

Jack's Right-Hand Agronomic Man

Ed Etchells has made a distinguished career out of watching over Nicklaus-designed golf courses

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

If Muirfield Village GC is Jack Nicklaus' baby, then Ed Etchells is Nicklaus' long-time babysitter. Nicklaus designed and built his dream golf course, which hosts the Memorial Tournament, near his hometown in Columbus, Ohio, in the early 1970s. "It represents what I believe and love about the game," Nicklaus says.

Etchells, who has looked after Muirfield's agronomic challenges and needs for nearly 30 years, could say the same thing. While he's not as intimately attached to Muirfield as Nicklaus, the course is still close to his heart.

Etchells was Muirfield's maiden superintendent, spending six years at the course in the 1970s. When Etchells left Muirfield in 1978 . . . well . . . he really didn't leave.

Since then, Etchells has served as Nicklaus' right-hand agronomic man, overseeing many of Nicklaus Design's courses worldwide. He visits Muirfield monthly to meet with superintendent Mike McBride and evaluate the course.

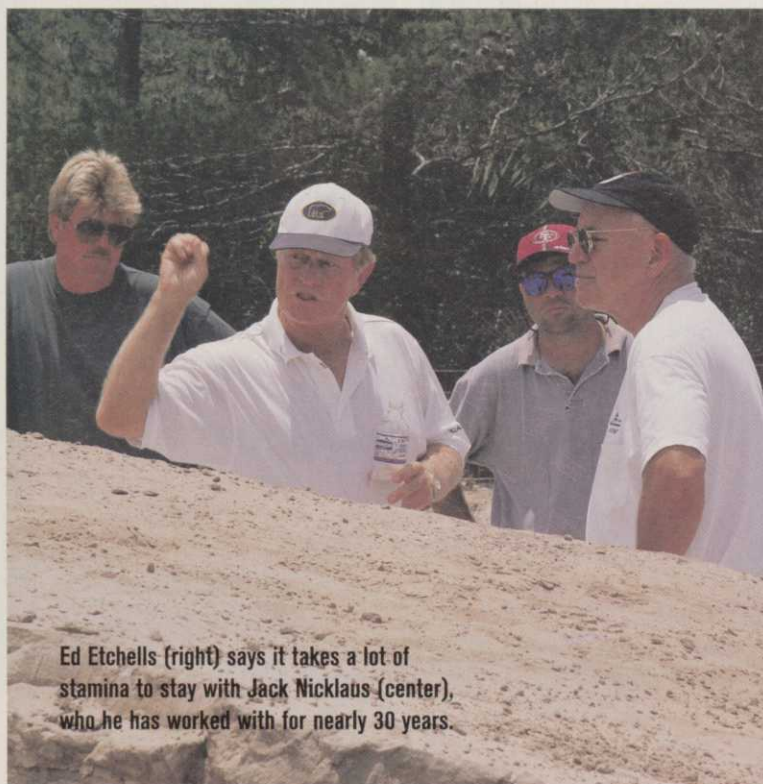
Etchells knows the ins and outs of Muirfield's fairways, tees and greens even better than the Golden Bear. "I know things Jack will *never* know," he quips.

Lasting relationship

Etchells' career with Nicklaus took a recent twist. He recently left Nicklaus Design after a 29-year career, including 20 years as president of Golfturf and 12 years as senior vice president of Nicklaus Design, both divisions of Golden Bear International. But when Etchells left Golden Bear International last December, he took Golfturf with him and added it to his own agronomic consulting and turfgrass maintenance firm — Greens Management Co., based in Tequesta, Fla. David McIntosh and Ed Hodnett, agronomists with Golfturf, joined Etchells.

"I'm grateful for the many years I've been

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Ed Etchells (right) says it takes a lot of stamina to stay with Jack Nicklaus (center), who he has worked with for nearly 30 years.

PHOTO BY JIM MANDEVILLE

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associated with Jack Nicklaus and Nicklaus Design, but this is an opportunity for me to grow something on my own," Etchells said last December.

The 59-year-old Etchells, however, will continue to work closely with Nicklaus-designed courses, including Muirfield. Greens Management assumed all current maintenance con-

tracts with Nicklaus Design upon acquiring GolfTurf.

"The bottom line is I have to worry about billing and cash flow on top of everything else I used to do," Etchells says, only half-joking.

Keeping up with Jack

Nicklaus hired Etchells in 1972 during construction of Muirfield when Etchells was superintendent of Brookside Golf & CC in Worthington, Ohio. Working for Nicklaus has been a treat and a trip, Etchells says. When asked about their working relationship, Etchells sighs deeply before answering.

"He's a perfectionist," Etchells says. "He's a workaholic, and he wants to do everything right. He brutalizes himself with the way he goes about his work. You must have stamina to stay with him. He's just go, go, go, go."

Etchells says Nicklaus is tough but fair — and very generous.

"He'll be there for you, and he has been there for me," Etchells says. "I've done a lot of things and I've gone a lot of places that few people get to go because of him. He's been very good to me."

The two have had their differences. Nicklaus expects the keepers of his courses to learn their playability. That includes Etchells, who doesn't play golf.

"Playability is about how a course plays, not about how pretty or green it is," Nicklaus says. "I had to hammer [that] into [Etchells'] head. It took a long time for him to understand what I was interested in."

"I have an eye for playability . . . it has been drilled into me," Etchells says with a laugh. "I give Jack credit for that."

Nicklaus is his friend, but not his pal, notes Etchells, who had no desire to be buddy-buddy with his former boss and now client, even if he's arguably the world's all-time greatest golfer.

"I've always been a firm believer in separation between employer and employee relationships," Etchells adds. "But Jack knows where to find me, and he can get a hold of me if he needs to."

