

He's the Real Deal

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

You know what you get with Hazeltine National superintendent Jim Nicol

It's early June in Chaska, Minn., but it could easily be mistaken for November. It's a cruel 48 degrees, and a chilly rain falls steadily from the ashen sky. The dreariness of the day has Hazeltine National GC in its formidable grip.

At the course's turfgrass center, located

between the fourth and 13th holes, certified superintendent Jim Nicol can hear the rain dribbling outside his office door. The wacky, unseasonable weather is nothing new to him. Nicol leans back in his chair, throws his large hands behind his head, and announces that, thanks to an uncooperative Mother Nature, he and his crew are three weeks behind preparing for the 84th PGA Championship, set for Aug. 12-18 at the Robert Trent Jones Sr.-designed track.

"We haven't had any normal weather," Nicol says, going on about 90 degrees in early April and 40 degrees in mid-May. "This is the coldest spring in 50 years, and the weather hasn't been conducive to growing grass."

Other superintendents might be wiggling out about being so far behind. You would think Nicol would be angry and frustrated with the weather's unwillingness to help him and his crew prepare for the golf season's final Major. But the pragmatic Nicol, who turned 50 earlier this year, refuses to push the panic button.

"I'm not worried about it," he says in his thick Minnesota accent. "There's nothing we can do about it."

Well, that's not entirely true. Nicol is cool and composed about the matter, but

not James-Bond-in-the-middle-of-a-death-defying-stunt cool and composed. He confesses to a few sleepless nights. He's also trying to do *something* about it, like get a leg up on Mother Nature.

Maybe it was amid the tossing and turning in bed that Nicol came up with an idea last winter to protect his greens from desiccation. The Twin Cities area received little snow last winter, and Nicol was concerned that a few of the course's greens would be dried out because they were exposed to the cold, harsh wind. So Nicol and his crew collected snow from low-lying areas and spread it on the greens to protect them. They don't teach you that in school.

"I'm feeling a little heat, but most of it's self-induced," Nicol said in June, commenting on the pressure that comes with hosting a Major. "You worry about the weather, and you worry about the unknown."

While Nicol keeps everything in perspective, nobody wants the course to be in better shape for the tournament more than he. "Believe me," Nicol says, "*nobody* cares more about this than I do."

But Nicol stops short of saying that hosting the PGA will be his career highlight — he doesn't want to jinx himself.

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Biography

Name: Jim Nicol

Age: 50

Education: Penn State University

Years as superintendent at Hazeltine

National GC: Six

Previous positions: Superintendent of Bunker Hills GC in Coon Rapids, Minn., from 1978-1996; assistant superintendent at the Playboy Resort in Lake Geneva, Wis., from 1974-1978.

