

# The Keepers of Hallowed Turf

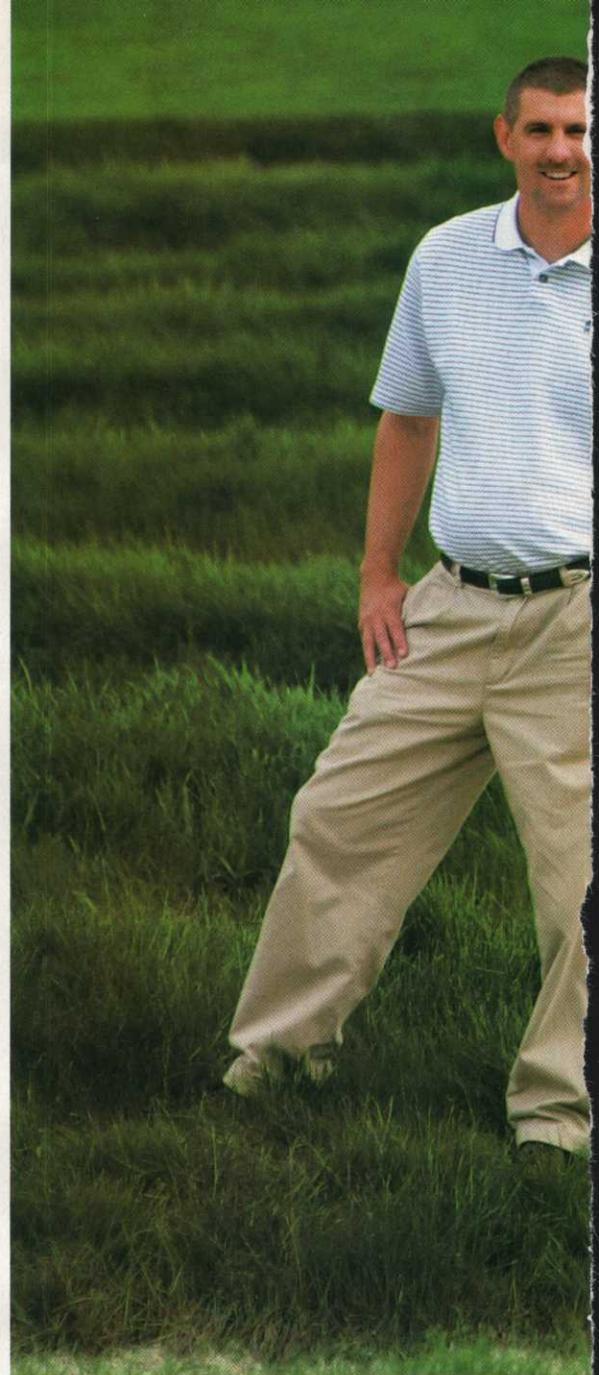
BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

**T**he quick-thinking and fast-talking Rick Christian Jr. pauses when asked if he considers himself the luckiest person in the golf course maintenance world. After all, Christian holds the eminent title of superintendent at Pine Valley GC, arguably the greatest golf course in the nation and one of the top tracks in the world.

"To be honest with you," Christian says humbly, while pondering the sentimentally fueled question, "I feel blessed to be where I am."

Who wouldn't? The George Crump-Harry Colt designed course in northern New Jersey is considered hallowed ground in golf circles. If there's a Yankee Stadium of golf courses, Pine Valley is it.

