

# Give Peace a Chance

They're supposed to scorn each other, but these superintendents and pros strive to get along for the betterment of their careers and courses

BY LARRY AYLWARD,  
MANAGING EDITOR

**T**hey're supposed to get along like Dennis Rodman and NBA referees or Kevin Costner and film critics. They're supposed to *loathe* each other.

But Cary Splane, golf pro at Gainesville Golf & CC, and Buddy Keene, the superintendent at the course, get along like baseball's best infield double-play combination.

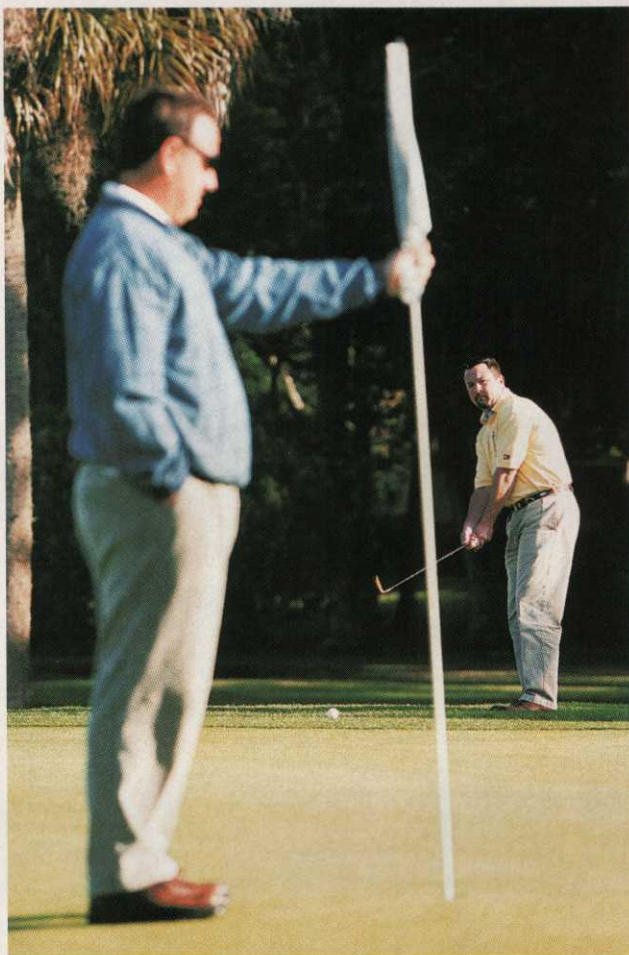
*Continued on page 38*

Pro Cary Splane (left) and superintendent Buddy Keene are co-workers and comrades.



JON M. FLETCHER

## Give Peace a Chance



*Continued from page 35*

On the Florida course, they're in sync when there's work to be done and a business to be run. Off the course, they have beers and go fishing together when there's fun to be had.

It doesn't make sense, of course. A superintendent and a pro that are cronies *on* and *off* the course? Since when do such hot-blooded adversaries get along, for goodness sake?

But Splane and Keene will tell you that getting along is vital — for business sake. A good working relationship also makes their jobs that much more enjoyable.

The two will also tell you that it doesn't make sense to take an us-vs.-them attitude. Life — and careers — are too short for that balderdash.

So Splane and Keene have elected to mold a relationship based on give-and-take, trust, understanding and patience — like a rock-solid marriage.

"We're definitely on an even playing field," Splane says. "He's the grass expert, and I'm the golf expert."

"I communicate well with him, and he communicates well with me," Keene adds.

Splane and Keene — and other superintendents and pros who strive to be allies — realize they need each other if they're going to be successful in their careers. Woody Woodall, the pro at the Country Club of Mobile, will tell you he would be going around in circles if he didn't have the Alabama course's superintendent Ron Wright providing him direction. Vice versa, Wright would say.

