

Youth Will

Whistling Straits put its faith in 27-year-old superintendent David Swift, who accepted the challenge with confidence

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR., MANAGING EDITOR

The cool, fall-like air crackles with anticipation on this June morning. A biting wind roars off Lake Michigan, dropping the 60-degree day to 45 degrees with breath-taking quickness. A black-bird, its ruby-streaked wings glinting in the sunshine, plunges headlong against the gale toward Whistling Straits Golf Course in Sheboygan, Wis.

In the middle of this flurry of activity stands a blonde-haired man of medium height and a thin-but-muscular build, whose feet are spread apart like a sailor braced on the deck against unruly seas. With implacable calm, his sky-blue eyes keep close watch on what's going on around him — the sheep grazing to his left, the wheat-colored fescue rippling in the roughs and at his busy crew members mowing and primping the course's more than 600 bunkers, its fairways and its greens. As he watches the preparations unfold for the PGA Championship, which will arrive at the complex's Straits Course Aug. 9-15, he breaks into a wide smile.

"Our conditions aren't exactly where I want them to be for the tournament, but we're close," says 27-year-old David Swift, superintendent at Whistling Straits. His eyes twinkle as he looks around again, and in a voice brimming with optimism, he says, "I can't wait for the event to start."

Every day presents unusual challenges to "Swiftly," a nickname bestowed on him by nearly everyone at the course (visitors feel out of place if they call him David or Dave). This morning, he set up a roadblock across the two-lane highway that plunges visitors through a messy green, brown and golden patchwork of Wisconsin farmland leading to the course. The sheep in his care pass unscathed to the other side and on to the course to delight (and possibly frustrate) the early-bird golfers at 7 a.m. Wait, did he say sheep? On a course in Wisconsin?

"Mr. Kohler [*Editor's Note: Herb Kohler, CEO of the Kohler Plumbing empire and owner of four area golf courses, including Whistling Straits. Everyone calls him Mr. Kohler, and his presence is deeply felt at the course even when he's not there.*] and [architect] Pete Dye wanted this course to look like it was on the coast of Ireland, so they decided the course needed sheep," Swift says. "It's my job to release them on the course every morning, and you can't have the sheep getting hit by cars. That's why I have to block off the road."

He grins as astonishment registers on the face of his listener.

"If you think that's odd, you should have been here when the crew and I tried to shear them one year," says Swift, rolling his eyes and laughing. "Suffice to say we have a professional do it now."

Continued on page 32

GLENN THIESEN/HUSEN

Serve



Continued from page 30

Swift recognizes how many other superintendents his age would love to be in his position. Barely six years out of school, he now stands on the precipice of hosting his first Major. He shrugs when asked about the added pressure of being one of the youngest superintendents ever to do so.

"I'm pretty excited to be in this position," Swift says. "I happened to be in the right place at the right time, but I've had four years to get used to the idea of hosting the PGA. We've been working hard to get the course into Major shape — and it will be."

Swift arrived at Whistling Straits after completing the two-year turf-management program at Penn State University under the tutelage of the late George Hamilton, an assistant professor at the school. As Swift moved toward graduation, Hamilton asked him if he would be interested in taking an assistant's job at Whistling Straits. Swift, a Sherburn, Minn., native, jumped at the chance.

"I'm only six hours from home [*Editor's Note: Sherburn is nearly 383 miles due West on Interstate 90 from Sheboygan*], so I can get home more often to play golf with my Dad," Swift says. "I enjoy being close to my family and getting back to the Midwest."

Swift grew up in a golf-playing family, including his father Monte, mother Kathy, brother Paul and sister Tina (and Tina's husband, Scott, also plays and keeps a ledger comparing his scores for the year with Paul). His father, a fifth-grade teacher by trade, worked as the superintendent of a small, nine-hole course called Fox Lake Golf Club in Sherburn, and brought his children to work with him. His father, now semiretired, works part-time on the crew at Interlaken Country Club in Fairmont, Minn.

"I've wanted to be a superintendent since I was 10 years old," Swift says. "I couldn't wait to get out to the course when my dad was there. I enjoyed it so much. I remember being thrilled when he told me you could actually go to school for it."

Whistling Straits hired Swift as an assistant on the Straits Course, but quickly moved him to grow in the Irish Course in 1999, an experience he says taught him what it takes to run his own course. Then, when the PGA of America awarded the Straits Course the 2004 Championship, Swift returned to prepare it for its debut on the international stage. When he worked at the Irish Course, he called home and rounded up two of his closest friends from his hometown to join his staff (see sidebar). Four followed him over the next three years. They're all young and hungry, like Swift himself, and look forward to hosting the tournament.