Christian has been at Pine Valley for 20 years and has been its superintendent for the past 16 years. But even after two decades of working there, the 38-year-old doesn't take any part of his job for granted. He realizes that

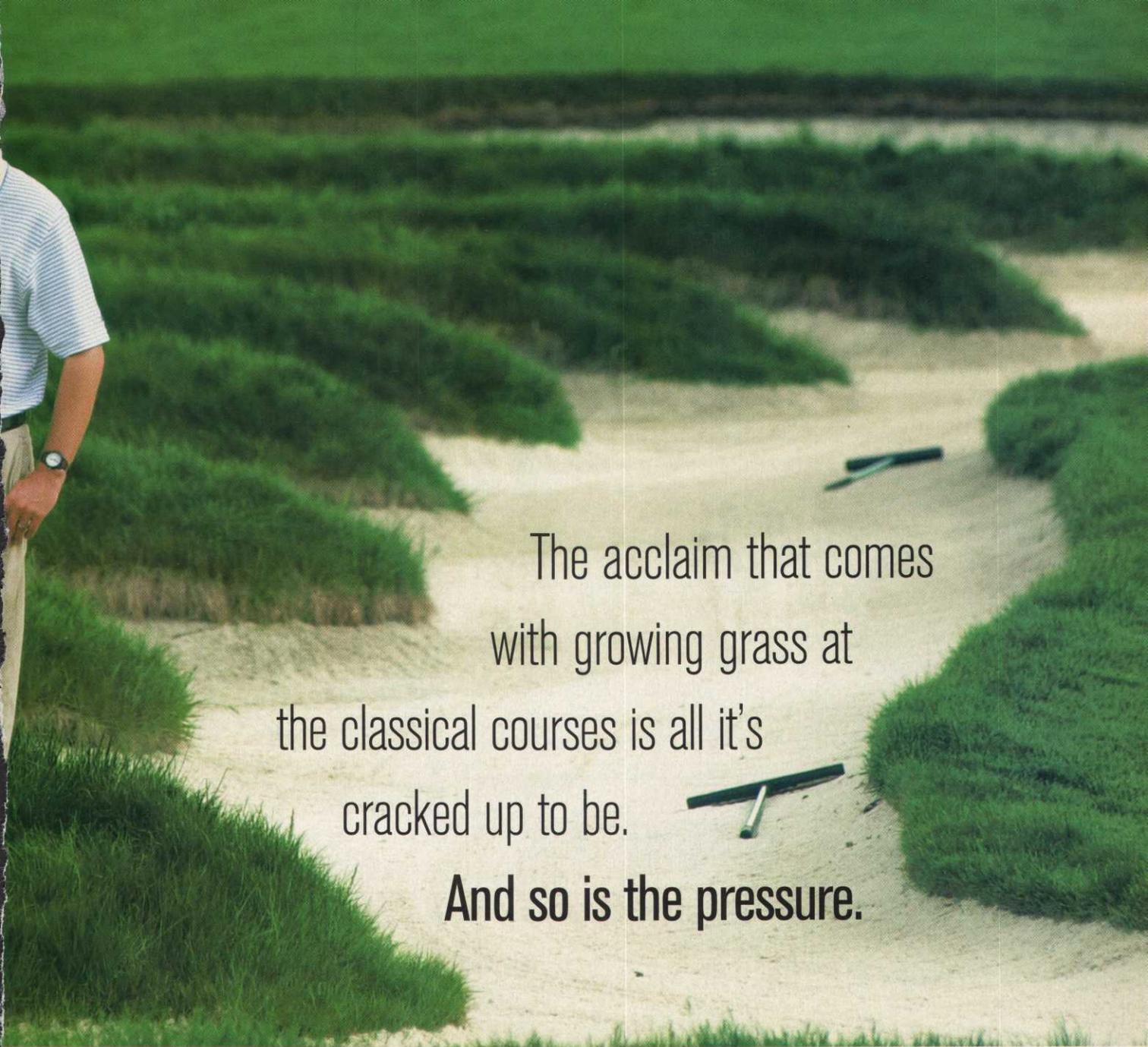


some superintendents would give up a chummy relationship with a green committee chairman or a fleet of new walking greens mowers to be in his shoes.

That's not to say that Christian doesn't have his share of hectic days at Pine Valley. It's just that he gets to have them *at* Pine Valley.

