

Back to Life in the

Bronx

A full-time superintendent and the First Tee are just what the doctor ordered for Mosholu GC

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

Click-clack. Click-clack. Click-clack.

The crowded subway train glides swiftly along the track through a tattered section of the Bronx. It sways subtly from side to side unbeknownst to its seasoned riders, many who stare expressionless out the train's windows at the seemingly never-ending row of run-down and graffiti-stained tenements.

You can almost hear the weathered brick faces of the buildings groan in despair as the train travels past them. Indeed, this section of New York's famous borough appears bruised and battered.

Click-clack. Click-clack. Click-clack.

"The next and last stop is Woodlawn," a monotone voice announces on the train's public-address system.

Mosholu's first tee is a short wedge shot from the Bronx's No. 4 subway line.



A few moments later, the clicks and clacks diminish as the train decelerates and coasts into the dark station. Woodlawn is the end of the line for the No. 4 train.

Upon rising from your seat to vacate the halted train, you see *it* from the left row of windows. *It* is hard to believe, really.

Where did *it* come from? How did *it* get here in the midst of this crowded, concrete jungle?

To the first-time visitor, Mosholu GC looks a little out of place. But the nine-hole course is a wonderful thing to see in the thick of the bustling Bronx.

It's amazing to think that Mosholu has been here since 1914. It's even more amazing to think how much the city-owned course has improved in the past year. After all, Mosholu had been left for dead only about two years ago.

The course was dirty, ugly and neglected then. Overgrown tree branches surrounded its crabgrass-infested greens. Its tees and fairways hadn't been aerified in 10 years. Heck, the course didn't even employ a superintendent.

But what a comeback Mosholu has made under the auspices of New York's finest — from the city's golf industry, that is. Mosholu is not the most spectacular facility in the New York area — far from it. But the 3,100-yard course has found a new and important purpose for its existence.

Mosholu is the first course in the metropolitan New York area to become a member of the First Tee program, which was formed



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MOSHOLU GC

in 1997 by the World Golf Foundation to provide affordable golf to kids and others who might not have an opportunity to play otherwise. Mosholu celebrated its opening as a First Tee facility last June.

Scores of kids from the Bronx now come to Mosholu, which is now operated by the Metropolitan Golf Association Foundation and the Metropolitan (New York) Section of the PGA, to learn about and play golf. The First Tee and Mosholu are a good fit. A reason for that is Mosholu's property included plenty of land to construct a learning center and outdoor teaching area, essential components of the First Tee program. Another reason is that the Bronx includes children from several nationalities — African-American, Hispanic, Asian and Irish — who have easy access to Mosholu because of its close location to the subway and bus lines.

"There are thousands of underprivileged kids who live here," says Jay Mottola, executive director of the Metropolitan Golf Association and its charitable foundation. "Those are the kids we want to reach."

Amid Mosholu's transformation into a First Tee facility, Mottola and Charles Robson, executive director of the Metropolitan Section of the PGA, decided to revamp the course as part of the project. They did so because they wanted the local kids to have a course to play when they are ready to tackle the 400-yard par 4s. Mottola and Robson also wanted to

reaffirm to the course's regular clientele — the folks who have been golfing at Mosholu for years — that the course had a bright future.

As part of the plan, Mottola and Robson hired Erik Feldman as the full-time superintendent. They also committed the funds to purchase new equipment to help Feldman maintain the course.

In essence, Mottola and Robson spearheaded Mosholu's revival.

A lot of TLC

It was a tremendous boon for Mosholu when it was announced in 1997 that the course would be the city's first site for the First Tee. But shortly after the announcement, the city announced it was going to build a \$700 million water-filtration plant on the course's location. That meant the course had to be closed for several years during the construction of the site and restored after the plant was built.

That meant Mosholu's destiny was unknown, and the First Tee plans were off the table. Understandably, because of the pending construction of the plant and the course's unknown fate, Mosholu's turf was neglected from a maintenance standpoint, and the course deteriorated.

But in early 2001, the city decided to scrap its plans for the plant because of public pressure not to build it. The First Tee proposal was back on the table, and there was renewed hope for Mosholu.

Continued on page 62

Mosholu's fairways and greens were ugly and neglected before, but not anymore.

