



Sweet Home Chicago

Superintendent Jon Jennings thanks the golf course gods for guiding him to this golden oldie of a club

**STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY
LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF**

This month marks Jon Jennings' fifth year as certified superintendent of the Chicago Golf Club. There are 2.6 million minutes in those five years, and Jennings hasn't taken one of them for granted. When he talks about the gratitude he has for his job, there's a glimmer in his eyes and a gleam in his smile.

"It's just been a great experience," the 41-year-old says of his stint at the course, located in Wheaton, Ill.

It's a dream job, really. While the pragmatic Jennings will be the first to tell you the word

"dream" is overused in such a context, he admits that his gig at the Chicago Golf Club is a dream job.

Jennings steps outside his office on a beautiful autumn day. He stares at the vista of trees and turf that stretches out in front of him. It's a picture of which he never tires of looking—a sight he'll always behold.

Jennings is superintendent of the oldest 18-hole course in America, built in 1893. He's the fourth superintendent the club has had in its 122-year existence. He replaced Bill Whitley, who was at the club for 12 years, in 2000.

Jennings doesn't want to be anywhere else.

But don't think Jennings loves his job because it's easy. The Chicago Golf Club is *not* the happy-go-lucky Mayberry Country Club. The club's members, who Jennings describes as "captains of industry," have lofty expectations for him to maintain the best playing conditions possible.

Fact is, what Jennings likes most about the Chicago Golf Club are the members because they understand his plight. "If the clubhouse has a hole in the roof and I need a new mower,

the clubhouse gets a bucket and I get a new mower," Jennings says.

While the members expect premium conditions, they realize what Jennings and his staff are up against to attain them, as in the formidable Mother Nature.

The members, more than half of whom sport single-digit handicaps, understand why Jennings and his crew must aerify and verticut. They understand why the course might emerge from a winter looking a little haggard

in spots. They understand that turf can wilt in the heat and humidity brought on by a stifling Midwest summer.

They understand all these things, and they don't complain. And Jennings is so thankful for their understanding that ...

"It makes me want to stop the car each morning when I come into work and kiss the ground as I enter," he says.

Speaking of the ground, Chicago Golf Club's terrain is hallowed in golf circles. That's another thing Jennings adores about the place.

When Jennings interviewed for the post in late 1999, he remembers touring the course and being flabbergasted by its beauty.

"I was up on the second hole and looked out across this vast expanse of architectural beauty," Jennings says. "It was just amazing. I knew then that I wanted the job."

What Jennings relishes about the club is that it's a throwback to another era. The huge

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Profile

Who: Jon Jennings.

His Work: Certified superintendent of the Chicago Golf Club.

Trips Around the Sun: 41.

His Other Half: Married to Susan for 13 years. Susan, who grew up on a farm in upstate New York, understands why Jon must work long hours. "He said one of the reasons he decided to marry me is because 'I got it,'" Susan says. "My father had to get up in the morning and milk the cows, and Jon has to get up and mow the greens."

How He Met Her: Jon met Susan when he was superintendent of Hiland Golf Club in Queensbury, N.Y. Her father was a member of the club. "I committed one of the cardinal sins in the business — I married a member's daughter," Jennings says.

