

Got **Gusto?**

Tom Alex does, and he's brought plenty of it to his job as superintendent of Orlando's Grand Cypress Resort

By Anthony Pioppi,
Contributing Editor

Tom Alex sits behind his desk at Grand Cypress Resort, and it's easy to see he finds great happiness in his position as director of grounds for one of Orlando's most prominent golf resorts.

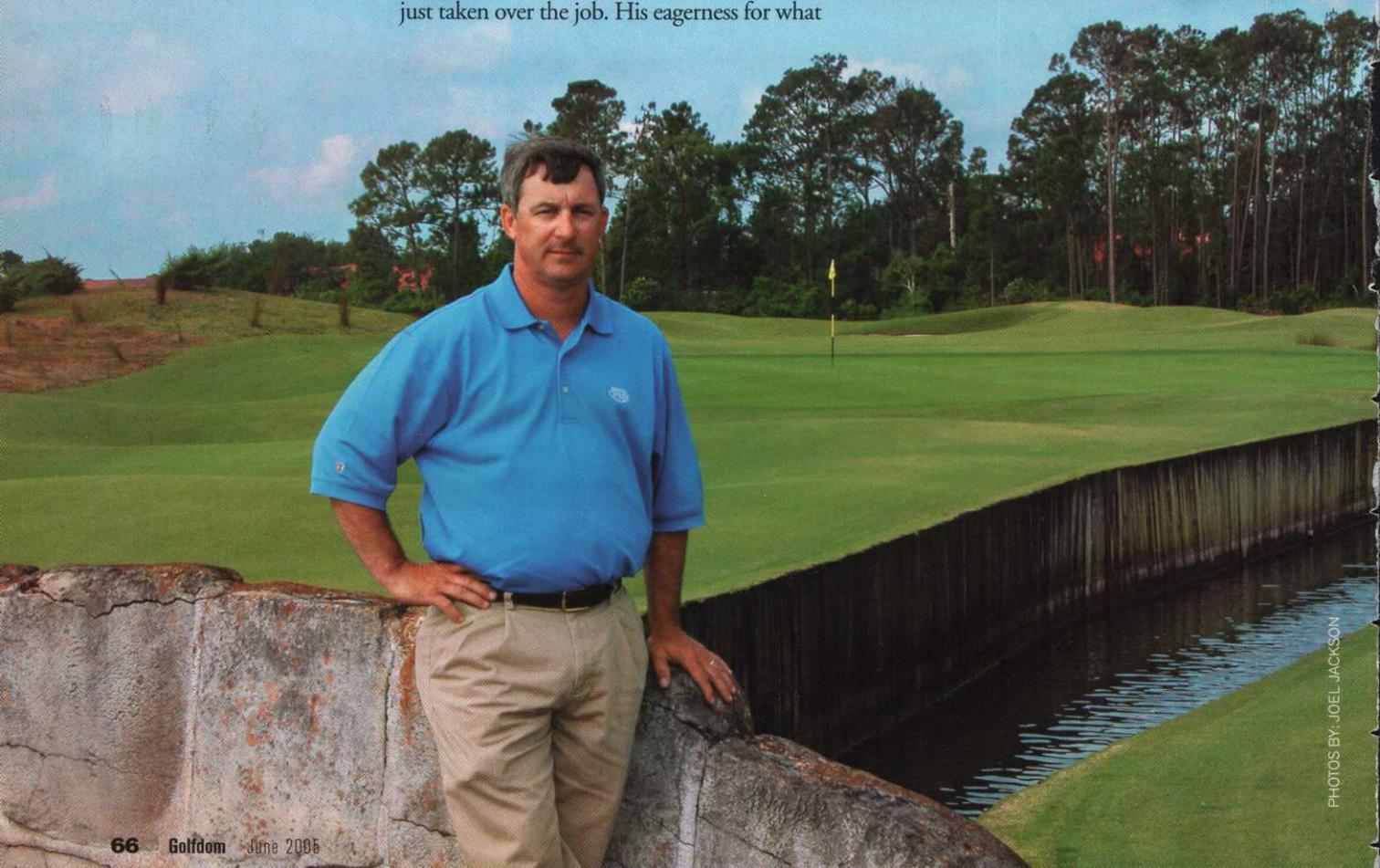
You would expect his enthusiasm to be a bit tempered; after all, he's had his hands on the Grand Cypress reigns for more than 20 years. But the 44-year-old Alex acts more like he has just taken over the job. His eagerness for what

he does is apparently contagious. Nearly 30 of Alex's former employees have gone on to become superintendents, including Mark Michaud, the superintendent at Shinnecock Hills Golf Club.

