

Southern Man

In the heart of the Bible belt surrounded by encroaching suburban hustle, a historic golf club remains steeped in traditional charm. A sentry guards the handsomely landscaped entrance gate to Southern Hills Country Club, the first site to host a fourth PGA Championship.

But the historic club has its share of modernity as well. A \$25-million, facility-wide renovation features massive upgrades to the entire Tulsa, Okla., property, including new USGA-style greens and U3 bermudagrass in the fairways and rough.

Its golf course maintenance staff is fairly new, too. About 20 new faces joined the staff following the New Year to bolster the 31 existing crew members, almost all of whom began at the course prior to hosting the 2001 U.S. Open.

One of the freshest faces is Russ Myers, the new superintendent of the Perry Maxwell masterpiece. He's only had since last Labor Day to prepare for his first Major Tournament as superintendent, but he's no rookie to the demanding tournament tempo.

He's been around dozens of championships, including four Masters during his tenure at Augusta National, and he's volunteered at about 20 other championships throughout his career, including U.S. Opens, Walker Cups, U.S. Amateurs, U.S. Senior Opens, British Opens and a PGA Championship.

"He started out volunteering at Congressional (1997 U.S. Open) and then he turned into a tournament junkie," says Matt Shaffer, superintendent at Merion Golf Club in Ardmore, Pa. "Whenever any of us had an event, he was always there front and center."

Shaffer invited Myers to survey Merion prior to hosting the U.S. Amateur Championship in 2005. Myers, an 11-handicapper, hit wedges into various greens to give Shaffer the players' perspective. Shaffer says it's important to have people whose opinions you trust and respect out to view the course several weeks before the event while there's still time to make changes.

"We're all really incredibly busy with high-profile jobs ourselves, but Russ has given so unselfishly of himself to support us that we all feel as though we need to be there for him now that he's having his first Major," Shaffer says. "A couple of us are flying out prior to the event to spend time with him. We all owe him big."

But Myers never considered it a chore. He loves the pace involved with Major Tournament setup and agronomy.

"I immediately fell in love with the focus that goes into maintaining a golf course at a certain level of perfection," Myers says about his four years at Augusta National Golf Club, where he progressed from intern to assistant-in-training. "That's why I pur-

