

Back in Business at Baltusrol

After exiting Oakmont and nearly leaving the greenskeeping field,
Mark Kuhns finds new life at the site of this month's PGA Championship

Could a down-and-almost-out superintendent revive his career at a course named after a murder victim?

Alone in a Newark, N.J., hotel room, Mark Kuhns wondered just that. And it wasn't a pretty scene, that mid-September eve in 1999.

Kuhns was exhausted following his sixth and final interview for the top job at Baltusrol Golf Club, just seven miles due west, in Springfield.

He was stranded, having missed his flight back to Pittsburgh after getting lost in the labyrinth of Newark Airport.

And worse yet, he was soggy. Irony, it seemed, wasn't the only thing dripping in his world.

"This was right after Hurricane Floyd went through," Kuhns recalls. "I walked into my room, took my shoes off, and the floor was wet because the hurricane had beat through the windows and dumped all kinds of water. I smelled like an old wet dog, and I'm think-

ing, 'Oh, God. If I could just click my heels together and go home.'"

Kuhns would never make it back to Western Pennsylvania — at least, not as the same person.

Upon calling his wife Janet, he discovered that Dick Fowler, the search committee chairman whose much drier socks he had just tried to knock off, was already looking for him.

What had Fowler sounded like, Mark nervously asked his wife. Was he happy? Was he sad? Was there any indication? What, Janet, what?

"I'm hyperventilating at that point," Kuhns says.

"Mark," his wife repeated once and for all, "just call him."

So Kuhns anxiously dialed the club. And before he could explain that he was still in the same area code, Fowler began a "little dissertation" that Kuhns says wound up lasting about 15 minutes. It even started to sound like a Dear John letter, he adds. "You know — 'Thank you, but no thank you.'"

Continued on page 40

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS SKERNIVITZ, MANAGING EDITOR



▲ Mark Kuhns, the director of grounds at Baltusrol Golf Club, will have plenty to brag about when the PGA Championship arrives this month. He'll be especially proud of the 20 or so stone headwalls that he built with his own hands as a method of relaxation.

◀ As two cable company officials discover, nothing gets past Kuhns when it comes to preparing for a major tournament. His eye for detail is "amazing," according to Lower Course Superintendent Scott Bosetti.

Continued from page 38

At that moment, the career of one of America's top certified superintendents — Kuhns had hosted three major tournaments, including the 1994 U.S. Open, at Oakmont and Laurel Valley country clubs — was hanging in the balance. It would either survive at historic Baltusrol, the site of seven U.S. Opens. Or it would go down like the club's tragic namesake — Scottish farmer Baltus Roll, who, on the night of Feb. 22, 1831, was beaten and robbed by three men and left to freeze to death outside his home, which sat on land that would become club property 64 years later.

Kuhns — “burned out with golf,” he says, after some chilly days of his own at Oakmont — had prepared to leave the field even before learning of the Baltusrol opening. If rejected in favor of one of the remaining candidates, Mark Michaud or Matt Shaffer, he would happily accept a sales position within the golf industry and enjoy weekends off with high school sweetheart Janet and their teenage children, Elizabeth, Stephen and Kristen.

But Kuhns really liked Baltusrol. He had fancied the course since raking bunkers for superintendent Joe Flaherty at the '93 U.S. Open. He had put his heart and soul into two phone interviews, a committee visit to Oakmont, and three face-to-face interviews with as many as 15 Baltusrol VIPs at one sitting. And from the age of 11, when he first met Arnold Palmer as a range boy, he had wanted to be only one thing — a superintendent.

Now he was waiting ... and waiting ... for the final say from Fowler.

“It got right to the end, and it was the greatest thing because you still didn't know how this story was going to end,” Kuhns says. “Finally, he says, ‘And for all these reasons, this is why we selected you as our new director of grounds.’”