Alex offers no secret for his longevity.

"I like coming to work every day," he says as he sits relaxed in his small, comfortable office.

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PHOTOS BY: JOEL JACKSON



Alex, who is the only superintendent that Grand Cypress has known, confers with Larry Smith, the club's maintenance shop manager.

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And this is no cushy private facility job. The 45 holes designed by Jack Nicklaus see plenty of play. "We're busy all the time," Alex says, pointing out that Grand Cypress has a tournament office to book all the outings the club hosts.

On the Grand Cypress property are 144 villas. The nearby Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress has 750 rooms, and its guests have access to the courses.

Although Alex can spend a good part of his day attending meetings, signing purchase orders and the like, he's still out on the course every chance he gets. It's there that he finds his most enjoyment.

Grand Cypress has had only one head superintendent since the first course opened in 1983. Alex grew it in, maintains it and has made occasional renovations to it since arriving from the TPC at Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.

The long way around to a career in course maintenance began for Alex in the small north-

west Connecticut town of Washington Depot, where he excelled in baseball under the tutelage of his father, who coached the Washington High School team for more than 30 years. During his sophomore year Alex took his first summer job, shagging golf balls at the nine-hole Washington Golf Club. As the club pro gave lessons, Alex picked up balls one at a time and made 50 cents a lesson.

Alex graduated to the grounds crew and spent much of the next two summers pushing a rotary mower. "When they finally put me on equipment, that's when I screwed it up," he says.

After graduating high school Alex had no intention of going into golf course maintenance for a living, nor did he have any intention of going to college, especially with his below-average grades.

However, nearby Hotchkiss School, an exclusive private academy whose students come from money and go on to the Ivy League, needed a shortstop and Alex needed some direction in his life. His father used a connection, made a phone call and Hotchkiss suddenly recognized "my academic potential," Alex says, shaking his head with a wry smile on his lips.

Alex spent a year at Hotchkiss doing nothing but playing baseball, soccer and studying. "You didn't have any extra time, especially when you weren't brilliant," he says.

Although Alex can spend a good part of his day attending meetings, he's still out on the course every chance he gets.

It was during his time at Hotchkiss that he began thinking seriously about college, and the idea of going to turf school appealed to him. While his classmates went off to the likes of Yale, Princeton and Brown, for Alex it was the University of Massachusetts-Stockbridge and a two-year degree in turfgrass science, a major his guidance counselor at Hotchkiss didn't even know existed.

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Alex (center) is most happy when on the golf course. Here he talks with assistant superintendent Erin Galloway (Left) and senior superintendent Pat Gibaratz about a tee addition project.

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The unexpected twists and turns in Alex's life were far from over.

He excelled in his studies in his first year at UMass and was intending to head back to Washington Golf Course for the summer when he was approached in the midst of final exams by legendary Stockbridge Professor Joe Troll. Troll asked Alex a question that would change his life: "Have you ever been to Florida?"

Alex had not, but he found himself there a few weeks later as an intern working on what would become TPC Sawgrass under grow-in Superintendent Dave Postlethwaite. Alex arrived in north Florida in March and went to work in the swamps as part of the early stages of clearing. His companions were local lumberjacks and snakes — large snakes. But Alex knew he was on to something special.

"The maintenance facility was bigger than

the Washington town garage," he says.