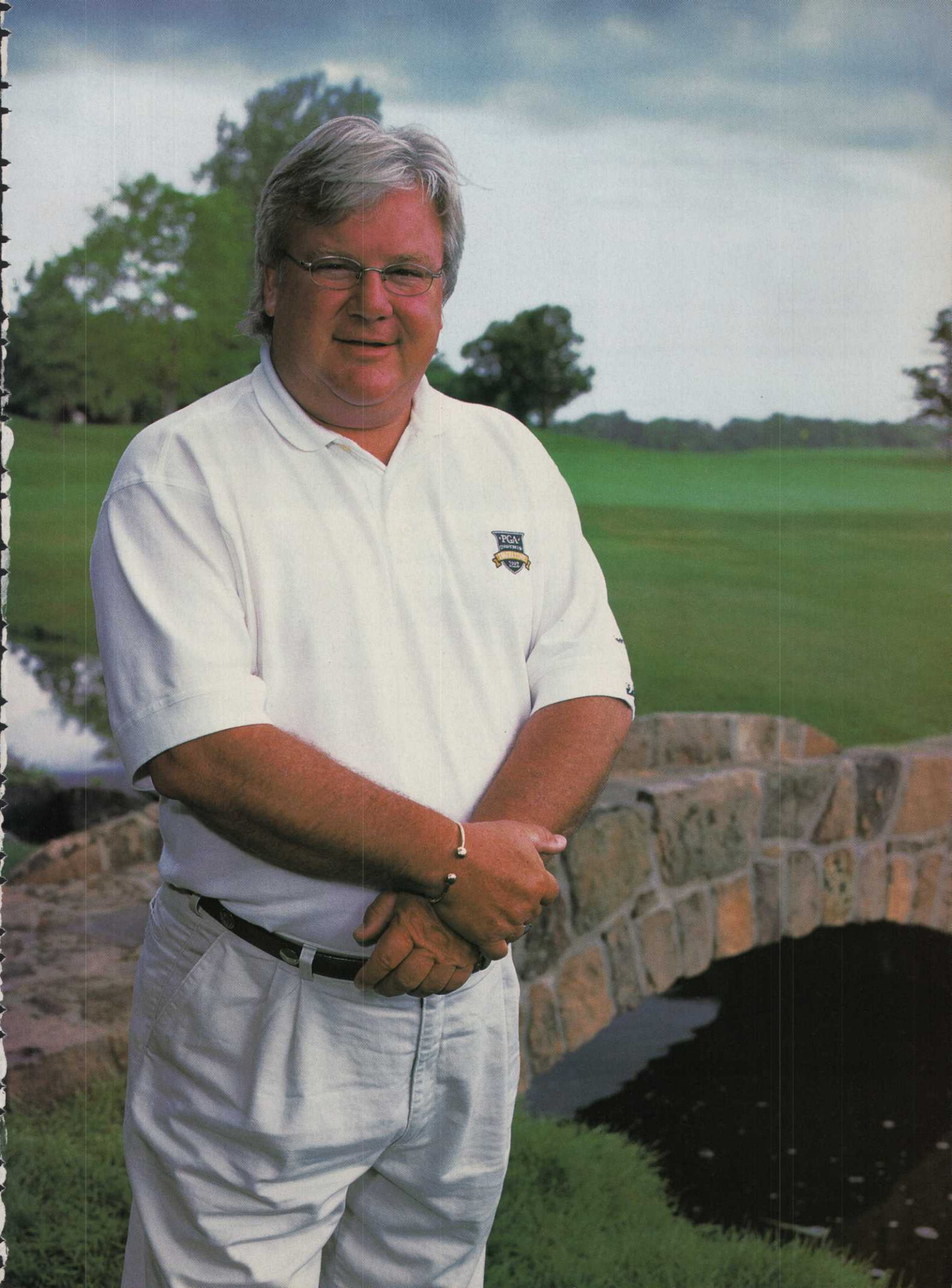
Tournament experience: Four Senior PGA Tour events, 16 State Opens and many local tournaments.

Career highlights: Certified in 1985; former board member of the Minnesota GCSA (served as president in 1999).

Wife: Barbara, married 15 years; no children.

Favorite sports movie: *Slap Shot*

Favorite recreational activity: Fishing



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"It could be a career lowlight," he insists. "One of my biggest fears is getting a big rainstorm and having the course flood. If we get 3 or 4 inches of rain, I'm not sure we're playing."

There's nothing phony about Nicol. He speaks his mind. He'll never tell you what you want to hear if he doesn't believe it himself.

Nicol, a member of *Golfdom's* editorial advisory board, has been called brash by his peers, but he's also humble. He's on one of golf's biggest stages, but he's not bragging about it. He doesn't wax poetic about how his career led him to Hazeltine. He doesn't go off about how he feels "his" course will tame Tiger.

His manner is the opposite. Nicol says there are better superintendents than him at nine-hole courses in places like Cowtown, S.D. He says he's thankful to

Course Conditions

Certified superintendent Jim Nicol says the heat was more severe in Minneapolis-St. Paul last year in mid-August than in areas of the Deep South, where the PGA Championship was held last Aug. 13-19 at the Atlanta Athletic Club.

People may think cold and snow when they hear Minnesota, but it can get as humid as . . . well . . . the Deep South in August. The heat and humidity, of course, will pose challenges to Nicol and his crew at Hazeltine National GC as they prepare the course for this month's PGA Championship.

Nicol plans to have the greens stimping at 11.5 to 12, but that isn't as easy as it sounds.

be surrounded by good people at Hazeltine, including Mark Storby, his first assistant and right-hand man.

"This is exciting for my friends and family," Nicol says of the tournament.

"It's a hard time of the year because of all the humidity," he says. "The leaf blades tend to get a little more succulent. We should be able to do it, though."

Tiger, Lefty and the others may find the rough difficult, especially later in the week.

"The rough will be cut at 4 inches the Saturday prior and then left alone," Nicol says. "It could be as long as 6 or 7 inches by the weekend."

The fairways will be cut at one-quarter inch.

"They'll be 'tournament championship brown,' as some people say," Nicol says.

