

A VIEW from the TOP

A patient Robert Waller plans methodically at Marriott Golf

If you're like most superintendents or course operators, you wake up in the morning worrying about how your 18 little babies have fared overnight. Robert Waller wakes up worrying about more than 1,000 putting surfaces around the globe.

Gulp!

Waller is senior director of golf grounds operations and development for Marriott International, the hotel and resort giant and longtime player in the world of corporate golf management. Waller and his colleagues oversee maintenance for 45 Marriott properties in 13 countries, including nine at plush Ritz-Carltons. The company's holdings range from marquee facilities such as Doral in Miami and Starpass in Tucson, Ariz., down to one that's essentially a city-owned course in Tennessee.

Like many, Waller started at a local mom-and-pop place with a blue-collar customer base and plenty of work opportunities for a kid who loved to be outside. He was a night watchman, worked in the golf shop, life guarded and rode a mower at a course in Austell, Ga. While there, the owner hired a new general manager who was a certified superintendent.

"That blew me away," he says. "I couldn't believe this was actually a career path. I just figured the superintendent was always the owner's son."

That superintendent, Roger Cagle, became Waller's first mentor and helped set him on the path that led him to the top of one of the nation's biggest golf organizations. From there, he went to Florida's Lake City Community College and earned a degree in 1992 after completing internships with Cagle at Eagle Watch Golf Club in Atlanta and at Pinehurst's No. 6 and No. 7 courses under Todd Biggers.

At that point, he met another superintendent who would shape his career and much of his management philosophy.

"Ken Mangum of the Atlanta Athletic Club came to Lake City to interview for assistants, and he was just amazing," Waller says. "I ended up working for him for five years and learned so much – not just about managing a course but how you should

carry yourself. Plus, he showed me how to treat people. He had the same demeanor with the president of the club or Rees Jones as the guy he'd just hired to rake bunkers. He's such a great example."

Waller calls his experience at AAC priceless, but after the club secured the 2001 PGA Championship and he fielded a few offers, he connected with Herman Vonhof, the developer of The Georgian Resort in Villa Rica, Ga., and became superintendent there in 1997. Vonhof had hired Marriott to oversee the project, so Waller joined the staff. He enjoyed working with Tom Schlick, his predecessor as senior director, and Claye Atcheson.

"They basically gave me a master's degree in golf course management and a bachelor's in business administration at the same time," he says.

Waller took the Frog Golf Club at The Georgian from ground breaking to grow-in and oversaw the course for three years, all the while learning about the Marriott way of operating. In 2001, he jumped to the company's corporate headquarters in Orlando and, eight years later, finds himself running the show.

Why should superintendents fear or embrace the typical management company?

I'll answer that in two ways. First, at Marriott, we're not a management company, per se. If XYZ Club opens, we're not submitting a proposal to run it. Our mission is to support Marriott International. We're an operations group, and we typically don't do short-term agreements at stand-alone facilities.

Second, what's different in corporate golf from other management models is we operate more methodically. We have more processes in place with regard to budgets, hiring, hierarchy and so forth. You have to be more patient and have a greater capability for planning. We've had superintendents who came from those other worlds who like that and embrace it, but some don't. We can't turn on a dime like they can, but more single operators are moving to our model more. It's evolving our way.



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What drew you to Marriott?

I came to the corporate office when Tom Schlick (longtime head of maintenance for Marriott) was in charge. I looked at it like a doctorate degree in golf course management. It's a chance to touch so many golf operations. I've worked on construction projects in seven countries. It's broadened my horizons in terms of business, turf types, learning the operations side, retailing – you name it – and I've worked with so many experienced operators. I'm beginning to feel like I understand operations as a whole.

I'm a capitalist at heart. We shouldn't apologize for that in the golf business. You used to hear, "My expenses are fixed, and I can't change the way I maintain the course." You can't operate that way. It's about being profitable. That's the reality of every other business in the world. Anyone who thinks differently isn't going to survive long these days.

Everyone says money is tight in the corporate golf business. How do you deal with that?

We've gone to great lengths to build a structure around budgets. What's the competitive set, what are the core components – acreage, geography, etc. – and internal needs based on revenues and sales. That creates a window – or a template – for the budget. We have five or six general models based on those things and then, like always, it becomes an art based on other factors – water costs, local expenses, etc. Then, we have the purchasing programs that give us cost leverage, which helps us do more with less.