Mosholu GC

Superintendent Erik Feldman has helped transform Mosholu into a respectable golf course. But Feldman will be the first to say that a lot more work needs to be done.



Continued from page 61

That's when Robson and Mottola came on board with a plan to transform Mosholu. They subleased the course from the previous operator, who managed the course under a license from the city. Because it was now a member of the First Tee, Mosholu received donations from the USGA Foundation and other individuals and organizations to build and run the learning facility.

But Robson and Mottola knew they had a lot of work to do on the golf course. Mosholu needed a little — make that a lot — of tender-loving care. One of the first things Robson and Mottola did was contact John Carlone, certified superintendent of Meadow Brook Club in nearby Jericho, N.Y., and the then-president of the Metropolitan GCSA. They wanted to get Carlone's impression of the course from an agronomic standpoint. In April 2001, Carlone visited Mosholu and was ready to critique it.

"I walked all nine holes [with Robson and

Mottola] from tee to green," Carlone says. "I gave my honest opinion to them of how bad the course was and how much it needed to be refurbished — even for a low level of acceptability."

Overgrown trees caused much of the problem. On tees, many branches were so overgrown that golfers hit them during their swings. Tree branches also hung over the edges of greens, making them difficult to mow with a triplex, Carlone says.

While the course was a mess, Carlone didn't play the role of a prophet of doom and tell Robson and Mottola that it couldn't be saved. But he was realistic.

"I knew it was going to be a long haul," Carlone says. "I told them the first thing they needed to do was hire a full-time superintendent to get the course on track with a maintenance regimen — because it didn't have one."

The right guy for the job

Carlone visited Mosholu several times from April through October 2001. He helped prepare a five-year budget for the course, which included money allocated for equipment and a superintendent's salary.

That October, Carlone organized a cleanup day of Mosholu with members of the Metropolitan GCSA, including superintendents and commercial members.

"We told superintendents to bring their assistants and crew members," Carlone says. "The goal for the day was to make the place a bit prettier on the outside to make an immediate impact. We wanted the public to realize there was somebody else in charge of the course."

A priority was to clean up the course's entrance, which included the outside of the clubhouse. Three tree companies donated equipment

Continued on page 64

Kids from myriad nationalities flock to Mosholu for its First Tee learning program. The practice tees are made of synthetic Tour Turf.



Mosholu GC

Continued from page 62

and workers to help the cause. Carlone estimates the tree companies contributed about \$30,000 of free work that day.

Also around that time, Robson and Mottola heeded Carlone's advice to hire a superintendent.

"I told Charlie and Jay, 'You're not going to get a guy from Winged Foot GC to come in here and be the superintendent,'" Carlone says. "It's going to be an assistant from probably a public club. He might only stay three to five years, but that's OK. You'll get a guy who will work his tail off for a few years."

That guy was Feldman, who has worked his tail off and is a big reason for Mosholu's success. The 32-year-old has only worked in the golf course maintenance industry for a little more than three years. He previously worked as a stockbroker and a salesman.

"I didn't have a passion for those jobs," Feldman says. "I have a passion for golf."

A few years ago, Feldman heard from a friend of a friend that Craig Currier, who oversees maintenance at the five courses comprising Bethpage State Park in Farmingdale, N.Y., was looking for help. "I went in there and told him I wanted to work for him," Feldman says.

It was the fall of 1999, and Feldman found himself working on Bethpage's A.J. Tillinghast-designed Black Course, site of the 2002 U.S. Open. In 2000, he moved over to Bethpage's Green Course as an assistant superintendent to Andrew Wilson. Feldman learned golf course maintenance from A to Z. He also met a lot of people in the business and began taking classes in horticulture at a nearby community college.

Working with Currier gave Feldman the chance to learn from one of the nation's best young superintendents. Feldman says Currier allowed him to perform myriad duties, which enabled him to learn quickly on the job.

"I condensed a lot of experience into a short period of time," Feldman says. "In two years, I did everything you could possibly do on a golf course."

In early 2002, Feldman heard about

the Mosholu job from Currier, who thought Feldman would be a good fit. The opportunity intrigued Feldman, who was looking for a fixer-upper course to establish himself as a head superintendent.