"It's been kind of like a barn-raising," Swift says. "I've known these guys my entire life, and we work well as a team. I couldn't have asked for better building blocks on which to fashion a crew."

His family members, however, remain his most ardent critics.

"When they come play Whistling Straits, they don't hold



FRANK H. ANDORKA JR.

The Essential David "Swifty" Swift

I drive a: Ford F-150

Favorite pizza topping(s): Sausage and mushroom

Favorite movie: *Fletch*

When I want to relax, I: Fish

Favorite band: Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers

If I could change one thing about myself: My receding hairline

The thing most people don't know about me: "I have taken 15 fishing trips in the last five years without landing a trophy walleye."

Favorite sport other than golf: Football

If I could try any profession other than my own: Resort owner

I'm currently reading: *Somewhere in Ireland, A Village Is Missing An Idiot*, by David Fehrety

Favorite ice-cream flavor: Chocolate Almond

back at all," Swift says. "They're brutally honest, especially my brother Paul. He always tells me what he likes and doesn't like, but that's OK. It's good to get the golfers' perspectives."

Of course, a superintendent can't host a Major on his own. Swift credits the club's director of golf course maintenance, Michael Lee, for making his job infinitely easier.

"Mike's been taking care of everything outside of the ropes so I can focus on getting the golf course in shape," Swift says. "He's been an invaluable resource for me."

Lee sits in his office at Whistling Straits looking content in a gray Whistling Straits golf shirt and tan khakis. He looks like a man who has seen it all and who won't lose his cool coordinating the circus of a Major.

Lee gained crucial tournament experience working at Whistling Straits' sister course, Blackwolf Run, which hosted the 1998 U.S. Women's Open and three Anderson Consulting World Championships of Golf from 1995-1997. He

Continued on page 34

Youth Will Serve

Continued from page 32

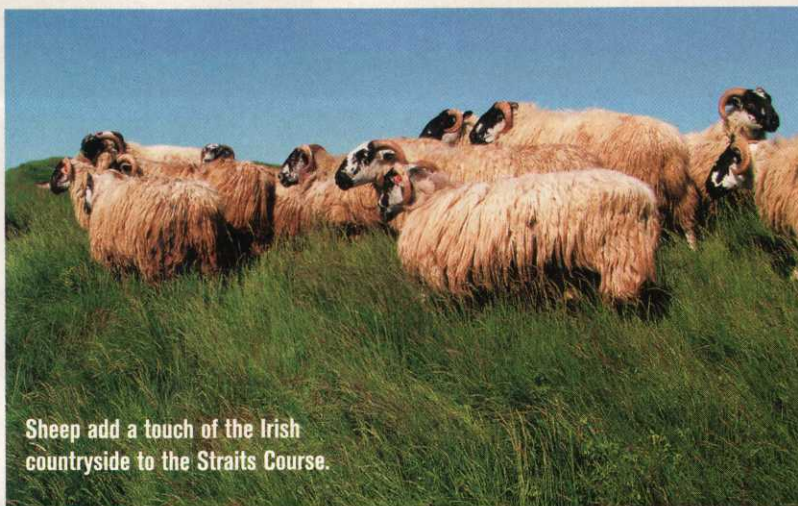
says he learned from those experiences what he can control and what he can't — and it prepared him to handle the PGA with relative calm.

"Of course, none of those tournaments quite rose to the scale of a Major, so there are new challenges you have to face — like the sheer scale of the galleries," Lee says. "You learn which vendors do the best job, and you work with them. It cuts down on the number of distractions that can keep you from producing a great tournament."

Lee says — and Swift concurs — that the biggest challenge Whistling Straits faces is getting the fairways looking like the ones golfers see in Britain's Open Championship. Fescues grow most energetically in sandy soils, a stark contrast to the clay soils of Wisconsin's farmland. Lee says the course has added more than 200 truckloads of topdressing sand since it opened in 1998 to change the soil profile. To date, only the fifth fairway completely satisfies Swift.

"There was one peninsula of sand on the land when Mr. Kohler bought it, and that's where they happened to build the fifth fairway," Swift says. "I want them all to look like that, but it's an uphill struggle."

As Swift crunches an apple to complement his breakfast-time coffee (liberally laced with French vanilla-flavored cream),



Sheep add a touch of the Irish countryside to the Straits Course.

FRANK H. ANDORKA, JR.