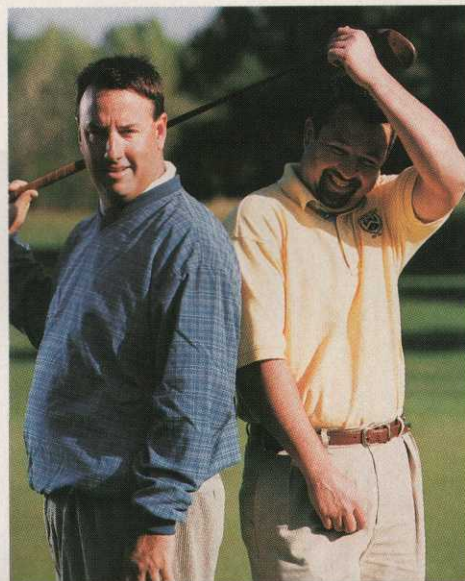
"It's essential that we have a good relationship," Woodall contends. "I'm going to get along with him — no matter what."

Woodall, who has been at the country club for 25 years, has seen and heard the stories of superintendents and pros who like each other about as much as Seinfeld and Newman.

"It's sad," Woodall admits, "but it's true. But the first thing you have to do to have a successful relationship is put your egos in a dark corner. There's plenty of credit to go around for everyone if you have a great operation."

Maybe the best way to avoid potential pitfalls is to learn to laugh at the tension that's supposed to be in your relationship. Splane

*Continued on page 40*



JON M. FLETCHER

**Yes, that's Cary Splane, the golf pro, holding the pin for Buddy Keene, the superintendent (top). They get along *that* well. And what's so funny about peace, love and understanding between a pro and superintendent? Nothing, Splane and Keene will say, but they still like to clown around (bottom).**

*Continued from page 38*

and Keene don't take each other's titles too seriously.

"When we meet people, I tell them that I'm the golf pro and Buddy works for me," Splane says with a chuckle. "And he'll say that he's the superintendent, and I work for him. It's a running joke."

### The issues

Don't think that Splane and Keene don't have issues to work through. Keene expects Splane to realize he has budget constraints and that playing conditions can't and won't always be impeccable. Splane expects Keene and his

crew to give the course extra attention when there's a tournament — to roll the greens and wipe the cups even if it means more man-hours.

At Pine Ridge CC, a public course in North Oxford, Mass., pro Mark Larrabee and superintendent Rob Larson strive to meet at a middle ground when it comes to the number of golfers playing the course and the maintenance schedule. "We understand we need to balance the maintenance of the course with getting people

through," Larson says.

"If Rob has to spray a few holes on the front nine in the morning," Larrabee says, "we're willing to close those holes and start on the back nine."

There are other issues that superintendents and pros must deal with, such as whether golf cars can be used during inclement weather. There's also the infamous who-should-be-in-control issue, which has led to many a power struggle.

One of the major issues between superintendents and pros doesn't have to do with the

course, but with money. That's no surprise; we've seen what money can do to relationships. But the superintendents and pros who say they have strong working relationships don't seem to be concerned about how much each other is earning.

"I don't have a clue how much Woodall makes," Wright insists. "And I'm not concerned. I hope he makes a ton of money. And if I wasn't making enough money, it's not because he is."

Keene believes superintendents should make as much or more than pros, but he says salary is a non-issue in his relationship with Splane.

"He knows what I make, and I know what he makes," Keene says. "I make a good salary."

Wright says a "professional" superintendent wouldn't care how much the pro makes. "A person needs to worry about his or her own business and not get wrapped up in what other people are doing," he adds.

### You gotta understand

Perhaps the vital element in a healthy relationship between superintendents and pros is understanding what each other's roles are in the successful operation of the course. Perhaps even more important is *wanting* to understand.

At Pine Ridge, Larson and Larrabee get along because they want to understand each other's functions. Larson says that Larrabee, also the course's general manager, isn't just concerned with herding people through the course like cattle to get the cash register ringing. Larson says Larrabee understands that constant shotgun starts and double tees will soon catch up to a course's aesthetics and overworked maintenance staff.

