

Labor *of* Love

John Szklinski's deep voice quivers and cracks, and his blue eyes well with tears. Szklinski, superintendent of Southern Hills CC in Tulsa, Okla., is a mixture of melancholy and joy when he talks about his father, Richard, whom he calls his mentor and best friend.

Szklinski leans forward in his chair and wipes the trickling tears from his face with his large, coarse hands. His eyes are bloodshot but beaming when he tells how much his 60-year-old father has taught him about ethics, responsibility and hard work.

"I am whom he created," Szklinski says softly, noting he has seen his dad, who lives in his hometown of State College, Pa., only four times in the past 12 years because they live so far apart. "I miss my dad. He taught me a lot. I'm grateful."

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

One of the things the sensitive and strapping 6-foot-4 Szklinski learned from his father, who worked in the electronics industry for 35 years, was an intense work ethic. That work ethic has helped Szklinski get to where he is now. Southern Hills is one of the top tracks in the country, as well as the host course of the 2001 U.S. Open, June 14-17. Szklinski, who says he has wanted to be a superintendent since he was 18, is at Southern Hills because he worked his tail off to get there.

Szklinski and Southern Hills have benefited from each other. The course's green chairman, John Frame, says long-time members of the club have told him that Southern Hills hasn't looked better in 30 years. The club's general

Biography

Name: John Szklinski

Age: 36

Education: Penn State University

Years as superintendent at Southern Hills CC: 2.5

Previous Positions: 1994-1998, superintendent of Desert Highlands GC, Scottsdale, Ariz.; 1990-1994, superintendent of Desert Forest GC, Carefree, Ariz.

Previous Tournament Preparation: 1990 USGA Senior Amateur Championship at Desert Forest

Family: Wife, Jill, and two children, Devyn and Andrew

On his golf game: "I have time to play about once every three months. If you're playing four times a year, you're not playing well. You'll have moments of genius, but you'll also have moments of buffoonery. That's me."

manager, Nick Sidorakis, says Szklinski is one of the hardest-working and smartest superintendents in the business.

"John is a ball of fire, and he has tremendous

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**John Szklinski proves
hard work will get you
somewhere – like
Southern Hills CC and
hosting the U.S. Open**





General manager Nick Sidorakis (right) says John Szklinski is a leader and a visionary — just what Southern Hills needed.

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skills,” says Sidorakis, who hired Szklinski in December 1998 to replace Bob Randquist, who was at Southern Hills for nearly 19 years. “I couldn’t ask more from an employee. He works seven days a week. I have to tell him when to go home.”

But it’s more than Szklinski’s work ethic that impresses Sidorakis, Frame and members of Southern Hills. It’s Szklinski’s fervor for his job that wows them most. Szklinski genuinely *loves* what he does.

When he talks about preparing the course for the U.S. Open, you feel his zeal. After listening to Szklinski rave about Southern Hills for an hour, with his arms waving and head bob-

bing, you’re pumped to go out on the course and rake bunkers with him for eight hours.

“This is his love; this is his passion,” explains Frame, a Tulsa surgeon. “John is miserable when the weather is inclement, and he can’t be outside doing something.”

“He’s in perpetual motion; he’s nonstop,” says assistant superintendent Todd Towery.

Szklinski is confident in his ability as a manager of people and an authority on grass, but he’s also humble. Szklinski insists he’s the most fortunate superintendent in the world to achieve two of his top career goals — being a superintendent at a top-ranked course and hosting a Major — at the ripe old age of 36.

He may be fortunate for reaching those goals, but life as the superintendent at Southern Hills has been difficult — at times, drastically difficult. Szklinski has endured hardships in the last 2.5 years, including loss of staff, vandalism, a maintenance facility fire and a severe drought, from which other superintendents might have walked away.

“He has persevered through a lot of adversity,” Sidorakis says. “But he’s stronger for it.”

Szklinski was selected for the job from a pool of superintendents from the nation’s top 25 golf courses, Sidorakis says. Szklinski came to Southern Hills from Desert Highlands GC in Scottsdale, Ariz., where he was superintendent for five years. Szklinski, who has degrees in agribusiness and turfgrass management from Penn State University, didn’t like what he saw at Southern Hills upon his arrival — specifically the work ethic

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Szklinski rates Southern Hills CC for the 101st U.S. Open:

On the course: “It’s unbelievably tight. With the fairways cut down, the roughs up and the trees full of leaves, you feel like you’re in a box when playing. It’s claustrophobic.”