Thunderstruck, Kuhns fell backward onto his bed, wide-eyed as the hurricane that had irrigated his hotel carpet. “Mr. Fowler,” he said, “I know you're excited to get going, and believe me, I know you won't ever regret your decision.”

To Fowler's surprise, Kuhns mentioned that he was still in town.

“Can you stay?” Fowler asked.

“I can stay the rest of my life,” Kuhns answered.

'Ready to go'

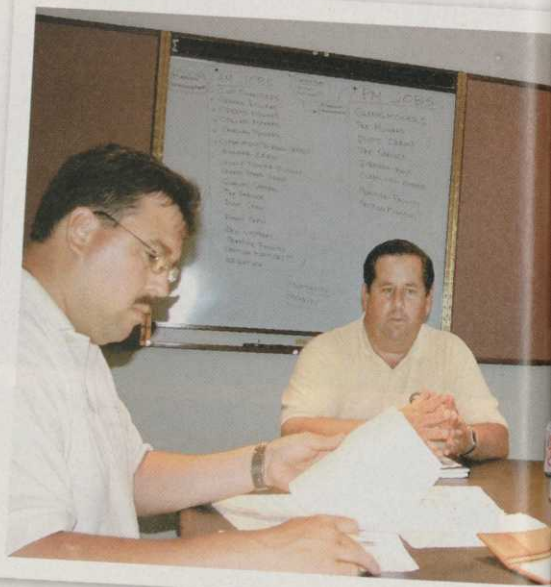
Six summers later, Kuhns and Baltusrol are back in the national spotlight. The club is preparing for its first PGA Championship, Aug. 8-14, on its par-70, 7,400-yard Lower Course.

“I've been here six years and there isn't a day that goes by that I don't jump out of bed and I'm ready to go,” Kuhns, who turned 50 in March, says. “I've never once questioned whether I wanted to be here in those six years. And I can't say that about everywhere I've been.”

Leaving Oakmont was a “bittersweet experience,” Kuhns says. He had spent nine years there as head superintendent and had hosted the 1992 U.S. Women's Open and '94 U.S. Open. Without Oakmont and those Majors to his name, there would have been no chance at Baltusrol, he maintains.

But there weren't many stress-free days at pressure-packed Oakmont, he adds. And like

► Flanked by his “first lieutenants,” superintendents Bosetti (left) and Doston Kish, Kuhns leads a review of volunteers assigned to work the PGA Championship at Baltusrol.



a marriage gone sour, both unhappy parties started to look elsewhere. Kuhns interviewed for several jobs, including Southern Hills Country Club in Tulsa, Okla. At the same time, word got out that Oakmont was looking to replace him with John Zimmers, a scenario that would eventually unfold.

“There was somewhat of a lack of confidence in each other,” Kuhns says. “They knew I had interviewed for a number of jobs. And I didn't have any faith in them either ... because people were biting the dust left and right. It was a little like a shark smelling blood in the water.”

So Kuhns decided to leave Oakmont, even if it wasn't necessarily on his own terms. And he would second-guess that choice, as well as himself, right up until the time Fowler said he was their man.

"Sometimes things happen in your life where it's a pretty bitter pill," he says. "And you just really question whether you made the right decisions in life."

First lieutenants

Kuhns' numerous protégés, many of whom share his Western Pennsylvania roots, are forever indebted to him and his decision to leave Oakmont. The list is topped by the four superintendents — Scottie Hines, Mark Hughes, Scott Bosetti and Doston Kish — who have tended to Baltusrol's Upper and Lower courses since Kuhns' arrival in 1999.

