

Wise Beyond *His* Years

{ BY THOMAS SKERNIVITZ, MANAGING EDITOR }

ERIC GREYTOK DOESN'T REMEMBER the "Massacre at Winged Foot." He was 17 months old that June of 1974 when the U.S. Open came to Mamaroneck, N.Y. Had he been crawling around the historical course, he probably would have gotten lost in the 6-inch rough that had the best golfers in the world reaching for pacifiers instead of pitching wedges.

The blue hairs of 83-year-old Winged Foot Golf Club won't forget that Father's Day weekend. They relish the fact that, 32 years later, no one has won a U.S. Open with a higher score. Hale Irwin answers to that piece of trivia, having shot 7-over-par, two strokes better than runner-up Forest Fezler.

"I remember the relief, the immense relief, not only to have survived but to have won," Irwin said years later. Jack Nicklaus jokingly lamented that the "last 18 holes are very difficult." Dick Schaap wrote a book about the tournament — "Massacre at Winged Foot: the U.S. Open Minute-By-Minute." And the USGA's chairman, Sandy Tatum, in response to whether his organization was trying to embarrass the best of the best, uttered the since-clichéd, "No. We're trying to identify them."

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ERIC GREYTOK, at age 33, prepares to host his second U.S. Open, this time at storied—and sometimes unforgiving—Winged Foot Golf Club



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Greytok has heard the stories. He's been the superintendent at Winged Foot since April of 2001.

"The members are very proud" of the '74 Open, he says.

With the event back at Winged Foot's A.W. Tillinghast-designed West Course this month, the club's constituents would

love to once again stick it to the pros. Greytok cannot promise similar carnage, nor does he necessarily want to.

"The whole point of this exercise is to prepare a golf course that is fair and tough," he says. "I think right around par will win it."

Par would be a happy medium. No one wants a repeat of Phil Mickelson's

28-under triumph at this year's BellSouth Classic; or even the rain-aided 11-under victory by Davis Love III at the 1997 PGA Championship, the last Major held at Winged Foot.

"These courses that have scores of 25 under par, it's almost unfair to the membership, if it's a private course, to humiliate the golf course in that fashion," says Ted Horton, the superintendent at Winged Foot from 1967 to 1980. "It just doesn't leave the right impression."

Then again, few were overjoyed with the final round of the 2004 U.S. Open in nearby Southampton, N.Y. Some of the greens at Shinnecock Hills Golf Club dried up and, according to many players, turned unplayable. Whether the USGA was an accomplice to the transgression is conjecture. Whether the association would think of messing with the integrity of Winged Foot is moot, Greytok says.

"You don't need to trick up Winged Foot," he says. "It's just a tough, tough golf course. Four, 5, 6 and maybe 7 are the only four holes where maybe you can catch a break."

Nixon caught more breaks in 1974 than the guys who played that year's U.S. Open. So what made Winged Foot exceedingly difficult? Horton cites two reasons:

► The USGA asked for 6 inches of rough, and that's exactly what Horton gave them. Thanks to improved mower technology, turf could be trimmed at higher lengths. In turn, thin spots were more readily noticeable and could be remedied with seed or fertilizer.

"So when the golfers got out there, they literally couldn't find their feet, let alone their golf balls," Horton says. "That was a significant situation that, really, I'm kind of proud of because we developed a whole new way of preparing the roughs. The kids today are doing a much better job than we were, but I think we were one of the first to get it there."