On the 12th hole, the course’s signature hole: “It’s a tough par 4. There’s usually rough around the green, but it has been cut down. If your ball hits right, it could trickle down to the creek.”

On the 18th hole: “It will be a brutal hole. It’s 465 yards and a par 4. It’s a dogleg right into the wind. It features a green with enough speed that balls will fall off the face of the earth.”

On the favorite: “It’s going to be someone who’s very controlled off the tee. Vijay Singh is the kind of golfer who could do well here. The course favors him if he’s playing well.”

On strategy: “As a player, you can never relax out here. There’s not a lull on the course.”

Szklinski (back of vehicle) doesn't apologize for being a hands-on superintendent. He's not afraid to get dirty.

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of some course employees. "There was a lot of wasted motion," Szklinski claims.

Szklinski says some employees wouldn't listen to his commands regarding course maintenance. For instance, the collars around the greens were erratic in width. In one area near a green, the collar was 9 inches wide but dropped to 2 inches in another area. Szklinski says he told workers to mow the collars to a consistent width, but they wouldn't follow his direction. "They didn't care enough to perform the job correctly," he says.

Szklinski challenged his employees to work harder. He admits he came on like a freight train at times, but he was also delicate in his approach.

"I wanted to get them excited about what we were doing," Szklinski says. "I mean, this is Southern Hills! This is class!"

But not everyone wanted to follow Szklinski's lead. Thirty of 38 crew workers quit during Szklinski's first six months on the job. Some



BILL WELCH

older workers left on good terms to seek less-strenuous employment, and one employee was fired, Szklinski says. But other employees who remained were bitter at Szklinski and challenged his authority. Szklinski says they told him he was foolish for doing certain procedures on the course, and that he wouldn't last two months at Southern Hills. But eventually those employees also left Southern Hills, Szklinski says.

Unfortunately, one disgruntled employee who quit allegedly poured acid on 12 of the

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Keith Foster Would Make Perry Maxwell Proud

By Larry Aylward, Editor

A year ago, Southern Hills CC reopened to its members after a year-long renovation. In a few weeks, the course, located in a residential area of Tulsa, Okla., opens to Tiger, Lefty and the rest of the field for the 101st U.S. Open.

But 15 months ago, members of Southern Hills wondered if their course would ever be the same. An intense renovation was under way and the course looked like a war zone. "The place was torn up," says superintendent John Szklinski.

Today, many are saying that Southern Hills is in its best condition since its glory days. The Perry Maxwell track, which opened in 1936, was restored closer to its original design by Paris, Ky.-based architect Keith Foster.

"Keith is a student of Maxwell's work," Szklinski says. "That's why we bought him in."

Over the years, the greens on Southern Hills' championship course diminished in size because of encroaching bermudagrass. Foster, with old black-and-white photos and maps to guide him, recaptured the square footage of the greens lost over time. On average, the diameter of the greens expanded 8 feet to 12 feet. They weren't cored, but they were gassed and resurfaced with a Penn A1 and A4 bentgrass blend.

Foster also directed extensive tee and bunker work. Nine new tees improve the course's consistency, as well as adding the extra

130 yards required by USGA. All bunkers were cored and reshaped to match their original style. "Players who were here for the 1996 PGA Championship will see bigger greens and deeper bunkers," Szklinski says.

In addition, the course installed an extensive drainage system and a new irrigation system. It also received about 17 acres of new sod on tees and around green and tee complexes.

When Foster arrived for work at Southern Hills in August 1999, he said he checked his ego at the gate.

"[The renovation] wasn't about me; it was about what was right for Southern Hills," Foster says. "Maxwell was a great architect. I knew I had to take a back seat to him, and I was glad to do so."

Nick Sidorakis, general manager of Southern Hills, says veteran members of 30 years tell him the course has never looked better. *Golf Digest* recently ranked the course No. 15 in America, up from No. 25.