On the other hand, Larson says he understands why Larrabee must schedule the occasional 120-person tourney — and why Larrabee must see dollar signs. It's spelled r-e-v-e-n-u-e.

"But that money will eventually go into capital improvements and equipment and allow us to do a better maintenance job," Larson adds.

It doesn't hurt if you have a superintendent and pro who not only understand each other's roles, but actually sympathize with each other's duties.

*Continued on page 42*

"When it comes to what makes this place exist, it's the golf course. So our superintendent is the key element."

MARK LARRABEE  
pro at Pine Ridge  
CC, on superintendent  
Rob Larson



*Continued from page 40*

"I realize what a difficult job it is to be a superintendent," says Alyn Stanton, the pro at Sun Ridge Canyon GC in Fountain Hills, Ariz. "You're at the liberty of Mother Nature. I've always thought it's important to respect the people that are maintaining your golf course."

Stanton, a 15-year-veteran, realizes that pros shouldn't throw curve balls at superintendents, such as: "Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you. We're having a group of 150 people here tomorrow morning at 7 for a shotgun start." Stanton knows that poor communication of such will only get a superintendent's blood boiling.

"You need to have an appreciation for what your compatriot does — and the pressures and deadlines he or she is under," Stanton adds.

### **Talk, talk, talk**

It's easy to say (and cliché) that communication is integral to a healthy relationship. But why is communication so difficult?

Maybe it's because a superintendent and pro don't view each other as partners and, hence, don't interface. Then when things go wrong — and disagreements mount — their relationship turns ugly.

"Communication is not easy, and it's a big problem," Keene says. "And when there's friction, it's hard to communicate."

Communication is an art, Keene adds. You have to know when to talk and when to listen. You have to know when to tread lightly or hold your ground if there's conflict.

Communication, in its purest sense, means keeping each other informed. If you're a superintendent, you have to let a pro in on almost everything you're doing, Keene says. Splane will be one of the first to know when Keene is aerifying, topdressing or verticutting. And Keene will tell Splane *why* something must be done.

Splane appreciates Keene's efforts because he not only wants to know what's going on, he wants to be able to tell members *why* the greens were aerified or *why* they are slow. "I also act as a liaison between the members and him so I can let him know what's going on," Splane adds.

Splane stresses how important it is for pros

to know *why* superintendents do what they do.

"A lot of pros won't admit that they don't know what's going on," Splane says. "They know what the problem may be — the course is wet — but they don't know why. Then they're quick to jump on superintendents and blame them."

Splane and Keene will criticize each other — constructively.

"If he's upset with something I'm doing, he tells me," Splane says. "If there's something going on that either the membership or I'm not happy out, I tell him."

No one's saying that understanding and communication will lead to a perfect relationship, but it sure takes the pressure off.

"Not every day is a bed of roses, but when there's a dispute we always work it out," Wright says of his relationship with Woodall.

The men meet daily to discuss the day's activities and their concerns.

"We try to work as a team," Wright adds. "A lot of times, superintendents think they're more important than pros, and pros think they're more important than superintendents. They are really a right foot and a left foot — and you must have both."

Wright came to the Country Club of Mobile about five years ago. He wondered whether Woodall, a fixture at the club, would pull rank on him. But he has found Woodall to be a compromising co-worker.

"We have a lot of respect for each other," Wright says.

"We've had a nice understanding from the beginning," Woodall adds. "When Ron came here, I told him that I didn't want him to walk on egg shells around me. I told him to blast away, and that I would blast away. And when the smoke clears, everything will be beautiful."

Woodall would endorse Stanton's philosophy, which has nothing to do with control but everything to do with making concessions. In the end, according to Stanton, it's about superintendents and pros getting the job done together — and liking it.

"I have a saying," Stanton reveals. "We spend a third of our lives working, a third of our lives sleeping and a third of our lives doing laundry."

"So you had better enjoy your work as much as you can." ■

**"I've always thought it's important to respect the people that are maintaining your golf course."**

**ALYN STANTON**

*pro at Sun Ridge Canyon GC*