Often, when the heat is getting to Christian — literally and figuratively — he'll take a break to reflect on where he is and what he does. "I'll take a step back, look around me for about 10 seconds and say to myself, 'This is *awesome*,'" he says.

Christian is not alone in his sentiments for the celebrated turf he oversees. Many superintendents of classical courses pay homage to



The acclaim that comes  
with growing grass at  
the classical courses is all it's  
cracked up to be.

And so is the pressure.

the golf course gods for the opportunities they've been provided. They realize they're tending turf at historic and extraordinary tracks designed by the likes of MacKenzie, Ross, Raynor and Tillinghast. They know that *they're* part of history.

But make no mistake: The glory that comes with being a superintendent at a highly ranked classical course does not come without distinct agronomic challenges, as well as demanding green committees and members. Indeed, there is stress at the top. In fact, most superintendents of these legendary courses confront bottom-of-the-ninth-type pressure almost every day.

Despite the pressure, they're passionate about what they do because of where they do it.

"Who could ask for more?" says Michael Morris, talking about his job as certified superintendent of Crystal Downs CC in Frankfort, Mich., a famed classical course designed by Alister Mackenzie and Perry Maxwell in 1931. "This is a beautiful piece of land in a spectacular setting, with a golf course created by two of the greatest architects in the history of golf. It's a great privilege to be the superintendent here."

#### **Living on the edge**

Matt Shaffer, director of golf course operations at Merion GC in Ardmore, Pa., ducks inside an air-conditioned room to escape the intense

*Continued on page 60*

**John Zimmers and his crew at Oakmont CC have a bundle of bunkers to maintain, including the famous "Church Pews" bunker between the third and fourth fairways.**

DOUGLASS OSTER

## Hallowed Turf

**“I’ll take a step back, look around me for about 10 seconds, and say to myself, ‘This is awesome.’”**

RICK CHRISTIAN JR.  
PINE VALLEY GC

*Continued from page 59*

heat on this sizzling summer afternoon. The tall and tanned Shaffer kicks back in a chair and talks about his first five months on the job at Merion. His rugged face beams when he talks about the course, designed by Hugh Wilson in 1912.

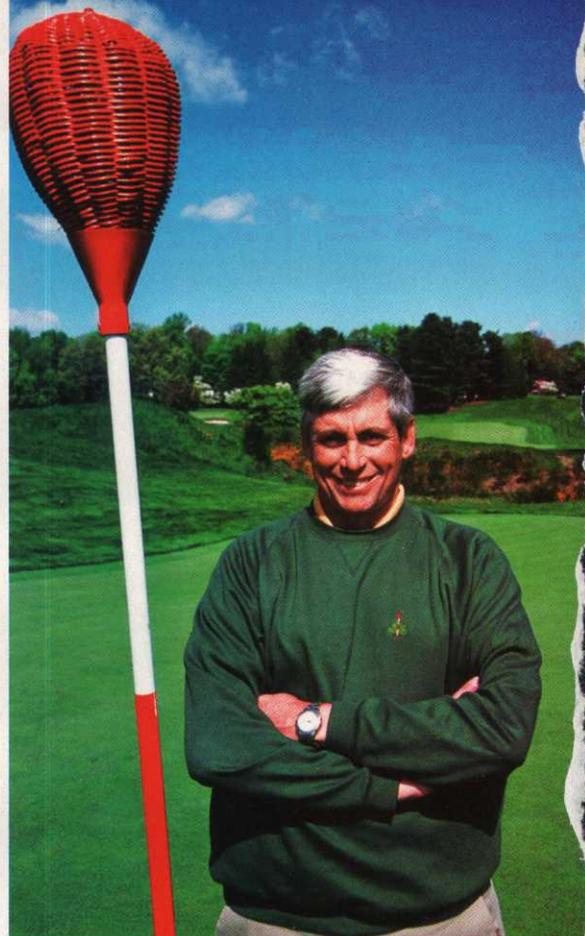
“This is a dream job for me,” Shaffer says. “It’s everything I’ve worked for.”