Following that season, the USGA changed its championship specifications, Horton says. Cool-season grasses were

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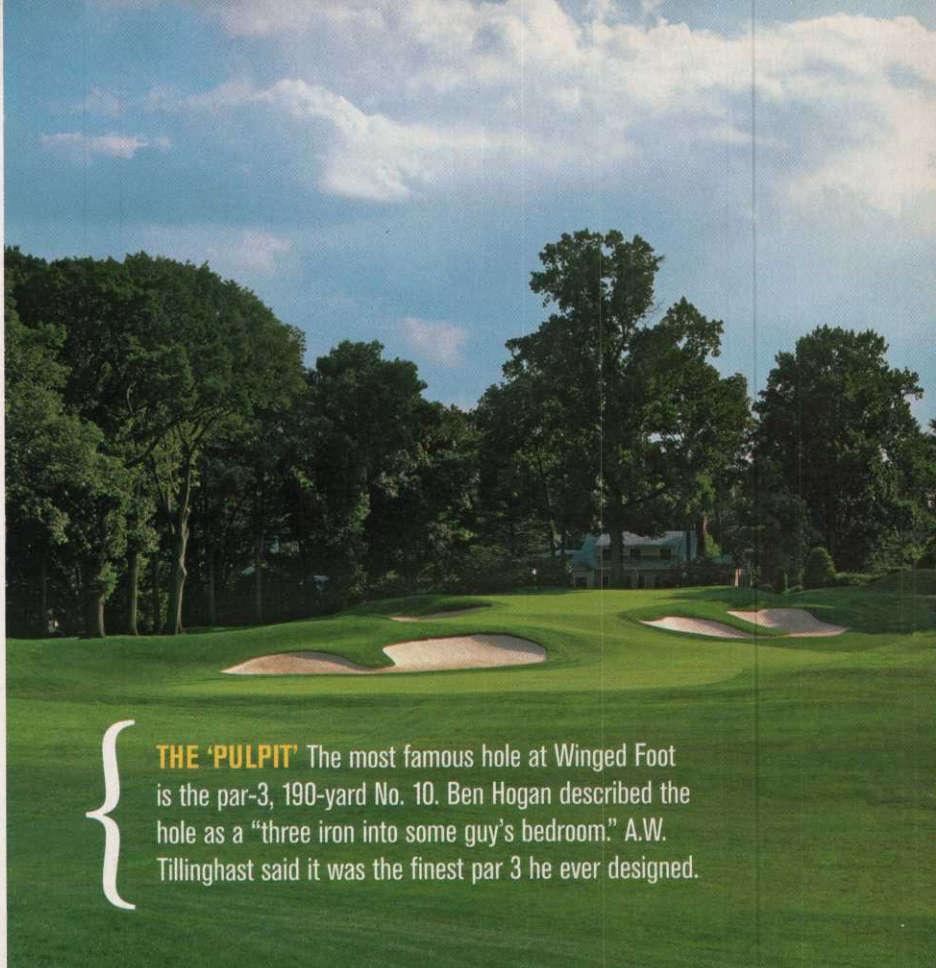
► Fast greens, attributable to preparation-friendly weather, played havoc from the get-go. Nicklaus, from 20 feet out on the first hole, putted 30 feet beyond the pin and off the green.

"At that point we recognized that we had the greens pretty firm, pretty fast," Horton says. "And perhaps they were firmer and faster than had been presented."

"(But) I don't think we tricked it up," Horton stresses. "We didn't narrow the fairways excessively. The rough was tough, unpredictably tough. But we did nothing out of the ordinary on the greens. I would have to assume they're going to achieve the same speeds (this month) that we achieved, if not faster."

Speaking of the current playing conditions at Winged Foot, Greytok isn't saying much. Despite being the caretaker of the club's East and West courses (both are

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THE 'PULPIT' The most famous hole at Winged Foot is the par-3, 190-yard No. 10. Ben Hogan described the hole as a "three iron into some guy's bedroom." A.W. Tillinghast said it was the finest par 3 he ever designed.