What should superintendents understand before going to work for a corporate golf organization like Marriott?

What we probably do most differently is require a higher degree of planning and justification. You have to have more patience than you would in a private structure. But that process produces more consistent, excellent results. Having the ability to plan, put it on paper and zero-base a budget is critical. Just because you spent X dollars last year doesn't mean you need to do that this year.

What drove Marriott to make the environmental commitment it has made?

Our superintendents are like most – we do an excellent job protecting and enhancing the environment – but we wanted a third party to validate our programs. And, because we're Mar-

riott, we wanted the gold standard. So, we went with Audubon's certification program. It's a comprehensive program in terms of wildlife management, chemical usage, water conservation, native areas ... you name it. The biggest thing is that we've done an organizational outreach program to communicate all the work we've done.

It was the easiest sale of all time internally because Marriott is already so committed to green policies. The company jumped all over it. It grasped the benefits of Audubon International program immediately. Frankly, it's great brand recognition that's meaningful to most people. It means something positive environmentally.

We just completed our mandate, achieving certification for 25 of our courses in 2008. That includes all of our domestic facilities plus one in the Caribbean. In 2009, we'll extend the program to the rest of our international operations (another 17 facilities) in places such as the Bahamas, Costa Rica and Spain. The Cooperative Sanctuary principles make sense everywhere on the planet. And it's good business because it's a cost-saving program. You can show year-over-year savings financially.

Describe your average week.

My typical week includes a lot of travel. I logged about 130,000 miles in the air last year and was on the road 115 nights. Usually, it's Monday in the office, leave on Tuesday morning, visit a few facilities and come back later in the week. I spent 30 days in Tucson last year working on our Ritz-Carlton Dove Mountain project. Most people would be overjoyed about the idea of spending 30 nights in a Ritz-Carlton in Arizona, but even the nicest place grows old compared to home-cooking and family after a while.

My office is in a five-story office building that's not directly connected to a golf course, so I don't get to spend as much time on green grass as I'd like. I do a lot of internal education within the group, such as conference calls with our clustered operations (Caribbean, Florida, etc.) comparing properties and best practices and new ideas. I've learned that whatever challenge you're facing, someone else has faced it before.

Communication between our superintendents is critical, and it's a big advantage. Superintendents by nature share information, and that's one thing that's great about our organization. We can do that internally regularly instead of sporadically over coffee or a beer at a chapter meeting.

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SUPERINTENDENT PROFILE

What would you prefer to do be doing instead of sitting in an office or on a plane?

I love what I do. I may be the last person on the planet who still gets up excited to go to work every day. That said, playing center field for the Braves would be nice.

What advice do you have for young people considering a career in the business?

First, make sure you're truly passionate. Be prepared for incredibly long days and years in this business. You can't fake the passion that great superintendents have for what they do. From a resume standpoint, earn a B.S. degree in turf but think about a minor in a business discipline. In 15 years, you'll be using that minor more than the major. Intern with the most respected club and superintendent you can find and focus on maintaining those relationships for the rest of your career. That's the key.

Also, intern or take your first job in the climate you intend to live in. Location matters. There's a huge learning curve otherwise. If I'm picking from two equal candidates, I'm going to lean toward the candidate who has experience in that region.

Next, play golf. I don't care how good you are, but you have to be knowledgeable and able to communicate about what's going on with the game. Never lose sight that golf is the business we're in. Be seen as an expert in all things golf.

Internally, it's important to become fluent in real Spanish – not just golf course Spanish. Build relationships with the whole team – no matter what language they speak – rather than dictating to people.

Finally, get experience in new course construction, renovation or a grow-in. At some point, it will make the difference and pay off.

