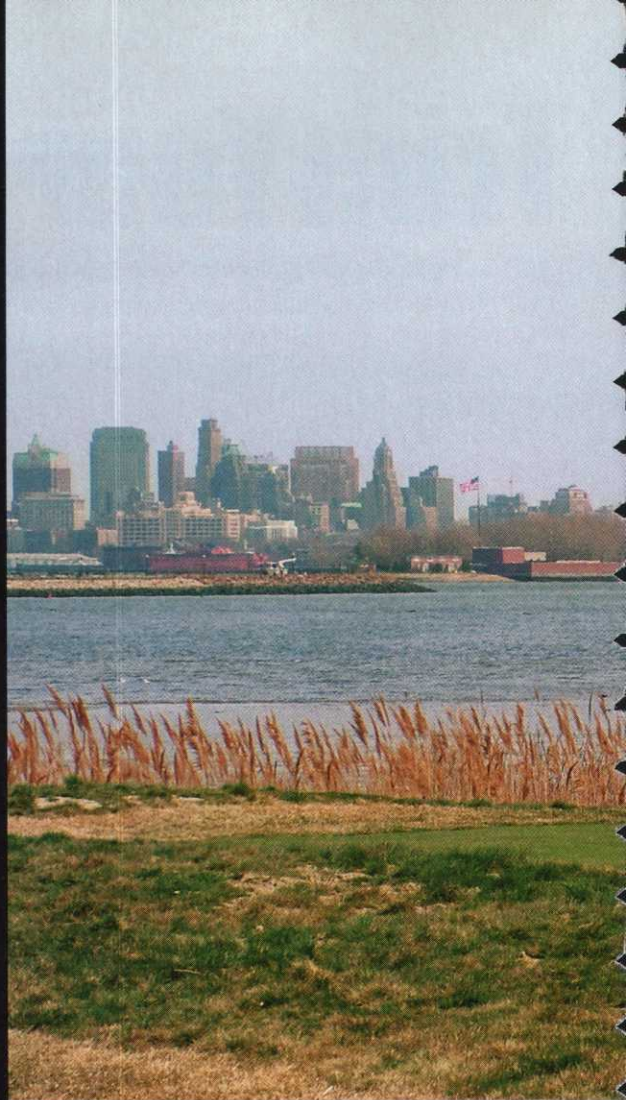


Gotham City Golf

In the shadow of Lady Liberty, unpretentious construction manager **Joe Voss** helps build one of the most expensive and exclusive courses from the contaminated ground up