Shaffer doesn’t mind the pressure that comes with managing such distinguished turf. In fact, he welcomes the scrutiny placed on him to have the course in a constant state of excellence.

Shaffer recalls his first taste of working for a classical course. He worked as an assistant to Paul R. Latshaw at Augusta National in the mid-1980s, and he saw firsthand the pressures a head superintendent endures when he’s at one of the top classical courses in America.

“I was Latshaw’s right-hand man, and I saw the stress he went through,” Shaffer says. “I said to myself, ‘Man, I wonder if it’s worth it.’”

Shaffer doesn’t wonder that now. He’s



**Matt Shaffer, director of golf course operations at Merion GC, says of his job, “It’s everything I’ve worked for.”**

HOWARD P. NUERNBERGER

learned that working at one of the top courses in the country, despite the stress the job may bring, is worth a few gray hairs. More than that, Shaffer has learned to thrive on the pressure.

That pressure is directly related to course conditioning and agronomics, which often equates to golf in the fast lane. Members at Merion and other classical courses like the fairways firm and the greens fast, and Shaffer is responsible to deliver such conditions. He describes Merion’s playability as “raw, unadulterated golf” for six months of the year. It’s fast and furious, and hell on the turf.

“We cut, roll and hand-water the greens every day,” Shaffer says. “We mow the fairways every day.”

It’s living on the edge for a superintendent, Shaffer says. And when you’re adhering to such high standards of play and testing the wrath of Mother Nature, you can’t doze, Shaffer warns. If you do, you could be staring down at a dead green in two days.

“I have my heels on the edge of the cliff,” Shaffer says only half-joking.

Certified superintendent Mark Kuhns

## Ask the Experts

Go ahead, ask our customers:  
**Who makes the best Rotary Finishing Mowers?**



Thousands of **satisfied customers** can’t be wrong.

Visit our web site at:

**[www.progressiveturfequip.com](http://www.progressiveturfequip.com)**

Call Toll Free: 800-668-8873 E-mail: [info@progressiveturfequip.com](mailto:info@progressiveturfequip.com)

knows the pressure that comes with fleet greens at classical courses. Kuhns, currently in his fourth year as director of grounds of Baltusrol GC in Springfield, N.J., previously worked as superintendent at Oakmont CC for nine years, where super-swift greens are the norm. Oakmont's members prefer the greens stimping at 12 feet or more — daily.

Kuhns says the time he spent at the Henry Fownes-designed Oakmont, where he hosted the 1994 U.S. Open and the 1992 U.S. Women's Open, was challenging.

"Their demands are clear — they want firm and fast greens on a day-to-day basis," Kuhns says of the Oakmont membership. "Sometimes that's hard to achieve and people get upset with you when the greens aren't that fast."

Kuhns and Oakmont parted ways in 1999, and Kuhns immediately landed at Baltusrol, another esteemed old course designed by A.W. Tillinghast in 1922.

Kuhns firmly understands why members at Oakmont and other historic courses expect nothing but the best when it comes to condi-

tioning and playability. "They pay a lot of dues and a lot of green fees, and believe the courses should be in top condition all the time," he says.

While there's expected pressure that comes with being superintendents at classical courses, many superintendents are known for placing extra pressure on themselves, Shaffer says.

"You put more pressure on yourself than anybody else puts on you," he adds. "The fear of failing is far greater than the joy of success."

### Agronomic challenges

While Oakmont's greens have historically been known for their wicked speed, they've also always been known for their high maintenance. When the greens are maintained consistently to be faster than the norm, the risk of them getting stressed and contracting disease rises.

Oakmont's 100-year-old greens are also known for their perennial *Poa* turf, which doesn't grow quickly or recover from injury or disease quickly. That makes them even more

*Continued on page 64*

### Augusta and the Sounds of Silence.

See Larry Aylward's Pin High column on PAGE 22

## An Instant Winner



Our winning team, Larry Aylward, Frank Andorka and Pat Jones, brings you the *Golfdom Insider*, your source for cutting-edge turf industry news, delivered right to your inbox twice per month.

