

Keepers of the Green

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Keeping Tradition Alive

Golfdom and Floratine Products team up to honor professionals with a special commitment to mentoring

The tradition of apprenticeship is as old as the profession of greenkeeping itself. It's a time-honored way to share the knowledge gained from decades of experience with a young person who wants to follow in your footsteps. But, in these times of nearly mandatory college degrees and fast-tracks to head superintendent jobs, this tradition seems imperiled. Is mentoring on the endangered species list? Not if we can help it.

Golfdom is extremely proud to introduce the first four winners of the "Keepers of the Green" award, a new program sponsored by Floratine Products. Our winners come from diverse backgrounds and different types of courses around the nation, but they share one thing in common: an extraordinary commitment to identifying and nurturing talented young people with an interest in our business. Their stories are on the following pages.

A few thanks are in order for bringing this all together. First, I want to express our appreciation to Floratine Products and its president, Bill Byrnes. As the financial sponsor of the program, they enabled us to take a nice idea and put some teeth into it. Because of them, the winners enjoyed an expenses-paid trip for two to New York and other goodies. As Byrnes put it, they received a "reward to go with their award." Floratine will also be highlighting the winners in a series of ads you'll see each month in *Golfdom* throughout the rest of the year. This is a remarkable commitment from a remarkable company.

Second, I want to thank our panel of independent judges: Matt Shaffer, Merion GC, Ardmore, Pa., chief judge; Michelle Frazier, certified superintendent, Boston Hills GC, Hudson, Ohio; Willie Lopez, certified superintendent, Landmark GC, Indio, Calif.; and Jim Husting, certified superintendent, Woodbridge (Calif.) G&CC. These individuals, great professionals in their own right, faced the daunting task of reviewing two dozen outstanding candidates and ranking them. Thanks for a job well done.

Finally, I want to personally thank our winners for the wonderful example they provide to everyone in the profession. Because of you, the tradition embodied in the phrase "Keepers of the Green" is alive and well.

— Pat Jones, Publisher



THE 2003 WINNERS

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He Teaches People to Treat Others with Respect

BY MARK LESLIE

Team building, along with advanced detailed planning of course maintenance, are keystones to the learning curve for assistants working for Fred Biggers, the certified superintendent at 45-hole Wintergreen (Va.) Resort.

But some of his former pupils, more than a dozen who are head superintendents at their own courses now, would say that caring for employees as people more than workers is a subject of crucial significance that they learned from working with the 24-year veteran.

"Whenever I spoke with Fred, he always asked about my family, my children and me," says David Smallridge, certified superintendent of Sourwood Forest GC in Snow Camp, N.C. "This is where Fred holds my greatest respect."

"He made you feel as if you were an integral player," says Jim Matthews, superintendent of Greenville (S.C.) CC's Chanticleer Course, where he worked for Biggers. "He taught me to treat everyone as an individual and with respect, and to try to bring out the best from within each person, whether [that person] is an assistant superintendent or on the crew."

Because of his influence, Biggers is a recipient of *Golfdom's* Keepers of the Green Award, sponsored by Floratine Products, for being one of the nation's best superintendents/mentors. He was nominated for the award by Bill Appel, president of Growth Enhancer, a Floratine distributor in Roanoke, Va.

Biggers says he wants employees who have integrity and a positive attitude, and who are friendly and respect their co-workers. "Employees are all valuable people, and if you are not treating them like that, you are not doing your profession justice," he says.

At the same time, Matthews, Smallridge and the others who worked with Biggers at the 36-hole Greenville CC from 1988 to

April 1999 or at Wintergreen Resort since then have received a master tutorial in the management end of golf course maintenance.

"A lot of guys get out of school, and they think they know everything they need to know," says Biggers, a Clemson University graduate who has served as president of the Carolinas GCSA and South Carolina Turfgrass Foundation, and as vice president of the Virginia Turfgrass Foundation since 2001. "They learn they know a little bit and that it's totally different when the rubber meets the road. They realize they are the ones who have to drive the backhoes out there, dig up the leaks and fix them."