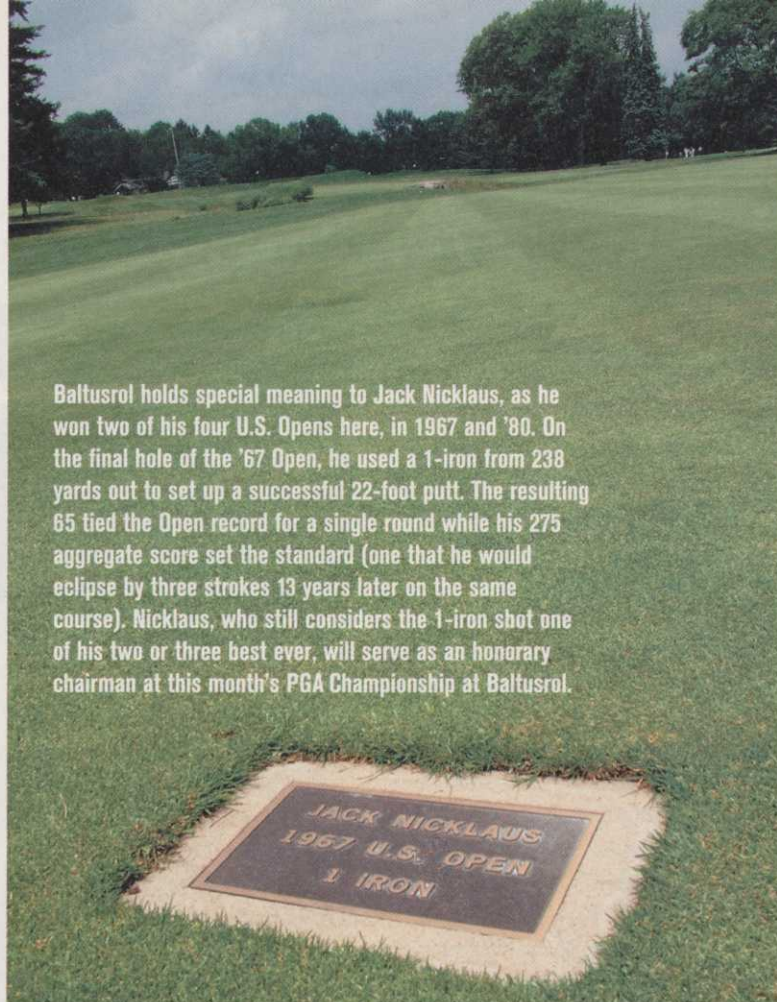
"I've worked for Mark on and off for almost 20 years now," Hughes says. "Mark has been like a father figure to me. He's had a lot of good people who have worked for him through the years, and a lot of them have gone on to be superintendents at some pretty prestigious clubs. So he really has a network of people who are there to support him. He's been important to a lot of people's lives."

With Kuhns' blessing, Hines and Hughes, both certified superintendents, have since taken control of their own courses; Hines at Wind Song Farm Golf Club in Maple Plain, Minn., and Hughes at Monroe Golf Club in Pittsford, N.Y.

"I don't hire life-long assistants," Kuhns says. "I hire an assistant who is hungry, who wants to go on to be a superintendent. That guy is going to work hard to achieve that goal and to move on."

Bosetti, 34, and Kish, 26, now supervise the Lower and Upper courses, respectively. They share several traits, specifically career path. When Kuhns first hired them at Oakmont, he did so despite their young age, inexperience and the fact that neither had a long-term interest in greenskeeping. Bosetti was con-

Baltusrol holds special meaning to Jack Nicklaus, as he won two of his four U.S. Opens here, in 1967 and '80. On the final hole of the '67 Open, he used a 1-iron from 238 yards out to set up a successful 22-foot putt. The resulting 65 tied the Open record for a single round while his 275 aggregate score set the standard (one that he would eclipse by three strokes 13 years later on the same course). Nicklaus, who still considers the 1-iron shot one of his two or three best ever, will serve as an honorary chairman at this month's PGA Championship at Baltusrol.



templating a career in federal law enforcement and Kish was eyeing a degree in golf course architecture from Penn State.

"To say the least, Mark Kuhns took a chance on both of us," Bosetti says. "And Doston and I probably have the same philosophy — that this guy believed in us, and the last thing we're going to do is fail for him. I'm not going to make him look bad by any means, and I'll damn near kill myself out here before I'd fail."