To register for *Golfdom Insider*, go to [www.golfdom.com](http://www.golfdom.com).

For sponsorship opportunities, contact Pat Jones at 440-891-3126 or [pjones@advanstar.com](mailto:pjones@advanstar.com).

The Pro Series

**THE ONLY THING IT LEAVES BEHIND IS PERFECTION**

*Designed to prevent scalping*

*Enclosed decks to contain debris and reduce clippings*

*Mastering all turf.*

307 Hwy 52E • Opp, Alabama 36467  
1-800-537-3713 • 334-493-1300 • [www.locketurf.com](http://www.locketurf.com)  
Send for a kit of the full Locke line • Dealer inquiries invited

**“It’s nice to be recognized, but no one has to tell the membership at Crystal Downs that this is a great place.”**

MICHAEL MORRIS  
CRYSTAL DOWNS CC

*Continued from page 63*

difficult to maintain. John Zimmers, superintendent of Oakmont CC, acknowledges that the maintenance of the greens, which were originally built on a 6-inch base of clay and have never been renovated, have caused him stress. “In the summer, it can be nerve-wracking,” he says of maintaining them.

Zimmers and his crew combine various techniques in their maintenance approach, including deep-tine and core aeration. “We also do a process of sand injection into the top 3 inches to 4 inches of the soil profile,” Zimmers says, adding that the injection improves oxygen flow, root growth and drainage.

Classical courses feature several maintenance challenges that are directly related to their age. At Crystal Downs, Morris says the course’s bunkers are a prominent feature, but they don’t appear modern-looking, which is tricky when it comes to maintenance. “With the bunkers, like many other aspects of the course, it’s a challenge to strike a balance between the ‘old and natural’ elements and the

‘new and manicured’ elements of the course,” Morris says.

Pine Valley is known for its vast bunkers, which present Christian and his crew with plenty of tedious work.