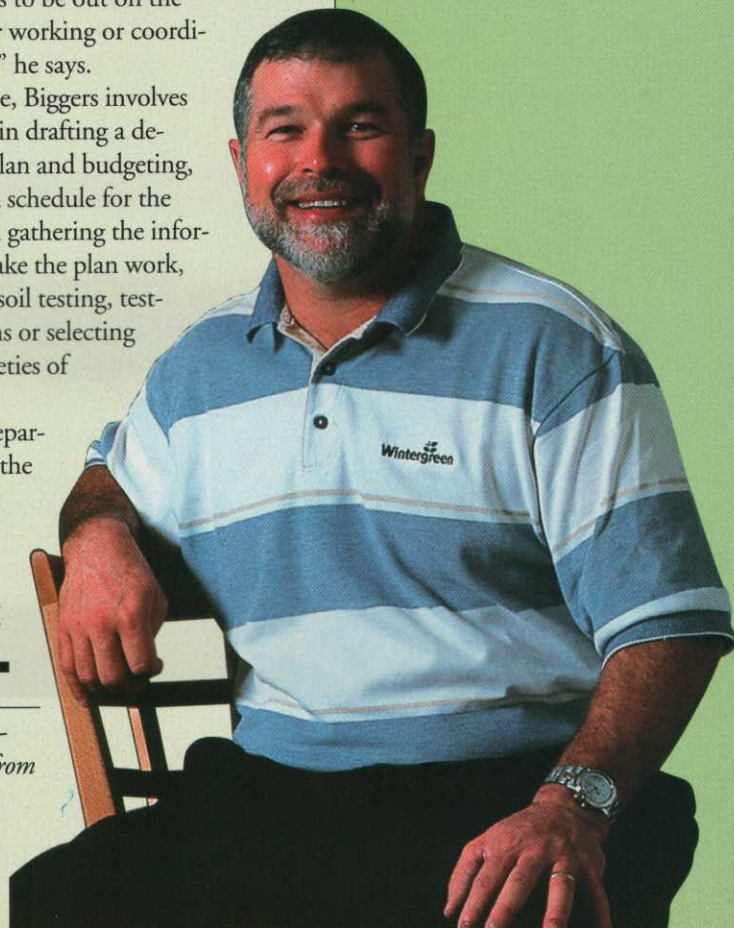
Since his current and previous jobs were at multiple-course facilities, Biggers has found himself in a position to mentor others. What does he teach? Work ethic, organization and planning. "I want my superintendents to be out on the course, either working or coordinating work," he says.

Meanwhile, Biggers involves his assistants in drafting a detailed work plan and budgeting, establishing a schedule for the next year and gathering the information to make the plan work, whether it is soil testing, testing the roughs or selecting different varieties of grass to use.

"We're preparing them for the job they will have to do when they get their own golf courses," Biggers says. ■

Leslie is a freelance writer from Monmouth, Maine.

Fred Biggers
Certified superintendent
of Wintergreen (Va.) Resort



Focused on Educating The Next Generation

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR., Managing Editor

One of the first things you hear when you talk to people about Brian Darrock is his commitment to education for himself and for those who work for him.

"Brian likes teaching," says David Kovack, sales representative for the Floratine Products Group of Southwest Turf Management, an independent distributor located in Palm Desert, Calif. "Brian feels it's his duty to train and supervise his assistants and interns so they can go on to bigger and better positions."

"He's a good, solid neighbor," says Mike Hathaway, certified superintendent and director of operations at The Bridges at Rancho Santa Fe (Calif.) GC. "He's the first to be there with ideas and gives freely of his time whenever a colleague needs help.

For his commitment to education and to helping his colleagues, Darrock is a recipient of *Golfdom's* Keepers of the Green Award, sponsored by Floratine Products, for being one of the nation's best superintendents/mentors.

Darrock, superintendent of Fairbanks Ranch CC in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif., likes education so much that he spent two years teaching classes at the San Diego Golf Academy to future golf professionals to help them better understand what superintendents do for a living. In fact, he would still be doing it today if the academy hadn't moved its headquarters farther from Fairbanks, which made it impossible for him to keep teaching. Darrock already commutes one hour daily from Murrieta, Calif., to his course, and he decided he couldn't continue to teach because it would add to the time he spends away from his wife and three children.

"It was a good experience for me and — hopefully — for my students as well," Darrock says. "Older golf professionals always thought of superintendents as Carl Spackler from *Caddyshack*. They're becoming more

familiar with what we do, and I was happy to contribute in whatever small way I could to that effort."

"I have to credit my father with raising me to have the attitude that you always want to help other people," Darrock says. "I've always thought that it's my obligation to give back to this industry, and that's what I try to do."

Kovack, who nominated Darrock for the award, says he knew what kind of person Darrock was when the superintendent was the president of the board of directors for the San Diego GCSA and established a benevolent fund to help golf course maintenance employees through difficult times, whether because of injuries or illnesses. Darrock's commitment to the fund stemmed from his own experience when one of his crew members was injured. Darrock solicited donations from his colleagues to help the employee feed his family.