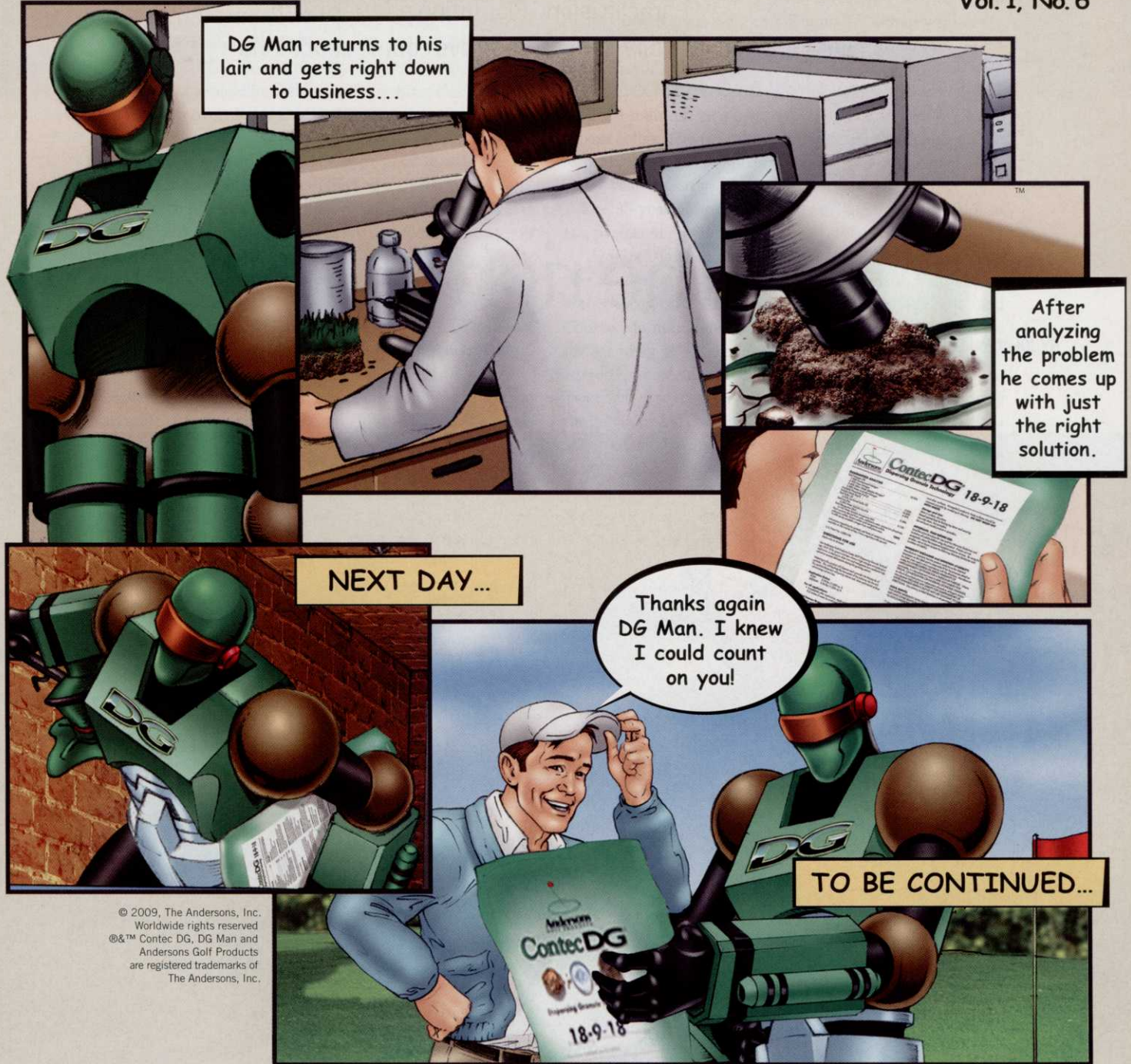
Final thoughts?

I constantly focus on the idea that we need to transform our image from maintenance experts to all aspects of club operations. I use a baseball analogy. We had a pitching coach in Atlanta once – Leo Mazzone – who was a tremendous teacher, but he never became a manager because he was viewed as a specialist.

