

# Weathered the Storms

Led by its unflappable superintendent, Steve Money,  
The Country Club of Orlando rode out a string of hurricanes –  
and became a better golf course in the process

**BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF**

**S**teve Money says 2004 will go down as the most fulfilling year of his young career as a superintendent. Clearly, 2004 will go down as the most defying year of his professional life. Money dealt with more pressure than an air-traffic controller working a 12-hour shift the day before Thanksgiving.

Consider that the 32-year-old Money sold his house and relocated with his pregnant wife from Boca Raton, Fla., to Orlando, Fla., where he took the job as superintendent at the Country Club of Orlando last spring.

Consider that Money's first day on the job in mid-April at the club was the member-guest tournament, an always-stressful event for any superintendent.

Consider that the course closed after the tournament so Money could help lead the track's \$2 million renovation.

And then there were the challenges inflicted by Mother Nature. Consider that Money had to endure the impact of not one, not two, not three, but four hurricanes in six weeks that left 40 inches of rain and nearly 400 downed trees on the course, not to mention other collateral damage.

Other superintendents would be frazzled after such a year. But the unassuming Money just shrugs his shoulders and chalks up the happenings to the lessons learned in the large class of Life 101.

When he was the superintendent at St. Andrews Country Club of Boca Raton, where the membership was demanding and the irrigation system was antiquated, Money says he thought he experienced a lot in terms of challenges.

"But this summer takes the cake," he says.





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"You say there's nothing that's ever going to surprise you, and then you get a summer like this."

The clean-cut Money is not complaining, though. While his modesty may prevent him from admitting it, Money is proud he was able to endure the fury hurled at him by a most-wicked Mother Nature.

"It will be very rewarding when I look back on my first year here," Money says, his piercing blue eyes staring off.

Jim Ellison, vice president of agronomy and golf course maintenance for Orlando-based Arnold Palmer Golf and a consultant at the Country Club of Orlando, says Money remained as calm and collective during the hurricanes as Peyton Manning under a heavy pass rush by a hoard of 300-pound lineman.

"You never saw his temperament change," says Ellison, who has consulted at the course for two years. "He never panicked. He was on cruise control."

**It's a gorgeous** fall day in Orlando, and Money zooms around the course in his utility vehicle. He points to two massive mulch piles under trees on the side of a fairway.

"Those are remnants from the trees that were knocked down," he says.

It's been about six weeks since the last hurricane and the course looks a tad ragged. That said, the course is in tremendous condition considering what it has been through.

The hurricanes won't be forgotten anytime soon. They can't be. All one has to do is look upward at some of the palm, pine and oak trees on the course. Their stout branches were

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**A downed transformer near the maintenance facility and trees snapped in half were a few of the things Steve Money and his crew had to deal with during the hurricanes of 2004.**



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**(Above) A few massive trees were uprooted during the hurricanes. (Below) Fortunately, some landmark trees on the course survived the four storms.**

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snapped like brittle twigs in the storms' fierce winds and now jut out from the trees' trunks as stubs with jagged edges.

Money jumps out of his utility vehicle and points to an expansive area on the No. 16 fairway that was washed out and transformed into a raging river caused by flooding during Hurricane Frances, the second hurricane and the most drenching of the four storms. The area is repaired now — it took about 50 trucks with 30 yards of fill each to restore it — and it's difficult to tell there was a washout.

"The water was 8 to 10 feet at its deepest point," Money says.

Orlando hadn't been hit by a hurricane in 44 years. But in six weeks — from mid-August until the end of September — the city

and the rest of Florida had enough hurricanes to last it more than 100 years.

The fast and furious Hurricane Charley, which hit in mid-August, left most of the damage as far as leveling trees, homes and buildings. Hurricane Frances, the second hurricane, was the longest-lasting storm, taking 30 hours to pass through Orlando and besieging the city with 12 inches of rain.

Hurricane Ivan was third but didn't cause much havoc in the area. (After moving out to sea, however, it later returned over the Orlando area as a tropical storm and dumped several inches of rain). But Hurricane Jeanne struck about a week after Ivan and followed nearly the same path through central Florida as Charley, dumping 10 more inches of rain.

The Country Club of Orlando was without power for 11 days after Charley roared through. The storm left trees bent and fallen throughout the city. Many homeowners couldn't get out of their driveways.

"That storm was loaded with tornadoes; it had to be," says Glen Davis, the club's past president and a member of the green committee.

Frances left the club without power for eight days. Thankfully, the power was out only 1.5 days after Jeanne struck.

Orlando was an eerie sight after Charley. The sound of humming electricity-producing generators could be heard throughout the city the morning after the storm. "It was like a ghost town," Ellison says.

