

# Michaud

# Mark

Down-to-earth  
superintendent  
thought he reached  
his career pinnacle  
at Pebble Beach.  
But then he came  
to Shinnecock Hills,  
site of this month's  
U.S. Open

**STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY LARRY AYLWARD,  
EDITOR**

**HAS MADE HIS**

**H**is first day on the job at Grand Cypress Golf Club in 1984, Mark Michaud pulled reeds out of a pond bank. It was a dirty and daring duty. The 23-year-old stood up to his knees in murky water. A swarm of slimy snakes swam about while menacing alligators lurked nearby.

But the unflappable Michaud, the new greenkeeper at the Orlando golf course, didn't vacate the pond or the premises. He went about his job — *enjoying* it.

"I remember thinking to myself, I wouldn't want to be doing anything else," Michaud recalls 20 years later while sitting in his cluttered office

at Shinnecock Hills Golf Club in Southampton, N.Y., where he's the superintendent. "It was just awesome. I loved it."

During that time in the pond, Michaud knew he had found his niche in life — golf course maintenance and management.

"Every day I went to work, I'd stay there from light until dark," Michaud says in his gruff voice. "I just loved being on the golf course."

On this day, a cool spring morning in April, Michaud reminisces about his career and talks about the people who helped him get to where he is today. This month, the





43-year-old Michaud will reach a career pinnacle when Shinnecock hosts the 2004 U.S. Open Championship.

Michaud appears relaxed as he slumps in a black leather chair with his legs crossed. Some superintendents dress like golfers, but not the burly Michaud. He wears blue rain pants, a blue jacket and duck shoes. His tan baseball cap features the Shinnecock Hills Indian logo and reads, "2004 U.S. Open."

Michaud's round face is tan and weathered and looks a tad weary — understandable for a man who's been busy readying his golf course for one of the nation's greatest sporting events. Michaud's big, blue-green eyes command your attention. During a long conversation, he removes his hat often and runs his large, coarse hands through a shock of curly, black hair tinted by a touch of gray.

Michaud has a sharp wit, enjoys telling stories (ask him if he has any deer-hunting tales) and loves to laugh. He's one of those people whose jovial laugh — a low, raspy cackle — is itself funny and makes other people laugh.

It was a homecoming of sorts when Michaud arrived at Shinnecock Hills in January 2000 from the Monterey Peninsula in California. He grew up in Rochester, N.Y., about a seven-hour drive from eastern Long Island.

In California, where he spent seven years, Michaud rose through the ranks at the Pebble Beach Co. He was assistant superintendent for four months at Pebble Beach Golf Links before being named superintendent, a post he held for 3.5 years. Then he was named agronomist/superintendent for all four courses under the Pebble Beach umbrella.

Pebble Beach was a great experience, but Michaud says the job drained him. The resort is open daily, and every tee time is always booked. Michaud rarely had a day off and remembers cutting cups on Christmas mornings. Pebble Beach got to be a grind.

"When I was home, I'd think about the course all the time," Michaud says. "I'd dream about the course when asleep."



The time at the company ripped by — three years, four years, five years.

"It went by so fast," Michaud says. "It was a treadmill. You can only do it for so long."

On top of that, Michaud says California is a "tremendously expensive" place to live. So is Southampton, but Michaud is making more money at Shinnecock.

Michaud says he loved his job at Pebble Beach, but it just burned him out. "I made a lot of great friends there, and I miss them dearly."

Don't misunderstand him — Michaud didn't leave Pebble Beach because he doesn't like to work long hours. In fact, he subscribes to the work-hard and play-hard lifestyle. But the difference between the Pebble Beach and Shinnecock jobs is that Michaud *has* time to play in his current role. He's an avid hunter and fisherman. He'll tell you that hooking a 15-pound striper from the Atlantic Ocean is as exhilarating as birdieing the par-3 seventh at Shinnecock, one of his favorite holes on the William Flynn-designed course.

