

# In the City



BY BRUCE ALLAR

**J**ames Patrick Morgan III is not the type to be wary of ghosts. He's a big-city boy who has seen more than his share of pranks and misbehavior. But one cloudy night when he was out exercising his dog and watering No. 17 at Juniata Golf Club, a city-owned course in north Philadelphia, he had a close encounter of a weird kind.

A hole opened suddenly in the cloud canopy and a moonbeam shone down, like a spotlight, on the exact spot where Morgan had once found a dead body. The ray of light pointed to the place where Al, a well-liked ball shagger who regularly worked the Juniata grounds, had committed suicide (see related story on page 40). Morgan was the first to happen upon his corpse, and he didn't want to be the first to find Al's ghost, too.

"I didn't investigate," says the superintendent, now at the Philadelphia municipal course, John F. Byrne Golf Club. "I took my dog and went right home. I'd had enough experience with that area."

Superintendents, golf professionals and others who work at courses in urban areas often come face to face with bizarre behavior, cruel pranks and senseless vandalism. Often working golf properties situated on city park lands surrounded by open public spaces, they have frequent nongolfing visitors interrupting their routines — and often doing costly damage.

Kevin Greenwell has been the head pro at Shawnee Golf Course, a municipal course in Louisville, Ky., for about seven years. His layout is bordered to the south by Shawnee Park and to the east by undeveloped city-owned land. Along its perimeter to the north and west



# FROM FINDING A DEAD BODY (AND HIS GHOST?) TO HAVING TO DEAL WITH HOMELESS PEOPLE BATHING IN THE IRRIGATION SYSTEM, SUPERINTENDENTS AT URBAN COURSES FACE SOME UNUSUAL CHALLENGES



is the RiverWalk, a bicycle-pedestrian path that runs between it and the Ohio River. Greenwell's course is separated by an imaginary, white-staked boundary from some of the city's lower-income areas. Greenwell particularly worries about young bicyclists who use his cart paths as cut-throughs from their neighborhoods to the RiverWalk.

"Do people understand what a white out-of-bounds stake means?" Greenwell asks. "Probably most of them do not. The kids don't know any better. You try to explain it to them, and they think you're badgering them. You're not. You're just trying to explain to them the danger of a golf ball. It doesn't go where it's supposed to. We know that, but the kids don't."

Some of the kids get obsessed with golf cars, looking for any opening to take one on a joy ride. One kid hijacked a car at Shawnee when

its driver was putting on the 15th green, only to find out that the player was a state trooper with the wind — and the determination — to run him down and get it back. Another of Greenwell's golf cars was involved in a high-speed chase with a police car. And a third ended up several miles away in the city's vehicle impound lot after it was abandoned on a city street. ("They wanted to charge me to get it out," says Greenwell, who later managed to get the fee waived.)

Another ongoing problem at Shawnee is caused by ATVs and dirt bikes that run in the roughly 50 acres of undeveloped land to the east of the golf course. A four-wheel-drive ATV did donuts on the second green two years ago, causing what Greenwell estimates was \$3,000 in damage to the ripped-up putting surface.

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"It dug so deep that it actually had to be sodded," he says. "The sod's still a different color from the original grass."

"Vandalism is a constant problem," says Marty Storch, golf manager for Metro Parks in Louisville and Jefferson County, Ky. The nine county-operated golf courses have their share of stolen flags, flagsticks and tee markers, as well as golf car heists. But here's one for the books: About eight years ago, some pranksters brought a shovel and ax to the course. They started on the third green, digging a hole 4 feet in diameter and 3 feet in depth right on the putting surface. Then they went elsewhere on the course, chopped down a tree, hauled it over to the green and re-planted it not far from the flagstick.

The golf manager says that concerns about vandalism at the Jefferson County-operated

courses have risen to the point that he has asked supervisors at each course to track the damage in 2004 — everything from ripped-off flagsticks to golf car thefts. If the expenses are high enough, especially when combined with vandalism in the public parks that surround many of the courses, Metro Parks may consider bringing back park rangers. The rangers haven't patrolled public parks in the Louisville area in about 20 years.

Security seems to help when urban courses can afford its presence. The links at Forest Park, a near-downtown facility in St. Louis, used to see episodes of assault, larceny and gang activity. Car and truck drivers tore up the course, which runs along a busy city boulevard, with spin-outs after hours — generally when the bars closed. But according to Chad Carpenter, superintendent at the Forest Park layout

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# The Urban Superintendent

'YOU WON'T BELIEVE SOME OF THE THINGS I'VE FOUND,' HE SAYS

BY JAMES PATRICK MORGAN III

**W**hen superintendents arrive to work in the morning, they wonder what challenges the new day will bring. Will a green be dry or has a disease set in during the night? Were skunks feeding on grubs in the fairways? These are problems that most superintendents experience.

But some of us encounter other problems when we get to work — problems that have nothing to do with the condition of the turf. The "some of us" I'm referring to are superintendents who tend turf at public courses in large cities.