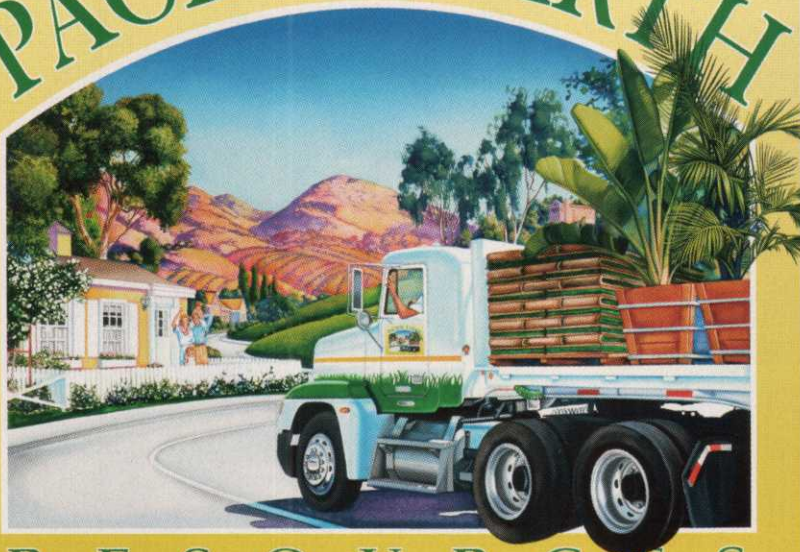
"We want the ball to bounce."

— Larry Aylward, Editor

"It's exciting for the staff and the membership. It's not just exciting for me."

Nicol is a Minnesota boy. He grew up in St. Cloud, about 75 miles northwest of the Twin Cities. He began his golf

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course maintenance career when he was 14, mowing greens part-time at St. Cloud CC. A short time after, Nicol joined the course's maintenance crew full-time. He enjoyed the job and loved working outside. He began to entertain thoughts of a career in the field when he graduated from high school.

"Every year [after the golf season], I watched the [St. Cloud] superintendent get in his car and drive to Florida for the winter," Nicol recalls. "I thought to myself, 'This guy has it figured out.'"

Nicol attended St. Cloud State for two years and then enrolled in Penn State University's turfgrass management program. While at Penn State, he interned at the Playboy Resort in Lake Geneva, Wis. After receiving a two-year certificate from Penn State in 1975, Nicol re-

Nicol speaks his mind. And he'll never tell you what you want to hear if he doesn't believe it himself.

mained at the Playboy Resort for two more years. But he longed to return to Minnesota and did so in the spring of 1978. He painted houses and performed other odd jobs during the summer before landing a gig as superintendent at Bunker Hills GC, a municipal track in Coon Rapids, Minn.

Nicol stayed at Bunker Hills for about 19 years. In that time, he says he did all he could do — PGA Senior Tour events, local tournaments and course construction. But after nearly two decades, Nicol felt he'd reached his peak at the course. He was 45 and wanted to move on.

In 1996, a dream job became a distinct possibility. Hazeltine National had an opening for a superintendent and the course's green chairman, Reed Macken-

zie, contacted Nicol to interview for the post.

Nicol says he was offered the job shortly after a Hazeltine committee member quizzed his wife, Barbara, in the restroom of a restaurant where the second interview was held. "People tell me, 'Barbara is the one who got you the job,'" Nicol says with a smile.

Mackenzie, the USGA's current president who served two stints as Hazeltine's green chairman (1985-1991 and 1996-2001), says Nicol was hired for myriad reasons.

"First, he maintained a municipal course with high traffic extremely well on a limited budget, which meant he was fairly efficient and used his resources well," Mackenzie says. "Second, he was well-regarded by the people who played the course daily. Third, he knows how to grow grass."

Hazeltine needed help with the latter, Mackenzie notes. The course's condition was not at members' expectations when Nicol arrived at Hazeltine that October. But Nicol, who says he was "excited and charged" about going to Hazeltine, was subtle in his approach and didn't try to do too much too quickly.

A few weeks after joining Hazeltine, Nicol and Barbara were at the airport waiting to board a plane to Florida for a vacation they scheduled before Jim took the job. Barbara pointed to the morning newspaper and told him to read the headline, which said, "Hazeltine to host 2002 PGA."

"That's how I found out about it," Nicol says. "Barbara and I just laughed."