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Michaud (left) confers with assistant superintendent Brian Goleski. "There's a handful of really good superintendents out there, and Mark is one of them," Goleski says.

**"I'd stay there from light until dark. I just loved being on the golf course." — Mark Michaud**



## Michaud Has Made His Mark

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**A**fter graduating from high school, Michaud thought he wanted to be a toolmaker, and he took a job as an apprentice. But Michaud noticed something distinctive about the veteran toolmakers he met — none of them had all 10 fingers.

He ditched that profession and took a job for a company that manufactured computers for AT&T. But after the AT&T breakup in 1984, the company folded and Michaud lost his job.

At 23, Michaud and his buddy packed up their belongings and moved to Orlando. They worked various construction jobs to pay the rent and eat. One day, Michaud scanned the want ads, saw an ad for a greenkeeper at Grand Cypress Golf Club and applied for the post.

"I got the job, not knowing they would take anybody they could off the street just to get the work done," he says with a self-effacing chuckle.

Michaud also didn't know at the time that his life was about to change. He hit it off with Tom Alex, director of golf course maintenance at Grand Cypress, and says his boss was a great teacher. Michaud worked at Grand Cypress for nearly a year.

"He was the type of guy you could give any assignment to," Alex recalls. "I'd say, 'Mark, get in there with those snakes and alligators.' He'd laugh and say, 'OK.'"

Alex, recognizing how much Michaud relished the profession, suggested he pursue an education in the field. So Michaud went home to New York to attend the State University of New York (SUNY) in Cobleskill. He worked as a greenkeeper at Rochester Country Club while going to school. Michaud was 28 when he graduated from SUNY with a two-year degree in ornamental turfgrass management.

He took an internship at Oak Hill Country Club in 1988-89 and helped prepare the course for the U.S. Open in

1989. The experience electrified him. "I thought it was the greatest thing I'd ever seen," Michaud says. "I knew then that I wanted to have my own U.S. Open someday."

Shortly after the 1989 U.S. Open, Michaud landed a job as assistant superintendent at the Monroe Golf Club in Pittsford, N.Y., where he spent three years. Then it was on to Pebble Beach, where Michaud gained much tournament experience with the annual AT&T Pebble Beach National Pro-Am. He also headed preparations for Pebble Beach's U.S. Open in 2000.

It was difficult for Michaud to leave Pebble Beach for Shinnecock, especially six months before the course's U.S. Open was to be held. But Michaud, his wife and two kids longed to move back east. Shinnecock wasn't exactly a comedown, and Michaud knew he couldn't pass up the opportunity.

He succeeded long-time Shinnecock



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superintendent Peter Smith, a Shinnecock Indian and a second-generation superintendent at the course. The Smiths' forefathers built the course in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Michaud says he didn't feel pressure to replace Smith, who had been the superintendent since 1980 and grew up working on the course under his father Elmer, Shinnecock's superintendent for 34 years.

The relationship between Smith and members had soured, and it was time for Smith to move on. He took a job as superintendent at Foxwoods Resort, but Smith died suddenly from a heart attack in 2002.

The news of Smith's death shocked Michaud. He respected Smith and notes that Smith oversaw two successful U.S. Opens at Shinnecock in 1986 and 1995.

"He was such a lovable guy," Michaud says. "He lit up the room when he walked in it. We were sad to see him ago."

Michaud and his wife divorced more than a year ago. His ex-wife and two sons — 13-year-old Mark and 10-year-old Jordan — live in Rochester. Michaud tries to visit his boys often. His face beams when he talks about them.

Michaud admits he's been fortunate to be in the right place at the right time in his career path. But he also says tenacity has played a big part in his success.

"I've aggressively pursued everything I've obtained," he says. "I don't sit around and wait for something to happen."

Throughout his career, Michaud sought to learn from his peers. He says Alex taught him the basics of golf course maintenance at Grand Cypress as well as how to get projects done efficiently.

