

# The Old Pro

They say grow-ins are only for young superintendents.

But don't give Roger Barton that bull

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

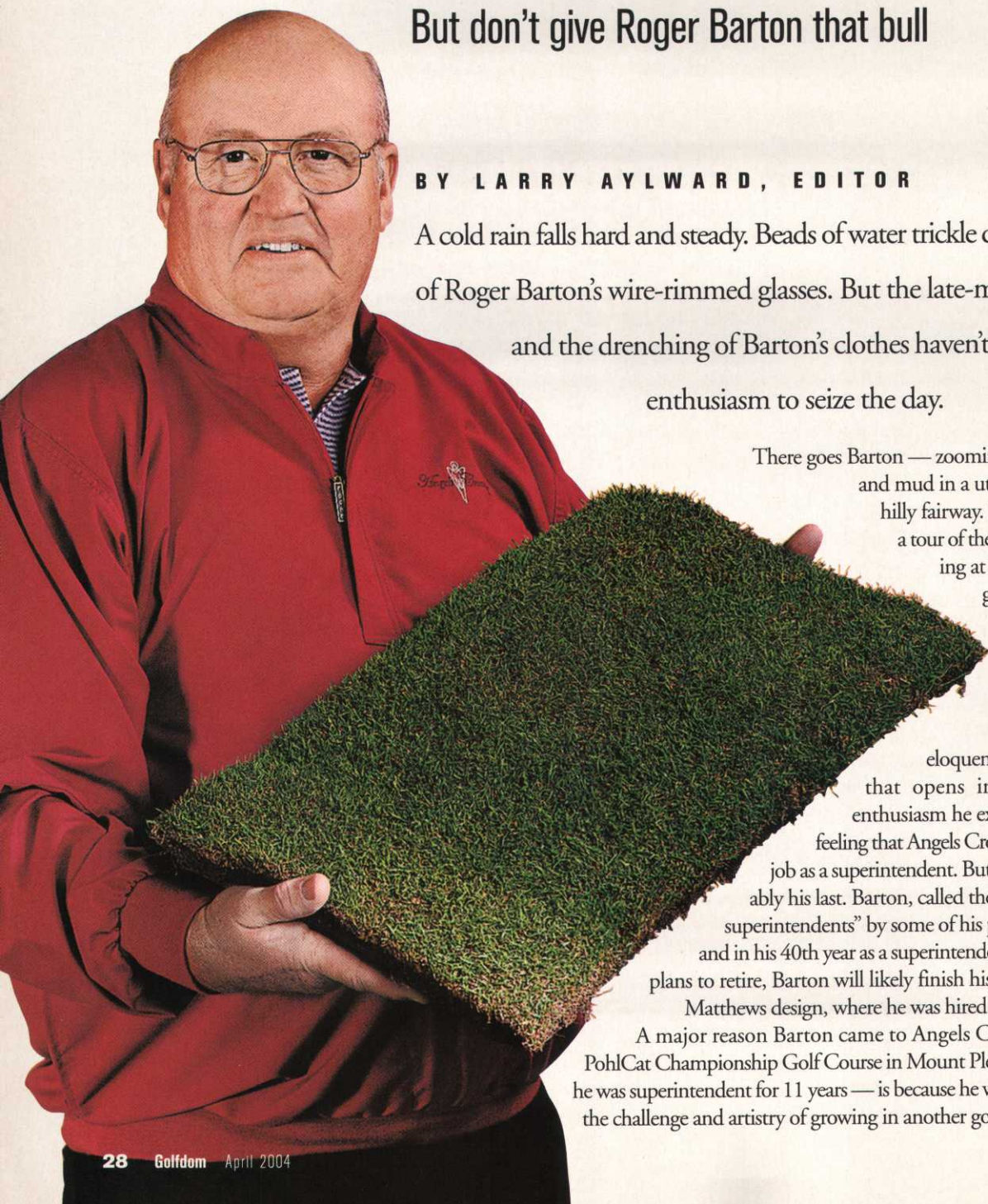
A cold rain falls hard and steady. Beads of water trickle down the lenses of Roger Barton's wire-rimmed glasses. But the late-morning deluge and the drenching of Barton's clothes haven't dampened his enthusiasm to seize the day.

There goes Barton — zooming through puddles and mud in a utility vehicle down a hilly fairway. He's giving a visitor a tour of the fledgling turf growing at his new job — Angels Crossing Golf Course in Vicksburg, Mich.

An excited Barton points here and there, waxing eloquently about the course that opens in May. With the enthusiasm he exhibits, one gets the feeling that Angels Crossing is Barton's first job as a superintendent. But, ironically, it's probably his last. Barton, called the "dean of Michigan superintendents" by some of his peers, is 65 years old and in his 40th year as a superintendent. While he has no plans to retire, Barton will likely finish his career at the Bruce Matthews design, where he was hired in early 2003.

A major reason Barton came to Angels Crossing — and left PohlCat Championship Golf Course in Mount Pleasant, Mich., where he was superintendent for 11 years — is because he wanted to experience the challenge and artistry of growing in another golf course.

ROGER BOETTCHER







Angels Crossing is Roger Barton's third grow-in in his 40-year career. Barton and others involved with the project say the creation of Angels Crossing is a fine example of teamwork. See the related story on page 32.

They say grow-ins are for young superintendents in their primes. But don't give Barton that bull.

The big-shouldered Barton looks, feels and talks like a man much younger than his mid-60s. Remember Nolan Ryan blowing away hitters with his heater when he was in his 40s? Now picture Barton on the course getting down and dirty with his 20-something crew.