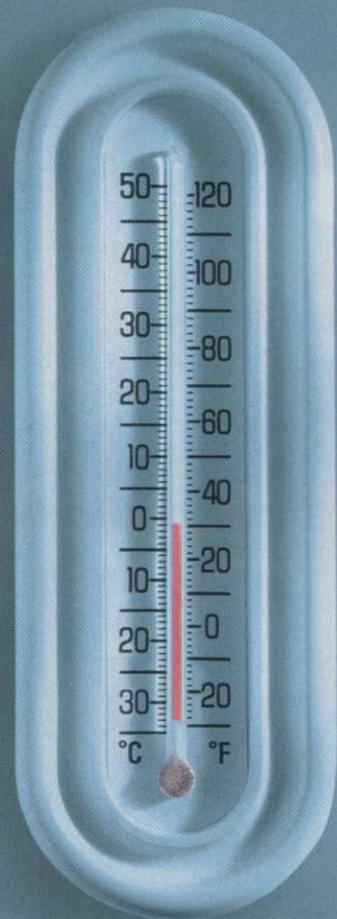
The next few months were made up of 90-hour weeks and a severe learning curve, part of which included getting to run heavy equipment for the first time. Alex also estimates he spent part of at least 100 days with course designer Pete Dye.

Often that meant Dye standing there as Alex raked out the final grades on greens. Alex didn't just rake the grades, he also contributed to forming them. He recalls Dye querying him once from off the green as he smoothed out a putting surface, "Hey Tommy, can we put a pin there?" When Alex said, "Yes," they moved on.

Another time Dye couldn't figure how to grade the right side of the 14th fairway. After failing on more than a few occasions to get it right, he climbed off the bulldozer and left with instructions to Alex, "Do something."

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So Alex shaped the right side. When Dye returned, he was ecstatic about the work and left it as is. "That's the way he did things," Alex says with a shrug.

Sawgrass was the first TPC course and as a result the PGA bigwigs were often around, including then-PGA Tour Commissioner Dean Beaman, whose idea it was to create TPCs. Alex made fantastic connections within the golf maintenance world, even being offered a chance to forgo his last year of college to move on to another course construction project in Florida. He intended to take the position, until he phoned his father with the news.

"He told me to get my butt home and finish school," Alex says.

Alex returned home to finish school and he graduated from UMass in 1981. He returned to Sawgrass shortly after and stayed until June of 1983. He was the acting superintendent for six months at Sawgrass before he left for the opportunity at Grand Cypress and was replaced by Bobby Weed. (Weed would later join Dye's firm as a designer before forming his own architecture company. Weed has since made numerous alterations to Sawgrass.)

Also on the TPC staff was current USGA Championship Agronomist Tim Moraghan, who had come to Sawgrass from Pinehurst, where he was a superintendent. Like Alex, he too is from northwest Connecticut.

Alex left Sawgrass for another grow-in. Initial clearing at Grand Cypress had just begun when he took the job. Alex says his intention was to build the course and keep moving on, but Orlando has been home since. In that time he's grown in a third nine holes, a teaching center and the 18-hole New Course, all Nicklaus designs.

While Alex was tending to the turf, he was also cultivating new superintendents. He says teaching people is as important to him as tending turf. Alex takes pride in the fact that so many of his former employees are now superintendents — a number of them, not coincidentally, at Nicklaus-designed courses throughout the southeastern United States.

One of those, Mark Heater, is the superintendent at The Loxahatchee Club in Jupiter, Fla. Heater had already been a superintendent when he came to Grand Cypress, but his work experience had been at a small-budget facility, nothing like Grand Cypress.

"I had never seen an operation like that," Heater says. "When I saw how good the golf course was, it opened my eyes."

Heater, bursting with enthusiasm about his job at 44, says he fed off the same attitude from Alex.

"I loved working for him. It was a blast for me," Heater says. "He's the person who made me discover my own work ethic."

Chris Neff is superintendent at Timuquana Country Club, the oldest course in Jacksonville. He was not sure what he was going to do after college but discovered his calling about a week after going to work for Alex. Alex helped Neff to nurture that enthusiasm.