Continued on page 24

BY DAVID FRABOTTA, SENIOR EDITOR

'Tournament
junkie' Russ
Myers hosts
his first Major

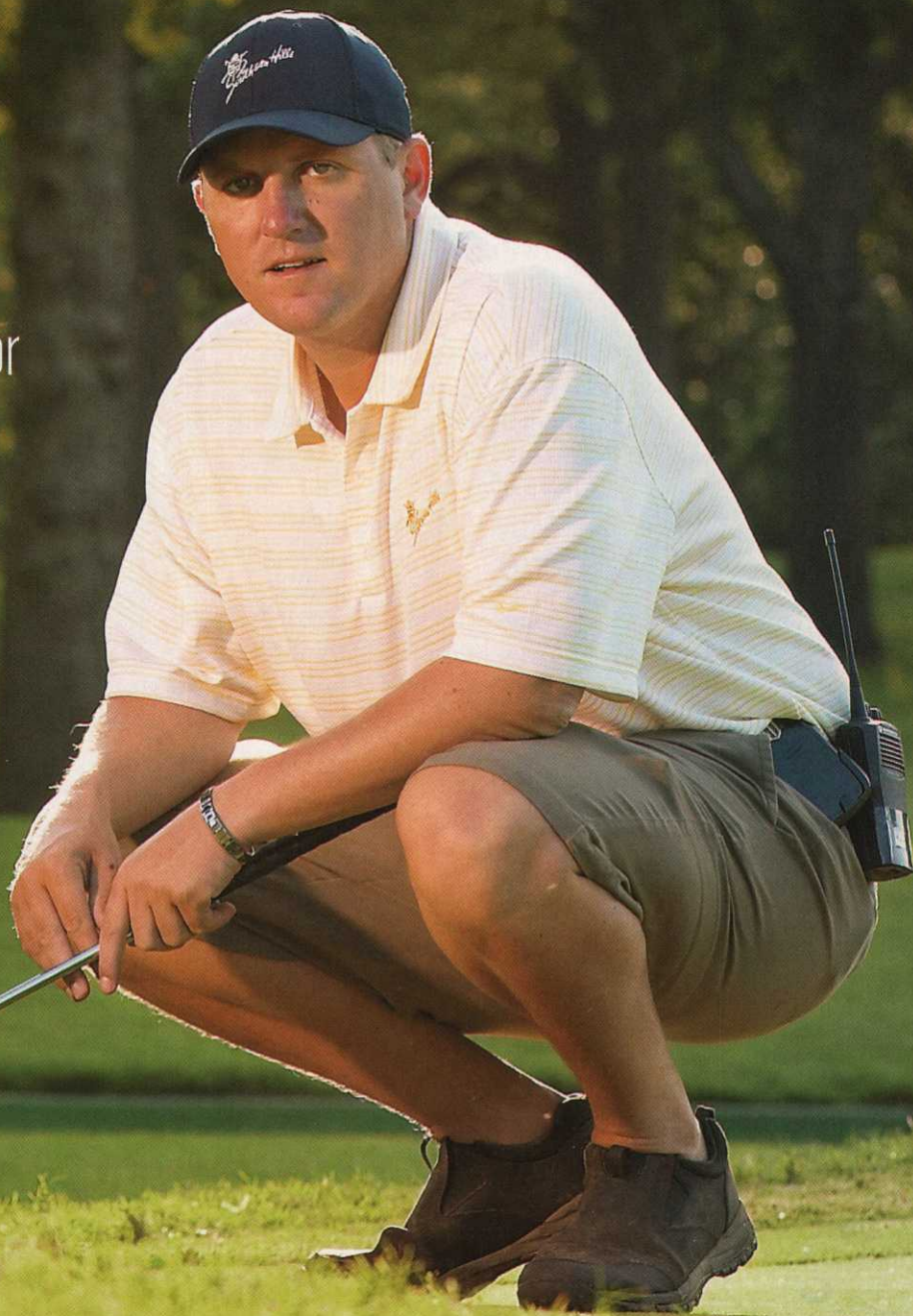
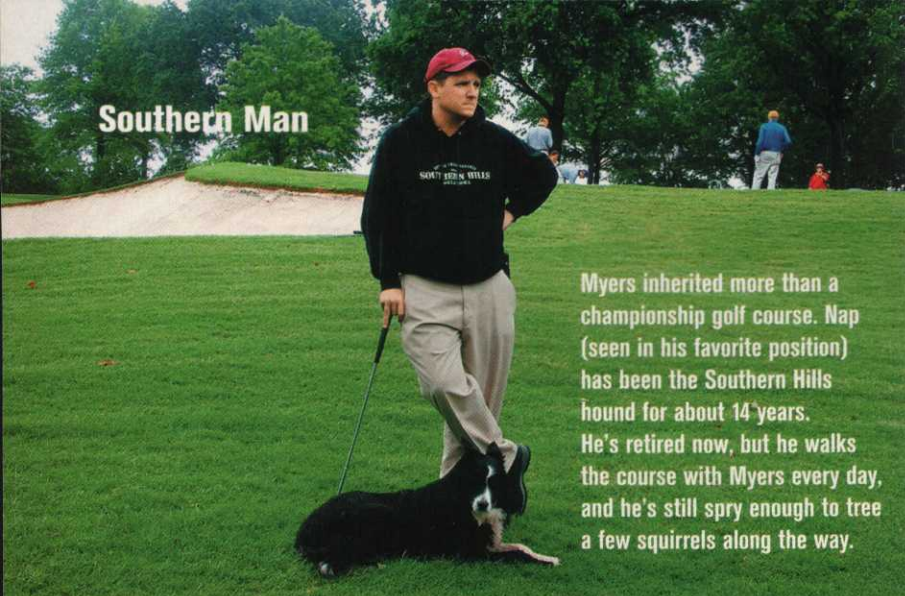


PHOTO BY: BILL WELCH

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Myers inherited more than a championship golf course. Nap (seen in his favorite position) has been the Southern Hills hound for about 14 years. He's retired now, but he walks the course with Myers every day, and he's still sly enough to tree a few squirrels along the way.

Continued from page 22

sued Southern Hills. I wanted to obtain the unique experience of being evaluated on the world stage. I always knew it was a good fit for me and what I really liked.”

His wish came true this month as the world tuned in to witness the last Major of the season. The 98th-annual PGA Championship boasts the strongest field in golf, including more top-100 golfers than any other event along with 20 PGA club professionals.