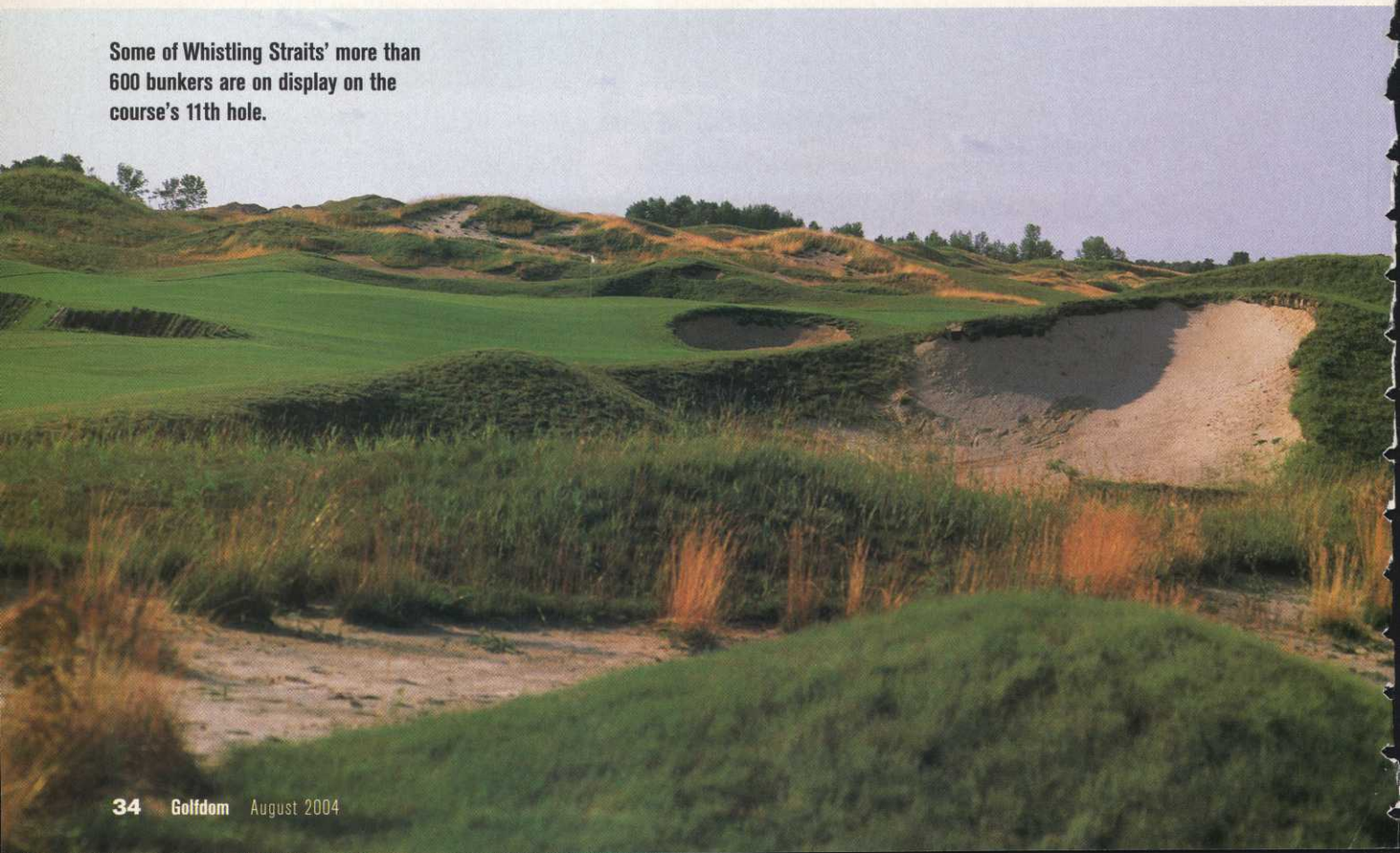
he looks at the fairways, soaked by 11 inches of rain in 20 days. Fescues like dry soils, too, Swift explains, so the unusually wet weather has inhibited the amount of maintenance he and his crew can do on the course, including the all-important topdressing. Still, the ever-optimistic Swift says the poor weather had its blessings. "It allowed us to see what problem spots remain and allows us the time to work on them before the pros arrive," he says.

Swift takes another bite of the apple and jumps off the cart to break up clumps of grass in the rough with a kick. He shakes his head as he looks at the line — it isn't as straight as the PGA demands. He motions to the crew member, who cuts the motor and walks over. In broken Spanish, Swift explains the need for

MIKE KLEMM

Continued on page 36

Some of Whistling Straits' more than 600 bunkers are on display on the course's 11th hole.