The course will feature 4-inch rough for the Open (it's normally 2 inches to 2.5 inches). Greens will stimp at 11.5 to 12 (they're usually at 10 to 10.5).

"In terms of notoriety, this is my career highlight," says Foster, whose designs include The Quarry in San Antonio, Texas; Sun-Ridge Canyon in Fountain Hills, Ariz.; and Buffalo Run in Denver. "This is the most exposure I've ever had — and probably the most exposure that I'll ever have." ■

'Maxwell was a great architect. I knew I had to take a back seat to him, and I was glad to do so.'

— KEITH FOSTER

'John is the most intense superintendent I've ever seen.'

— KEITH FOSTER, ARCHITECT

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course's 27 greens, including eight greens on the championship course. The employee, who quit his job the morning after the vandalism, has not been charged, but Szklinski says a warrant was issued for his arrest.

The vandalism occurred in June 1999, almost exactly two years before the U.S. Open, and Szklinski was devastated. "I was rock bottom," he says.

Szklinski admits he was also concerned what others, especially green committee members, thought of their new superintendent after he was the target of vandalism and lost about 80 percent of his work force. "I was worried that fingers would point at me," he says.

But Frame says he never doubted Szklinski's integrity. "Through all the bad things that happened, I was not concerned in the least about John's ability as a superintendent," Frame says.

Still, it was a dismal time at Southern Hills. Sidorakis says Szklinski took the vandalism

harder than anyone. But after a few days of brooding, Szklinski and the others took a constructive approach to the situation. They decided it was a perfect time for renovation at Southern Hills. The damaged greens needed to be repaired, they thought, so why not restore the other 10 greens on the championship course, as well as the bunkers and tees. It was also a good time to lengthen a few holes for the U.S. Open, install a new irrigation system and improve drainage. Szklinski could also replenish his staff with his style of workers.

Szklinski told his peers: "This is an opportunity to turn a strong negative into the strongest positive you can imagine."

Southern Hills' members supported the project, and the course was closed for nearly a year to be renovated (*see sidebar on page 32*). Keith Foster, a Paris, Ky., architect and a student of Perry Maxwell, who designed Southern Hills in 1936, was hired to direct the renovation.

Szklinski and Foster hit it off. One of the

History Repeats Itself

When Tevye led his fellow villagers in the song "Tradition" in *Fiddler on the Roof*, they weren't singing about the United States Golf Association

— but they could have been. After all, just as Tevye lauded a traditional family structure, the USGA lauds traditional course design in its choices to host Majors.

You can almost hear the officials in Far Hills, N.J., speaking in solid and respectable tones as they choose their Major courses: "In 2001, we will hold the U.S.

Open at Southern Hills CC (circa 1936) and the Senior Open at Salem CC (circa 1925)."

In the midst of declarations that modern equipment has left classic courses impotent against Tour-caliber golfers, the USGA still chooses those same courses as the venues for the U.S. Open and U.S. Senior Open. The U.S. Women's Open will soon return to the classics for a long-running engagement.

In the past decade, the men's Open visited Pebble Beach (twice), Pinehurst No. 2, Olympic Club, Congressional, Oakland Hills

Though the USGA doesn't rule out using newer courses for its majors, history and heritage give certain courses an advantage

and Shinnecock Hills. The Senior Open has been played at Saucon Valley, Des Moines Golf & CC, Riviera, Olympia Fields, Canterbury, Congressional, Pinehurst No. 2 and Cherry Hills. The ladies, while interspersing modern clubs like Blackwolf Run and Pumpkin Ridge with notable oldies like Broadmoor and Colonial, will begin a run of classic venues beginning in 2006, according to David Fay, USGA's executive director.

The explanation

"There are some great old golf courses that have proven they can host the Open," says Tom Meeks, USGA director of rules and competitions who sets up the courses for the championships. "We have been to these old courses and know the challenges they provide. We know in advance [that] they are going to work. A good new course might

come on the scene, but it hasn't been tested yet. Right now, we have so many great old courses available, it's hard to not go back there periodically."

Ron Forse, a golf course architect who has performed restorations of two of the last three sites to host Senior Opens, as well as this year's venue, Salem CC in Peabody, Mass., says the choice of classic courses makes sense because the USGA is tradition oriented.