That's a lot of professional expertise scrutinizing Myers' work, not to mention the estimated 520 million viewers who tuned to 28 televised hours. But as he leaned back in his desk chair surrounded by stacks of paperwork and a buzzing radio in early June, the 34-year-old didn't appear the least bit anxious about the challenges ahead of him.

“There is just so much to accomplish that keeps you focused and motivated on what needs to get done that I don't think about the PGA all that much,” he says. “Every day I get up and have fun with it. And it's been seven of the most fun months that I've had on the job. Everything is fast-paced and exciting.”

It's a good thing Myers is having fun at Southern Hills because it's unlikely he's had time to do much else, including settle into his office. Just a few personal items adorn the stark, white walls. There's a staff photo from the Card Sound Golf Club in Key Largo, Fla., where he spent eight years as superintendent, and a couple photos of friends' children Scotch-taped to the wall behind his desk. A raffia-lace cowboy sun hat hangs on a hook above filing cabinets, and a 30-pound blackfin tuna — a memento from a sail-fishing trip with his brother off the Florida Keys — hangs

on the adjacent wall. The rest is all business.

The only other clue that someone has settled into this office (aside from the customary microscope and an array of now-dried turf samples) is a set of golf clubs. Although Myers doesn't get out as much as he'd like, he putts each of Southern Hills' greens every day in lieu of using a Stimpmeter.

“A lot of the decisions I make with the greens come from putting,” he says. “I know I don't like playing slow greens, so I need to go out and feel it for myself. It takes me about two hours to make my way around the course, but it gives me the opportunity to get the players' perspective.”

That players' perspective comes pretty easy for Myers, who golfed for his high school in Odessa, N.Y. He tried out for a college team, but “didn't like practicing as much as everyone else,” he says.

But he knew he loved the industry, so he started looking for ways to make a living in golf. He enrolled in turf school at the State University of New York at Cobleskill. But his interests began to meander in different directions.

It began when Cobleskill basketball coach Ken McCarthy was recruiting a high-schooler coached by Myers' father, Roger, who coached basketball, baseball and football. McCarthy needed players, and Roger told him about Russ, who was a pretty good player in high school.

“I had a beer in my hand at noon sitting on my couch when he [McCarthy] called and asked if I would play,” Myers remembers.

It was a good fit, and Russ took on a leadership role as a player until his eligibility expired. But being a team player wasn't out of his blood yet. He returned the next year as a coach while he finished up his turf degree. He enjoyed the work and started to give serious thought to following in his dad's footsteps.

He was at a crossroads. It was his fourth year of turf school and he was shopping for internships. But he loved coaching, so he applied to graduate school, vying to become a teacher and coach. But just to hedge his bets, he sent out four applications for intern positions at a couple rinky-dink clubs: Augusta National, Pine Valley Golf Club, Pebble Beach Golf Links and Oak Hill Country Club.

“I was looking for something unique,” he

Continued on page 26

Southern Hills Country Club

- 7,131 yards, par 70
- Designer: Perry Maxwell, 1936
- Renovations: Robert Trent Jones, 1957; Keith Foster, 1999, 2004
- Greens: A1/A4 bentgrass
- Tees, Fairways and Rough: U3 bermudagrass
- Hazards: 86 bunkers, running creeks and three ponds
- Members: 930 (about 500 to 550 golfers)
- Annual rounds: About 26,000
- Golf course budget: about \$1.8 million

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Future PGA Championships:

- 2008 Oakland Hills Country Club, Bloomfield, Mich.
- 2009 Hazeltine National Golf Club, Chaska, Minn.
- 2010 Sahalee Country Club, Redmond, Wash.
- 2011 The Atlanta Athletic Club, Duluth, Ga.
- 2012 The Ocean Course, Kiawah Island, S.C.

Continued from page 24

says. Then, McCarthy gave him a call while he was on his way to Pinehurst to play with some friends, and made him a formal offer to be his assistant basketball coach. It could have sealed the deal if none of his internships came calling. But one did: Augusta National wanted to give Myers a shot.

"It could have gone either way," he remembers. "But after talking with my father, I knew Augusta was an opportunity I didn't want to pass up."

