

Speaking

CourseCo's Ray Davies walks the talk when it comes to golf's role in the environment

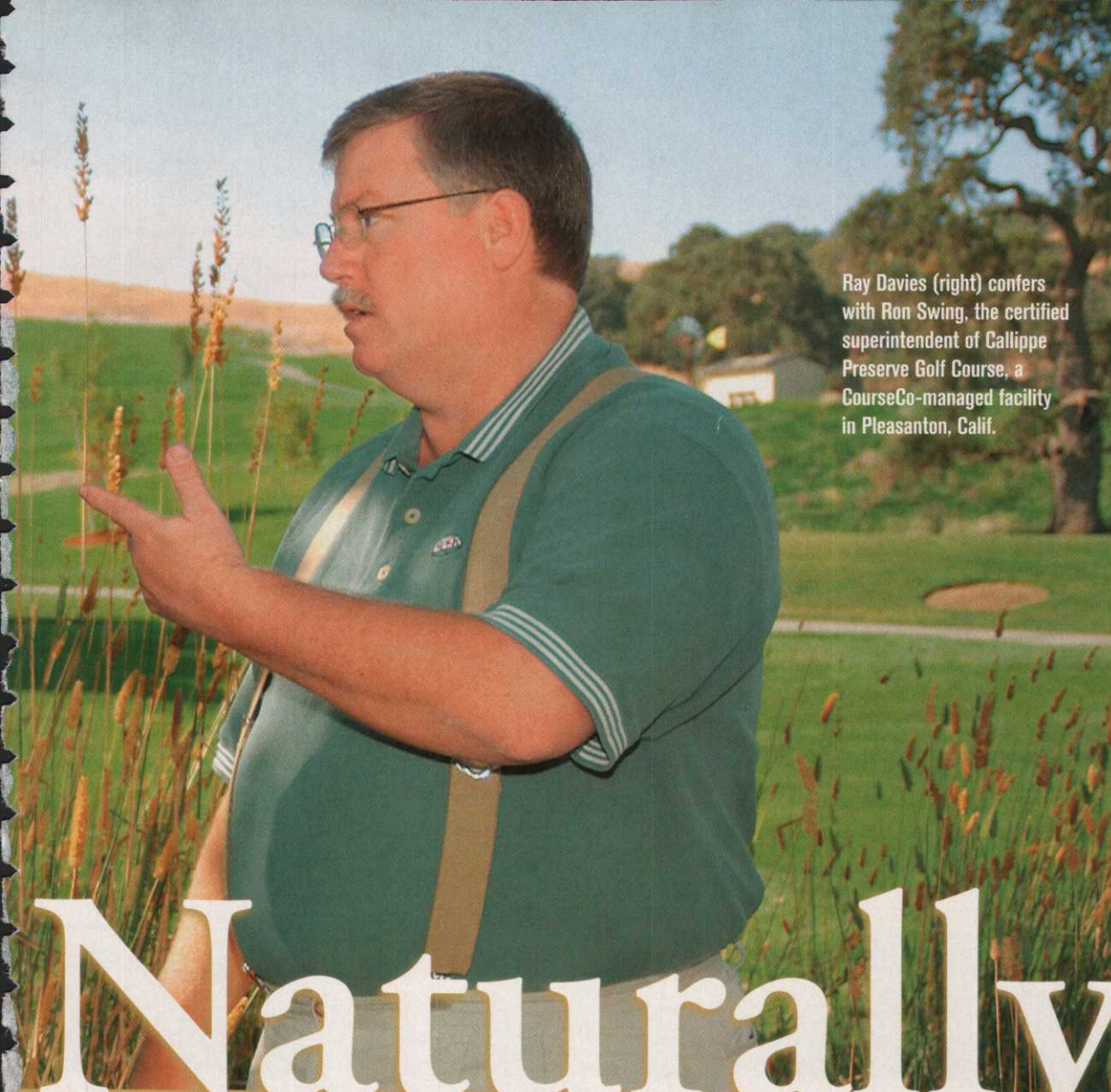
BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

It's shortly before five on a golden and gleaming northern California afternoon. Most people are winding down from the workday. But not Ray Davies. He's just getting wound up.

Davies, the director of golf course maintenance and construction for CourseCo, a golf course management and development company based in Petaluma, Calif., motions with his arms and hands while waxing about two of his favorite subjects — golf and the environment.

"What you've got in a guy like me is a million opinions," Davies says.