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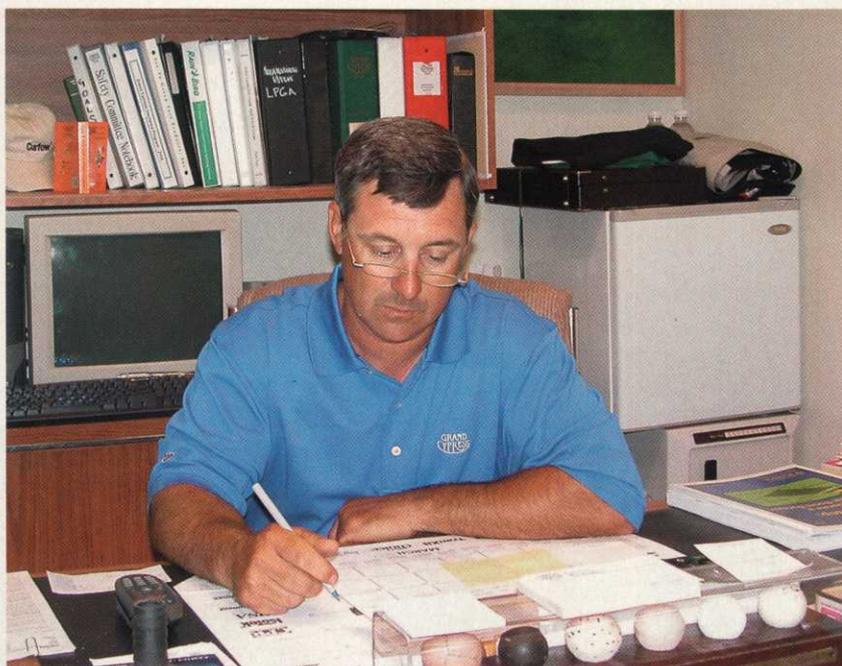
"If you showed interest in what he was trying to accomplish, he showed interest back," Neff says.

This is not to say it was all fun and games under Alex's guiding hand.

"At first he was a tyrant," Heater says. "He's very disciplined and regimented in getting the job done."

Neff concurs. "You're going to take your chewings. You're going to learn from him and not make the same mistakes again."

Michaud's golf course maintenance career began under Alex in 1984. He says Alex was a great teacher and motivator.



People who have worked under Alex are impressed with his sense of urgency to get things done.

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

Neff says Alex set the standard for golf course maintenance, not just in Orlando but for most of Florida.

Alex says that’s a direct result of working for Nicklaus, who demands excellent course conditions but also provides the tools to make that happen. Alex says Nicklaus wanted low heights of cut across the boards at Cypress — lower than any course in Orlando at the time — but made sure the greens were USGA spec, the irrigation system was top of the line and drainage was superior.

The goals Nicklaus wanted were met and are continuously improved upon by Alex, who in turn has forged the reputation as one of the best and most innovative superintendents in Florida, even having Grand Cypress used as a test facility for companies like Rain Bird Irrigation.

Alex remains at Grand Cypress — not surprisingly, Neff points out — because he values loyalty so highly.

“Who knows how many jobs he’s

been offered through the years?” Neff speculates.

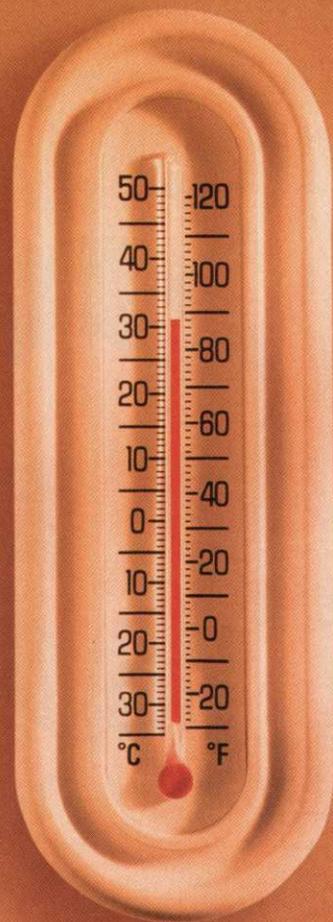
How many jobs he’s helped fill is another question. For years Ed Etchells was head of agronomy for Nicklaus Design. The company was responsible for finding a grow-in superintendent for most of its projects and Alex often received calls from Etchells looking for recommendations, which explains why so many of Alex’s people moved on to other Nicklaus designs.

According to Alex, Etchells preferred superintendents who already understood how to maintain a golf course to standards that Nicklaus demanded.

Alex has confidence in the people he recommends but understands there’s not much else he can do for them once they leave Grand Cypress. “You can help a guy get his first job, but you can’t help him keep it,” he says.

Alex’s track record proves there may not be much else he needs to do. From south Florida to eastern Long Island, Alex proteges are firmly in place at some of golf’s best layouts. And they’ve made their employers — and their mentor — proud of their accomplishments. ■

Golfdom’s Larry Aylward contributed to this story.



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