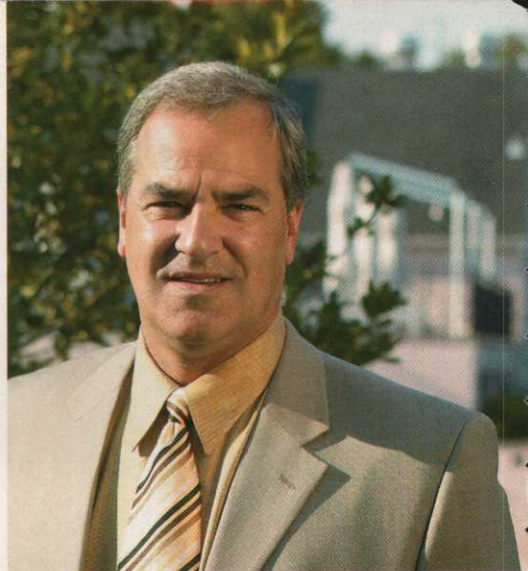
Southern Hills is glad he didn't. General Manager Nick Sidorakis says Myers is a great fit for the club because of his technical acuity, high energy and strong management skills.

"We went through a thorough search, and as it worked out, we got the right person for the job," Sidorakis says. "Russ has done a fabulous job,"

His professional expertise began at one of the hardest-working clubs in the country, and he absorbed all he could from the Augusta National crew, including Marsh Benson and Brad Owen, as well as former Augusta guys who noticed Myers when they made their way back for the Masters, including Paul R. Latshaw and Shaffer.

"There are no magic tools at Augusta," Myers says. "They are using the same mowers that everyone else uses, but they work very hard to make the course peak [for the Masters]."

Myers took that work ethic with him when Card Sound made him head honcho in 1998. He pointed his energy into making the golf



General manager Nick Sidorakis says Southern Hills is the best it has looked in his 12-year tenure.

course better. He toiled every day and sometimes well into the night, but there was only so much one man could do. That's when he understood the importance of being a strong leader.

"There was a time at Card Sound when I was mowing at five or six at night, and it occurred to me that I could mow all night and the club still wasn't going to get any better," he says. "You need to love working and love being there, but you won't be successful until you are able to survey the property, analyze how to get things done and set a plan into motion that has a chance at accomplishing your goals."

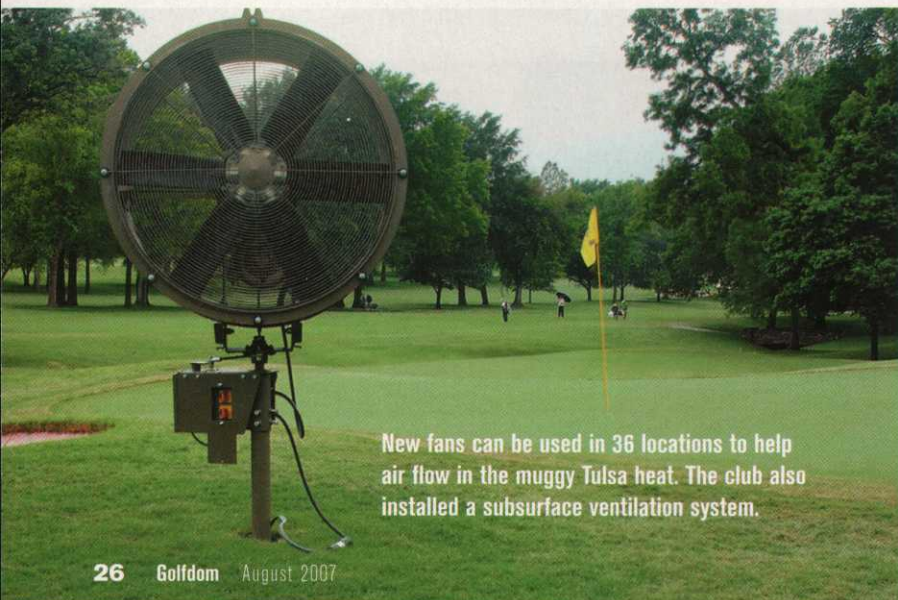
That's when Myers traded in his mower for his putter and started focusing on long-term planning instead of everyday minutia. He let his assistants make decisions on day-to-day operations, and he started focusing on the big picture.

That revelation helped his Southern Hills transition, too. Taking the helm less than one year away from a Major at a course conditioned at a championship caliber meant he could "sit back and let my managers continue doing the good jobs they were doing already," he says. "The course was probably ready to hold a championship the day I got here."

That's a compliment to his predecessor John Szklinski, who oversaw the golf course renovations in 1999 and 2004 (sidebar p. 28).