The same is true for us. Too many of us hit a clog in coming up through the industry because we are viewed as too specialized. We have to change that perception, because superintendents have tremendous skills in all areas of operations if they're given the chance. **GCI**

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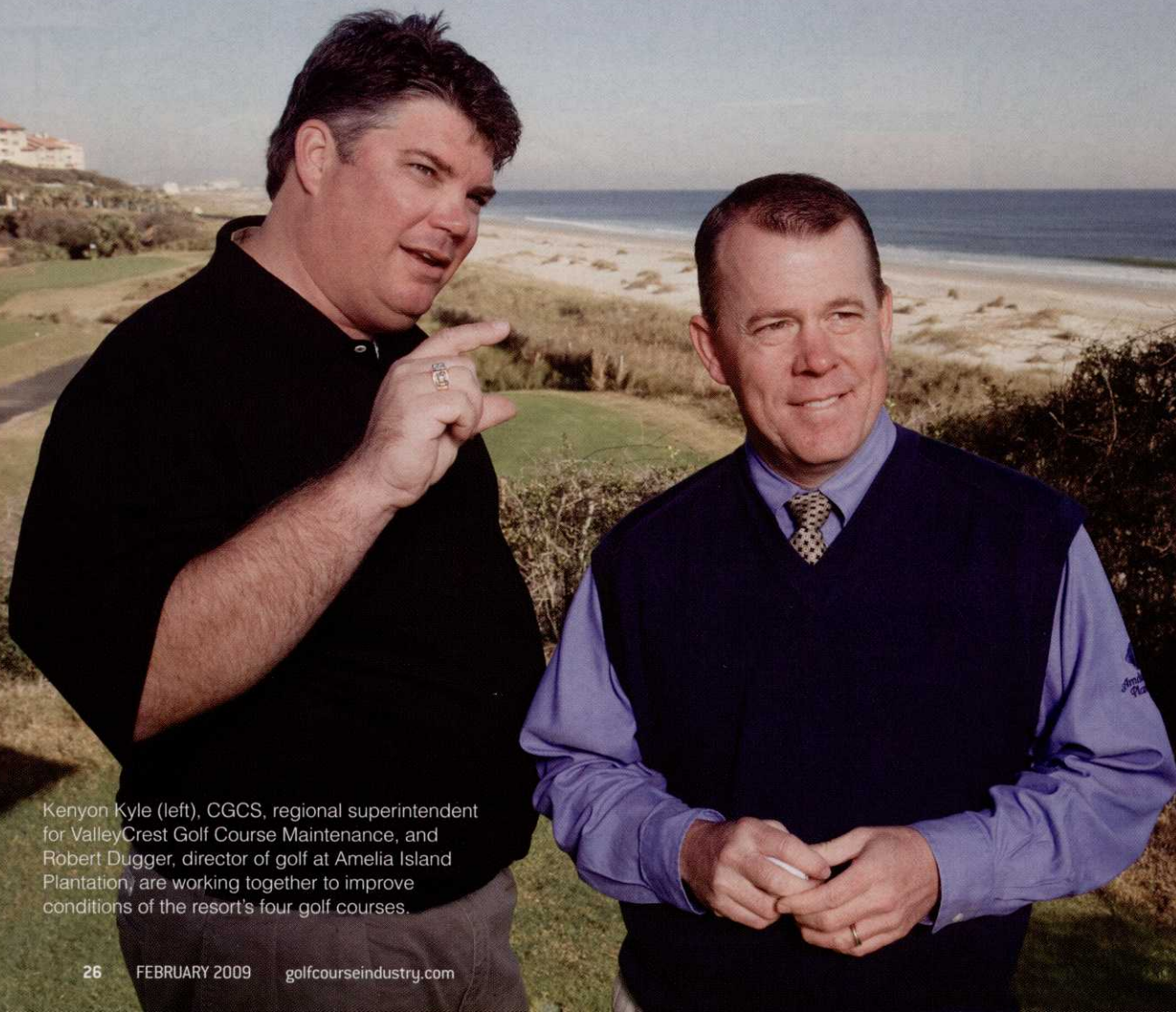
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Amelia Island Plantation partners with
ValleyCrest to improve course conditions

BY JOHN WALSH

The right match



Kenyon Kyle (left), CGCS, regional superintendent for ValleyCrest Golf Course Maintenance, and Robert Dugger, director of golf at Amelia Island Plantation, are working together to improve conditions of the resort's four golf courses.

Amid stiff competition, Amelia Island Plantation wanted – and needed – to improve the conditions of its four golf courses. Years of focusing more on real estate took its toll on the playing conditions. “The *Poa annua* population, from years of overseeding, exceeded anything I’ve seen before,” says Kenyon Kyle, CGCS. “The *Poa* was everywhere. It was like Visa.”