Brian Sandland, superintendent of Escondido CC in Escondido, Calif., worked for Darrock for six years, the last four as his assistant. He says Darrock was invaluable in helping him advance to his current position.

"I had the pleasure of being Brian's assistant for four years, and it was an experience I wouldn't trade for anything," Sandland says. "I would never have achieved [my current position] without the mentoring I received from him."

Darrock's efforts leave a lasting impression on those who work with him, even if it's only for a short time. Just ask Thad Kintigh, superintendent of the PGA of Southern California in Calimesa, Calif. Kintigh interned with Darrock in 1993 and credits him with helping him decide to enter the industry.

"I was only there for six months, but Brian opened my eyes to the possibilities of this profession," Kintigh says. "He taught me what separates a great course from a good course. He also makes you feel like you matter to him. ■

→ Brian Darrock

Superintendent of Fairbanks Ranch CC in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif.



His Acute Attention to Detail Makes a Lasting Impression

BY MARK LESLIE

When Kirk Carls decided to make a midlife career change into turfgrass management, he was very fortunate. The Michigan State University professor he called for advice connected him to Kurt Thuemmel, certified superintendent of Walnut Hills CC in East Lansing, Mich., one of the country's foremost mentors of golf course assistant superintendents.

Seven years later, and now head superintendent at Spring Lake (Mich.) CC, Carls says: "Everything I have today is because of Kurt Thuemmel. He's been invaluable to me. You always have one guy who brought you along, gave you advice and helped you in time of need. He has been that guy for me."

"One of the things you immediately learn from Kurt is the importance of attention to detail, as well as keeping your nose to the grindstone and minding every detail on a daily basis," says seven-year Thuemmel assistant Curt Grost, now head superintendent at Willow Wood CC in Portland, Mich.

For his dedication, Thuemmel is a recipient of *Golfdom's* Keepers of the Green Award, sponsored by Floratine Products, for being one of the nation's best superintendents/mentors.

Carls and Grost are among at least 10 former Thuemmel assistants who are current head superintendents, according to Jim Johnson of Green & Grow, a Floratine distributor who nominated Thuemmel for the award.

"It's very rewarding (to mentor), especially when you get a phone call and they tell you they are doing some of the same practices as you, and they are very happy with the results," Thuemmel says. "You see yourself reflected in their work."

Proud of the success of his pupils, he says, "If a person does not move on and

become successful, you have to wonder if you have not contributed enough to his or her development."

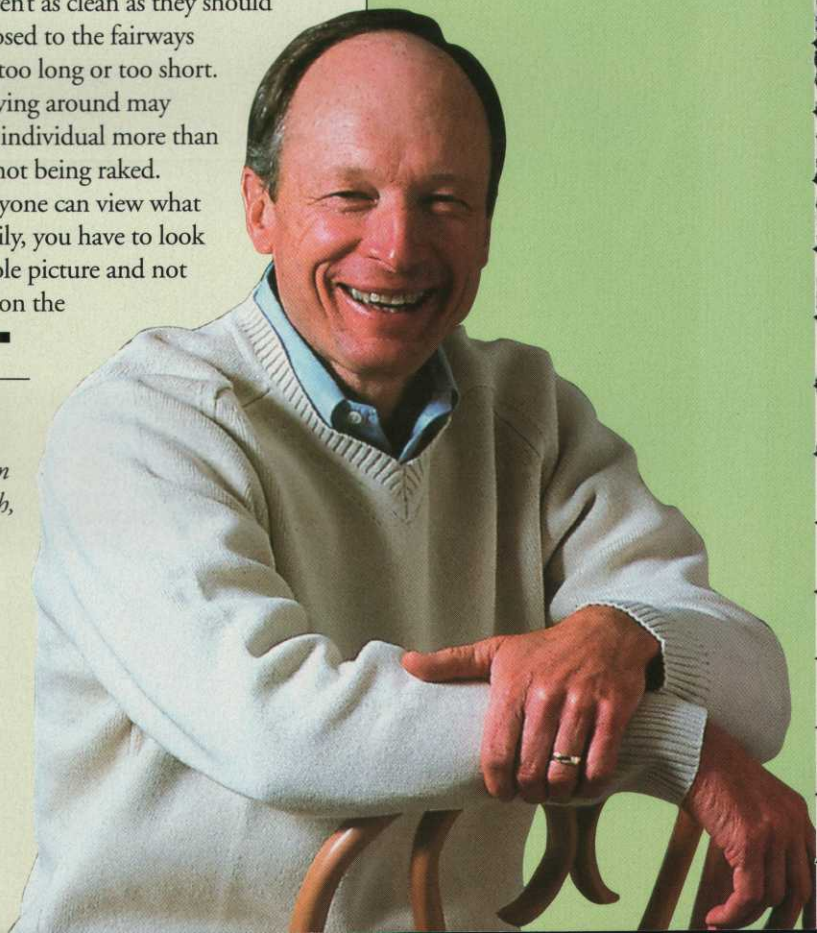
A 1971 Michigan State University graduate and past president of the Michigan Turfgrass Foundation and West Michigan GCSA, Thuemmel lists "dedication to your employer" as the No. 1 priority he tries to instill. Also important, he adds, are "a good work ethic, integrity, being meticulous and responsible and being able to make decisions that aren't always necessarily popular but you believe are the right things to do. You take a stand."

