

Civic Superman

With a one-way ticket out of the only town in which he'd worked, **Mark Woodward** could have left his heart in Mesa. Instead, he left behind a legacy in municipal employment (and a slightly less-glamorous body part)

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS SKERNIVITZ, MANAGING EDITOR



he discomfort in Mark Woodward's gut wasn't a case of the butterflies. It *could* have been, considering the job interview ahead of him. And it *should* have been, considering at stake was the career of a lifetime — the chance to manage San Diego's three municipal golf facilities, including the site of the 2008 U.S. Open, picturesque Torrey Pines.

Instead, his woes went beyond nerves, deeper literally than the pit of his stomach. In August 2004, a month after he had mailed a rather healthy resume to city hall in San Diego, Woodward began suffering the symptoms of diverticulitis. The condition — an inflammation of the lining of the large intestine — prevented select foods, particularly nuts and seeds, from passing through his colon.

"It was very painful," Woodward says. "And I used to eat a lot of popcorn."

He kissed the kernels goodbye, but the condition persisted. Ultimately, surgery to remove 10 inches of his colon was scheduled at Desert Samaritan Hospital in his long-time home of Mesa, Ariz. The date: Nov. 18.

While preparing to go under the knife, Woodward learned he had made the first cut for the Torrey Pines gig. That meant an hour-long flight to Southern California for an interview. The take-it-or-leave-it date: Nov. 16.

"My first interview was held two days before my surgery," Woodward says. "So I was in pain going through the anticipation of surgery. It was quite a process."

Apparently, the misery didn't hurt his prospects. On Jan. 7 — following a most eventful 2004 in which he also re-married and



Healthy and anything but homesick, Mark Woodward couldn't be happier now that he's operating out of Torrey Pines in San Diego.

served as president of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America — the City of San Diego named Woodward its golf operations manager. He started Feb. 15.

"It was an emotional rollercoaster because I wouldn't hear anything for a month or so, then I would hear I had an interview, then I wouldn't hear anything again," Woodward says. "So it was an

up-and-down process during my illness. Things move very slowly in municipal government."

Woodward would know. The City of Mesa signed his paychecks for 31 years. In turn, he earned every penny, his former boss says, and evolved into the perfect candidate to operate Torrey Pines and its sister facilities, Balboa Park and Mission Bay.

"I knew if they ever got a chance to interview Mark, he'd have the job," says Joe Holmwood, Mesa's community services manager and former parks and recreation director. "Mark isn't your typical golf superintendent. He's progressed beyond that."

As Mesa's parks and recreation administrator, Woodward oversaw two golf courses (Dobson Ranch and Riverview), a tennis facility, the Chicago Cubs spring training site, a camping reservation and the city cemetery. "Every 10 minutes I was wearing a different hat," he says.

A different hat ... with the same old smile.

"Mark's greatest asset was his customer-service skills. That's one of the reasons he surfaced to the top as one of our better administrators," Holmwood says. "He was a good communicator and he represented the city and our parks and recreation division very, very well."

Woodward arrived in Mesa in 1974 with a bachelor's degree from Arizona State University in environmental resources in agriculture. At Dobson Ranch and Riverview he progressed from assistant superintendent to superintendent to golf administrator and, in 1986, became certified.

"Mark started out as a hands-on,"
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front-line golf guy. I mean, he was a specialist," Holmwood says. "Over the years, though, he was transformed into a general manager of a whole array of facilities, some of which had to do with turf, but a lot of them didn't."

Bitten by the management bug, Woodward in 1997 collected a master's degree in business administration from the University of Phoenix. He started lecturing annually at the National Institute of Golf Management in Wheeling, W. Va. "I was interested in the revenue side of golf as much as the expenditure side of golf," he says. "I started looking into things like golf car revenue, and greens fee revenue and food and beverage revenue. I was looking at the big picture of the operation. It was very enlightening and very interesting."

The politicians in San Diego certainly appreciated Woodward's versatility. Ellen Oppenheim, the city's director of parks and recreation during the job search and now its deputy city manager, says Woodward's business acumen separated him from other superintendent applicants but not at the expense of agronomic savvy.

"In the final analysis, the product we offer is so dependent on those course conditions for users that I wanted to make sure the person

The maintenance crew at Torrey Pines has set its sights on perfecting the South Course, site of the 2008 U.S. Open.



leading our program really brought a depth of knowledge in that arena to help us," she says. "And Mark had demonstrated in a variety of venues and programs (in Mesa) his ability to manage people and resources and to do so in a very positive way."

Surprisingly, Woodward had little remorse leaving Mesa despite being "kind of the golf guy" there, he says. A new job, new wife and newfound appreciation for health — "I'm damn sure I don't want to go through what I went through three or four months last year" — essentially added up to a new life. So why look back, he figured.

"I have a lot of roots there, but for me (leaving) wasn't tough at all," he says. "I don't like to get stuck in my little box. I had spent enough time in Mesa. Even though my job changed every few years and it was very exciting taking on new responsibilities, the magic number for retirement in Mesa was 30 years. So once I had my 30 years in, I was going to do something different. It was just a matter of time."