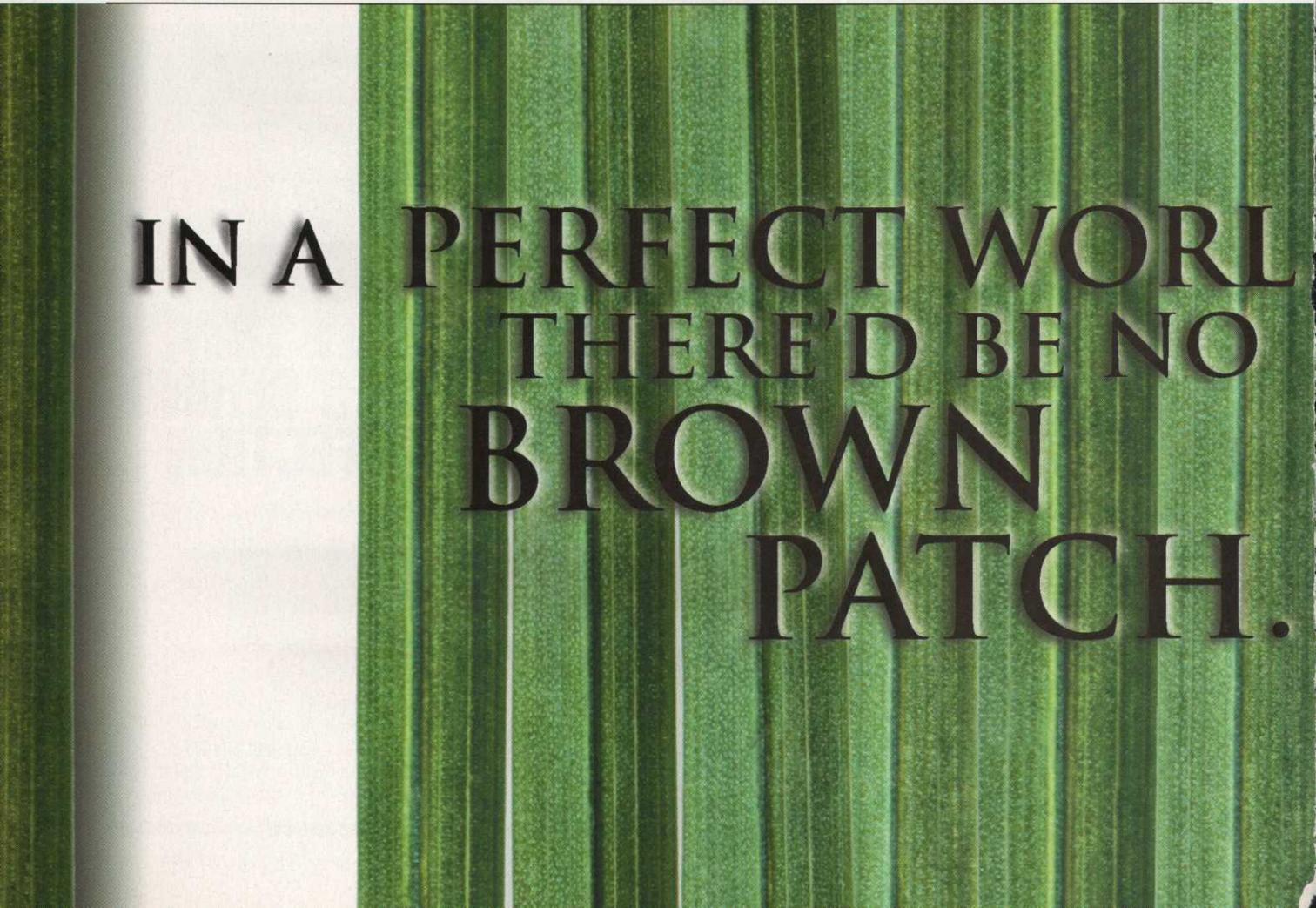
“The bunkers are large areas that look like waste areas,” Christian says. “While they look natural, it’s a tremendous amount of work to keep them that way. It almost looks like we do nothing to them, but they require constant cleaning and sand replacement.”

Zimmers and his crew have a bundle of bunkers to maintain at Oakmont — about 200 (there used to be about 350), including the famous “Church Pews” bunker between the third and fourth fairways. “They are demanding,” Zimmers says.

Another major maintenance challenge at old courses is tree management. There are going to be tree issues when a course is as old as Oakmont.

When Zimmers joined the club about three years ago, he found himself in the midst of the

*Continued on page 66*



**IN A PERFECT WORLD  
THERE'D BE NO  
BROWN  
PATCH.**



The competition is tough for jobs like Baltusrol GC, an A.W. Tillinghast design in Springfield, N.J.

### Three Superintendents, Three Classical Tracks

It was a low point in Matt Shaffer's distinguished career. He didn't get the job at Baltusrol GC.

Shaffer, who was the superintendent of The Country Club, a 1931 William Flynn design in Pepper Pike, Ohio, was a finalist for the director of grounds job at Baltusrol in the late 1990s. He desperately wanted the job at the 1922 A.W. Tillinghast design. But he had stiff competition from two superintendents who tended turf at a couple of classical gems – Mark Kuhns, the former certified superintendent at Oakmont CC; and Mark Michaud, the former superintendent of Pebble Beach Golf Links.

Kuhns got the job. Shaffer and Michaud got the spoils, which didn't turn out to be so bad.

In 2002, Shaffer landed at Merion GC in Ardmore, Pa., one of the nation's greatest old tracks designed by Hugh Wilson in 1912. Ditto for Michaud, who took a job at Shinnecock Hills GC, designed by Howard Toomey and William Flynn in 1931.

