

**M**ark “Doc” Grace danced precipitously close to the edge of disaster in 1994. His sod farm, a family operation in Owings, Md., since 1955, could no longer compete against the bigger farms that moved into his area.

Grace’s expenses mounted — he had a wife, three kids and a mortgage. Just when he thought he would have to give it all up, his neighbor, a meat cutter, walked in and asked if he could hit some golf balls on one end of the farm.

It seemed the man couldn’t find the time or money to get a tee time at the local courses. Grace, whose only previous experience with golf was as a caddy for his high-school chemistry teacher (“I was flunking the class — I needed to do something to ingratiate myself to him”), told him to go ahead. Soon, the neighbor brought seven or eight friends and they all hit golf balls on the outer edges of the sod farm — and Grace saw the light.

“I decided to open a driving range,” Grace says. “I had no idea how to build one or what it would take to run it, but watching them hit the balls inspired me.”

Grace educated himself by reading industry magazines on maintenance and ownership topics. He taught himself how to build and run a driving range. He learned how much to charge for a bucket of balls. With his new knowledge and understanding, Grace set out to make a success of his range.

Grace’s story recalls a different era in golf course maintenance, when hard work, self-education and learning on the job might be enough to launch a superintendent’s career. But today, when even the most entry-level maintenance job requires a four-year degree, Grace’s story reads like something out of the yellowed pages of a history book. It also contains a lesson that there still are opportunities for self-made superintendents to succeed with a willingness to commit to lifelong learning.

Ten years later, Grace’s self-education continues. He still reads and learns all he can about how to run a golf operation, and it’s a good thing — he’s added a nine-hole par-3 course and a

## The Triumph of a Self-Made Man

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR.



IN AN ERA WHEN  
THE MOST ENTRY-  
LEVEL JOB  
REQUIRES A FOUR-  
YEAR DEGREE,  
‘DOC’ GRACE’S  
STORY READS LIKE  
SOMETHING OUT OF  
A HISTORY BOOK

nine-hole regulation course to his portfolio at Mellomar Golf Park to complement the driving range. That required more knowledge than how to shag golf balls, so Grace focused on becoming his own architect and superintendent.

When he built his par 3, he read everything possible on golf course architecture. Grace also leaned on the advice of a young engineering student who had worked for him in high school, doing odd jobs around the course for the chance to use the range.

“He was ambitious, and he went to work for the construction company that built the course,” Grace says proudly. “Now he’s in charge of a construction crew that’s handling a huge renovation in Florida. He definitely has talent.”

Of course, building the track was only the beginning. Grace knew he needed to increase his agronomic knowledge, so he went to one of the most respected superintendents in the area, Keith Herschberger, with a proposition.

“I told him I didn’t want to get paid,” Grace says. “I told him I was willing to do anything he wanted me to do on his course. But the catch was that I could ask him any questions I wanted about how to care for a golf course. He was completely understanding and helped me immensely.”

Grace realizes how lucky he is to be in a business where people are willing to help out others without letting egos get in the way.

“I’ve been able to rely on a lot of people who didn’t have any reason to help me out other than their love of what they do for a living,” Grace says. “I’ve been lucky to know so many of them as I’ve gotten into this business.”

Money is still tight, but it’s getting better. To this day, Grace doesn’t keep an official maintenance budget (although he says he’d be

*Continued on page 72*



## Down and Dirty

*Continued from page 70*

surprised if was more than \$75,000 per year) and relies on his local distributors to meet his chemical needs no more than a month in advance.

"I'm not going to be able to offer you perfect conditions, but I'm going to offer you good conditions for the price you're paying," Grace says. "I want to blow the customer away with his experience here."

(For the record, it costs golfers \$15 for nine holes of golf. If you come back to play the course a second time on the same day, it costs \$10.)

He's come a long way to eliminate the financial peril that nearly engulfed him 10 years ago. His debt load is light, and he's not losing money on the sod farm anymore. But he's not rolling in money: He and his wife Peggy still have to take themselves off the payroll every winter to make ends meet.

"I have a patient and understanding

**Mark "Doc" Grace credits his wife, Peggy, with helping him keep his golf dreams at Mellomar Golf Park in Owings, Md., alive.**

wife, which has been one of the keys to my success," Grace says. "She squirrels away enough money during the season that we can stop paying ourselves during the winter. It's not always easy for her, but we know that we'll eventually stabilize the finances."

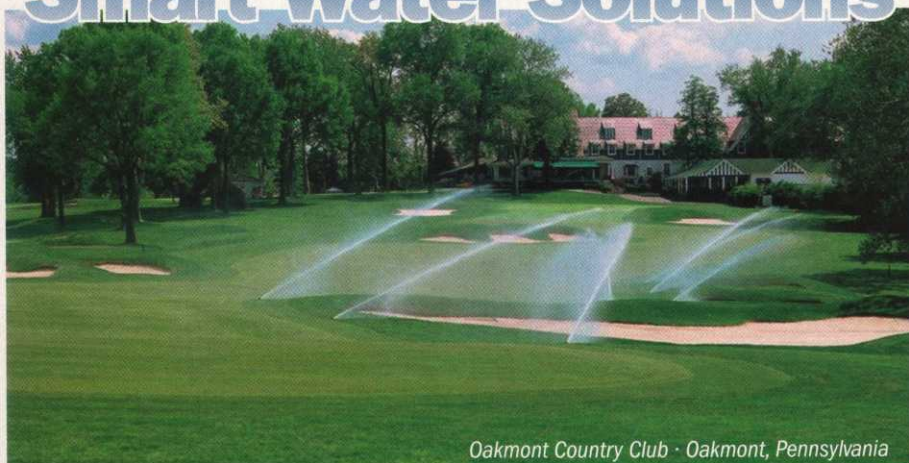
And for Grace, the life-long learning opportunities the golf industry provides him makes any risk he takes worth it.

"Every day is a perpetual learning experience," Grace says. "I can't wait to get here every morning and check out what's happened to my golf course since the sun went down the night before." ■



JIM BLACK

## Smart Water Solutions



Oakmont Country Club · Oakmont, Pennsylvania

*"Hiring a professional irrigation consultant is very important to the success and outcome of a major irrigation installation or restoration project. The planning and specifications, prepared by a professional consultant, lay the foundation for lasting solutions that achieve environmental and business objectives."*

**JOHN ZIMMERS**

Golf Course Superintendent • Oakmont Country Club  
Oakmont, Pennsylvania

Professional members of the American Society of Irrigation Consultants have passed an extensive peer review and qualification process.

Working with an ASIC member gives you the confidence that a highly-qualified irrigation consultant is on the job, helping to protect your interests and your investment

**Contact ASIC to find a consultant near you.**



111 E. Wacker 18th Floor  
Chicago, IL 60601  
312.372.7090  
Fax: 312.372.6160  
[www.ASIC.com](http://www.ASIC.com)