

Off The Fringe

On the (Golf) Ball

NORM SPAHN MAKES HIS LIVING DIVING IN THE DRINK TO RETRIEVE SHOTS GONE AWRY (AND OTHER ASSORTED ITEMS)

By Shane Sharp

On the other end of the telephone line is golf ball diver Norm Spahn. If you didn't know better, you'd swear it was Bill Murray's character Carl Spackler from *Caddyshack*. The words roll out of his mouth with a surfer-like drawl, and you half expect every sentence to end with "dude." The stories don't involve the Dali Lama, hitting a 200-yard approach shot with a nine iron or receiving total consciousness on his deathbed.

No, they're much better than that.

It's a sunny, warm spring afternoon outside of Atlanta, and the third round of the PGA Tour's Bell South Classic is underway. Sitting just beyond the grandstand on the 18th hole at the Tournament Players Club of Sugarloaf is a small lake. One of the tournament officials decides to park a brand new Dodge Ram pick-up truck on the bank so it won't block a small service road. Only problem is that he leaves the truck in reverse, not park.

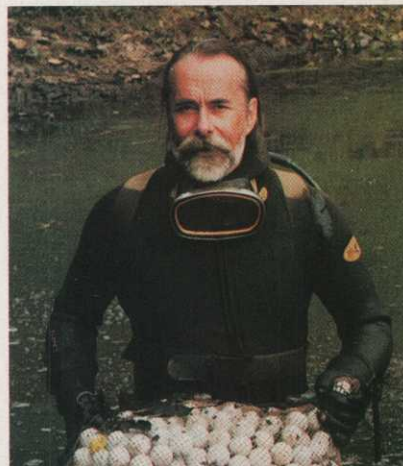
Five minutes later, the Dodge is sitting at the bottom of the lake, poised to become the course's most expensive artificial reef. Mike Crawford, Sugarloaf's certified superintendent, is momentarily perplexed as to what to do. Then he remembers the chap that spends up to four hours a day in zero-visibility water searching relentlessly for golf balls. By Monday morning, Spahn is at the bottom of the lake, searching through the muck to find a secure place on the truck to tie off the tow chain.

"Now that was a tough job because the frame of the truck was up against the hardpan, under two feet of mud," Spahn says. "It was a brand-new truck with 100 miles on it, and it was trashed. But they couldn't leave it there,

and no one else wanted to deal with those diving conditions."

For Spahn, it was just another day at the office. Since an entrepreneurial endeavor went belly up a few years back, the Jacksonville, Fla., native has been making his living salvaging golf balls from watery graves for the Davis Golf Ball Co. Spahn's territory includes most of the Southeast, with an emphasis in Florida and Georgia. Half his working life is spent in water that you wouldn't wash a stray dog, much less set foot in. And Spahn's unique vocation hasn't gone unnoticed by superintendents from Naples, Fla., to Duluth, Ga.

Fred Klauk, superintendent of the




Norm Spahn fishes for golf balls, Ford trucks and ball retrievers as part of his job.

Tournament Players Club of Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla., says Spahn and his crew come by every three months.

"I try to get them on the Stadium Course on Tuesdays when it's are closed for maintenance. If I have any problems with any of the irrigation pipes in the water, I can ask Norm for help."

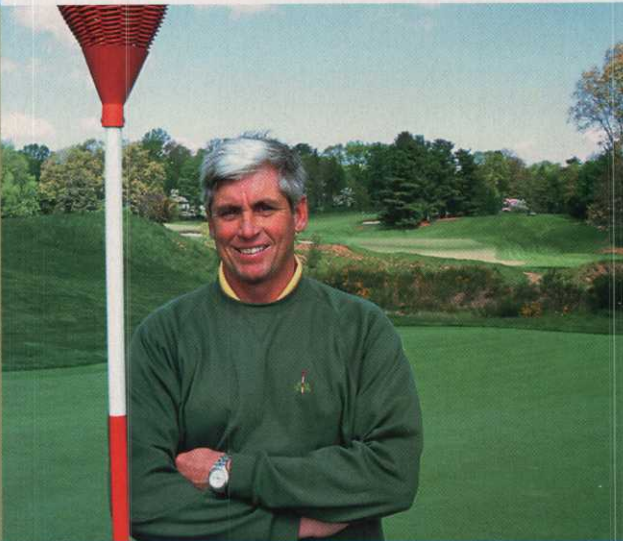
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Klauk and Crawford are not alone. At Deerfield Lakes GC in Jacksonville, superintendent Bruce Whitson was at a loss as to how to keep one local citizen from spending up to 30 minutes ball hawking during his round. The golfer, nicknamed "Soupy" for his propensity to spend countless hours trolling for submerged golf balls, was holding up play almost daily. Finally, Whitson called Spahn into action.