But Myers has already had a chance to put his stamp on the classic course. He's overseen the completion of various course upgrades, including the installation of a subsurface ventilation system and 36 fan locations, which involved four miles of conduit and about a dozen transformers. The club axed about 24 trees as well, including an elm that

Continued on page 28



New fans can be used in 36 locations to help air flow in the muggy Tulsa heat. The club also installed a subsurface ventilation system.

Makeover Augments Old-World Charm

When some of golf's greatest players battled Southern Hills Country Club during the 2001 U.S. Open, many were frustrated with what they called inconsistent green speeds on No. 9 and No. 18.

This year, Southern Hills features all new USGA-style greens, complements of architect Keith Foster. Greens were cored, extensively mapped and rebuilt to Perry Maxwell's original specifications in 2004.

And some slight alterations were made to the contours on No. 9 and No. 18. The "inconsistent speeds" on those greens were a result of settling. Maxwell needed to do a large-scale fill to offset the slope that leads to the clubhouse from the finishing holes on each nine. Over time, the slope percentages increased — albeit slightly — because of settling fill.

"We took the back of the green and lowered it slightly, and that enabled us to soften the percentages," Foster says about the ninth green. "So it still has the same characteristics with a slightly lessened slope percentage with just a couple inches here and there."

A similar process was done on the 18th green, where spectators and players will also notice new pin positions this year. The notorious undulations on 18 were so severe that just about 5 square feet of cupable area existed in the upper tier. With the softening of the slope percentages, Foster was able to craft a pinable position behind Jaws, the finishing hole's huge bunker that guards the front-left quadrant of the green.

"We ended up lowering that upper quadrant 3 to 4 inches, softening the percentages so we would gain a lot more cupping along the

upper transition," Foster says of the 18th green. "Then we put a cup behind Jaws, which is a great pin position."

It was Foster's second tour of duty at the Tulsa course. He regrassed the greens with A-1/A-4 bentgrass prior to the Open along with former superintendent John Szklinski.

This time around, Foster softened some of the bunker entrances, installed new bunker guards and drainage in all 86 bunkers, reconstructed the greens, regrassed the fairways and rough with U3 bermudagrass, lengthened No. 2, No. 3 and No. 8, and rebuilt the No. 7 green along with No. 9 and No. 18.

No. 7 was moved and rebuilt by Robert Trent Jones in 1956, and many felt it was a tad inconsistent with the other greens.

"It was one green (No. 7) that didn't really carry the Maxwell character. It was a little flatter and nondescript," notes Southern Hills general manager Nick Sidorakis. "Keith really mimicked No. 15 and No. 3 and gave it the Maxwell roll, and he also sized it down and repositioned the bunkers."

The rebuilt greens were imperative in the months leading up to the championship. An unusually wet May and June in Tulsa forced superintendent Russ Myers to mow fairways about weekly, and he had to buy 20 push mowers from Home Depot to mow the rough because it was too wet for equipment. Without the drainage of the USGA-style greens, disease pressure could have dampened the demeanor of the hard-working crew.

"The leaf blade has been wet since June 8," Myers said in early July. "There was one day where it dried off in the middle of the day, and then it rained again."

Continued from page 26

might have been the oldest in Oklahoma, Myers says. He also completed a transition to TifSport collars.

"It's in the best condition I've seen it in the almost 12 years I've been here," Sidorakis says. "That's a tribute to John Szklinski, and it's a tribute to Russ Myers. John helped develop it and put it in gear, and Russ has taken it and just tweaked it to make it better."

And while Myers might be held to task if something goes awry, he's quick to give the credit of the successes to the maintenance staff.

That relationship of trust and freedom to make decisions builds a respect and camaraderie that's clear to see when Myers talks with his crew. He's collaborative when discussing spray formulations, and

he's sympathetic to the drudgery that oftentimes occupies a laborer's days and weeks. And with his extended championship staff of 52 and about 100 volunteers trickling in for the big week, Myers says no one can oversee that many people to any great extent. They have to be trusted and empowered to make decisions. And they are.

"Russ delegates and leaves a lot of the daily decisions on the course to us after we talk about the possibilities," says Jeremy Dobson, who was promoted from spray technician to assistant superintendent after the 2001 Open. "With such a large staff and as many new people as we have, that's important because you want as many people to know everything that's going on in order to produce the best-possible course."