BY THOMAS SKERNIVITZ, MANAGING EDITOR



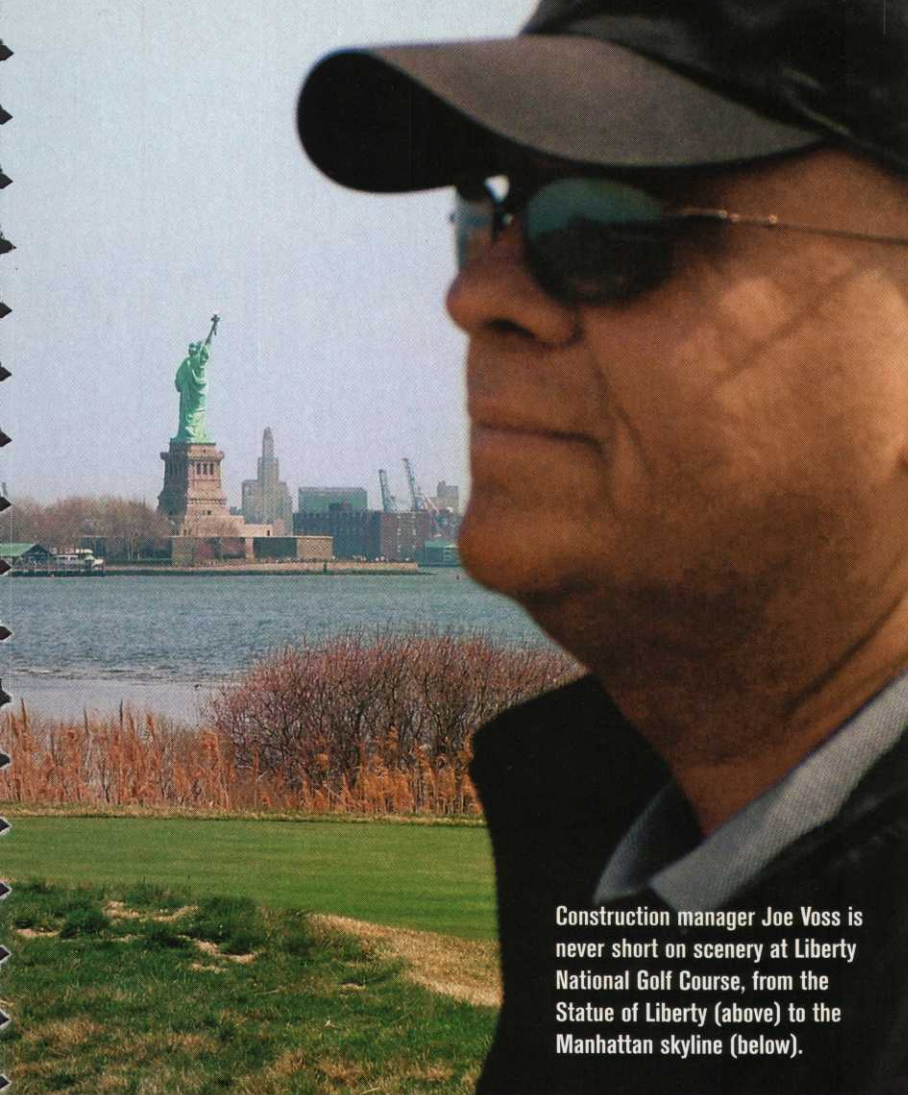
SOMEDAY JOE VOSS WILL RETURN TO

Liberty National Golf Course on the Jersey City shore. He'll break from running that mom-and-pop dive shop that's anywhere closer to the equator and drop in on one of the world's most exclusive clubs. He won't use the helipad. He won't hobnob with Charter Member No. 2, Bob Kraft (behind Charter Member No. 1, Rudy Giuliani). And he'll save all compliments to the house chef — none other than Gramercy Tavern's renowned Tom Colicchio — for someone far more appreciative of the *foie gras* terrine.

But when Voss eventually does come back to the brownfield-turned-golf course that he's spent the last two years building from literal scrap, he'll do so living larger than the copper lady standing a thousand yards from the 18th green.

"I'm happy and proud enough to say that I can go back to anywhere I came from and be welcomed," Voss says. "I didn't burn my bridges."

Good thing for the Voss bank account — a charred overpass at Liberty National would be anything but a free pass. The course, which opened June 14, will sap at least \$129 million from the pocket of Paul Fire-



Construction manager Joe Voss is never short on scenery at Liberty National Golf Course, from the Statue of Liberty (above) to the Manhattan skyline (below).

man, the founder of Reebok.

"Technically, money isn't an issue here," Voss says.

Still, watching the bottom line is one of the myriad jobs Voss has as the construction manager of Liberty National.

"We have a very strict budget, so we don't want to go out and run footloose," he says. "But nobody knew what we were getting into here."

That's what happens when one of the world's richest individuals — Fireman ranks 698th, according to *Forbes* magazine — decides to build a 165-acre course along Upper New York Bay shoreline that was once occupied by rail yards, a military installation and other heavy industry. Toxins, especially chromium and hydrocarbons, had to be removed or covered by 4.5 million cubic yards of soil that on some parts of the course measure 60 feet high.