Interestingly, the Philadelphia-born Etchells, who earned a turfgrass degree from Rutgers University in 1964, describes himself the way Nicklaus has been described.

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for playability. . .
it has been
drilled into me.”**

— ED ETCHELLS

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“Many people think I can be tough and abrasive at times,” Etchells admits. “But they also know me as being very fair and telling it like it is. I never have to look over my shoulder.”

On the road again

Etchells’ business serves accounts from The Golf Club of Purchase (N.Y.) to Spring City Golf Resort in Kunming, China. He’s a road warrior—logging more than 230,000 air miles annually.

Etchells usually travels Mondays through Thursdays and is back in the office on Fridays tending to paperwork. “Most of my work days are around 18 hours,” he says.

Life on the road is fun but taxing, says Etchells, who often visits Japan and China. Earlier in his career, Etchells traveled almost nonstop. It took a toll on his first marriage, which ended in divorce. Etchells celebrated his 25th wedding anniversary in April to his second wife, Lanna, who he says is more tolerant of his travel schedule.

Been There

Ed Etchells has consulted at more than 75 golf courses worldwide. Some of the more notable courses are:

- Augusta (Ga.) National
- Shoal Creek (Ala.) GC
- Muirfield Village (Ohio) GC
- Desert Highlands GC, Scottsdale, Ariz.
- Firestone CC in Akron, Ohio
- Tokyo (Japan) GC
- Glen Abbey GC in Oakville, Ontario
- Bear Creek GC in Chandler, Ariz.

While on the road, Etchells visits up to five golf courses a week. But his job isn’t just talking turf and filing reports. There’s a human element, which Etchells enjoys. Last summer, he says he helped save a superintendent’s job during a visit. The superintendent and the club president were at odds and Etchells acted as a mediator between the two.

IN A PERFECT WORLD
THERE'D BE NO
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PATCH

"Lately, a lot of superintendents have been coming to me for services, which is a change," Etchells says, noting that it's usually general managers or green committee chairmen who seek him for consulting. "They say they need help in trying to deal with their memberships."

It's been a nearly 40-year career and Etchells has seen many changes in the industry, from height of cut to heightened pressure on superintendents to maintain near-perfect tracks.

"When I came to Columbus in 1968, the standard for height of cut on greens was a quarter of an inch," Etchells says. "Now everybody's aiming for six-sixtyfourths and seven-sixty-fourths of an inch."

Career highlights

Etchells wears several feathers in his cap. He's proud that three PGA Tour agronomists have worked for him, including Jon Scott, the tour's current vice president of agronomy, who was employed by Golfturf for several years. "Golfturf seems to get its fair share of



PHOTO BY JIM MANDEVILLE

talent that goes on to bigger and better things," Etchells says.

Being a member of Augusta National's Turf Advisory Committee is another career milestone, Etchells says. When Augusta was hav-

Ed Etchells (left) makes a point while Jack Nicklaus (right) and others look and listen.

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“When I came to Columbus in 1968, the standard for height of cut on greens was a quarter of an inch.”

— ED ETHELLETS

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ing problems converting its ryegrass/overseeded bermudagrass greens to bentgrass in 1979, Etchells was called in to help. He remained on the committee for several years.

Etchells says he's also proud he's become a respected consultant in Japan's golf industry. He's also respected among superintendents, including Muirfield's McBride, who says Etchells is his mentor.

“We go way back, and I've learned a tremendous amount from him,” says McBride, who worked as laborer under Etchells when Muirfield was built. “It's been a long-lasting relationship.”

Etchells advises up-and-coming superintendents to *not* expect the world to be handed to them upon graduating with turfgrass degrees. “You have to get your hands dirty and learn how to crawl and walk before you can run,” he says.

While superintendents can be taught how to grow grass, they can't be taught the nuances of how to manage people. Etchells be-

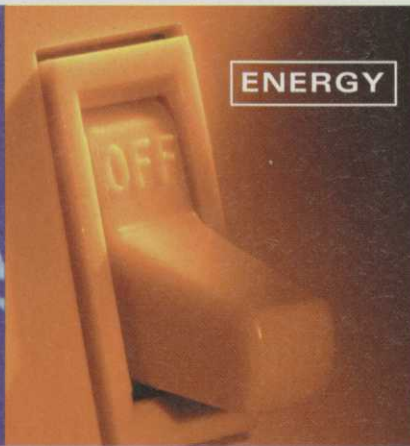
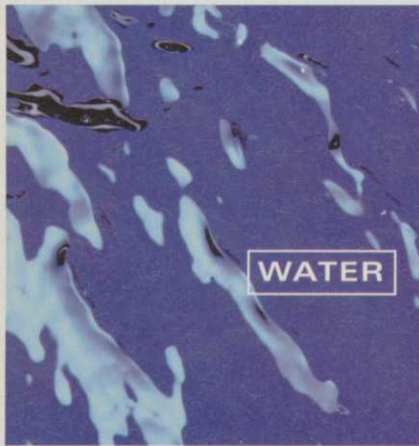
lieves the business is 90 percent people skills and 10 percent growing grass. “There are some real talented young people out there, but they don't know how to manage their laborers,” Etchells says, adding that superintendents must motivate workers to want to work for them.

Etchells didn't mention the importance of having a passion for the profession, but he did display his zeal for his job during a recent visit to Muirfield. He and McBride, who Etchells says does a “fabulous job” overseeing Muirfield, spent several hours on the course discussing possible renovations. You could sense the fresh approach both took to studying the course, which they know so well.

“It's my favorite place to come,” Etchells said softly, while driving his golf car down one of Muirfield's finely groomed fairways.

That comes from a man who comes and goes many places. ■

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