

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

— KEITH FOSTER, ARCHITECT

Continued from page 32

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

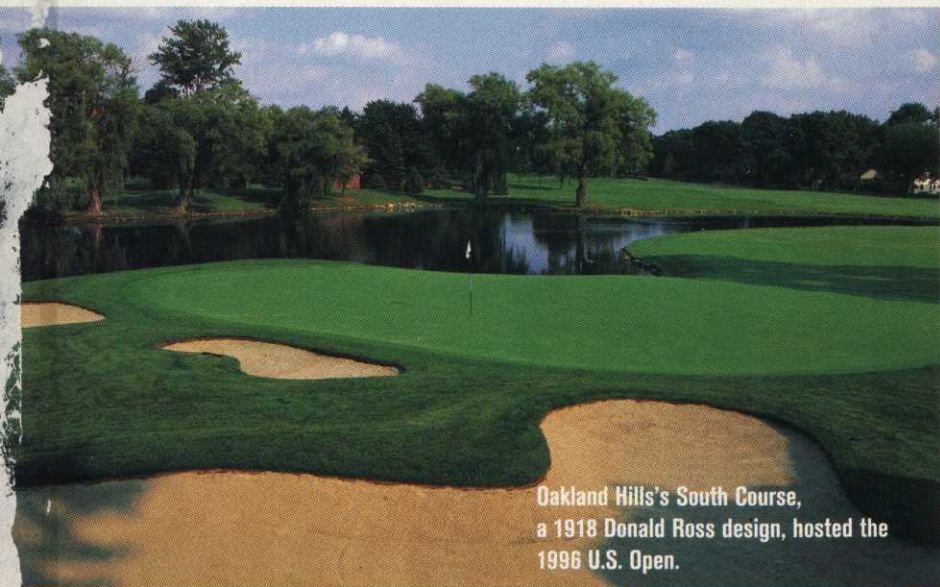
maintenance facility was already under construction. Still, it was a downer. Szklinski lost important paperwork in the fire, which also damaged expensive equipment.

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
Continued on page 36



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

Continued on page 36

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

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

— JOHN SZKLINSKI

Continued from page 35

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.

Continued on page 38

Continued from page 35

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.

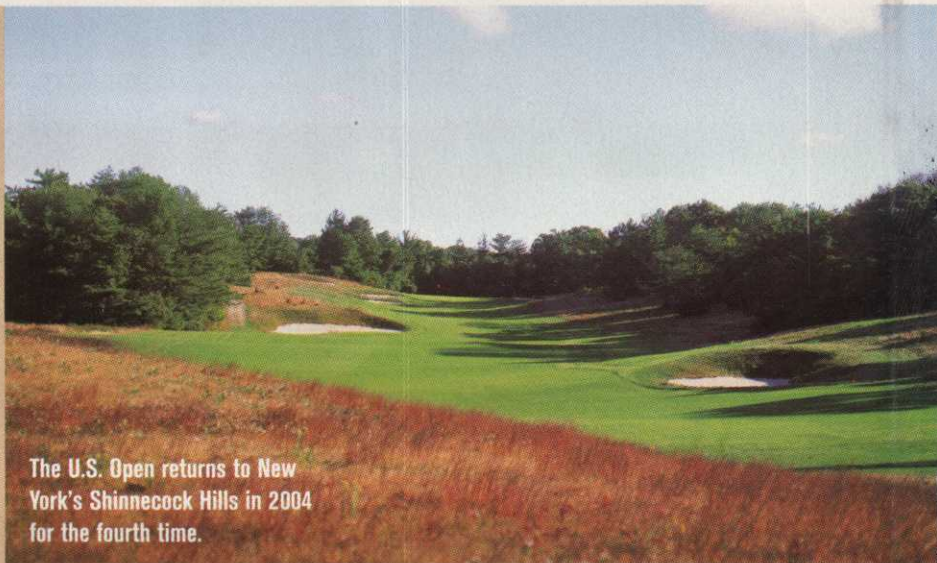
"The Open has gained the imprimatur as the world's toughest golf tournament because of the setup," he adds. "We believe par is a good score."

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."

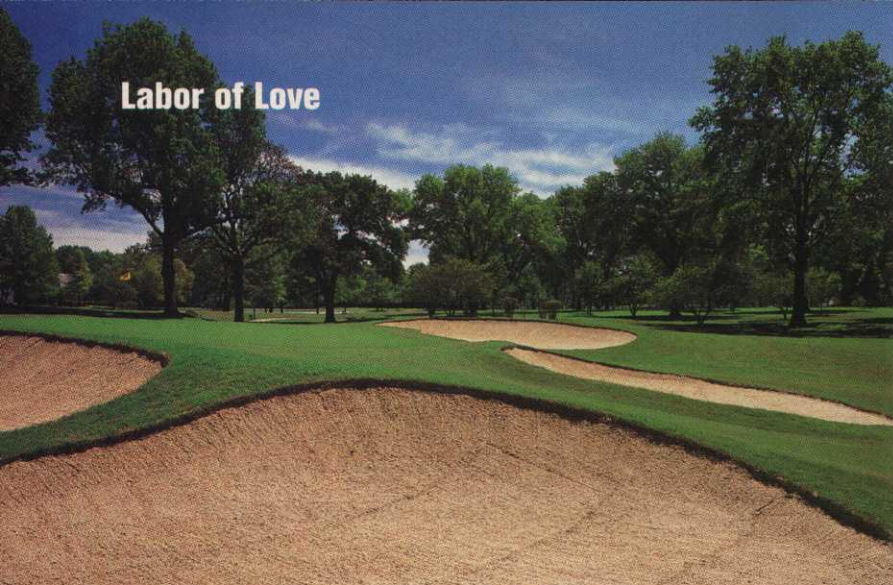
Architect Keith Foster, who renovated Southern Hills for this month's Open, says the USGA places a premium on ball striking and putting. Greens are the great equalizer in the Open, he says.

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

Continued on page 38

MIKE KLEMM

Labor of Love



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

Continued from page 36

"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

Continued from page 36

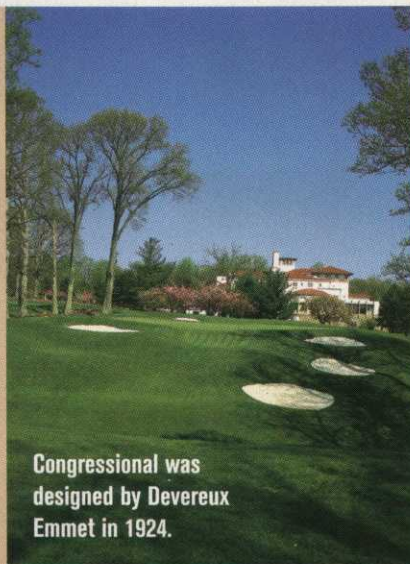
of 1.5 percent to 2.4 percent, the classic courses sometimes have green slopes of 4 percent or 5 percent. Modern cutting heights on old-time greens equal ... well, do you remember the old Bugs Bunny baseball cartoon where he was the pitcher, catcher and played every field position at once? "Therein lies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



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. ■

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MIKE KLEMM