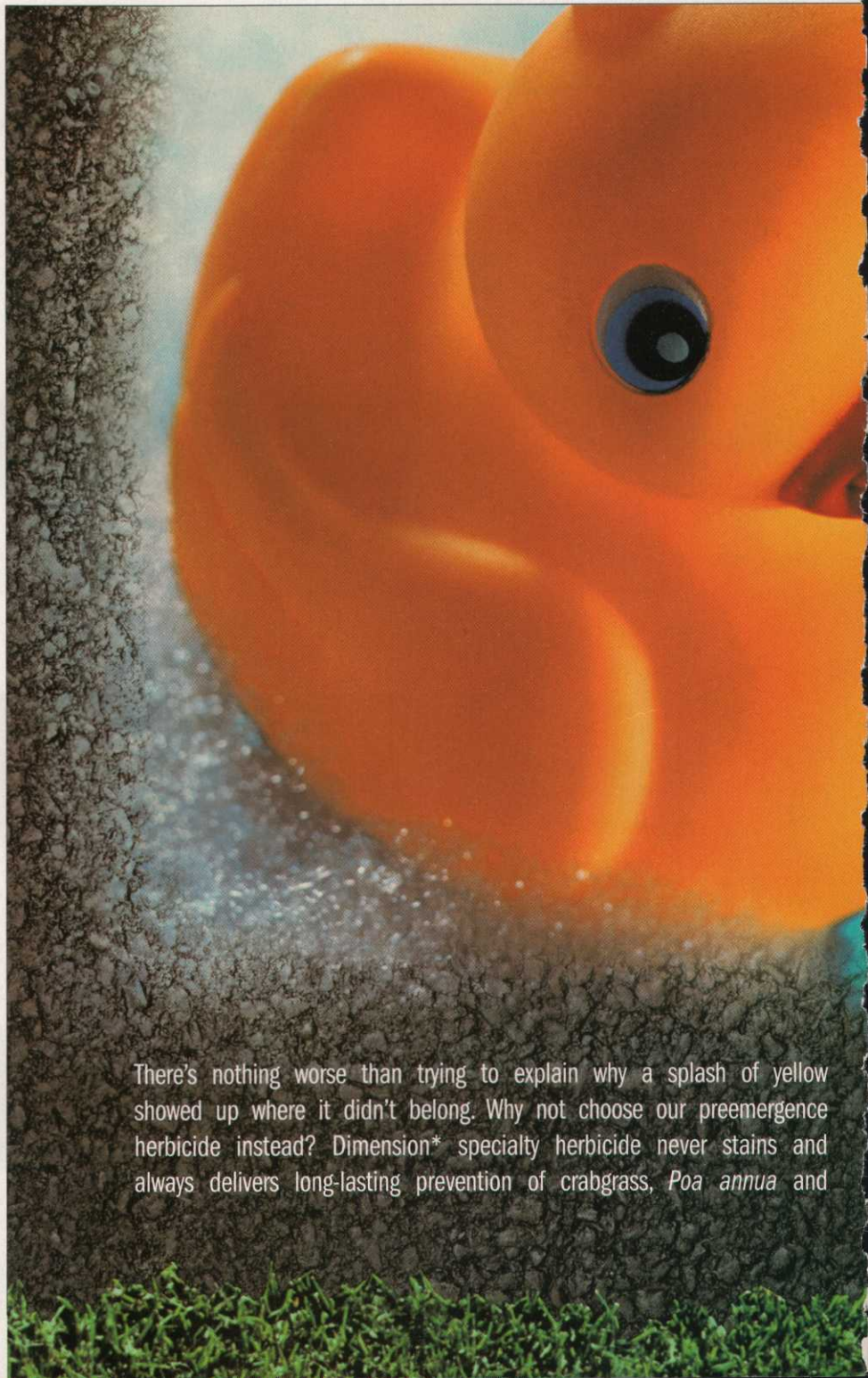
"I knew I needed something like that to prove myself," Feldman says. "It was an opportunity for me to make my mark."

Feldman interviewed for the post and

was offered the job. He began in March 2002. Feldman knew the course needed a lot of work, but he wasn't intimidated. "I felt up to the challenge," he says.

Trial by fire

Feldman had his hands full from the beginning at Mosholu. He faced one problem after another. For starters, the



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course didn't have a lot of maintenance equipment when Feldman began.