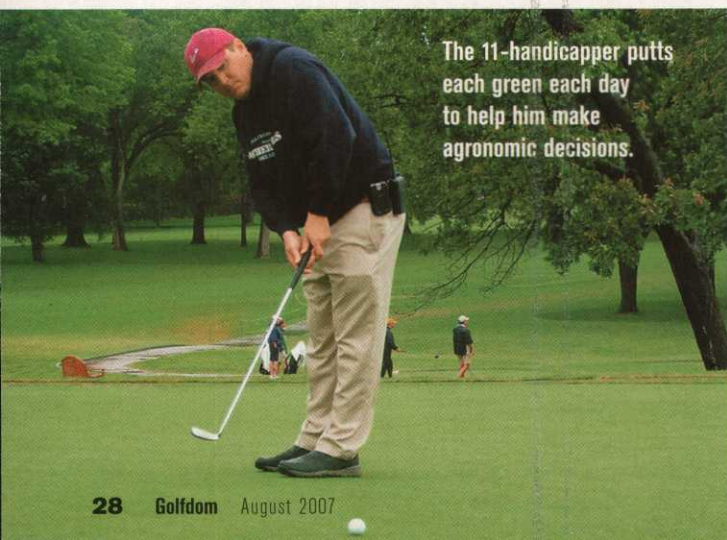
It's a course to be proud of, but it has its challenges. Hosting an August tournament on bentgrass greens in muggy, 100-degree heat will stress more than just the turf. But Myers is a realist.

"If you can't control it, then there's no sense fighting it. We just have to play the hand we're dealt."

His sage attitude appears almost nonchalant. But it's a guise, Sidorakis says.

"He comes off as laid back, but he's really not. He has a lot of energy and a lot of focus," Sidorakis says. "It's just a first impression because you seen him in his crocks and his shorts. Sometimes I tell him he's establishing a new dress trend here."

Still, that impression is something Myers doesn't apologize for. "That's just me. I'm a sweatshirt-wearing guy, and I might be young, but I'm still living a kid's life." ■



The 11-handicapper putts each green each day to help him make agronomic decisions.



Jaws guards the 18th green, which will feature new pin positions for the PGA.

And the course's brand-new subsurface ventilation system "is the only thing that keeps me sleeping at night," Myers says.

The other change to the championship setup involved eliminating the strip of rough between some bunkers and the fairway to bring more bunkers into play. It was the brainchild of PGA Tournament Director Kerry Haigh, who says having U3 bermudagrass in the fairways and rough gave the PGA a unique opportunity to change fairway contours, and change them back if need be.

"We liked the way it looked, felt and played, so we've been very pleased with it because it offers another challenge to what is already a wonderful golf course," Haigh says.

Foster and Szklinski (now at Charlotte Country Club) directed the overseeding of U3 in 2004, and Foster says he welcomes the diversity the setup offers.

"We all see how narrow the fairways get under USGA [setups], and then the bunker is removed from the hole sometimes because of fairway width," Foster says. "I think this is fantastic. The USGA setup Southern Hills really well for the Open, and now here is another option."

The club also bolstered the size of its practice tees and practice putting green. All of the improvements help offer a more con-

sistent venue for this year's pursuit of the Wanamaker Trophy.

The clubhouse and other facilities have been overhauled as well to the tune of almost \$22 million.

"We basically touched every part of the club facilities," Sidorakis says. "Everything is new except the original living room, and we are upgrading that with new furnishings."

The renovation included a new entranceway, which moved from the golf course side to the southwest side, and a new driveway to the banquet facilities. The facelift also included upgrades to the men's grill and locker room, upgrades to the ladies' locker room, new indoor tennis facilities, pool upgrades, new spa and a 7,700-square-foot fitness center, all while retaining the French Normandy theme of the club.

Perhaps more amazing than the scope of the project was the timeframe. The board approved the project in April 2004, and construction began in August, originally slated for several phases throughout 10 years. "But we felt like we would have lost some momentum if we would have waited until after the PGA, and costs would have doubled," Sidorakis says.

Subsequently, the eight-phase project was completed in just three years. It paid to be quick. With building materials such as copper and lumber on the pricing pendulum, the club burned through the 15-percent construction contingency in the first 10 months of renovation work.

"The beauty of it was that we never closed the club," Sidorakis says. "We never missed a lunch, and we never missed a dinner." ■

— David Frabotta, Senior Editor



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