GLENN THIESSENHUSEN

Continued from page 34

clean lines to define the rough. The worker, one of 28 Hispanics on the crew, nods his head in comprehension. Swift pats the man on the shoulder, and the worker grins. Back in the golf car after five minutes of breaking up clipping piles and examining fairways for imperfections, Swift chuckles when complimented on learning Spanish so he can talk with his employees.

"I'm still not fluent by any stretch," Swift says. "We've been working together long enough now that we've learned how to communicate in a mixture of English and Spanish. We've also created our own vocabulary of words that don't actually exist, but we know what they mean so the job gets done."

It takes many superintendents years (and a headful of gray hairs) to learn the delicate art of communicating with general managers and players, but Swift may have mastered it already. Steve Friedlander, general manager and director of golf for the complex, raves about his young superintendent.

"He's a great, talented superintendent," Friedlander says, relaxing in his office. "I've always tried to hire people who communicate well, and Swifty does it as well as anyone I've ever employed."

In addition to his general manager duties, Friedlander occasionally plays with selected guests and assesses the course condition. He marvels at how well Swift hides intrusive maintenance practices like aerification from golfers — no easy task, given that Whistling Straits is a packed, public course.

"Swifty works hard to maintain conditions so the golfers don't have to play a 'dirty' golf course," Friedlander says. "He's

Close to Home

In the six years Whistling Straits superintendent Dave Swift (red shirt) has worked at the Straits and Irish Courses, he has brought along a few friends from home (the Sherburn, Minn., area) to work on the crew. They are (from left to right):

Chris Stenson — Maintenance Crew, Straits Course
Houston Schubert — Maintenance Crew, Irish Course
Matt Zehms — Assistant Superintendent, Irish Course
Kaleb Anderson — Maintenance Crew, Straits Course
Josh Peterson — Maintenance Crew, Straits Course
Clint Forstrom — Maintenance Crew, Straits Course

a great blend of aggressiveness and understanding. He's always ready to try new practices while balancing revenues and maintenance. My job is to protect the club's biggest asset — the golf course — and I trust Dave to do just that. We talk constantly."

Swift doesn't talk about his attention to detail as much as he shows it. While driving around the course, he frequently hops out of the cart to pick up trash, reposition errant garbage cans and disperse clumps of grass clippings.

"I watched some of the best superintendents in the business deal with PGA Championship preparations, and I learned that you can't get rattled by anything," says Swift, who visited Hazeltine National Golf Club superintendent Jim Nicol in 2002 and Paul B. Latshaw at Oak Hill Country Club last year to watch them stage PGA Championships. "They [Latshaw and Nicol] showed me how to deal with almost any crisis. I learned so much from them."

Swift says Latshaw, Nicol, three superintendent mentors (James Gardner, Tim Taagen and Saeed Assadzandi) and his fa-

Continued on page 38

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

Master It!

**TRAP
MASTER**

It's a constant battle: erosion, sand loss, contamination from dirt and debris, clogged drains. Keeping your bunkers playable and attractive costs you money and wastes your valuable time! But it doesn't have to!

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.

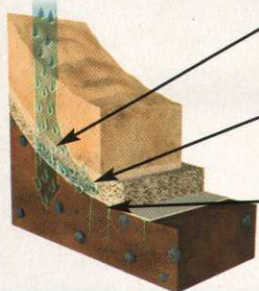


**GET
10% OFF
YOUR ORDER!**
(Call for details.)

Together, the patent-pending TrapMaster™ 2-layer design:

- 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
- Greatly minimizes bunker maintenance costs!

With TrapMaster™, you'll save yourself and your crew time, money, and a lot of work!



- Upper blanket layer allows water to penetrate and drain evenly – drastically reducing the incidence of erosion.
- Sand fills the blanket layer, keeping it in place – even on slopes with up to 60° angles!
- Spunbond underlayer is porous enough to let water pass through but dense enough to keep troublesome weeds and debris out.