"They lean more toward the strategic and traditional courses," Forse says. "They understand the character of the classic course is more [than] a championship test of golf. They could choose any number of difficult new courses, but those places would not have a sense of history."

"We don't want to turn our backs on new courses," Fay says. "But we can only go where we are invited. You see the same names com-

BY MARK LESLIE

first things Foster noticed about Szklinski was his work ethic — he wasn't afraid to get dirty, and no job was below him. Foster says Szklinski was always picking up trash on the course. Even late in the day, when the two were exhausted from working, Szklinski would stop the golf car they were riding in to pick up a piece of trash.

"John is the most intense superintendent I've ever seen," Foster says. "I don't know of anyone as driven as he is."

Foster remembers Szklinski helping workers dig a ditch late in the day to find a leak in an underground pipe.

"He was like a steam shovel; there was mud flying all over the place," Foster says. "He was in this slop up past his knees. He said, 'We're going to find this water if it kills us.'"

Foster comforted Szklinski when the club's maintenance facility burned down in February 2000. The fire, caused by an electrical short, wasn't as bad as the vandalism because a new

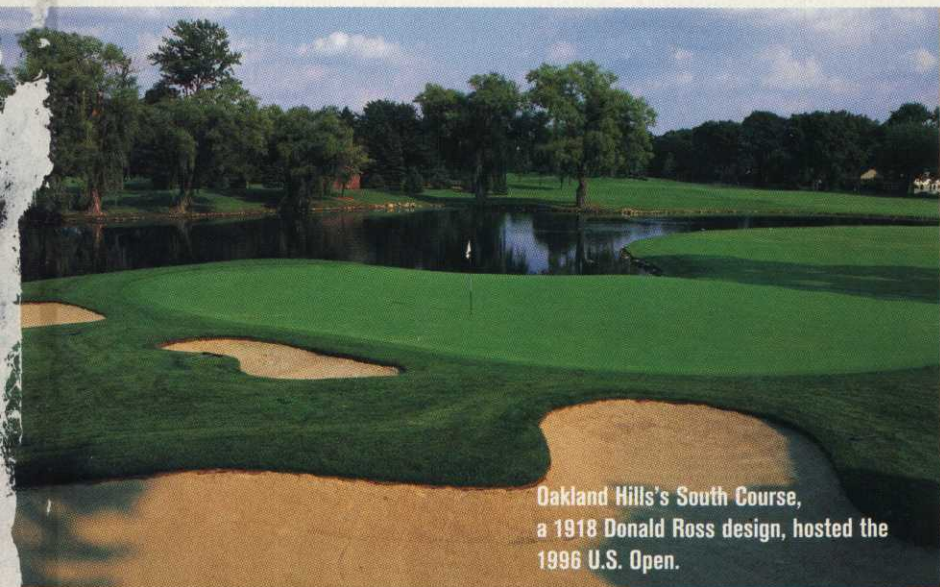
maintenance facility was already under construction. Still, it was a downer. Szklinski lost important paperwork in the fire, which also damaged expensive equipment.

Foster says he told Szklinski that bad things happen to everyone. "But the measure of a person is what they do when those bad things happen," Foster adds.

Szklinski didn't let the fire get him or his revamped staff down.

"John kept the staff going forward instead of backward," says Towery, who worked for Szklinski at Desert Highland for 1.5 years before joining him at Southern Hills in early 1999. "He always tries to look for the positive things instead of dwelling on the negative. Like he says, 'If it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger.'"

The course completed the renovation in time for one of the hottest and driest summers in
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Oakland Hills's South Course, a 1918 Donald Ross design, hosted the 1996 U.S. Open.

year at Saucon Valley, [but] they may not think so this year," he says. "The greens are severely sloped at Salem."

The women, meanwhile, have been tearing up the modern courses at their Opens, clipping along with winning scores at 16-, 10-, 8-, 2- and 7-under par, with a blip on the screen of 6-over par at Blackwolf Run in 1998. Perhaps their return to classic courses in five years will humble them. If humility is not the aim of USGA officials who set up the Open venues, it's at least a byproduct.

Fay says there will be no unnecessary toughening of Southern Hills this year in response to Tiger Woods's extraordinary victory at Pebble Beach last year.