After networking and researching, ownership and management decided to partner with ValleyCrest Golf Course Maintenance to achieve desired improvements. In 2007, Amelia Island signed a contract with ValleyCrest to manage its golf course maintenance operation. Halfway into a three-year contract, conditions are improving, although they haven’t reached their goals yet.

“We had brought Billy Fuller out before to consult on a side basis,” says Robert Dugger, director of golf for Amelia Island. “The fact Billy was associated with ValleyCrest helped.”

Fuller, a former golf course superintendent at Augusta National, launched Atlanta-based Billy Fuller Golf Course Design in 2003.

“We needed a cultural change, a new way of thinking,” Dugger adds. “Amelia Island will embark on a \$65- to \$70-million lodging expansion, and we need to make sure the golf product matches that. We’re an independent resort looking to take the golf courses to the next level.”

Dugger received approval to hire ValleyCrest from the privately owned resort’s executive team, which consists of the president, general manager and executive vice president.

“We’re going to be a flagship property for ValleyCrest,” he says. “We were one of the first resort courses for them. They wanted us, and we wanted to leverage the high profile they would give us.”

John Crowder, the director of business development and marketing for ValleyCrest, approached Amelia Island after he attended a conference there three years ago. He acknowledges the course conditions had a bearing on his introduction.

“Robert Dugger didn’t know contract maintenance was an option,” Crowder says. “He had an open mind and another way of doing things.”

“We look at people to see if there’s a match,” he adds. “We saw a fit. We saw potential. They were aware of who they were and their competitors. Amelia Island competes with the big boys (high-end courses from Hilton Head to Daytona Beach), and they wanted to step up their commitment to golf.”

During initial discussions, Dugger was impressed with ValleyCrest’s employees and clients.

“John Crowder and his team have impressive experience,” he says. “We have a core membership group who is vocal and was skeptical about the ValleyCrest move at first, but after communicating to them, it’s been nothing but positive. ValleyCrest has changed members’ expectations. The ValleyCrest move is out of the box, but I want the best thing for us.”

James Wathan, golf course superintendent at Amelia River Golf Course (formerly Royal Amelia) who has been there since November 1999 when the course was under construction, didn’t have a problem with ValleyCrest’s involvement.

“My first thought when I heard ValleyCrest was taking over the maintenance operation was that if they were like Kitson & Partners (a real estate company that managed the resort before), I’d have no problem because Kitson paid their bills,” Wathan says.

The 35-year-old property’s owners wanted to position it as a preferred golf destination.

“Amelia Island has been successful in the resort destination market and wanted to position itself up,” says Kyle, who’s a regional superintendent with ValleyCrest Golf Course Maintenance and serves as director of golf course maintenance at Amelia Island Plantation. “It was looking for a stronger correlation between the resort and golf courses. Twenty-five percent of the people who used the resort used the golf courses. Ownership wanted to increase that to 50 or 60 percent. The challenge to me was to develop consistency among the courses’ conditions, obtain the best value for products and services, and help refine and develop the staff.”

Crowder makes a distinction between ValleyCrest, which is a contract maintenance company, and a management company. The company has a portfolio of partners, not properties, he says.

“One difference between us and a management company is that we’re maintenance specialists,” he says. “We’re not responsible for driving rounds or marketing. We’re there to position the property so they can sell it. We’re part of the maintenance budget. We’re subject to budget changes. We’re not an outsourcing company. Amelia Island isn’t handing something off to a third party. We offer an intimate service.”

One of ValleyCrest’s significant challenges is to define control.

“We’re not branding our maintenance,” Crowder says. “If you feel like you’re branding the golf course, it’s the wrong idea. We get our partners to understand their properties better, allocate their resources better, understand their financial commitments and gain control of their operation. We have one person working on property with a point person from the club. All labor are our employees. Our intention is to hire all people that work there.”

A LITTLE HISTORY

For a while, Amelia Island, which has 1,700 members, focused more on real estate than the golf courses, says Dugger, who has been at Amelia Island for eight and a half years, starting as a head golf pro at two of the resort’s properties and then becoming director of golf in 2004 when the position was vacated. As a result of that focus, the conditions of the golf courses slipped.