Later, Davies sits at a small table in the clubhouse at Crystal Springs Golf Course, an



Ray Davies (right) confers with Ron Swing, the certified superintendent of Callippe Preserve Golf Course, a CourseCo-managed facility in Pleasanton, Calif.

Naturally

idyllic design in Burlingame, Calif., and talks about the environmental maintenance programs CourseCo has implemented on the ecologically sensitive site. The course, which sits atop the placid Crystal Springs Reservoir, offers sights to behold from an array of angles.

The view overlooking the 23,000-acre reservoir, part of the Peninsula Watershed that is home to the highest concentration of rare and endangered species in the Bay area, might be the most stunning. The reservoir's vivid blue water sparkles in the late-afternoon sun. Its sandy shore bleeds into a dense stand of timber, that includes cypress, pines and firs. From the golf course, the distant trees fuse to form a dark-green mass of brush that ascends a steep ridge and jets with jagged edges into the soft blue sky.

"The scenery is just beautiful here," Davies says.

It's a postcard view that Davies doesn't take for granted. And because the view originates from a golf course — *his* golf course — it's even more special to him.

That's because Davies has spent a good part of his career trying to convince detractors that golf courses — often hailed as environmental foes because of their perceived lavish use of water, fertilizer and pesticides — can operate in sync with Mother Nature. And Crystal Springs Golf Course, built in the 1920s, offers proof. The course has earned a slew of honors for its environmental accomplishments since CourseCo took over its management in 1996.

Such awards are common with most of CourseCo's properties. The company has made a name for itself in northern California for its

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Deer and other wildlife are a common sight at Crystal Springs Golf Course.



CourseCo's Alan Andreasen has made the best of a second chance given to him by his boss Ray Davies. See Larry Aylward's Pin High column on page 6

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environmental expertise. It's a reason why CourseCo was awarded California's prestigious Governor's Environmental and Economic Leadership Award in 2003.

The 48-year-old Davies, a past winner of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America's Environmental Stewardship Award, is a force behind CourseCo's environmental achievements. Since joining the company in 1996, Davies has spearheaded an effort to get all CourseCo courses involved with the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program (ACSP), an education and certification program that instructs golf courses on how to pro-

tect the environment. Audubon International, a not-for-profit organization that helps golf courses implement environmental management plans to improve efficiency and promote conservation, operates the program.

Of the 13 daily-fee golf courses that CourseCo manages, 11 have become Fully Certified Cooperative Sanctuaries, which means the courses demonstrate a high degree of environmental quality by utilizing best-management practices in a number of areas, including environmental planning, wildlife and habitat management, outreach and education, chemical-use reduction and safety, water conservation and water-quality management. The two remaining courses should be fully certified by the year's end.

When asked about his environmental prowess, Davies says, "I don't know that I have prowess. I have knowledge. I've dedicated a lot of time to reading up on the subject."

Davies enlightened himself on the subject
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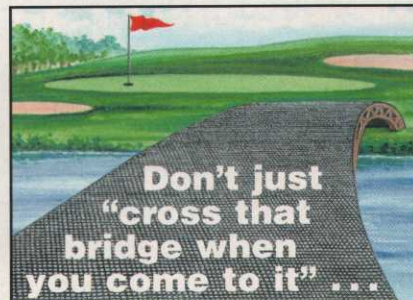
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because he was tired of environmentalists' accusations in the late 1980s that golf courses were harming the environment. But Davies admits he was subjective in his view as a young superintendent. When he studied the situation objectively, he realized golf wasn't always coming up roses with the environment.

"Golf courses shouldn't be bad for the environment, but they can be," Davies says in his customary matter-of-fact tone. "If golf courses aren't managed properly, they can be harmful to the environment, especially when they are grown in."

Tom Isaak, who founded CourseCo in 1989, holds the same philosophy. And Isaak hired Davies partly because he subscribed to the same environmental ideals.

"It was obvious to Ray that I held environmental values, and it was obvious to me that he found that to be very exciting," Isaak says.

Davies joined the company when CourseCo signed a 20-year lease to manage Crystal Springs. Davies was hired as the club's superintendent and general manager then. He worked hard to achieve the Fully Certified Cooperative Sanctuary designation at Crystal Springs, which it did in 1997, marking the company's first project to attain the status.

At Crystal Springs, Davies directed several projects to upgrade the course from

environmental and playability standpoints. The course's drainage was improved immensely, and water testing was implemented throughout the property. The course's maintained acreage was reduced from 130 acres to 87 acres, which helped create a wildlife corridor that's now a bastion for various beasts, including bobcats, deer and more than 60 bird varieties.