"We just witnessed an extraordinary golfer with his A game," Fay says. "I can assure you there will not be the Winged Foot response."

Fay was referring to the fallout when Johnny Miller shot a 63 in the 1973 Open at Oakmont. The next year, Winged Foot became a nightmare. Players complained of rock-hard greens, ankle-deep rough and narrow fairways. The 1974 Open will forever be referred to as The Massacre at Winged Foot, when Hale Irwin's winning score was 7-over par.

"Before declaring that the ball is going further and that our great and classic golf courses are becoming obsolete, you have to

ing up for future sites, and these are venues with great historical competitions."

Tradition. Yes, Tevye would be pleased.

Unfair criticism?

But what about critics who charge that new equipment is rendering the classic courses obsolete? Recent history says today's greatest players are not beating the Pinehurst No. 2s of the world into submission. In fact, the only course that cried uncle recently was Pebble Beach last year when Tiger Woods

played as if he were on another planet and finished at 12-under par. But he was the *only* player in the field who broke par. In the previous five years (1995-99), the winners shot a combined 7-under par at the U.S. Opens.

The seniors have fared better over the last decade, with the winning score coming between 6- and 13-under par half the time, but at even or over par three times. This year, Meeks warns, players won't be nearly as happy with the choice of course.

"The players thought we were angels last

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'I look for opportunities to get in the trenches.'

— JOHN SZKLINSKI

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Tulsa's history. In fact, Tulsa endured the driest July, August and September on record since the Dust Bowl days of 1936. The course lost some fescue grass under trees, but that was the only damage, Szklinski says.

With all that's happened to him, Szklinski only half-jokingly says his career at Southern Hills is 2.5 years going on 10 years.

"But you know what, I'm better for it," he says. "I've learned a lot."

During the renovation, Szklinski admits he felt severe pressure. There was so much work to be done that he worked five months without a day off. But he was invigorated by it.

"It was addictive — having so many irons in the fire and so much responsibility," he says. "At times, I felt like I was getting squashed, but it was exciting."

Szklinski knows his rigorous work ethic has helped him scale the ladder of his profession. But his work ethic can also intimidate. "There

are people who work for me that think I'm a little twisted to the extent I'll go to get something right," he admits.

But Szklinski makes it a point to let his employees know he's not above what they do. He'll mow fairways, spray the greens and dig ditches with them.

"I look for opportunities to get in the trenches," Szklinski says proudly. "I'm the muddiest guy on some days."

The course is ready for the U.S. Open, but Szklinski is not done with the course. He's champing at the bit to get going on other projects when the tournament is over. "I want the course to be the best it can be," he says.

Szklinski and his crew will continue repairing the course's eroded creeks. He also wants to bring the course's 1936 vintage bermuda-grass fairways up to date.

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look at the big picture," says Tim Moraghan, USGA tour agronomist. "Who is making the classic courses shorter? It's Tiger Woods, Karrie Webb, Hale Irwin, David Duval — and they are fantastic golfers. They are going to hit the ball farther."

Setting up the Opens

Nevertheless, Moraghan and Meeks work with course architects and superintendents to fashion the Open courses according to a well-established template meant to reward keeping the ball in play, Fay says.

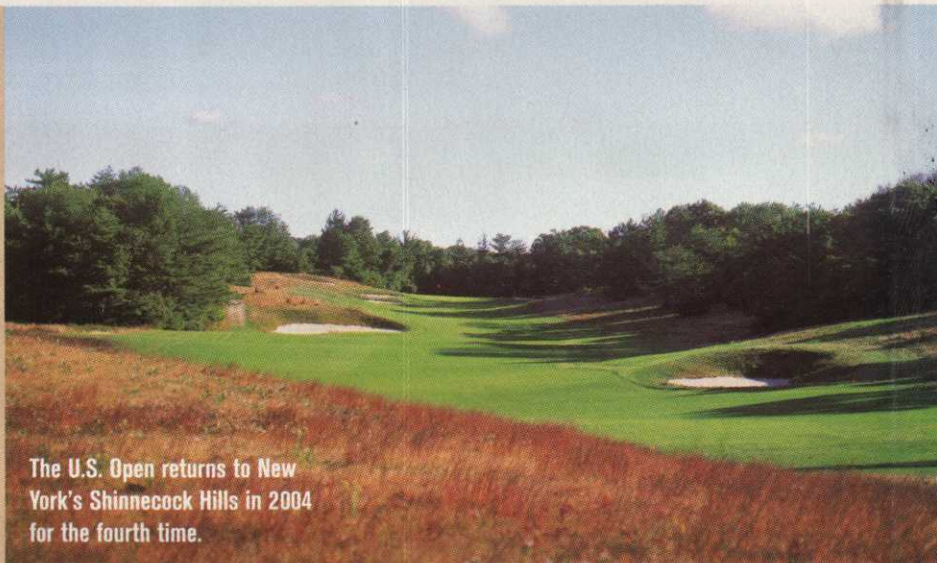
"The Open has gained the imprimatur as the world's toughest golf tournament because of the setup," he adds. "We believe par is a good score."

