

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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