He won't back down

Davies understands why golf courses are a big target of environmentalists' wrath. They comprise many acres, are perceived to use an ocean of water, and are assumed to use dangerous chemicals liberally. Golf's elitist reputation doesn't help matters.

But the environmentalists' indignation doesn't intimidate Davies, who's not one to back down from a challenge. The straight-shooting Davies is also secure in his plight. He reveres CourseCo's money-where-your-mouth-is mission statement, which reads: "To lead in environmental management by continuously building knowledge and developing innovative practices."

Pat Gross, a United States Golf Association (USGA) agronomist who has worked with Davies and known him for several years, says CourseCo is a "trail-blazing" company. From its outset CourseCo took contract maintenance jobs that other management companies

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Davies doesn't just want CourseCo to comply with the laws of the land. He wants the company to be an industry leader in **environmental management.**

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wouldn't touch because of the properties' environmentally sensitive locations. "CourseCo seized those opportunities," Gross says.

But Davies, who assumed his current position after CourseCo landed its eighth management contract, doesn't just want CourseCo to comply with the laws of the land. He wants the company to be an industry leader in environmental management.

For example, if a permit for a new course construction calls for 25 acres of naturalized areas, Davies will submit a plan for 30 acres. "We want to do better," he stresses.

It's not just about aligning solely with Audubon International, either.

"We don't just jump the Audubon hurdle and say we're done," Davies says. "The Audubon hurdle, in my mind, is quite low."

That said, he says the company has done well in pursuing its goals.

"I don't feel like we've come up short in accomplishing the things we set out to do,"

says Davies, noting that each course under CourseCo's management has its own extensive integrated pest management program and chemical application management plan in place. "But it's a process, and we're never done."

Davies says CourseCo strives to communicate its environmental philosophy to golfers through various means, including signage on courses and distribution of brochures in clubhouses. Davies admits most golfers care more about having positive golf experiences and less about what golf courses do environmentally, but that doesn't mean they don't appreciate the latter. But being an environmental steward is more important to CourseCo's clients, the municipalities and private owners by which the company is employed.

How difficult is it for a golf course to be environmentally proactive in an area of the country known for its stringent environmental requirements? "It's actually easier here because you have to," Davies says. "When you go to

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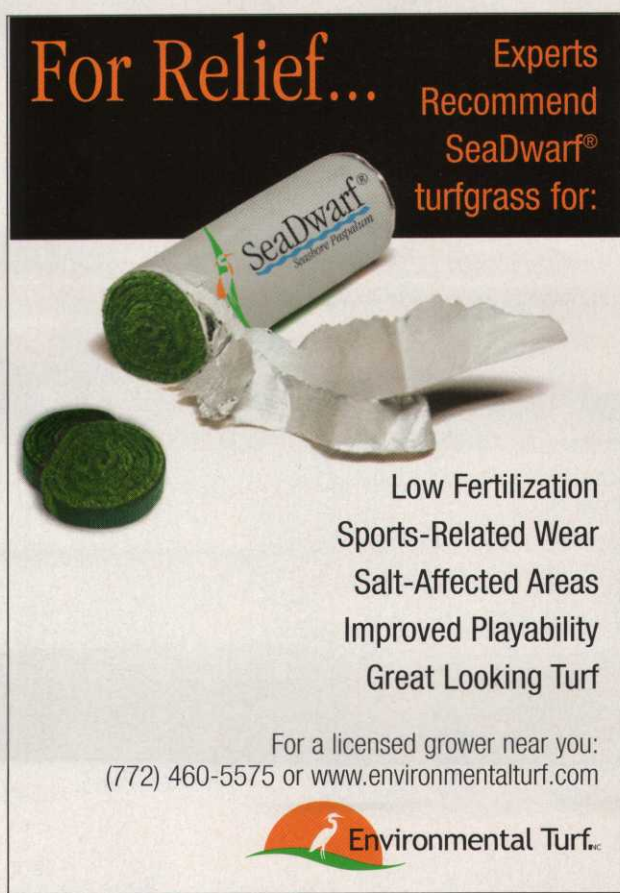
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get permits, the requirements put on you are so stringent that you have to have some competencies already in place.”

Davies expects his superintendents to perform their environmental duties like other chores. He makes these responsibilities part of their performance evaluations.