"I never dreamt that Merion would come along," Shaffer says, after not landing the job at Baltusrol. "The competition is stiff for jobs like these."

– Larry Aylward, Editor

MIKE KLEMM

D,

## HEY LOOK, A PERFECT WORLD.

Ever notice how brown patch can turn a perfect course into a perfect mess? Good thing there's Fore<sup>®</sup> Rainshield<sup>®</sup> specialty fungicide. It provides the most cost-effective control of brown patch, pythium and more. Plus, it features patented Rainshield technology to minimize wash-off under extreme moisture conditions. There really is a perfect world – and it's available at just the right price.

**NO BROWN PATCH FOR LESS.**

 Dow AgroSciences

**Fore<sup>®</sup>**  
Rainshield<sup>®</sup>  
Specialty Fungicide

### “The bigger the maintenance budget, the bigger the expectations.”

MARK KUHNS  
BALTUSROL GC

*Continued from page 64*

course's tree-removal program, which began in 1994 and is almost near completion. When finished, more than 4,000 trees will have been removed from the course.

“It's amazing to take a 100-year-old course and to think you can change it that dramatically without moving any dirt,” Zimmers says.

Ongoing restoration, such as leveling tee boxes and dealing with encroaching trees on bunkers, is a constant challenge for Christian and his crew, as well as superintendents at other classical courses.

“The restoration is all part of preserving Pine Valley,” Christian says. “This is a special piece of land.”

Yeah, many of the old clubs have big maintenance budgets to get a lot done. But having lots of money to do those things is overrated, Kuhns says.

“The bigger the maintenance budget, the bigger the expectations,” he says. “You must be able to perform.”

### Getting along

Zimmers says keeping Oakmont's members happy is the most difficult part of his job. While members desire greens as fast as the traffic on the nearby Pennsylvania Turnpike, they often don't understand the agronomic risks that he and his staff take to make them that quick. But Zimmers' philosophy for his work is simple.

“I try to focus on the right thing to do for the golf course and what I was hired to do,” he says. “You never have to apologize for doing the right thing.”

Zimmers has taken it upon himself to educate the membership with the help of PowerPoint presentations. He attends various board meetings and dinners, and talks turf with the members. It's vital — and beneficial to Zimmers and his crew — that members understand exactly what it takes to maintain a place like Oakmont.

Christian says he strives to communicate strongly with Pine Valley's members daily.

## THE ALLEN ADVANTAGE: VALUE!



VALUE IS MEASURED IN YEARS, NOT MONTHS. ALLEN BUILDS THE TOUGHEST, BEST PERFORMING HOVER MOWERS IN THE INDUSTRY. THESE PROFESSIONAL GRADE MACHINES ARE BUILT FOR COMMERCIAL USE AND DESIGNED TO LAST. WHETHER POWERED BY SUZUKI OR HONDA, THEY TACKLE THE STEEPEST SLOPES, BUNKER FACES AND LAKESIDES WITH EASE. ALLEN HOVER MOWERS ARE AN INVESTMENT IN EQUIPMENT THAT WILL LAST FOR SEVERAL SEASONS. YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR SO INVEST IN THE BEST — ALLEN HOVER MOWERS.

CALL 1-800-780-9889 FOR YOUR NEAREST DEALER.

P.O. BOX 1131, HOBE SOUND, FL 33475 • PH: 772-546-9889 • FAX: 772-546-4242 • WWW.ALLENSEAGO.COM • E-MAIL: HOVER@ALLENSEAGO.COM

**allen**  
SEAGO INTERNATIONAL, INC.

WHETHER YOU GROW IT OR MOW IT,  
ALLEN IS THE PROFESSIONAL'S CHOICE.

Hence, they're more understanding of turf problems and supportive of his remedies to combat them.

But Christian, who describes himself as an intense person ("My wheels are always turning," he says), puts pressure on himself to deliver the finest course possible to players. Christian realizes that members' guests view playing Pine Valley as a golf chance of a lifetime.