"Golfers judge your work on a daily basis," Thuemmel says. "I tell my assistants that what sets us apart from other golf courses is the fact that we pay attention to the little things, which are often the sources of negative feedback from the golfers. It could be the towels and ball washers aren't as clean as they should be as opposed to the fairways being cut too long or too short. Or trash lying around may bother an individual more than a bunker not being raked. Since everyone can view what you do daily, you have to look at the whole picture and not just focus on the obvious." ■

Leslie is a free-lance writer from Monmouth, Maine.

Kurt Thuemmel

Certified superintendent of Walnut Hills CC in East Lansing, Mich.



He's Always Extending a Helping Hand

BY LARRY AYLWARD, Editor

They like Mike. The general manager, the director of golf, the greens committee chairman and just about everybody else at Cedar Ridge CC in Broken Arrow, Okla., have nothing but respect for Mike Wooten, who has been the superintendent of the golf course for 17 years. They're especially impressed with Wooten's ability to mentor.

"He's a real team player," says Buddy Phillips, director of golf at Cedar Ridge.

"Mike is always extending a helping hand, not only on the golf course but at the club as a whole," says Cleve Stubblefield, general manager at Cedar Ridge.

"In addition to the excellent job Mike has done for our club, he commands the respect of his peers in Oklahoma," says Weister O. Smith, the course's green committee chairman.

The 49-year-old Wooten, who graduated from Oklahoma State University with an agronomy degree in turf management in 1978, is a recipient of *Golfdom's* Keeper of the Green Award, sponsored by Floratine Products, for being one of the nation's best superintendent/mentors.

"You lead from the front, not the rear," says Wooten, describing his management style. "It's like when a general goes into battle with you. You want that general right out there in the battle with you."

David Nowland, who started True Turf, a Floratine distributorship in 1998 in Tulsa, Okla., nominated Wooten for the award. Nowland says he began True Turf without any background in turf management, and Wooten helped him learn the business.

"Mike was very generous with his time to answer my questions over that first year," Nowland says. "Now five years later, Mike is not only a great customer, but also a friend and mentor of sorts, even though I sit on the other side of the desk from him as a vendor."

Wooten, who has been a superinten-

dent for about 21 years, is also the mentor to 19 former assistant superintendents (and counting) who've gone on to become superintendents.

"It's nice to see some success out of those guys," Wooten says. "We talk often, and we remain good friends."

Will Clark, superintendent of Elks CC in Salina, Kan., worked as Wooten's assistant from 1987 to 1992.

"I have the highest respect for Mike, and I value his expertise," Clark says. "Mike's knowledge and guidance has helped me become the best superintendent I can be."

When Wooten hires an employee out of college, the first thing he says he teaches the employee is a strong work ethic.

"Working hard is a large part of this job," says Wooten, who has twice been the president of the Oklahoma GCSA.

Wooten is also a big believer in hands-on experience. New employees are involved in almost every aspect of the job, from spraying pesticides and renovation projects to record-keeping and budgeting. "I want them to get a feel for things and make decisions on their own so they can build their confidence," Wooten says.

One of Wooten's assistants is his son, Jared, who grew up working at Cedar Ridge and elected to follow in his father's footsteps. He says his dad is his mentor.

"I had always dreamed of being an assistant for my father," Jared says. "Like so many who came before me, I wanted to work and learn from the best, and strive to make my dad proud." ■

Mike Wooten

Certified superintendent of Cedar Ridge CC in Broken Arrow, Okla.