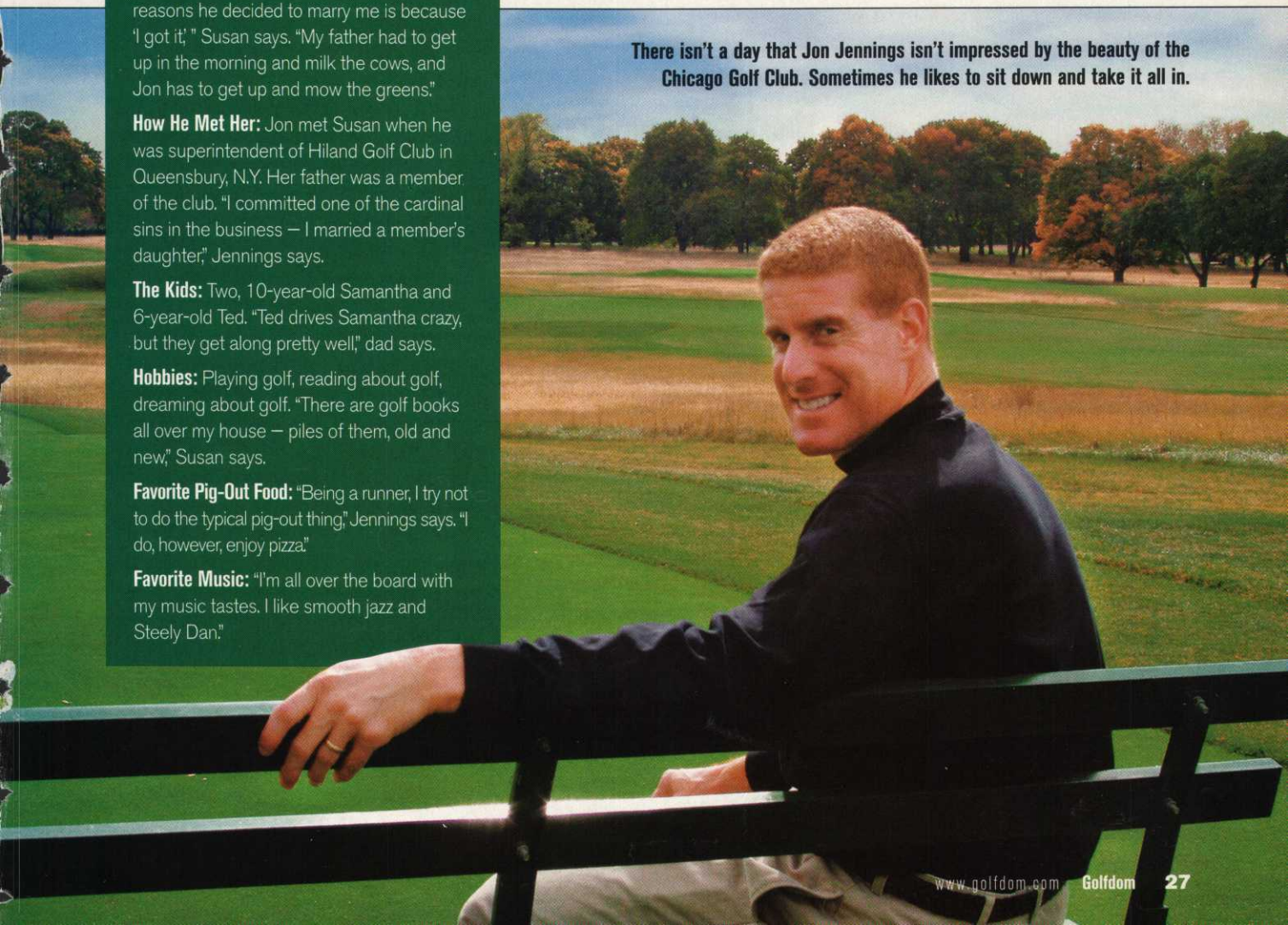
The Kids: Two, 10-year-old Samantha and 6-year-old Ted. "Ted drives Samantha crazy, but they get along pretty well," dad says.

Hobbies: Playing golf, reading about golf, dreaming about golf. "There are golf books all over my house — piles of them, old and new," Susan says.

Favorite Pig-Out Food: "Being a runner, I try not to do the typical pig-out thing," Jennings says. "I do, however, enjoy pizza."

Favorite Music: "I'm all over the board with my music tastes. I like smooth jazz and Steely Dan."

There isn't a day that Jon Jennings isn't impressed by the beauty of the Chicago Golf Club. Sometimes he likes to sit down and take it all in.





Jon Jennings (left) credits the hard work of crew members for much of the course's success.

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clubhouse, with its creaky wooden floor and antique furniture, has no air conditioning and sports a musty smell and slight echo.

"The understated elegance of the clubhouse and the atmosphere around here is part of the charm and the mystique," Jennings says, while walking through the clubhouse and studying the historic framed photographs on the walls.

Jennings is a fan of the old-time architects, such as C.B. Macdonald and Seth Raynor. The former designed the Chicago Golf Club and the latter renovated the course in 1922. He likes that these architects took such bold approaches to their work. While riding in his utility vehicle, Jennings points to the punch bowl-style green on the course's No. 12 hole, a Raynor specialty.

"You feel like you're taking care of something in golf's history by maintaining this course," he says.

Of course, there are challenges that come with the territory of maintaining one of the game's great old tracks. For instance, the greens at Chicago Golf Club are big — their average size is about 7,200 square feet — so there's more turf to tend. Because expectations are high, the greens must be hand-mowed and double-cut. And because the greens occupy a sizable piece of the course, more than 6 acres,

more money is needed to maintain them. So it's easy to surmise that Jennings' crew spends a lot of time and money on the greens, which are 60 percent *Poa annua* and 40 percent bentgrass.

The course also has about 100 acres of native rough that the maintenance team looks after. Keeping weeds out of those areas is a difficult task. The weeds must be hand-picked once the grass grows in high.