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“There’s a lot of history here before me,” he says. “The golf courses weren’t the main focus – real estate was for a number of years. Golf got pushed to the side. It was an amenity. That was the culture. So we said, ‘What’s the carrot that brings people here?’ The golf courses are the most valuable asset and need to be the asset that draws people here.”

Wathan says conditions at Amelia River have been consistent since the course was built, although the resort has gone through some difficult economic times and two private owners. The property went into default, the previous owner went into Chapter 11 bankruptcy, and the Bank of South Carolina took over the property for one year during which time Kitson & Partners managed the property. Amelia Island Plantation, which leases the property from the city, took over the property in 2005.

Since 2004, Long Point Golf Course has improved, Dugger says. The Ocean Links Golf Course peaked and became OK, then it transitioned and deteriorated. The facility acquired a fourth course, Amelia River, which was in good shape and has been taken up a notch since ValleyCrest came on board.

GETTING BETTER

ValleyCrest approached Kyle, who has been involved with golf course construction and multicourse operations for more than a decade in the Naples, Fla., area, to take the position at Amelia Island. Dec. 26, 2007, was Kyle’s first day.

“Anytime you walk into a golf operation that existed for two or three decades, you’ll run into a lot of cobwebs,” Kyle says. “There was *Poa annua* and other weeds that were problems, along with the density of the bermudagrass base. Our goal was to improve conditions and eradicate weeds. Right now, we’re focused on the playing surface. Eventually, we’ll move toward outlying



Improving aesthetics in outlying areas will be the focus once *Poa* and weeds are eradicated.

areas to improve aesthetics, but that depends on the economy.”

One of the beauties of working for ValleyCrest is the depth and breadth of experience, Kyle says. For example, he sat down with Jeff Higgins, the company’s agronomist, to address the improvements needed at Amelia Island. To do that, Kyle implemented a basic integrated pest management program that includes applying a postemergent herbicide followed by a calendar-based preemergent program.

“It will be two years before our goal is met,” he says. “Before I came on board, the owners decided not to oversee two of the golf courses, which gave us time to work on the weed population. It was a bold move because people come down from the North and want to see green.”

“We were brown and tan,” Dugger says. “This year, we’ll oversee. It’s taking time, but we’re seeing changes.”

The overall age of the facilities was another issue. Kyle and his staff have done a lot of work to improve the pump station and repair the ir-

rigation system in the field. They’ve replaced or repaired a significant amount of the cart paths, too.

One significant challenge is the maturity of the live oaks, which create a lot of shade. The crew is making lists to remove and thin trees to open up the course without losing the ambiance.

“They started removing the trees before I got here,” Kyle says. “It’s ongoing, and I’m not sure we’ll ever be done, but we need more sunlight on the turf.”

Kyle dealt with members and golfers overreacting about tree removal, but the complaints about it have subsided.

“Once residents and members saw the improvement and look of the golf course, it was difficult to argue the results of tree removal,” he says.

One of Kyle’s goals is to develop more consistency among the golf courses via bunker maintenance and the height of cut on greens.

“Ideally, I want to rake all bunkers the same way every day, but it’s difficult to achieve consistency with old and new bunkers,” he says. “I want golfers to have a consistent, good experience throughout all the golf courses. We want to create the same experience whether it’s the member course or resort courses.”

Part of the goal to becoming a preferred golf property is expanding the facilities, Kyle says. In tune with that, ownership is planning to build a new golf lodge.

“Once the lodge is complete, expect the facility to be transformed and be equal to or better than facilities in the competing markets from Daytona Beach to Hilton Head,” he says.

The golf courses of Amelia Island Plantation

Amelia Links, designed by Pete Dye and Bobby Weed, is a 36-hole configuration including two courses, [Oak Marsh](#) and [Ocean Links](#). Ocean Links is the primary resort course, and doesn’t generate much member play. Oak Marsh is a resort course, and also generates a fair amount of member play. Most residents live around the Oak Marsh course.

[Long Point](#), a Tom Fazio design, is an 18-hole layout that serves as the private member-only club. It takes some resort play on occasion.

[Amelia River](#), formerly Royal Amelia, is a Tom Jackson-designed 18-hole layout that supports the resort, receives a significant amount of member play and some daily-fee traffic.