"This is the hottest part of the site," Voss says, standing on a plot where every-

thing but Jimmy Hoffa has been exhumed since June 2004. "It's an amazing amount of money we're spending here to clean this site up. And every day there's a surprise."

Perhaps the biggest shocker is that Voss, 58, has spent the last two years on the grounds of one of the most expensive courses in the world, one that will command of its members a \$500,000 initiation fee. He and his equally down-to-earth wife, Judy, haven't played in many member-guest tournaments.

"The finished thing is not our scene," Joe says.

Joe and Judy met in the early 1970s while attending Kent State University. Judy stuck around the school long enough to party with Joe Walsh and the rest of The James Gang. She witnessed the May 4, 1970, Ohio National Guard shootings that resulted in the deaths of

four KSU students.

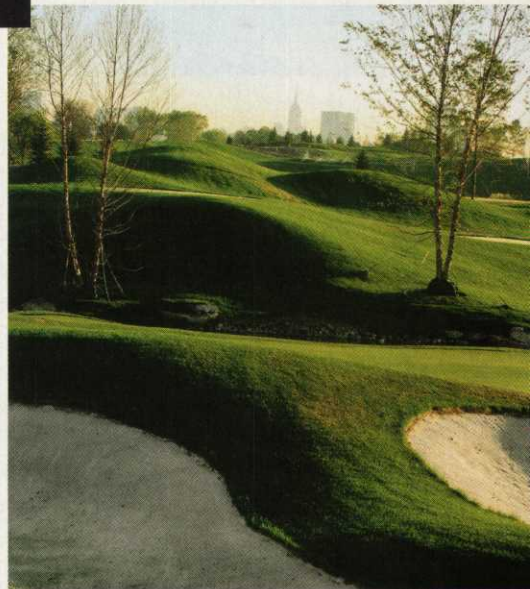
"I may have been a bit of a troublemaker when I was younger," Judy says, a bit of mischief still evident in her eyes.

Joe, meanwhile, had transferred to Humboldt College, in Arcata, Calif., where he drew the wrath of the governor.

"Ronnie Reagan put me in jail for 72 hours because I happened to have a Kent State shirt on and long hair the day of the shootings," Joe says. "I didn't even know (the shootings) had happened that day."

Not that Joe wasn't a bit rebellious while growing up in northeast Ohio. He moved out of the house at age 15. He went against the family grain and wanted no part of laboring in the steel business. And he wasn't too keen on the fact that his dad "thought Nixon was a god." He even got radical on the golf course during the Cleveland Open at Aurora Country Club.

"Early in the week I got to caddie in a group that Arnie was playing in. But for the actual tournament, they brought union caddies down. Us local guys



turned a few restrooms upside down as a sign of protest. It was a heckuva experience," Joe says.

"See, it's not just me," Judy laughs.

Joe eventually returned to Kent State

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A glimpse southeast reveals the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, which connects Brooklyn and Staten Island at the mouth of Upper New York Bay.

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to pursue a master's degree in plant physiology. The degree never materialized, but he accepted a job with a financial institution to oversee the construction and operation of Country Club Village, a facility in nearby Canton that had gone belly-up while being built. The birth of Joe Voss Contracting — "one of the first true maintenance companies," Voss says

— helped pay the bills, but it contradicted its namesake's Save the Whales and Sierra Club convictions.

"When I got into the golf business, I got a lot of flak from people that knew me. I had gone to school to cure the world of pollution," Voss says. "But when I got out of school, I was making about five grand a year, and that wasn't sitting well with me."

The golf industry had not yet ballooned in Ohio, but there was work to be found in landscaping and ballpark construction. "Construction is fun and exciting, and there's something different every day," Voss says, "but there are a lot of times when you don't eat."

With an undergraduate degree in wildlife biology and an accompanying knowledge of soil types, Voss satisfied his agronomic appetite by becoming a Class A superintendent.

"According to Judy, I was 20 years ahead of my time," Joe says. "I've been promoting conservation from the day I was hired."