Kish, who took over the Upper Course at age 24, was 17 when he began volunteering for Kuhns at the Family House Invitational at Oakmont. "Being an event that Mark held, it was very serious," Kish says. "He treated it just like the U.S. Open, and I fell in love with the intensity of it."

Kuhns admits he's a taskmaster, which, he adds, can be overbearing sometimes. But it's often necessary. His first responsibility as Baltusrol's director of grounds was having to replace many of the employees who had worked for the now-retired Flaherty. Time was short, as the club was slated to host the U.S. Amateur the following spring.

"There was a lot of old thinking and a lot of things that weren't going to change," Kuhns

Continued on page 43



Baltusrol Welcomes PGA for First Time

Upon taking over as director of grounds at Baltusrol Golf Club in 1999, Mark Kuhns quickly began altering the club's Lower Course. His intent was to lure the U.S. Open to Baltusrol for the first time since 1993 and eighth time overall.

But the United States Golf Association (USGA) had other thoughts. Winged Foot Golf Club instead got the 2006 bid.

Baltusrol's disappointment was soon offset when the Professional Golf Association (PGA) jumped at the chance to schedule its championship at the Springfield, N.J., course. The PGA originally offered its 2007 tournament and then bumped it to this summer when The Country Club, in Brookline, Mass., rescinded in February 2002 after experiencing logistical problems while hosting the 1999 Ryder Cup.

"One of the big problems with hosting a Major is moving people in and out," Kuhns says. "And if you don't have a second golf course or another 200 acres of land to work with, forget it. We've got 180 tractor-trailers that have to come in here (this summer) to deliver material. We're literally building a city."

Baltusrol has never hosted a PGA event. Kuhns, who hosted the 1994 U.S. Open as the certified superintendent at Oakmont (Pa.) Country Club, couldn't be happier working with the PGA and its senior director of tournaments, Kerry Haigh, especially when it comes to game-day decisions the week of Aug. 8-14.

"That's one nice thing about the PGA: They're not really demanding a dried-out prune situation," Kuhns says. "I asked Kerry, 'When does your agronomist come on board to assist us with any problems or guide us with setup?' He said, 'Well, we really don't have an agronomist, Mark. We don't go to clubs where we need an agronomist.' So there are no committees, no three or four people trying to decide where the pin should be or what the height of the rough is going to be."

Kuhns predicts the PGA champion will shoot a 4-under-par. Mark Hughes, the former superintendent of the Lower Course, says the course will offer "immaculate conditions."



"I know the greens will be firm and fast," Hughes says. "And the rough will be extremely difficult for players to get out of."

Under the guidance of Kuhns, Lower Course Superintendent Scott Bosetti and architect Rees Jones, several notable changes have occurred since 1999:

- For the sake of added length and historical restoration, new tees were built on holes 3, 5, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17 and 18. Totalled, the par-70 Lower Course measures 7,400 yards and is the longest course among the four Majors this year. In addition, it features the longest hole of the Major season — the 647-yard 17th.

"The 17th hole at one time was 630 yards and nobody had ever reached it in two until John Daly in the '93 Open," Bosetti says. "So just in case someone wants to get a little itchy and wants to try to do that again, we lengthened it to 647. It's a true three-shotter now."

- All of the rough inside the ropes was replaced with more than 40 acres of sod comprised of approximately 80 percent Kentucky bluegrass and 20 percent perennial ryegrass. The fairways, tees and greens

No hole has been renovated more than the dogleg right No. 13. A new tee adds 25 yards, and the fairway has been narrowed to 25 yards, with five new bunkers to the left and a relocated fescue-lined stream to the right. "Normally there wasn't any fear of bombing the driver off the tee," Lower Course Superintendent Scott Bosetti says. "Now, we put a little fear into that."

remain a mix of *Poa annua* and bentgrass.