Not that Mesa and the rest of Arizona will soon forget Woodward. His is the state's first family of greenskeeping, beginning with Woodward's late grandfather, superintendent Jay D. Woodward. "That's who started this whole mess," Mark jokes.

Woodward's son, Matt, from his first marriage, was the superintendent at Tubac Golf Resort until forming a landscaping and sign company last year. His daughter, Erin, on Oct. 29 will marry Cody Swirczynski, the superintendent at Revere Golf Club's Concord Course in

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One of the maintenance crew's first acts under Woodward was to replace every sprinkler head at Torrey Pines.

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Henderson, Nev. And Woodward's father, Dymond, spent a lifetime in construction and keeps busy in retirement as a starter and marshal at Hassayampa Country Club in Prescott, Ariz.

The family tree also includes Woodward's cousin, Mike Pock, the superintendent at Whisper Rock Golf Course in Scottsdale, and Mike's sons, Ernie and Jay Pock, the superintendents at Grayhawk Golf Club and Whisper Rock's upper course, respectively.

"Mark's a very good individual, and a lot of people look up to Mark in the industry," Ernie Pock says of his second-cousin. "With him having been the national president of our association, he's a lot better in politics than me, my brother or our father will ever be, and I think he takes a lot of that from my great-granddad, his grandfather. He's a very good people person, one of the few true politicians in our business."

With most of his time spent inside his Torrey Pines office, Woodward relishes having to supervise three facilities and 95 city employees. He doesn't miss getting his hands dirty, although he regrets that he's often too busy to play — an ever-present urge with the club's North and South courses just a few feet away.

"I look out there every day and see that beautiful facility, with the ocean right there, and it's hard not to get out there," Woodward says. "But my job requires that I spend a lot of time administratively in keeping the operation going."

Despite being one of America's top municipal courses and the annual host of the Buick Invitational — and despite a \$3 million Rees Jones redesign of the South Course in 2003 — Torrey Pines, Oppenheim

says, had room for improvement when Woodward arrived. And with the U.S. Open coming to the South Course, city officials let it be known that they weren't content.

"This job is way more detailed and there's way more at stake because of the pressure of the Open and the Buick Invitational and those type of things," Woodward says. "But I didn't want to take the easy way out. I like that excitement."

Woodward says he is focusing about 90 percent of his time and effort toward perfecting the South Course. "We're raising the bar on the entire operation, from customer service to the pro shop."

On the agronomy side, he and his crew are into the third round of extensive quarterly aeration and topdressing programs on the greens and fairways. They're also on their way



to heeding the United States Golf Association's wish that the greens consist solely of *Poa annua* — currently they're a combination of Penncross and *Poa* — and that the fairways feature as much kikuyugrass as possible.

All sprinkler heads have been replaced. A comprehensive tree management program on both courses has started. And upon conclusion of the Buick Invitational in February, several tee areas will be rebuilt or expanded, a bunker on the No. 6 fairway will be constructed, and the landing area on No. 18 will be leveled.

"Our course conditions at Torrey Pines are better than they've been in many years," Oppenheim says. "We've gotten three awards in the last few months at Torrey,

and I'm sure that wouldn't be the case if we weren't showing that kind of progress on the course and giving people a great experience while they're out there."

On top of the physical changes to Torrey Pines, Woodward transferred Balboa Park superintendent Candice Combs to Torrey Pines to evaluate her performance over a three-month trial that was slated to end in late September. Torrey Pines superintendent Jerry Dearie switched to Balboa Park.

"Mark's smart enough from a management standpoint to surround himself with good people," Holmwood says. "If he misses a beat from a technology standpoint, he makes sure he has people surrounding him that are top quality people.

Again, one of his strongest assets is that he's a team player. And he knows how to build a good team."

On the business side, Woodward is orchestrating a five-year operational plan and a subset of that plan, a 14-year cash-flow analysis of the city's three facilities. The latter initiative was warranted by the impending construction of a 27,000-square-foot clubhouse at Torrey Pines. With the \$13 million building slated to open in late 2007, the city wants to determine how course revenues can offset the debt.

"San Diego is going through some budget work, but luckily the golf enterprise fund is in pretty good shape right now, and we're not being hit as hard as some of the other entities are in the city, like the parks department," Woodward says. "We've got a lot of things going on right now, and they understand we have a pretty big event coming up here in 2008. They're not going to do too much to jeopardize what's going on with that."

Likewise, Woodward is doing nothing to jeopardize his family life and health. His bride, Amy, finally joined him at their Carmel Valley home in late May. Just days earlier his first grandchild, Trenton Jay, was born in Mesa. Since then, Woodward, an admitted workaholic, has tried to maintain a normal workday — 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., he says — although there's no absolutes with government work.

"We had a council meeting till 10 o'clock on Amy's first day here," Woodward says. "I'm dedicated to my job and I'll do everything to get it done, but there's life beyond work."

That might even mean time for a ballgame or movie. Just don't expect buttered popcorn on the menu.

"The doctor says there's a 99 percent chance the diverticulitis won't come back, but I'm shying away from all that stuff," Woodward says. "I even worry about the sesame seeds on hamburger buns." ■

Solid as a rock in his former town of Mesa, Woodward hopes to establish himself at Torrey Pines and San Diego's other two municipal courses, Balboa Park and Mission Bay.