I'm one of those superintendents. I've been the superintendent of the John F. Byrne Golf Club in Philadelphia for almost four years. You won't believe some of the things I've found on the course.

Once, I discovered an abandoned car burnt black as the darkest night. And then there was the time I found a dead



BRIAN RUSHING

body, the result of a suicide by an elderly gentleman the night before.

Instead of chasing geese off the course, I and other city superintendents have had to shuffle off the less unfortunate. And imagine the feeling of emptying the trash and coming in contact with a dirty syringe, which I've done.

Ever have a member miss a putt and loudly complain? Sure you have. How about that same member pulling out a 38 and discharging a few shots? That happened to me a few years ago. Now that's deep-tine aerifying, Philly style.

Yes, we still have the same turf worries as everyone else, but being a superintendent in the city offers a greater responsibility. A reason is that some city people see golf courses as retreats from the everyday hassles that await them. I learned this from a gentleman named Al. Let me tell you his story.

Al would walk around the golf course everyday and shag balls, which is nothing unusual. But Al was different. Every ball he found he gave to the local high school teams so the kids didn't have to buy them. This was Al's way of giving back to the game and promoting it in his own special way.

One morning I was in the pro shop

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BRIAN RUSHING

**James Patrick Morgan III decided to let homeless people use the course's sprinkler system to shower.**

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(which has been renamed the Norman K. Probst Community Golf Course), local officials committed \$112 million into rebuilding all of Forest Park, including a redesign of the golf holes by Hale Irwin. Now there's a police substation inside the park, and most of the problems have disappeared. It's a safe place, he says.

"It's just as peaceful and serene as any course in the country early in the morning before all of the traffic noise starts," Carpenter notes.

And in Houston, where the showpiece public course, Memorial Park Golf Course, is just three miles from downtown and set in the middle of a 1,500-acre park, problems have been minimal as well. Jason Harsh, the superintendent there, says the presence of a security guard at the course keeps troublemakers at bay.

"Just having a body going around the golf course and being noticed can deter a lot of vandalism," Harsh says. "It's when nobody's being noticed that you get problems."

Sometimes the illicit behavior is humor-

ous. In Philadelphia, Morgan once came upon an aspiring Picasso who decided to use one of his tee boxes as a setting for his girlfriend to pose nude for a painting.

Sometimes it takes humor to cope with it. Last year, Morgan says three cars were torched on golf courses in Philly by kids who stole them, took them on joy rides and then set them on fire. Golf course employees now say that any water pooling on the course that comes from efforts to fight a car fire is considered casual.

And sometimes compromise is in order. "How would you handle homeless people using your sprinklers for showers and washing machines?" Morgan asks. He's been both repulsed by naked men bathing on his course during early-morning watering and sympathetic to their plight.

At Louisville's Shawnee course, Kevin Greenwell has the opposite problem: aluminum cans everywhere on the periphery of the course — Old Milwaukee 24-ounce beer cans, to be specific, the preferred bargain brew of his ball chasers.

"They sell the balls, buy beer, and then

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when they run out of beer, they come back," Greenwell says. "It's an ongoing process with them."

Greenwell has had ongoing confrontations with these three men, who are nicknamed the Manson brothers because of their scruffy resemblances to the famous California criminal. When he arrived in the mid-1990s, Greenwell learned that the former pro and his staff had left these hustlers alone to find balls on the course and along its perimeter, then come on grounds and sell them.

He says that once, during a charity event hosted by NBA basketball star Allan Houston, a Louisville native, a couple of them went swimming with their shirts off in a water hole on the front nine while bobbing for balls. He's also heard from women or parents of young golfers who are intimidated by their presence. He once got a call about a dead man lying on the 17th hole, only to race out there and find it was one of these men passed out on the premises.

"I don't have any reason to be buddies with them because they are a deterrent to business," Greenwell says. "I've had people tell me that they're not going to come back because they are afraid. [The trespassers] didn't do anything to them — it's just the appearance."

"They've been here 20 years — that's the first thing they told me when I talked to them. They said, 'Well, we've been here a whole lot longer than you have. This is our territory.'"

Even after Greenwell insisted he would have them arrested, these ball chasers became masters at the game of leaving the property once they were detected and before the cops could get there. But eventually they were caught and arrested. Now only one of the Manson brothers returns with any frequency. He's shifted strategy, staying just outside of the boundaries of the course where he can find balls and offer them for sale without trespassing.

"He sits off property in an Indian position behind the 15th tee with the balls on the ground," Greenwell says. "There's no solicitation, but he will sell them."

Of course, some golfers will buy, out of penury or sympathy. "I don't have that sympathy because I think they should be working just like everybody else," says the Shawnee pro.

And Greenwell, like his brethren on urban

courses everywhere, keeps working the vandalism and trespassing situations as hard as he does the playability of the course.

"It's an ongoing problem," he says. "But I think as soon as you give up on the problem, it just gets worse. So you've got to keep trying to make it difficult on them." ■

*Allar is a freelance from Floyds Knobs, Ind.*

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