The course's antiquated irrigation system was another hassle. Feldman discovered the single-row coupler system was in disarray. "Five of the tees didn't have any irrigation at all," he says.

Many of the irrigation system's heads were buried throughout the course.

"We used a metal detector to find about 30 heads that we were able to get back up and running," Feldman says.

Shortly after Feldman and his crew got the irrigation system working adequately, the course was hit with a water restriction by the city. "We couldn't water the fairways," Feldman says.

The course's greens also suffered a

major case of anthracnose last summer. That was not good news for a superintendent who didn't have a sprayer in the maintenance shed.

During the first wave of the disease, Feldman and his crew were able to fight it off with a granular fungicide. But when the anthracnose returned a few weeks later, Feldman knew the greens were in trouble. He realized that granular products just didn't have the efficacy to fight off the disease again. He needed a sprayer with some big-time fungicides to contain the anthracnose. "I was in panic mode," Feldman says.

Feldman ended up borrowing a sprayer from a nearby golf course. He and his crew picked up the sprayer in a truck and hauled it to Mosholu to spray the greens. Feldman admits it was a by-the-seat-of-your-pants-management style, but it worked, and he is proud of what he and his crew accomplished.

"We saved the greens," Feldman says, still enthusiastic more than six months later. "I realized that day that no matter what happens there's always a solution to a problem. It was a defining moment for me."

Feldman and his four-person staff have an annual maintenance budget of about \$225,000, which is enough to get the job done, Feldman says. But Feldman feels he and the crew can do better.

"People think we've done a great job with the greens, but they can be better," he says. "Our objective isn't to reach some ultimate level of maintenance but to continually improve the facility."

A lot of friends

Mosholu's support network has been and continues to be wide-ranging. There's Lew Rudin, a deceased New York real-estate developer who provided financial support to build the First Tee learning center, which holds up to 80 children. There's the USGA Foundation and Nike Golf, which donated the money to build the practice green, practice tee and practice bunker for the outdoor teaching area, and to help with the First Tee teaching program.

Continued on page 66




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Mosholu GC

Mosholu's revitalization has not gone unnoticed by the course's regular players, who are more conscientious about taking care of the track.



Continued from page 65

There's Bayer Environmental Science, which donated thousands of dollars in fungicide to Feldman to help get the turf healthy. There have been numerous superintendents who have donated time, knowledge and equipment to the cause.

"We get calls from superintendents on a weekly basis that want to know what they can do to help," Robson says.

This season, the course is hoping to pick up where it left off last year.

"We had about 60 to 100 kids here daily throughout the summer," Mottola says. "The kids came from the Bronx and all over New York. We even had kids bussed in from Connecticut and New Jersey."

Mosholu's revitalization has also not gone unnoticed by its regular players, who are more conscientious about taking care of the course.

"For the people who get off that train — doctors, lawyers, nurses and sanitation work-

ers — Mosholu is their home course, and they're taking better care of it," Carlone says.

The key now is to keep Mosholu on track. Carlone says it's important for the course to draw repeat business.

"It isn't a destination resort," he says. "You're not going to get people from California coming to play Mosholu. It's all about repeat business at a city course."

But last June, the city threw Mosholu a curveball when it announced it was going to implement a surcharge on green fees, says Barry McLaughlin, Mosholu's executive director. Standard green fees went from \$17 to \$19, but senior citizens green fees soared from \$9.50 to \$14. "They didn't like it," McLaughlin says, noting that seniors, who are on fixed budgets, are a huge component of Mosholu's business.

As a result of the increase, business was flat in 2002 when compared to 2001. "It didn't cripple us, but it took away increased revenue from us," says McLaughlin, who plans to institute green-fee specials to increase play this season.

To increase rounds and revenue, the immediate key is to market the course to the myriad nationalities in the Bronx to gain new golfers — young and old.

"There's a melting pot of people right here," McLaughlin says. "But we can't put ads in the *New York Times* or the *New York Post* because those people don't read those papers. They read their local papers, which are in their languages. That's where we need to advertise."

McLaughlin would like nothing more than to see an assortment of people exit the No. 4 subway that overlooks Mosholu's No. 1 tee.

And all those people would have their golf bags in tow. ■

Two years ago, you couldn't see this window on the clubhouse because it was overgrown with unkempt bushes. Now the area is a testament for neat landscaping.



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