Voss spent the '80s and '90s overseeing lengthy construction jobs at notable courses such as Walden Ponds in Ohio, Ruffled Feathers and Mill Creek in Illinois, Dorado del Mar in Puerto Rico and Piedmont in Virginia. In the middle of the jobs, he earned superintendent certification while taking courses at Ohio State and Pennsylvania State universities.

Voss' work in Puerto Rico impressed course developers Greg Sherwood and

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Gotham City Golf

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Rowland Bates, both of whom are running the show at Liberty National under Fireman and his son, Dan, the project manager.

"They've been very nice," Judy says of management. "It's normal here."

Normal?

"As convoluted as this job is — things are going 100 mph in different directions, there's a lot of 15-hour days and six- to seven-day weeks — they leave me alone," Joe says. "And if I screw up, it's my fault."

With their stay at Liberty National set to end around Christmas, Joe and Judy aren't sure what and where their next job will be. "I'm pigheaded," Joe says. "This is a who-you-know business and not a what-you-know business, and I probably don't press the flesh as much as I should and PR myself."

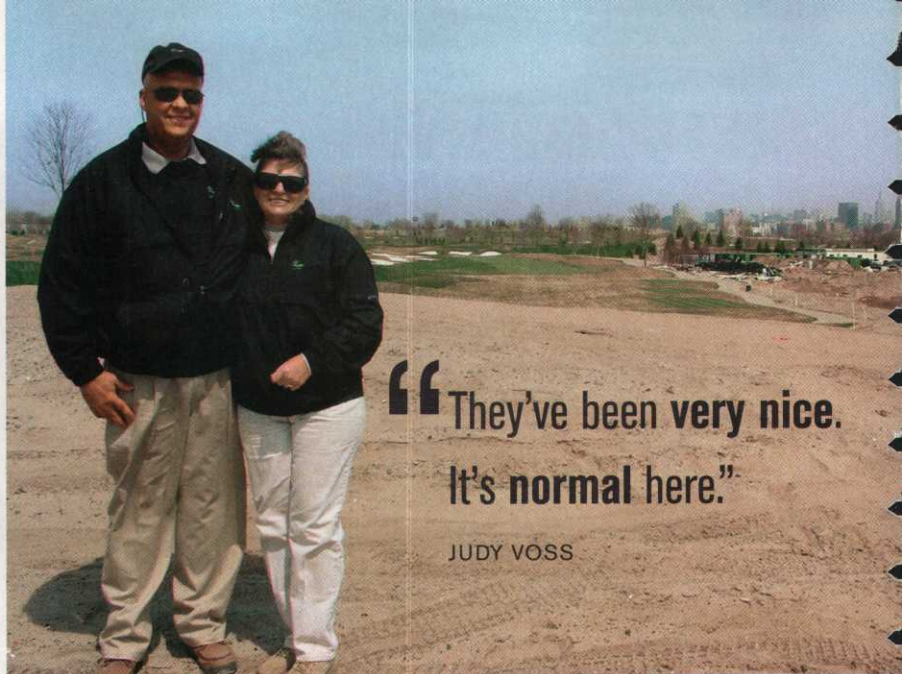
Still, Joe's reputation precedes him. The New Year could find him and his

wife at a job along the U.S.-Canadian border. Or maybe in Cancun. There is work to be had, Joe says, and retirement is another six to 10 years away. At that time, he'd love to bow out of the industry having just built and directed his own golf course.

In a worst-case scenario, he won't find work, and the Vosses will prematurely but

"They've been very nice. It's normal here."

JUDY VOSS



enthusiastically escape to some tropical destination, where they'll spend their days leading scuba diving and fishing expeditions. At this point in their lives, "all we have to worry about is the roof over our heads," Judy says.

Four million cubic yards of soil later, that's one construction job Joe should be able to handle in a New York minute. ■

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