermudagrass. Weaker strains of

Bermudagrass had limited the height of cut possible.

Choosing the turf type involves both the superintendent and architect, Waller says.

"Marriott has built four golf courses in Florida in the last two years and we've gone with TifSport Bermuda for fairways, roughs and tees at all four. On three of those courses we used Tifeagle on greens, and on one we used Champion. At Grande Pines, we decided on TifSport and Tifeagle. Grande Pines will not overseed and TifSport keeps its color much better through the winter than any Bermuda I've ever seen. It plays like a true championship golf course."

A major aspect of the renovation involved landscaping. Smyers, Andrews and Waller collaborated on the selection of plant material and its placement in the right context for the grading and features. Once all the features were exposed, low areas were dug out and marked with wetland material. If a ridge was created, the vegetation patterns were changed to create a pleasant feel and to allow golfers to



The 15th hole before and after (below). The par-3 hole was lengthened from 172 to 214 yards and the putting surface exposed. Tee space was doubled and native grasses provide low-maintenance aesthetics.





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The par-3, 4th hole before and after (above). Improvements included lateral shelves and wetlands in front of the green, elevating the green six feet, clearing overgrowth and lengthening the hole from 155 to 189 yards.

more easily read the course. Key plant materials selected included broomsedge, mully grass, coregrass, Fachahatchee grass, oaks, pines, magnolias and sable palms.

The \$1-million landscaping budget also included creating 40-foot buffers around ponds, Waller says. The aesthetics of the wetlands were enhanced with cypress trees, swamp lily, Golden Canna, arrowhead, pickerel plant, Eleocharis and Blue Flag Iris.

The art of compromise

Compromise between the superintendent and architect, and between the vision and budget, are facts in any renovation, Waller says. How well the compromise is handled often depends on their relationship.

The Grande Pines renovation required several compromises. Smyers is known for his bold and dynamic bunkering that sets a course apart from its competition. At the same time, maintenance concerns

were noted by Waller.

“Waller felt that bunkers are a pain no matter what kind you build,” Smyers says. “But he agreed that without great bunkers we would never be able to build the reputation for Grande Pines that we wanted. His was an extremely switched-on attitude toward design. Waller understood the game plan.”

In a number of areas Waller and Smyers worked at creative compromises to gain dynamic design and viable maintenance.

One compromise involved poor drainage issues on the first and second holes, where the soils were the heaviest.

“Florida is so flat you don’t have runoff,” Smyers says. “So you try to create a pitch that will move water from the two- to four-inch rains we get. On these two holes, Waller and I worked together to get not only the right pitch but also the right soils in place.”

Another compromise was handling the divide between parallel 13th and 14th holes.

“The 13th is a par-5 dogleg right, and the 14th is a par-4 dogleg left. On the earlier course, players would cut the corner off the 13th — something we all wanted to

change,” Waller says.

“Smyers had a design goal, and I looked at it through a superintendent’s lens. I didn’t want to have to build a satellite maintenance facility in that area just to maintain two holes. Severe sloping was a possibility, but it would have created too much handwork. Smyers was great in helping to solve this issue. He designed a series of bunkers, a 22-foot fill, and a lake to the right of the 13th green, which prevents cutting off the dogleg. Steve got the separation of the holes he needed, and I’m happy because we can now mow 90 percent of the area.”

Working together to overcome a variety of obstacles, Waller and Smyers say they accomplished the Marriott vision of creating a standout golf course that serves as the cornerstone of a future vacation property. GCN

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