There are some desirable things about tending the historic turf, too. It starts with the low number of rounds — about 7,800 — that the course gets annually. The turf is not beat upon and compaction is kept to a minimum, which makes for good growing conditions.

Speaking of which, the course's topsoil profile has remained virtually unchanged since Raynor's renovation. The soil is fertile and drains well. "It's a great medium for which to grow turf," Jennings says.

Turf disease is kept to a minimum because of the course's openness, which allows for excellent air movement. "We get a little bit of dollar spot and some brown patch and fairy ring, but that's about it," Jennings says.

Jennings says he couldn't ask for a more close-knit maintenance staff. The 22 members, 17 of whom are related and hail from the

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same town in Mexico, work hard and well together. "They are a pleasure to work with day in and day out," Jennings says. "That makes a big difference."

It's also a pleasure to work with the club staff, says Jennings, who has heard horror stories from his peers about their quarrels with green committee chairmen and pros. "That just doesn't happen here," Jennings says. "Everybody gets along."

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It sounds like Jennings has a lot to do with guiding the steady ship that is the Chicago Golf Club. The course's former green committee chairman, Steve Daly, credits Jennings with bringing a newfound zeal to the club when he was hired.

"Jon came with an energy level and enthusiasm that I haven't seen much in his profession," Daly says.

Despite his relatively young age and youthful looks, it's been a long road for Jennings to the Chicago Golf Club. Jennings grew up in Madison, Conn., a small town of 16,000 people about 75 miles northeast of New York City. The golf course maintenance bug bit him after working at the Madison Country Club in high school. "I liked operating the equipment and being outside," he says.

He was only a teenager, but Jennings, who had done a variety of jobs as a kid, knew he

wanted to be a superintendent. Jennings asked the superintendent of the course, Mike Chrzanowski, what he needed to do to become one. Soon Jennings was studying turf management at the University of Massachusetts. He earned a two-year degree in golf course management and a four-year degree in resource economics. Jennings could have been a broker on Wall Street, but he liked fairways more than finance.

"Sometimes I think about if I had pursued another opportunity," Jennings says. "Maybe I could have been a member here instead of the superintendent."

While in school, Jennings, a student of golf course architecture, realized he wanted to be a superintendent at one of America's top classical golf courses.

Jennings first job out of college was as the assistant superintendent of Onondaga Golf & Country Club in Fayetteville, N.Y., where he spent two years. Jennings landed his first superintendent's job at En-Joie Golf Club in Endicott, N.Y. He was only 24, and looking back, Jennings says he was fortunate to receive that opportunity at such a young age.

"You don't realize how much pressure there is or how hard the job is until you're actually sitting in that chair," he says. "That first day, I remember thinking, 'Oh, my gosh, I've got people expecting results out of me. I've got a staff that's looking for direction. I've got financial responsibility.'"

"But I thrived on the pressure," he continues. "I slept five hours a night that first year so I could be at work early every day and be the last person to leave."

Jennings left En-Joie for Hiland Golf Club after two years. But Hiland, a semi-private course in Queensbury, N.Y., struggled in the early 1990s because of the recession. The course went bankrupt a few years later. Jennings spent three

seasons at the club, but he began a new job search when he realized the club was in dire straits financially. Jennings also wanted to get back to the New York metro area because "that was the place to be."

"It's where the big clubs are, and it's the pressure cooker of jobs," Jennings says. "It's where

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Marathon Man

It's the morning after and Jon Jennings looks a tad weary. But, hey, give the guy a break. After all, Jennings just ran 26 miles in 3 hours and 18 minutes the day before in the Chicago Marathon.

"I feel pretty good," says Jennings, the certified superintendent of Chicago Golf Club. "I'm stiff when I get up and walk, but once I get moving I'm OK."

Jennings, who has been running competitively for several years and has run in several marathons, qualified for the Boston Marathon next month. "It's the oldest marathon in the country," Jennings says, "and it will be a thrill to compete in it."

With Jennings' busy work schedule during the golf season — he works 12-hour days and only takes a couple days off during a month — it's a wonder he finds the time to train. But Jennings has a bit of owl in him in that he likes the night. He gets up at 3:30 a.m. to get in his run before work.

"It's the best time to run," says Jennings, who says he's gotten up as early as 1:30 a.m. to train. "But I try not to go to bed any later than 9 p.m. If I see north of 9, I'm not happy. I'm so tired I can barely talk."