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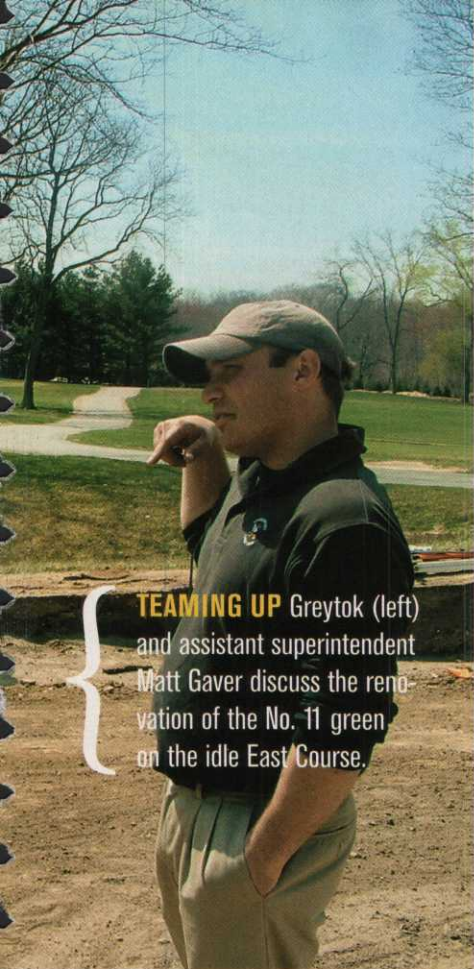
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perennially ranked among *Golf Digest's* top 100 in the nation), he defers all agronomic questions to USGA officials. And there's nothing wrong with that, according to Jack Holt, the veteran assistant superintendent at Pebble Beach Golf Links, where Greytok had previously worked.

"It's the USGA's deal, and it should be; it's their event," Holt says. "We're not there to dictate the tournament. We're there to facilitate. What they want is what we're going to do. Wouldn't it be nice to say, 'I'm determining all these things.' And some people can't resist that. But Eric is able to. He's a special guy. I have a lot of respect for him."

Holt has been the most influential of Greytok's who's-who list of superintendent mentors, one that includes Paul R. Latshaw and his son, Paul B., Mark Michaud and Chris Dalhamer. Distanced along opposite coasts, Greytok and Holt speak by phone at Greytok's convenience.

"I don't want to stick my nose into his business, but if he wants help, I'm always there," Holt says. "When you have the U.S.



TEAMING UP Greytok (left) and assistant superintendent Matt Gaver discuss the renovation of the No. 11 green on the idle East Course.

Open, you've got plenty of people giving you advice."

Ordinarily, a 33-year-old superintendent such as Greytok might need the counsel. But in what may be a first for someone of his age, he's preparing to host his second U.S. Open as head superintendent. Already on his resume is the 2000 U.S. Open at Pebble Beach.

"I've been real lucky," Greytok says, "and I think timing has a lot to do with it."

Greytok took over at Pebble Beach after Michaud jumped at the chance to head back east to supervise Shinnecock Hills. He admits that with only five months remaining until the 2000 Open, the groundwork had been accomplished under Michaud's watch. And the support structure within the Pebble Beach Co. has been unparalleled. Yet there was still nothing "lucky" about a 27-year-old first-time superintendent taking the reins of one of

Columnist **Geoff Shackelford** details (and questions) the USGA's decision to vary the height of rough at Winged Foot. **See page 20**

the world's biggest golf tournaments, at one of the world's most prestigious courses, and succeeding in the process.

"Eric stepped up to the plate and handled himself very well," says Horton, who was the vice president of grounds and operations with the Pebble Beach Co. during the 2000 Open.

"Eric fell into the perfect situation — perfect in some ways and extremely difficult in others," Holt adds. "Pebble Beach is a meatgrinder."

Despite what Holt considers "wonderful" ownership and unlimited resources at Pebble Beach, the pressure, he says, is ever-present to prepare 3,500-square-foot greens for 65,000 rounds per year. On top of that, the superintendent has to deal with native soil, reclaimed water and three annual tournaments — the AT&T, Callaway and state amateur.