**I**t was fate with a capital "F" that brought Barton to Angels Crossing. To many, Barton was destined to end his career at the course.

But enough about finales — Angels Crossing represents a new beginning for Barton. He may be near retirement age, but that doesn't mean he doesn't have goals and dreams like a kid fresh out of turf school.

Here's the funny thing: Nobody really knew Barton was looking for a new job — not even Barton. "I had no intention of changing jobs," he says.

Matthews says Barton was at the pinnacle of his career at PohlCat. "He was doing an excellent job and being compensated very well for it," Matthews notes.

But a fall day in 2002 changed all that. Matthews, who has known Barton for many years, asked him to tour the new course he had been hired to design in Vicksburg, located outside of Kalamazoo.

"I like to have Roger look at my golf courses," Matthews says. "I value his input."

Barton, who worked as superintendent at Grand Haven Golf Club in the late 1960s, a course designed by Matthews' grandfather, gladly accepted the invitation. He traveled the short distance to Vicksburg from Mount Pleasant and toured the property with Matthews. Oh yeah, the Thompson broth-

ers, Bob and Jim, who were building the course, tagged along for the tour.

As they walked the site, the Thompson brothers fired an array of agronomic questions at Barton, who answered them specifically and thoroughly. Barton also seemed genuinely interested in the course. He stuck his hand in a batch of greens mix and rubbed the material with his fingers.

"We were on the course for three and a half hours," Jim Thompson says. "After touring six holes, we knew Roger was the man we wanted as superintendent."

But Matthews told the Thompson brothers that Barton would never leave PohlCat to come to Angels Crossing, which made the Thompson brothers want Barton even more.

"You don't want to be told that you can't have something because that's usually the motivation you need to get it," Bob Thompson says.

What no one realized was that Barton was wondering what it might be like to be the superintendent at Angels Crossing. He had enjoyed his visit to the course immensely. He also liked the Thompsons and knew he would enjoy working for them. And deep down, he felt stagnant at PohlCat because he wasn't being challenged enough.

The more Barton thought about it, the more he was attracted to Angels Crossing. It was, in a sense, a dream job. He longed to do another grow-in, which would be his third. He knew he would also get to work with people he liked and respected.

**B**ob Thompson, a Vicksburg farmer, wasn't necessarily looking for some young whippersnapper to be the Angels Crossing superintendent. So when he met Barton, he was

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COURTESY OF ANGELS CROSSING



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impressed with his experience and knowledge. When he heard Barton's age, he didn't raise an eyebrow.

In fact, the 47-year-old Thompson, who spent a lot of time with his grandparents while growing up, has never accepted the stereotype that labels people over 60 as over the hill.

"I've always had a real respect for older people," he says. "I enjoy listening to them because I always learn so much from them."

Bob also wasn't concerned that Barton, regarded as one of the top superintendents in the state, would command a high salary commensurate with his experience and reputation. As a farmer, Thompson learned that paying more for quality was worth it in the long run.

"I've always found that it pays to hire confident, professional people to do things for us that we don't know much about," he says.

Jim Thompson says there's significant value in knowing the course has a superintendent who can cruise around the course in his utility vehicle, spot a specific turf disease with a glance and treat it before it spreads. Barton can tell you when conditions are ripe for an insect invasion or a turf disease breakout. He trusts his instincts like weathermen trust their Doppler radar.

"What does *that* do to the chemical budget?" the 35-year-old Jim asks rhetorically.

In his distinguished career, Barton has worked as superintendent at several Michigan courses in addition to PohlCat and Grand Haven, including Morrison Lake Golf Course, Dearborn Country Club and Blythefield Country Club. Barton, who has a two-year degree in tool and dye making from Grand Rapids Junior College, honed his turf skills by attending numerous short courses and seminars at



Bruce Matthews III (left), architect of Angels Crossing, and Roger Barton have known each other for many years.

Purdue University and Michigan State University in the past 40 years.

One might think the veteran Barton knows everything there is about the golf business, but not Barton. That's another reason he came to Angels Crossing. "I like to learn new things," he says.

Take the grow-in for instance, which occurred last spring and summer. It was a difficult time. A grow-in is a time-consuming and painstaking process. There are washouts, sunlight issues — and more washouts to deal with it. In the end, a grow-in can test the patience of even the most even-tempered superintendent.

"It takes a special breed of superintendent to be a grow-in superintendent," Matthews says.

Barton experienced his share of washouts at Angels Crossing. Unusual long and hard rains pounded the area. Two of the course's greens washed out three times. The washouts were so bad that the opening of the course, scheduled for July, was delayed until the fall and again until this year.

Barton, despite his wisdom and experience, was frustrated. "But I just learned to let it roll off my back."

Barton says it helped that his owner didn't jump up and down screaming and demand that Barton perform a Moses-like miracle to meet the opening date. But Bob Thompson, who has experienced his share of seed washouts as a farmer, knew better. "This wasn't anything new to me," he says.

Thompson's comment brings into focus another reason why Barton likes it so much at Angels Crossing. Everybody communicates well and tries to understand each other's needs. And they're friends. Barton says he and Bob talk all the time, and not always about work.

Who knows how long Barton will work at Angels Crossing. Seventy? Seventy-five? Here's betting he'll go as long as he can — for he's one of those people who cherishes his trade.

"I'm luckier than a lot of people," Barton says. "Being a superintendent hasn't been work for me. There's no reason to retire." ■



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANGELS CROSSING

Barton clowns with Angels Crossing pro Mike Hill (left). Who says superintendents and pros don't get along?