Davies, who became a partner with CourseCo in 2001, spends many of his workdays driving around northern California to visit the courses' superintendents. His Hyundai Sonata has about 181,000 miles on it, and it's less than four years old. Davies also spends more time in the air these days. CourseCo recently struck deals to manage two more facilities — in Corona, Calif., and in Pullman, Wash. — and Davies has been flying to those locations often for planning meetings. The company plans more growth in 2007.

In good company

The superintendents who work under Davies share his environmental vision. Davies also seeks to hire superintendents he feels are good fits at particular courses. “Their strengths match up to the agronomic and management challenges posed by the golf courses,” he says.

Davies believed certified superintendent Gary Ingram was a natural fit at the City of Oakland-owned Metropolitan Golf

Links because of Ingram's proficiency to tend turf grown on an inferior site, a former industrial garbage dump topped with salty soil that was dredged from the nearby Oakland bay's shipping channel. Davies also believed the gregarious Ingram was the perfect person to head the course's Oakland Turfgrass Education Initiative, a community service program for inner-city kids created to educate them about turfgrass management in the hope they will consider the field as a career someday.

Ingram says he's impressed with CourseCo because the company is not solely concerned with making money. CourseCo helps its clients manage their courses economically and environmentally. Ingram believes the two form a synergy. For instance, CourseCo's integrated pest-management program centers around an economic threshold, Ingram says.

“Economic threshold is the decision-making process we use to determine how bad we should let a problem get before we do something about it,” Ingram adds.

If a turf disease gets so bad that it affects the playability of a few greens, then Ingram says he would take action. But Ingram stresses he would only spray the diseased greens. “There's no reason to spray all the greens,” he adds. “We're not going to waste money or do things frivolously.”

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Gary Ingram is one of several CourseCo superintendents who shares Davies' environmental vision.

PHOTO BY LARRY AYLVARD

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Signs on golf courses can educate golfers about environmental issues.



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Alan Andreasen, the certified superintendent of Green River Golf Club, the new CourseCo operation in Corona, has grasped the company's environmental strategy. But it took some prodding from Davies. When Davies hired Andreasen in 2001 to oversee Los Lagos Golf Course and Rancho del Pueblo Golf Course and Driving Range in San Jose, he had to convince him to pursue the Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary designation at Los Lagos. Andreasen didn't like the formality of the process, and he figured he was an environmentally responsible superintendent anyway. But Andreasen eventually fulfilled Davies' request, and Los Lagos became a Fully Certified Cooperative Sanctuary in 2003.

"Part of our goal is to demonstrate that golf is not just for recreational value, but that it can exist in harmony with the environment and even enhance it," Andreasen says.

Earlier this year Andreasen was named the overall winner of the 2005 Golf Course Superintendents Association of America/Golf Digest Environmental Leaders in Golf Awards. It's one of the industry's top awards for environmental leadership.

The nature-loving Tim Powers, the certified superintendent at Crystal Springs Golf Course, is the perfect fit for his job. Powers, who joined Crystal Springs in 2001, beams when he talks about the wildlife he sees on the course, such as feeding fawns and soaring red-tailed hawks.

Because of the course's environmental sensitivity, the word is "spare" to describe fertilizer and pesticide use on the course. "We're not going to have perfect con-

ditions here like at other golf courses," Powers says, although he recently received a Turfgrass Excellence Award from the Northern California Golf Course Superintendents Association.

Adam Schauer, superintendent of CourseCo's Deep Cliff Golf Course in Cupertino, Calif., also strives to meet the company's environmental goals. Schauer says golf courses in general are over-maintaining turf. He's glad not to be doing that at Deep Cliff. "If we have some weeds or disease, I don't get too worried about them until they get to be problems," he says.

They say imitation is the greatest form of flattery. If that's the case, Davies should be content in the direction he's taking CourseCo. The USGA's Gross says he's noticed other management companies are taking CourseCo's lead, right down to aligning with Audubon International.

"[They realize] it not only makes good environmental practice, but it makes good business practice," Gross says.

Interestingly, Davies once worked for a private country club whose members didn't want him wasting time performing environmental duties on the golf course.

"They just wanted fast greens," Davies says. "If they thought I was spending time on the birds and the bees and the flowers, they wouldn't have appreciated it very much."

But Davies' peers appreciate his time spent tending to nature. He has proved that golf courses can be friends, not foes, to the environment, and his efforts have benefitted the entire industry.

And Davies loves to talk about it. Just ask him his opinion. ■



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