"There's a big difference between solid bluegrass and the native junk, which is pretty much a hodge-podge of bent, *Poa* and ryegrass. It's got a dark, deep color to it," Bosetti says. "It doesn't mind being mowed a low height, and when it grows out it gets gnarly and thick. Every time someone hits it into the rough, it's going to be a consistent lie. That was one of the things that we strived for."

- A rough renovation tightened the fairways, in most cases to 24 yards to 30 yards in width. "It's definitely a new look," Kuhns says. "We've narrowed all the fairways to PGA specifications from 260 to 330 (yards) out from the back tee."

— By Thomas Skernivitz

Continued from page 41

says. "I had to have a team that was loyal to me in a very short time."

Which meant opening the spigot to the PA Pipeline. "Scottie Hines was the first man with me," Kuhns says. "In fact, when I left here from the interview and went back to Pittsburgh's airport, I went straight to his course (Riverview). When his owner saw me coming, he knew something was up. You could see it on his face: 'What's he doing here? Oh, no.'"

And in almost every case, guys like Hines and Hughes couldn't say no.

"One of the reasons why I came to work for Mark," Bosetti says, "was to learn from him and gather as much knowledge as I can off of him, to where eventually I want to be a director of a course like Baltusrol or an upper echelon club."

Not that Bosetti or Kish would have ever thought of leaving before the PGA Championship. "That," Bosetti says, "would be like driving across the country and having someone pull your car in the garage for you. No way."

Beyond the PGA

The PGA Championship is by no means the end of the maintenance crew's trip. Scheduled this winter is a strategic meeting to discuss the immediate direction of the club. Some of the topics: What was learned from the PGA? Will Baltusrol continue to pursue Majors? If so, when will the bunkers be renovated and moved farther into play to offset "long" equipment? And what about the trees that need to be cleared to make room for more grandstands?

"I don't know if we'll be able to maintain the championship stature day in and day out," Kuhns says. "But certainly we've taken it to this level, and we don't want it to slide too far back going forward."

Likewise, Kuhns has every intention of following through on his obligations to the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA). He's a national director with the group, with plans to run for the GCSAA's secretary/treasurer position and possibly president.

"When I was interviewing for this job, I told

Continued on page 44

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Continued from page 43

(the search committee) that if they had any reservations with my involvement in that professional group, I wasn't the man they wanted for this job," Kuhns says. "One of the guys stood up and said, 'You're the type of guy we're looking for. That's national recognition.'"

And as Kuhns himself would discover soon after his hiring, there's nothing wrong with a little national recognition. Curious as to why he was chosen over so many other qualified candidates, and still stinging from his experience at Oakmont, Kuhns had a few questions for Fowler over lunch.

"Why Mark Kuhns?" Kuhns asked his new boss. "I'm not a knight in shining armor-looking guy or a rugged mountain man. I'm just me. Why me?"

Fowler noted Kuhns' four-year degree from Penn State and the parallels between Baltusrol and Oakmont. The search committee, he added, had

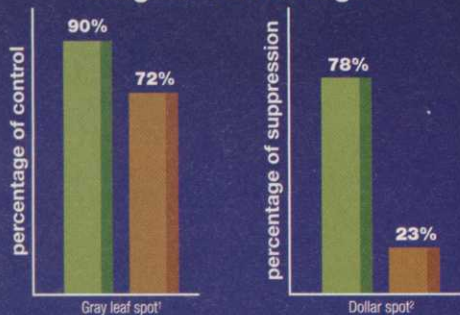
appreciated that Kuhns not only hosted three Major tournaments but was the "top dog" each time. And it didn't hurt that Kuhns had provided the committee a portfolio that included 20 of the approximate 4,000 slides in Kuhns' personal collection.