Nicol didn't scrap his vacation, though, to begin preparations for the tournament. That all began the following summer when architect Rees Jones was bought in to revamp his father's 1962 design, including stretching it to 7,350 yards. Jones also rebuilt bunkers and added a few championship tees.

During a "normal summer," Nicol doesn't work most weekends, and he and

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Caretakers of the Game



James Nicol
CGCS
Hazeltine National GC
Chaska, Minn.

The 84th PGA Championship will be held at Hazeltine National Golf Club during the week of August 12-18. The prospect of hosting a major championship gives our club the opportunity to again show-

case this terrific design by Robert Trent Jones, Sr., which has been enhanced by his son, Rees.

As the superintendent at Hazeltine, I realize that our staff and I are on the spot to ensure that the golf course is in superb condition for the week of the Championship. I greatly admired the result of the hard work put in by Craig Currier and the staff at Bethpage State Park for the U.S. Open in June, and hope we can enjoy similar success.

It is interesting to learn that 66% of the field at the U.S. Open wore non-metal spikes. I know that Hazeltine is in better condition because of our non-metal spike policy. The dearth of metal spikes simply gives us a better opportunity of having the golf course that the membership, The PGA of America and the players demand for a major championship and everyday play.

We look forward to hosting the game's best players, and if we see a heavy dose of Black Widow cleats that week, the players will then have an even better set of greens for "The Season's Final Major, Glory's Last Shot."

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Hazeltine National certified superintendent Jim Nicol (far left) is quick to credit his crew for the course's continued success.

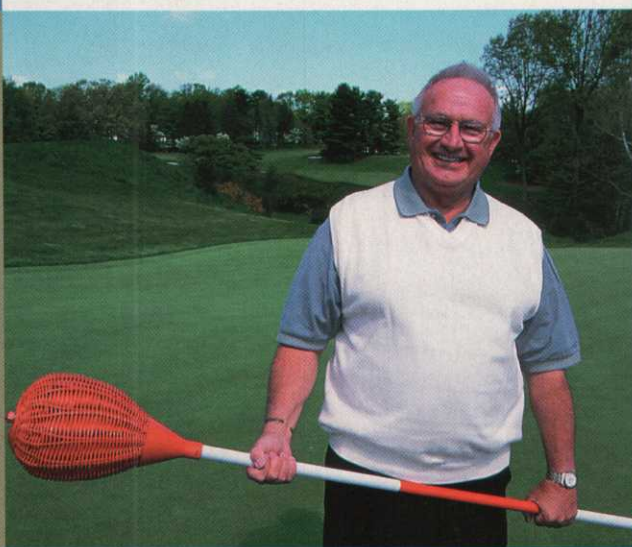
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Barbara take vacations. But this isn't a normal summer, and Nicol is resigned to the fact that Hazeltine is his second home. The carnival is coming to town, and Nicol is in charge of the main attraction.

"Right now our focus is on the championship," he says. "Everything we're doing is geared toward that week."

Don't ever accuse Nicol of being a workaholic, however. He prefers to work eight-or nine-hour days with weekends off and will return to that schedule soon after the carnival leaves town.

But don't get him wrong, Nicol loves coming to work and thanks the turfgrass gods for leading him to Hazeltine. "I can't imagine having a better job," he says. But being superintendent of Hazeltine is only a job. "It's a priority, but I have a life," Nicol says.

Nicol's life is Barbara, whom he married 15 years ago, his family and his friends. He and Barbara are nearly inseparable. "She's my best friend, and we do just about everything together," Nicol says. The couple doesn't have kids.

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JAMES C. CASTLE

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During the golf season, assuming the heat index isn't pushing 190 and there isn't a tournament happening, Nicol doesn't spend many weekends at Hazeltine. And he doesn't apologize for it.

He relates a story about bumping into Mackenzie a few years ago on a Saturday. Nicol was working, and Mackenzie was playing golf. Mackenzie had seen Nicol working the previous Saturday as well.

"Reed came up and said to me, 'Jim, what are you doing here? Don't you have this figured out yet?'" Nicol recalls.

Mackenzie was basically telling Nicol not to burn himself out. "If he's done a good job of hiring staff, which he has done, then there's no reason why Jim can't take time off even during the height of the season," Mackenzie says.

The encounter with Mackenzie made Nicol think. It also reminded him of something that legendary turfgrass professor Joe Duich taught students at Penn State. "Duich told us on the last day of school to train our staffs, surround ourselves with good people and live normal lives," Nicol says.