"They made up a sign with his nickname, Soupy, and they had me take the sign out into the pond on the end of a pole," Spahn says. "The sign had a glove reaching up from the water holding a golf ball, and I mounted it in the middle of the pond. The idea was to embarrass this guy so he'd finally stop. I guess it worked."

The Big Cypress GC in Lakeland, Fla., is part of Spahn's regular diving circuit. The green on the par three 15th hole is supported by bulkheading in the front. Standing on its edge, golfers can peer down at the hundreds of golf balls that didn't quite make it home. The first time he dove the pond on the 15th, Spahn was shocked to find a mess of broken golf ball retrievers stuck in the bottom.

After reporting this discovery to the maintenance staff, superintendent Dave Harley became increasingly concerned that some of Big Cypress' older constituents might lose their balance while gawking at all the lost golf balls, fall and impale themselves on the broken ball retrievers. Harley called upon Spahn to retrieve the retrievers.

"I get down there, and it turns out there are 41 of these things," Spahn says. "It looked like some sort of medieval torture chamber. I had never seen anything like it."

It's not always as glamorous as Dodge trucks, as gratifying as saving countless golfers from certain death at the hands of broken ball retrievers or as comical as teaching ol' Soupy a lesson. Sometimes Spahn simply lends a hand with repairing broken intake



pipes in dank lakes or pulling pond scum from clogged irrigation lines. Whatever the job, Spahn looks at it as good public relations.

"I do that stuff pro bono," he says. "If I can help those guys out, I will. That water is impossible to see in, and it's hard to find someone that can dive in black water conditions."

Spahn says he has even salvaged a few of his own balls while on the job. A golfer most of his life, Spahn doesn't play as much as he used to because the snail's pace of play on the weekends is too much for him to bear. When he does decide to tee it up, he has both the

Spahn's pick-up truck holds all of the equipment he needs to dive in "black water."

tools and the venue. Spahn has collected nearly 500 golf clubs while on the job, including a new set of graphite-shafted Pings.

"And a local Jacksonville municipal course extended me an honorary membership," Spahn says in his oh-by-the-way manner.

Now, if Bill Murray could just get Spahn to take care of that pesky vermin.

Sharp is a free-lance writer from Charlotte, N.C.

Golfdom and Floratine Salute 'Mentors' in New Awards Program

Most all superintendents have had one — that special supervisor or colleague who took the time to guide them, teach them and help them along the path to becoming a professional. Now there's a new award designed to pay tribute to these mentors, who have been such an important part of the profession.

Golfdom is pleased to announce the creation of the "Keepers of the Green" Awards, an annual program that identifies and honors the nation's best superintendent-mentors. The program, which is underwritten exclusively by Floratine Products, will identify four superintendents who've gone above and beyond the call of duty to pass along their skills, values and ideas to younger generations, according to *Golfdom* Publisher Pat Jones.

"Historically, the idea of apprenticeship and mentoring is one of the keystones that made the profession what it is today," Jones said. "We want to pay tribute to the people

who mentored today's superintendents, but we also want to keep this great tradition alive for future generations."

Nominations will be made through local Floratine distributors around the country. Bill Byrnes, Floratine's president, said: "This is a great opportunity to show our company's commitment to our customers and to the values and traditions that make this the finest industry in the world. We're thrilled that Floratine and our distributors around the country can bring the 'Keepers of the Green' program to life."

Each of the four winners will receive an expenses-paid trip to New York and a commemorative award. Winners will also be profiled in *Golfdom* and may be featured in Floratine advertising in the upcoming year.

Interested readers can share their ideas for possible nominations with their local Floratine distributor. To find a distributor in your area, call 901-853-2898 or e-mail techinfo@floratine.com.