For more information,

Call TOLL-FREE 1-866-273-9280

OR Mail This Coupon

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

Your Name _____

Course Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____

Zip _____

Phone (optional) _____

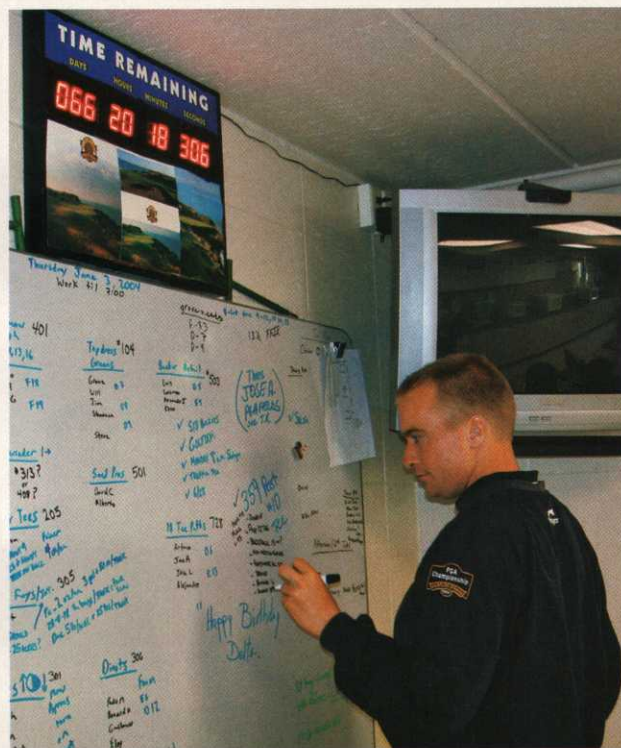
of bunkers you'd consider testing _____

Average size of each bunker _____

Mail to: **TrapMaster™**, 16224 Surfview, Wildwood, MO 63040

GOL0503

Youth Will Serve



David Swift makes assignments for his Whistling Straits' crew members on a board at the maintenance facility. A digital clock above the board counts down the days until the PGA Championship.

ther imparted the importance of teaching the art of golf course maintenance to members of his crew. He adds that his workers reward his efforts by loving their jobs enough to learn quickly.

"All of the guys working for me tell me it's the best crew they've ever been on," Swift says. "They act like it, too. I know how lucky I am to work with them and to have them helping me in this effort. I wouldn't be anywhere without my assistants [Jeff Rottier and Kyle Jacobsen]. They always seem to remember some of the little things I forget. We meet several times a day to keep each other updated on the course."

Swift also credits Grant Dewey, the Irish Course's superintendent, for sharing equipment and or crews. "With the championship coming up, everyone from both courses will play a role in its success," he says.

After World War I, an old saying asked how America's farms would keep its sons working at home after they'd seen the fast-paced life of Paris. Lee says the same question haunts him about how to keep Swift at Whistling Straits after he survives the crucible of his first Major this month.

"Swift's always smiling because his future is so bright," Lee says earnestly. "We will do everything we can to keep him within the Kohler family, and there will likely be other opportunities for him here. If we can offer him the best career

Continued on page 40

Youth Will Serve

Continued from page 38

opportunity, he'll stay. If we can't, then he *should* go. His future is practically boundless."

As for the man himself, Swift says he has no plans to leave Whistling Straits. After all, the USGA awarded the course the 2007 U.S. Senior Open, and the young man with the boyish good looks says he looks forward to that challenge. His immediate plans, however, include a long overdue vacation with his girlfriend, Shelly.

He told her she would have to make all the plans because he's too busy with course preparation. He looks forward to going someplace south and lying on the beach for a week, but he plans only a short respite.

"Then, when it's all over I'll be back here at the Straits, starting preparations for the Senior Open," Swift says. "I have no plans on going anywhere for a long time." ■



FRANK H. ANDORKA JR.

One of superintendent Dave Swift's (far right) favorite jobs is teaching his crew how to do specific tasks. Here he talks to (from left to right) Shannon Campbell, Will Kimberly and Jim Osbourne.

BECAUSE EVERY YARD COUNTS

For info, call 1.800.286.6100.x.280 email: sportturf@penningtonseed.com
or visit: www.penningtonseed.com

It's true to your game, and ours. That's why we make it our business at Pennington to provide lush, durable turfgrass for any managed property or athletic field.

Our Applaud Perennial Ryegrass series is rated #1 for its high turf quality, disease resistance, density, color, and mowability.

Pennington's Plantation tall fescue is also the top in its class, because of its fine texture and outstanding dark, green color that will endure any condition, any time of year.

Our bluegrass and perennial ryegrass is so good, it was used to cover every square inch of the season's toughest game in professional football – SUPER BOWL XXXVIII and will continue to cover the next four Super Bowl fields.

Whether it is the biggest arena in pro football or your front lawn, you can trust Pennington to go the extra yard for all your turfgrass needs.