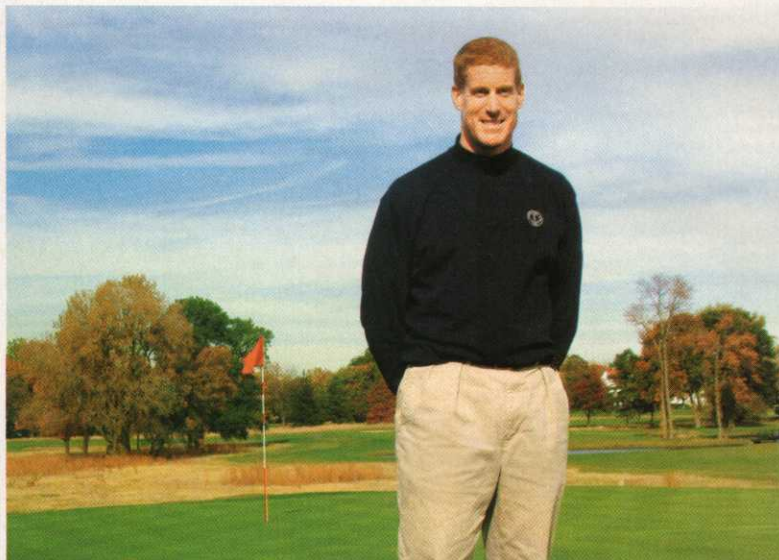
Jennings longtime friend, Pat Sisk, the certified superintendent of Milwaukee Country Club, turned Jennings on to running marathons. "Now he's a whole lot faster than I am," Sisk says.

Jennings says his wife Susan thinks he's moonstruck for getting up in the middle of the night to train.

"But I do have to say," Susan says, "that he rarely lets the alarm clock go off twice then, which is a benefit for me. He goes off and runs, gets ready for work and is gone long before any of us even consider waking up."

— Larry Aylward, Editor in Chief





Jon Jennings and Chicago Golf Club will host the Walker Cup in August.

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the highest standards are set and where superintendents make the most money.”

Jennings got his wish and landed the superintendent’s job in 1993 at the prestigious Patterson Club in Fairfield, Conn., a Robert Trent Jones design that was built in 1946 and had about 600 members.

“He makes a determined effort to stay three steps ahead of the membership.”

PAT SISK, MILWAUKEE COUNTRY CLUB

“I knew the pressure that was coming,” Jennings says, noting that Patterson’s play was about 28,000 rounds a year.

In his seven years there, Jennings says he was able to elevate the standard of the club by adding a new irrigation system and extensive drainage, among other things. Jennings enjoyed Patterson and things were going well there, but he wanted to fulfill his dream of working at a top classical club.

Jennings beat out two other top superintendents in the business — two men who were subsequently hired at two other classical gems — to get the post at Chicago Golf Club.

“Jon had a long- and short-term plan to

renovate the course, which was in a tired state,” Daly says. “He talked about what he was going to do, how he would do it and what resources he would need to get it done. He showed us where the course was now, and where he thought he could take it in terms of the greens and the fairways. He made quite a presentation and quite an impression.”

Jennings’ wife Susan remembers that her husband was like a kid on Christmas when he heard about the opening at Chicago Golf Club.

“He just looked at me and said, ‘That’s a dream job. That’s a golf course like almost no other in the world,’” Susan says. “He said, ‘I want to interview there even if it just means I get to walk the course.’”

When he interviewed for the job, Jennings was aware Chicago Golf Club was staging the Walker Cup this year. It wasn’t the main reason he wanted to come to the club, “but it was the icing on the cake,” he says.

Jennings has volunteered at a few major tournaments, including last year’s U.S. Open, but the Walker Cup, which pits America’s best amateur golfers against Great Britain’s and Ireland’s best, will be the first time he’s hosted a tournament of such magnitude as a superintendent.

Nobody was happier to see Jennings get the job at Chicago Golf Club than Pat Sisk, certified superintendent of Milwaukee Country Club, who grew up with Jennings in Connecticut and is his best friend. Sisk says Jennings is a perfect fit for the course for several reasons, including his love of architecture and his ability to meet members’ needs.

“Nobody will put more pressure on Jon Jennings than Jon Jennings,” Sisk says. “He makes a determined effort to stay three steps ahead of the membership. Nobody has any higher standards for the golf course.”

Chrzanowski, who broke Jennings into the business, isn’t surprised his pupil ended up at Chicago Golf Club.

“He’s about as hard a worker as I’ve seen,” says Chrzanowski, who has been at Madison for 25 years.

Jennings likes his job so much that it’s hard for him to stay away from Chicago Golf Club on his days off — and he only takes off about two days a month during the season.

“I just feel drawn here,” Jennings says softly. “It’s my love for the place and what I do. It’s a privilege and an honor to be employed here.” ■