"He always had a sense of urgency," Michaud says of his first boss. "Everything we did on the course every day was important, and it was urgent that we get things done the best we could."

Michaud says his Grand Cypress experience prepared him well. "After working there and seeing the massive amount of work that had to be done in such a short time, I've never been intimidated by anything."

Michaud says Tim Moraghan, director of championship agronomy for the USGA, influenced his career greatly. He met Moraghan in 1989 at Oak Hill during the U.S. Open. Michaud then spent ample time with Moraghan while volunteering at several other U.S. Opens. He says he learned a lot just by listening to and watching Moraghan.

Moraghan says Michaud is well-respected in the industry.

"He's the only guy I know who has worked on both coasts at two of the best golf courses in the world and turned them into wonderful products," Moraghan says. "He's low-key and takes his job seriously."

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**W**hat's better — tending turf at Pebble Beach or Shinnecock? "I like Shinnecock much better," Michaud answers without hesitation. "You look at the topography of this land and the contour changes and how natural everything is. It's a great place for a golf course."

Michaud's first order of business when he came to Shinnecock was to build a new maintenance facility to improve the operation's efficiency. The previous facility, at 6,000 square feet, was outdated.

The new maintenance facility is bright and clean and three times the size of the old one. Michaud says the new maintenance facility, as well as a new line of John Deere equipment, has improved maintenance immensely. "It has made all the difference in the world."

Michaud and his crew have been busy the past four years with a few major projects.

Shinnecock Hills Golf Club can compare with any American design. See Geoff Shackelford's story on page 46.

### Pros Will Have to Deal With Gusty Wind at U.S. Open

Who will win the 104<sup>th</sup> U.S. Open Championship? Mark Michaud, superintendent of Shinnecock Hills Golf Club, where the event is set from June 14 to June 20, says he wouldn't mind if a cat named Tiger wins it.

Michaud, who readied Pebble Beach Golf Links for the U.S. Open in 2000 but left the course for Shinnecock six months before the event took place, is still blown away by Tiger Woods' performance in winning that tournament. Woods was 13-under par for the tournament. His closest competitor was 2-over par.

"Pebble Beach was as tough as you can imagine a golf course playing," says Michaud, who spent seven years at the course from 1992 to 1999. "It was hard and firm."

And then Tiger tore it up.

"When something like that happens, you don't give up, but you wonder how much control you really have [as superintendent]," Michaud says.

Whoever wins this year's U.S. Open will have to deal with the infamous Shinnecock wind, which gusts up to 20 miles per hour in the late morning.

"If I was playing, I would hope to tee

off as early as possible," Michaud says.

"The guys who get out the earliest will have the advantage."

Shinnecock will play 6,997 yards at par 70. It's not a big-hitter's course.

"There's not a hole where you can rear back and hit it as far as you can, and then try to hit a wedge into the green," Michaud adds. "You really have to think about what's the big shot."

"It looks British and plays British," is how some describe Shinnecock. Indeed, Michaud hopes for windy, cool and misty conditions, not unlike the weather often seen at British Opens.

Michaud doesn't want the course to look too green on television. "I'm really looking for more of an off color, similar to the Scottish courses," he says. "I want it to play firm and fast."

Shinnecock's greens are 75 percent *Poa annua* and 25 percent bentgrass. Michaud keeps the greens, which average about 5,700 square feet, running between 11 feet and 11.5 feet on the Stimpmeter. Anything faster, combined with the greens' tricky contours and the stiff wind, will limit pin placements, Michaud says.

— Larry Aylward, Editor

Michaud and his crew finished one project begun by Smith and his crew.

Between holes on the course, masses of vines, trees and brush had grown so thick and high that they acted like walls and cut off air circulation throughout the course, not to mention hole-to-hole views.

"Holes were becoming isolated from one another," Michaud says. "So we just started getting in the woods and cleaning them out."