Some detractors claim USGA officials purposefully adjust the host courses to defend par and are overly concerned with a number rather than a course's natural characteristics.

"I'm not trying to defend anything," Meeks says. "We want the courses to be difficult, challenging and exciting — but fair."

The template they use to accomplish this goal includes:

- hard, dry and fast greens;
- fairways narrowed to 28 to 30 yards;
- a "punishing" rough;
- new tees added further back to lengthen



The U.S. Open returns to New York's Shinnecock Hills in 2004 for the fourth time.

the course and bring hazards more into play;

- bunkers angled or extended farther into the fairways;
- expanding any greens that have become smaller over the years, allowing more difficult pin placements; and
- changing par 5s to par 4s.

"We compared a course setup from 1975 to what Meeks and I did in 2001," Moraghan says. "Fairways now are treated like greens were 25 years ago — from cutting height to topdressing, aerification, irrigation systems, wetting agents, plant growth regulators and

sophisticated mowing equipment — even to hand mowing. That shows how far every aspect of the industry has come. Of course, the ball is going to go farther."

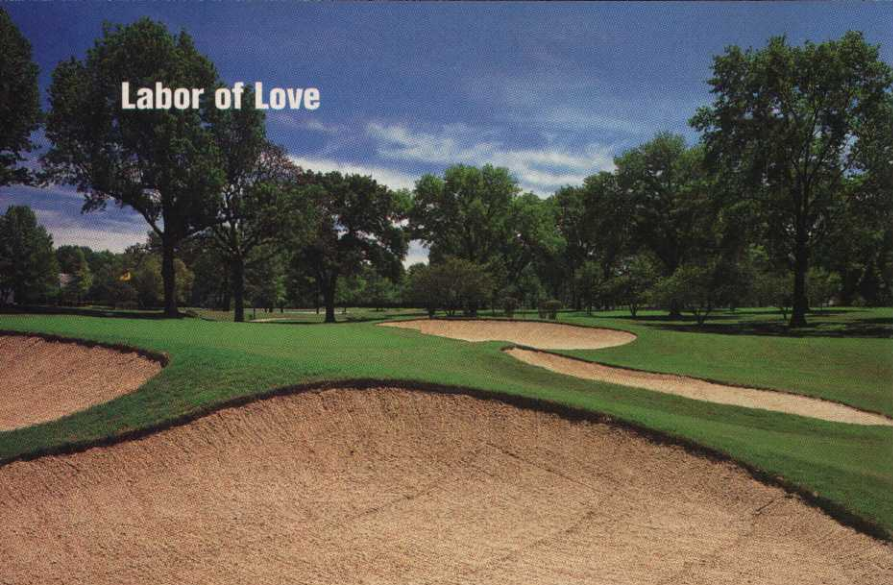
Architect Keith Foster, who renovated Southern Hills for this month's Open, says the USGA places a premium on ball striking and putting. Greens are the great equalizer in the Open, he says.

While greens built on new courses — with a sand base and turfgrass sometimes cropped to a mere 1/10th inch — have slopes

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MIKE KLEMM

Labor of Love



Members say Southern Hills hasn't looked better since its glory days.

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"I have a certain vision for Southern Hills, and we haven't scratched the surface of what we want to do," Szklinski says. "Do you know how awesome Southern Hills can be?"