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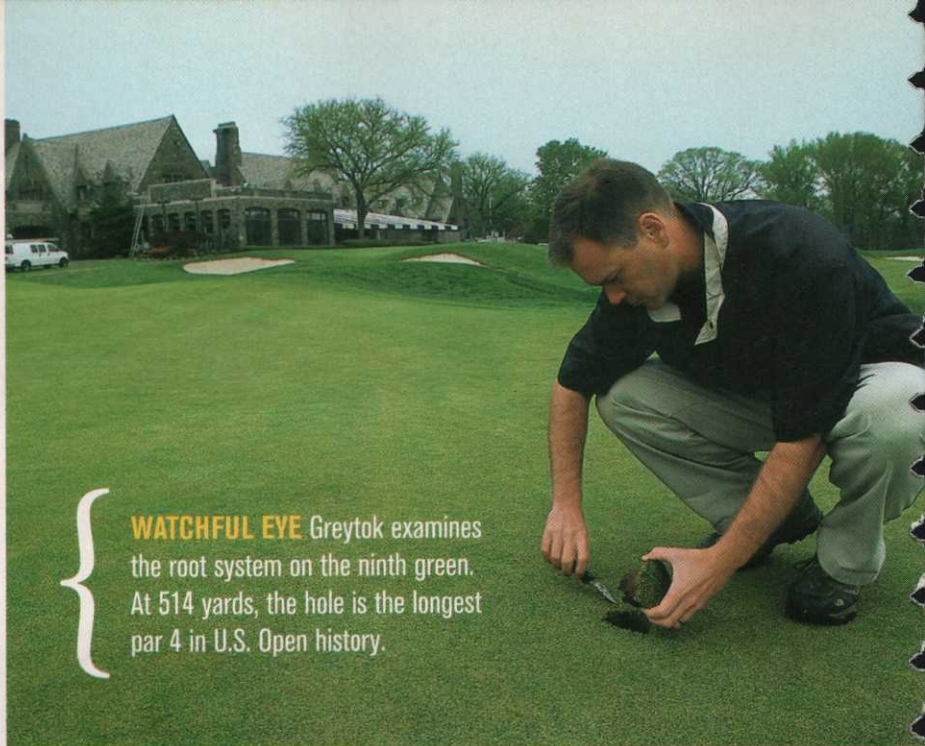
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"I can't say more about what great character Eric showed," says Holt, who has seen eight superintendents and three U.S. Opens pass through Pebble Beach during his 25 years at the club. "He was a busy guy, and he stood up beautifully to the pressure. At his age, I was extremely impressed."

Unfazed by the stresses, Greytok ironically had a more difficult time dealing with the course's many perks. Seeking greater challenges, he left for Winged Foot just over a year after having taken over at Pebble Beach. The switch allowed him to coordinate major projects, such as renovating bunkers, improving drainage and irrigation systems, and reseeding roughs.

"Everything went so smoothly (at Pebble Beach). I wanted to go through all those heartaches and pains to fully understand the commitment and reward at the end," Greytok says. "I walked away with no regrets."



WATCHFUL EYE Greytok examines the root system on the ninth green. At 514 yards, the hole is the longest par 4 in U.S. Open history.

Since Greytok arrived five years ago, Winged Foot's West Course has 300 more yards to cover. There are fewer trees and narrower fairways. About 95 percent of the lost hole locations have been recaptured.

"I feel I've paid my dues," Greytok

says. "I know some people might not have thought that when I was 27, but working at the places that I've worked at and working for the people that I've worked for, they were very demanding. I know how to work."

The turfgrass management graduate of Penn State University knows how to lead, too. His crew consists of 46 members, including assistant superintendents Sean Foley and Matt Gaver.

"His management style is aggressive but at the same time inclusive," Holt says. "He's able to challenge people but at the same time is perfectly willing to give a thumb's up for a good job. Again, his ego is not one that he has to have his back patted all the time. He's willing to give credit to other people."

Hopefully, Holt says, Greytok will receive a full share of accolades for his second U.S. Open — "as he deserved with the last one."

Ironically, the 2000 Open was the inverse of its '74 counterpart. Tiger Woods tallied the lowest winning score in Open history, 12-under, to win by 15 strokes.

Somewhere in-between the "massacres" involving Hale Irwin and Tiger Woods is that "fair and tough" tournament that Greytok is seeking. And if no one winds up writing a book about it, he'll be perfectly content. ■

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