The Country Club of Orlando is surrounded by neighborhoods, and the people who worked at the club were more concerned

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**The No. 16 fairway was washed out and transformed into a river during Hurricane Frances.**

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about their community than their golf course the days following the storm. So they took to the roads around the club and removed fallen trees and other debris so vehicles could get through. "It took a couple days to get the roads cleaned up," Money says.

The golf course was a sorry sight. About 380 of the 400 trees leveled during the hurricanes were felled during Charley. The club hired an Atlanta-based tree-removal company to help remove the fallen timber.

But unsightly debris speckled the landscape like garbage strewn about an unkempt city park. Brian Poorman, the club's assistant superintendent, wondered how in the heck the 17-member maintenance crew was going to clean up such a mess.

"I remember thinking, 'Man, where do we start?'" Poorman says. "I thought, 'Are we really going to get through this?'"

Poorman didn't know at the time that they would have to "get through this" a few times.

**Long before the** 2004 hurricane season, the Country Club of Orlando had been planning a major golf course renovation, headed by Uxbridge, Mass.-based architect Brian Silva. The club's goal was to return the course, designed in 1911 by Donald Ross, to its classic look. Silva had also renovated parts of the course, which was redesigned by Robert Trent Jones in 1959, in the late '80s.

TDI International, a Stuart, Fla.-based builder, was hired to repair problem drainage

throughout the course. The renovation also included a new Rain Bird irrigation system.

The fairways were recontoured so water could move off them quickly and into basins. The fairways were also regrassed with 419 bermudagrass. The greens were scraped down 4 inches to 6 inches, topped with a new greens mix and regrassed with TifDwarf. The domed tees were laser-leveled to sport a more classic and squared look. About 400 trees were removed from the course as part of the renovation before the storms hit.

Money, who has worked on golf course renovations before, was hired partly for his experience in that area. The club also spent about \$200,000 on equipment upgrades.

The club wanted a renovated golf course to match its elegant new clubhouse that was built a few years before. The course shut down in April for the renovation and planned to reopen in mid-November for a grand celebration.

Of course, that was before Mother Nature spoke.

Fortunately, most of the renovation was complete before the first hurricane hit. But Charley's rain and wind wiped out parts of six fairways that had been recently sprigged. It took about two weeks to clean up the course's greens, fairways, tees and roughs after Charley, and to resprig the six holes, Money says.

Then it was time to batten the hatches again and ride out Hurricane Frances. Its pounding

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Employees from the club's myriad departments pitched into help. They included chefs, waiters, bartenders, locker-room attendants, receptionists and people from the pro shop.

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rains washed out the sprigged holes again.

Silva visited the club in October, a short time after the fourth hurricane, and says he was shaken by the damage.

"I never thought it would be a golf course again," he says. "It was, at the very least, an entirely depressing scene."

But Silva was inspired by the never-say-die attitude that Money, Poorman, Shaw and the others exhibited to turn things around.

"I never sensed that they felt sorry for themselves," Silva says. "They never said, 'Woe is us.' They just got it done."

They got it done by making gutsy decisions. For instance, with fall rapidly approaching, Money knew the bermudagrass fairways wouldn't have the heat they needed to grow. He and the green committee realized the washed-out areas would have to be sodded if they were to grow in proficently.

David Shaw, president of the green committee, called a meeting shortly after Frances hit and the sprigs had been washed out a second time. It was a pivotal meeting, Shaw says, because the green committee had to make a difficult and expensive decision on the spot to order 10 acres of sod to replace the washed-out sprigs.

Looking back — and not knowing at the time that Hurricane Jeanne would have wiped out a third round of sprigs — Shaw says he was glad the board acted swiftly and made the decision to order the sod. (For the record, Money's crew installed the sod just in time for Hurricane Jeanne to hit.)

"The sod saved our fanny," Shaw says. "If

we hadn't made that decision on the spot. ..."

If they hadn't made that decision, the course would still be closed.

**Money, Shaw** and others from the Country Club of Orlando will never forget the hurricane season of 2004. But also engraved in their memories will be how employees of the club rose to the occasion and did what they had to do to clean up the golf course.

Employees from the club's myriad departments pitched in to help. They included chefs, waiters, bartenders, locker-room attendants, receptionists and people from the pro shop.

"Granted, it was a situation where you didn't get paid if you didn't come to work," says Jerry Valone, the club's general manager. "But if you weren't going to work in the kitchen, you were going to have to work on the golf course. And you were going to sweat. But there wasn't one person that whined about it."

Valone knew most everyone who worked at the club had to deal with their own set of problems at home — from lack of electricity to leaking roofs. But they still showed up for work.

Money, who isn't afraid to get down and dirty, led the clean-up brigade.

"And it's not like he put on a different hat after the storms," Valone says. "He's been that way since he came here. He's not afraid to get in there and do it. He has a whatever-it-takes attitude."