Nicol wants his staff members to have lives, too. After his first two years at Hazeltine, he empowered his staff to devise a plan so they could also have most weekends off. They did, and it has worked out well.

Nicol also isn't one to keep his crew at work until the crickets start chirping. Twelve-hour days equate to a high risk for accidents because employees get tired and careless after working too many hours, he says.

"We also don't work long hours for budgetary reasons," Nicol says. "Overtime costs money."

Nicol is the boss, and everyone on his staff knows it. But he's not a control freak, and he wants his crew to feel in charge of maintaining Hazeltine. "Here's how I look at it: If this place fails because I get in a car wreck and am laid up for three weeks, then I'm a failure," Nicol says.

Storby, in his ninth year at Hazeltine, says he loves working for Nicol because Nicol trusts him.

"He's helped me grow," Storby says. "He's taught me a lot."

Storby prefers Nicol's no-nonsense approach. "He's very straightforward, and you always know where he's coming from," Storby says.

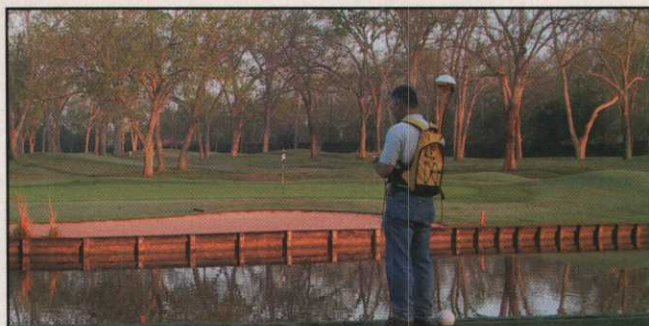
But not everyone likes Nicol's philosophy to tell it like it is. Sometimes, what he has to say doesn't go over well with the people he's talking to, which has included crew members, Nicol admits.

"But here's the thing," he says. "No. 1, it's never personal. No. 2, I do it because I care. No. 3, I'm not always right."

Nicol says he's been described as being "brutally honest," a character trait he does not deny nor relish.

"Some people say it's a quality, but I sometimes think it's

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a fault," Nicol says. "Sometimes I step over the line."

Nicol says he's "toned down the rhetoric," but he knows his demeanor has offended some people.

"I know there are people out there who don't like me," he says. "They think I'm brash and arrogant. But I don't think I'm arrogant as much as I'm confident."

You have to be confident to be in Nicol's shoes. Do you think Hazeltine's brass would want a superintendent without a backbone?

"He's a tough and firm employer with rules that [crew workers] are expected to follow," Mackenzie says. "On the other hand, he's fair and treats people well. He's a terrific manager of people."

Perhaps he gets along well with most people because he's a great conversationalist. Nicol is articulate and commands your attention. He'll have you thinking pensively one minute and guffawing loudly the next.

Barbara describes her husband as forthright and honest.



PHOTO COURTESY OF HAZELTINE NATIONAL GC

New at Hazeltine National GC is a bridge dedicated to the late Payne Stewart, who won the last Major held at the course, the 1991 U.S. Open.

"He's an emotional person," she adds. "He's not the type of person who holds anything in."

You get the impression Nicol loves to talk and not keep much in. But he's the first to admit he needs to shut up and be a better listener.

"I try to be quiet," he says with a smirk. "It's hard. It's a fault I work on improving constantly."

Nicol credits Mackenzie for teaching him how to become a better listener. Mackenzie likes Nicol's ability to relate to golfers and green committee members, even when they ask dumb questions.

"He's patient with those people to a point," Mackenzie says. "He's also willing to admit he doesn't know the answer to a question but will find out."

Nicol may help lead one of the country's great courses, but it hasn't gone to his head.

"I'm at a prestigious club and I have a great job, but I'll guarantee you there are superintendents out there who aren't as fortunate as me, but they're better than me," he says. "I know people at small 18-hole and nine-hole clubs that do wonderful jobs. They're the guys I respect, and I tip my hat to them."

For Nicol, there's plenty to look forward to at Hazeltine in the coming years. Next year, the course hosts the 2003 National Amputee Championship. In 2006, it hosts the men's amateur, and the PGA returns in 2009.

Then in 2016, the Ryder Cup comes to town. Nicol, who will be 64 then, says the tournament would make an awesome swan song.

"That would be 20 years for me at Hazeltine," he says dreamily. "I hope I can make it that long. That would be great." ■

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