Because there's so much work to be done, Szklinski vows there will be no letdown when the U.S. Open ends and the media circus leaves town with its bright lights and fanfare.

Szklinski also says he's eager to get back to his family life — his wife of 10 years, Jill, and his two young children. Szklinski wants to be home for dinner and play with the kids on the family-room floor.

"Jill has been awesome," says Szklinski, aware that it takes an understanding woman to be married to a man who gives so much to his job. "She knows this was my goal for 15 years."

Szklinski is not one to dwell on the obstacles he has overcome at Southern Hills. Never once does he exude even a hint of self-pity. As is his style, Szklinski takes a glass-is-half-full approach. Of course, he learned that positive approach to life's hardships from his father.

"There has been a lot of adversity," Szklinski says. "But all those gray clouds over Southern Hills ... well, every damn one of them had a silver lining. I've had people say I'm unfortunate, but I'm the most fortunate guy in the business." ■

BILL WELCH

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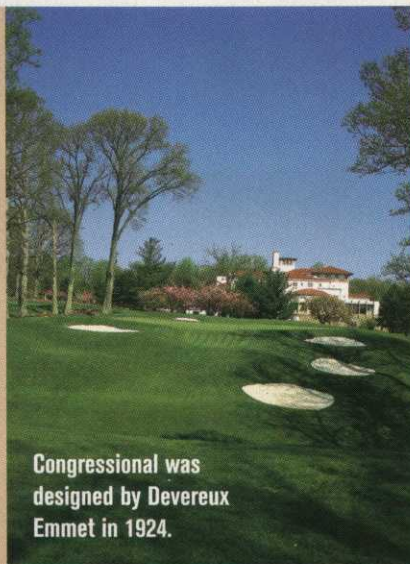
of 1.5 percent to 2.4 percent, the classic courses sometimes have green slopes of 4 percent or 5 percent. Modern cutting heights on old-time greens equal ... well, do you remember the old Bugs Bunny baseball cartoon where he was the pitcher, catcher and played every field position at once? "Therein lies the chief and primary defense," Foster says.

At Salem, Forse added tees to lengthen the course.

"You need to increase length and ensure that bunkers come into play as they were intended," Forse says. "Sometimes we will add fairway bunkers to keep the design intent intact.

"But when you narrow the fairways so much, the roughs become the hazards instead of the bunkers, and that is unfortunate," he says. "The problem is that rough has replaced sand [in the Open template]. Often, holes are more than 400 yards of hazards, with intermittent pockets of sandy relief."

Finesse players do better at the Open because recovery shots are more demanding, says Rees Jones, who is nicknamed the U.S. Open Doctor because of his work on many of the host courses. Narrowing the fairways and lengthening the rough causes some players to opt for irons instead of drivers off the tee,



Congressional was designed by Devereux Emmet in 1924.

giving the courses extra length that might not be possible otherwise, Jones says.

Critics charge that the added length tailors the Open courses to cater to only one type of golfer. Moraghan says the criticism is true only in the sense that the Open is designed to identify the best players in the world.

"OK, we identified Tiger Woods, Jack Nicklaus, Ben Hogan, Arnold Palmer and Lee Trevino," Moraghan says. "I'm sorry — those are some pretty good players."

"It's a great, great tournament," Foster

says. "Why shouldn't it uphold as many standards of the game as possible? Winning the Open is a big deal."

"The USGA wants players to think their way around a golf course, not play it by rote by the yardage," Jones says. "You want a player to decide when to go for the flag or green, according to where he hits his drive. If he hits an iron off the tee, he may have to go for the green rather than the flag.

The USGA wants golfers who can manage their games to win, Jones says.

"The USGA does that by making the hazards difficult," he adds. "It is the magician, not the mechanic, who prevails during the Open."

Is that how it was foreseen by the men who designed these great classic courses — Donald Ross, Alister Mackenzie, A.W. Tillinghast, Perry Maxwell and Jack Neville, among others?

"If I were designing today, I would add some room [to add length] 50 years from now," Moraghan says. "I think those men had the foresight that the equipment would get better, and I believe they added the room because of that."

There's apparently enough room in most cases to help tradition prevail. ■

Leslie is a free-lance writer from Monmouth, Maine.

MIKE KLEMM