Michaud also oversaw a massive renovation of the course's 164 bunkers. The goal was to get the bunkers back to the way they looked in the 1930s when Flynn designed them.

The grass faces on several bunkers grew down over the years so golfers couldn't see them in the distance. Michaud says Flynn's original intention was for the bunkers to intimidate golfers. But if the golfers couldn't see them, they wouldn't fear them.

"We have a club historian who preserved a lot of course pictures," Michaud says. "We were able to [restore] the bunkers with their natural jagged look. We've re-established the intimidation factor."

**T**he thrill of preparing a golf course for a Major can be addicting. But when the event is over — and the camera crews leave town and the corporate tents disappear — there are often voids in the hearts of the superintendent and his crew members, who spent several years readying the course for the tournament.

But Michaud believes his life will be fine when the U.S. Open ends. "I look forward to the challenge of getting the course back into shape as fast as we can for our membership after the Open," he says in upbeat tone.

Michaud says he won't suffer big-tournament withdrawal. He'll still volunteer at other Majors as he has done in the past.

"I'll get my tournament fix somewhere else," he says, adding that he expects the U.S. Open to return to Shinnecock in about seven years.

First and foremost, Michaud wants the course to be in great condition for the members. Also high on the list is his staff — he wants his crew members to be content and stimulated in their jobs. "I want to return the favor of their hard work and dedication by educating and prepar-

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**Michaud oversaw renovation of the 164 bunkers on the golf course. The goal was to get the bunkers back to the way they looked in the 1930s.**

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ing them to be superintendents someday," Michaud says.

Chris Dalhamer, who worked for Michaud at Pebble Beach, says Michaud prepared him well. Dalhamer, superintendent of Spyglass Hill Golf Course at Pebble Beach, says Michaud taught him the value of a strong work ethic, among other things.

"He knows what it takes to maintain a top-notch golf course, and he's not afraid to get out there and get dirty to make it happen," Dalhamer says. "I learned many, many valuable things from him, and I still look to him for advice frequently."

Michaud admits he's a hands-on superintendent, but he knows he would not be successful without his 21-person crew. He likes to keep a loose atmosphere around the maintenance facility. Workers laugh and joke. However, Michaud is not afraid to keep them on the straight and narrow. "He can be very direct when he wants to be," says Frank Hancock, Michaud's assistant.

It's top of mind for Michaud to let members of his crew know how much he appreciates their

work. He does that through simple actions — by throwing barbecues or purchasing workers new hats from the pro shop.

Hancock has worked with Michaud for seven years, including 2.5 years at Pebble Beach. Michaud asked Hancock to join him when he joined Shinnecock, and the Indiana native jumped at the chance. Hancock says Michaud is one of the top superintendents in the world. "I've learned a lot just by watching him interact with people," says Hancock, noting that Michaud has excellent people skills.

Michaud has done a lot and seen a lot in his golf course maintenance career — and he's far from done.

"I feel like I've been through five superintendents' careers," he says, only half-joking. "Some guys in this industry would have to live 100 years to experience what I've experienced in 10 years."

Tom Alex says he's not surprised his former pupil ended up as superintendent at two of the greatest golf courses in the world. He also says success hasn't gone to Michaud's head.

"He's the same old Mark Michaud who worked for me 20 years ago," Alex says. "He's as down to earth as anybody you know. It was fun to be a little part of his life. I'm really happy for him."

Driving in his utility vehicle across the rolling terrain that comprises Shinnecock Hills, Michaud scans the course against the horizon. Shinnecock, with its clusters of tall, rustic rough, is hailed as one of America's few authentic links-style courses. It's hallowed ground in golf circles.

"I thought I was at my career peak when I was at Pebble Beach," Michaud says softly. "But now I feel like I'm at my career peak again. I have no desire to ever leave this golf course. They're going to have to kick me out of here." ■

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# "He's the same old Mark Michaud who worked for me 20 years ago." — Tom Alex