"So we want it to be the experience of a lifetime for them," Christian says. "But sometimes if things aren't absolutely perfect [on the course], you feel like you let them down."

Members complain about the course at Crystal Downs, but Morris says their protests are a positive thing.

"The membership's sincere interest in the golf course and how we care for it is palpable," Morris says. "Almost all concerns or complaints about the golf course stem from a love for the course."

Morris says there's not a lot of pressure from members for him to do his part to keep Crystal Downs high in the rankings of "top" classical courses.

"It's nice to be recognized, but no one has to tell the membership at Crystal Downs that this is a great place," Morris says. "For me, like every superintendent, I work with my staff to make the golf course the best it can be every day."

Course rankings mean more to Baltusrol's members, though. When Kuhns joined the club, members told him they wanted to see its Lower Course improve in various rankings after slipping for a few years. "Through our conditioning, we've begun to bring the course back up," Kuhns says.

Baltusrol also hired architect Rees Jones last year to help renovate and restore tees and bunkers in preparation for the 2005 PGA Championship.

### Dream jobs, but ...

While Kuhns cruises Baltusrol's Lower Course in a utility vehicle, he chatters about the track's storied history. Baltusrol has changed dramatically over the years, Kuhns explains. It opened as an 18-hole course in 1895, but Tillinghast returned to Springfield nearly 30 years later and replaced the one course with two new designs.

"It's neat to be at a club where the great

est players that ever played the game walked the fairways," says Kuhns, who calls Baltusrol his dream job. "The history here is awesome."

Kuhns says Baltusrol, located amid the traffic and concrete of a busy New Jersey city, is a "beautiful piece of land in the middle of metropolis."

"I'd love to be here for the rest of my life," he says. "But there's no guarantee of that."

Most all superintendents face job pressures at their respective courses, but the superintendents at the big-name classical courses face pressure that perhaps is even more intense.

Shaffer, who grew up on a farm near Altoona, Pa., studied turf maintenance because he loves working outdoors. He sought a job at a high-profile classical course with high maintenance standards because he desired the ultimate challenge his field could bring. But Shaffer also realizes that the ultimate challenge can be risky business when it comes to job stability.

"I've been fortunate because I've never been fired," Shaffer says. "But I can imagine the wheels can fly off pretty quickly at this level." ■

## Don't Let Bunker Maintenance Become a Trap...

# Master It!

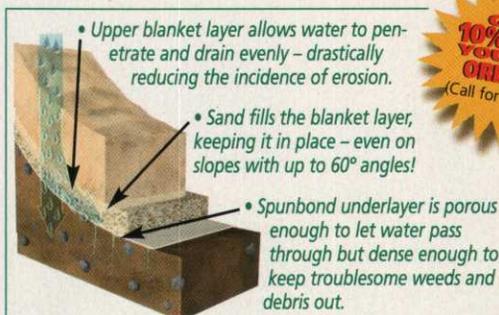
**Dramatically reduce your bunker maintenance costs when you install TrapMaster™**

**TrapMaster™** erosion control fabric solves your toughest problems. It's 2-layers – a thick, non-woven polyester "blanket" that absorbs and holds sand in place AND an innovative polyester spunbond fabric that adds durability and prevents contamination. Together, the patent-pending **TrapMaster™** 2-layer design:

- Greatly minimizes bunker maintenance costs
- Holds sand on steep bunker faces - up to 60°
- Prevents erosion and washout
- Keeps water draining and sand from clogging drains
- Functions as a weed block

"This innovative product was engineered and developed with input from golf course superintendents. TrapMaster™ will help solve your sand trap problems for years to come."

**Terry Grosch**  
PGA Master Professional



**GET 10% OFF YOUR ORDER!**  
(Call for details.)

**Call TOLL-FREE 1-866-273-9280**

and we'll send you an information packet along with the full **TrapMaster™** story!



Glit/Microtron  
809 Broad St, Wrens, GA 30833