"Those 20 pictures weren't necessarily colorful shots, but they depicted the detail you

► Kuhns and his two superintendents are never short of help, thanks to 14 interns, some of whom are shown here watching television inside the club's new multimillion-dollar maintenance facility/dormitory, affectionately dubbed the "Kuhns Mahal."



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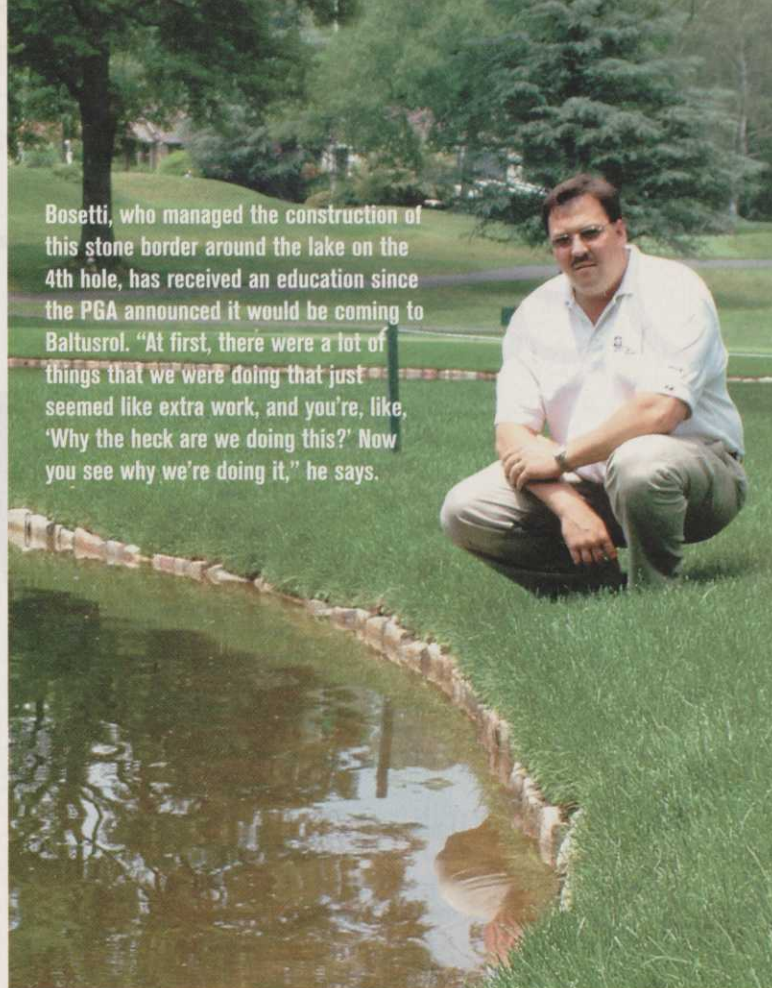
see around the collars and the bunkering and around the clubhouse,” Kuhns said. “That was significant. They said the pictures were worth 1,000 words.”

Worth even more were the glowing words of Kuhns’ references — 35 of them, to be exact — including some from an old friend he had met 39 years earlier at Laurel Valley Country Club.

“Dick Fowler is leafing through all the references and he goes, ‘This is the keeper right here — yep, if you’re good enough for Arnold Palmer, you’re good enough for us,’” Kuhns says.

Six years later, Kuhns still glows when recalling those references — votes of confidence when he needed them most. “When people step up to the plate for you, sometimes they’re just being nice,” he says. “But when all those people in those letters recognize the fact that you did something significant in your life, then it makes you feel real good.”

The lament of Oakmont is gone. There is no more second-guessing himself. Mark Kuhns has found new life at the final resting place of Baltus Roll. ■



Bosetti, who managed the construction of this stone border around the lake on the 4th hole, has received an education since the PGA announced it would be coming to Baltusrol. “At first, there were a lot of things that we were doing that just seemed like extra work, and you’re, like, ‘Why the heck are we doing this?’ Now you see why we’re doing it,” he says.

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