Poorman is the same way, says Valone, who relates a story about the 46-year-old assistant during the night that Frances hit. Valone and his family came to the club to wait out the storm. Poorman also showed up at the club. During the storm, a tree was downed across the road leading to the club's front entrance. Valone says Poorman went out during the storm with a chainsaw to remove the tree from the road.

The clean-up efforts were hard work for everyone, but rewarding as well.

"It wasn't a job that you'd like to do everyday," Money says. "But under the circumstances, it was more like camaraderie, not work."

Charles Bailes, a member of the club's board of directors and the board's liaison to the green committee, says the club's employees showed their true character in working together to clean up the course.

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"There's nothing more rewarding than to see the determination and commitment of people when things aren't good," Bailes says. "I hope I never have to go through anything like that again, but it was a great experience from that perspective."

Davis was astounded by the employees' efforts. "It was nothing but stellar," he says.

Davis' comment brings to light the positive relationship that many of the club's members have with the employees. Valone, who has worked as the general manager at Medinah (Ill.) Country Club and other prestigious clubs, says the membership at Orlando is one of the best for which he has ever worked.

**Green committee members are awed that the course has come this far. There is an ever-encompassing sense of relief among them.**

"A lot of the members here don't treat the staff like employees," says Valone, in his fifth year at the club. "They treat them like family."

Because of their mutual respect, Money says he, the green committee and other decision makers were able to act quickly when making important choices together.

"It was as coordinated a team effort as I've ever seen — from the green committee to the members to the management team," Ellison says.

**At a green** committee meeting in November, several issues are discussed as the course prepares for its grand reopening, which is about six weeks away and only a month later than the original date. Most of the green committee members are awed that the course has come this far. There is an ever-encompassing sense of relief among them.

Everyone agrees that if the renovation hadn't been undertaken, the Country Club of Orlando might not have been able to open until this summer because of worse damage that would have been caused by the hurricanes.

Had the 400 trees not been removed during the renovation, the course could have lost hundreds of more trees than it did during the hurricanes, especially Charley, Ellison says. When the trees were removed during the renovation, the course became more open and wind could circulate through the area more easily. If the trees had been left in place, an enormous wind canopy would have been created with various air funnels that might have brought many more trees down, Ellison explains. This happened at other Orlando courses.

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**Assistant Superintendent Brian Poorman is described as having a whatever-it-takes-to-get-the-job-done attitude.**



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One the weekend of Dec. 17, the course reopened for play. It was joyous occasion for all, including (left to right) David Shaw, Steve Money, Glen Davis, Brian Silva and Jimmy Ellison.

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"And they will never look the same," Ellison says.

If the drainage had not been installed, the course's fairways would have remained under water for a longer period of time, says Bruce Sheldon, regional operations manager for TDI International. "Without the new drainage there would have been more dead turf," he says.

Also, the heavy rains that accompanied the hurricanes revealed other areas on the course that needed improved drainage. Hence, TDI International returned to lay about 3,000 feet of additional drainage pipe on four holes.

"We wouldn't have done that if the storms hadn't hit," Money says. "And a couple of years down the road we would have needed to do it."

Nobody wants to dwell too much on the hurricanes, but most everyone at the club shakes their heads in amazement when they talk about how the storms kept coming, one after another.

"The superintendents in Florida call it the summer of CFIJ," Ellison says, reciting the beginning letters of each hurricane. "It will go down in the history books."

In the midst of the four hurricanes, Sheldon says he thought of the old Jimmy Buffett song, "Tryin' to Reason With Hurricane Season."

"But you just can't reason with it," Sheldon says. "You just have to deal with it and go on."

And that's what they did. On the weekend of Dec. 17 the Country Club of Orlando

reopened for play. It was a joyous occasion. "You would never have known that it was anything other than a perfect year to grow in a golf course," Silva says. "The place was in pristine condition."

"The course was in wonderful shape," Shaw adds. "The members' feedback was that the course exceeded their expectations. It was a very special day for me personally and very gratifying for all involved."

It was especially gratifying for Money, even though he admits he was exhausted when the grand reopening was over. "It was a good day, and I was fortunate enough to be part of it," he says.

In early January, Money looked back on the previous year, as many people do. So much of what he experienced was new — a new job, a new home and a new son born to Money and his wife on Father's Day. And then there were the four new on-the-job experiences, as in hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne.

There was a lot going on in Money's life, and, looking back, he says he couldn't have made it through without a little help from his friends, as in his co-workers and the club's members. Money, sitting comfortably at his small, tattered desk in his pint-sized office with two neatly framed photos of his son nearby, says he's never felt more at home than at the Country Club of Orlando.

"They make you *feel* like you're wanted and needed," he says of the club's members and staff, the gratefulness evident in his voice.

A lot of people at the club will tell you that Money *is* wanted and needed, including Shaw, who says, "Thank God we hired that guy." ■