

Fine *by* Nine

It's as good as any course in greater Boston, but it's practically invisible to golfers. Nestled into Westwood, a suburb where workers leave for and return from their jobs in the city, sits Norfolk Golf Club. The course subsists much the way it has since 1896 when a group of local businessmen built it, with spectacular conditions, quirky features and a non-formulaic approach to design. Its superintendent Jason Adams maintains greens that are as good as any of the more prominent courses in the greater-Boston area.

BY ANTHONY PIOPPA, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

But the club is hardly ever mentioned among a list of must-play courses and is relatively unknown even though it has had a number of prominent members, including Eddie Lowery, who as a 10-year-old carried the clubs of Francis Ouimet when he won the 1913 U.S. Open at The Country Club in Brookline. The club also enlisted Ted Bishop, who captured the U.S. Amateur in 1946, the first time the tournament was played after a four-year hiatus for World War II; and Wilfred Crossley, winner and medalist of the 1947 U.S. Public Links.

To Adams, the reason Norfolk exists in almost total obscurity is explained in a phrase he has heard over and over since coming to the club eight years ago.

"It's just nine holes."

The words are meant at once to demean and damn. They are a verbal dismissal, a blatant slight.

Adams, who was superintendent at an 18-hole course before coming to Norfolk and club champion at the nine-hole Petersham (Mass.) Country Club while growing up, chuckles when the sentence is repeated to him, as do Bruce Carlson, John Yakubisin, Alan Southward and Ed Bale, who, like Adams, are all keepers of nines.

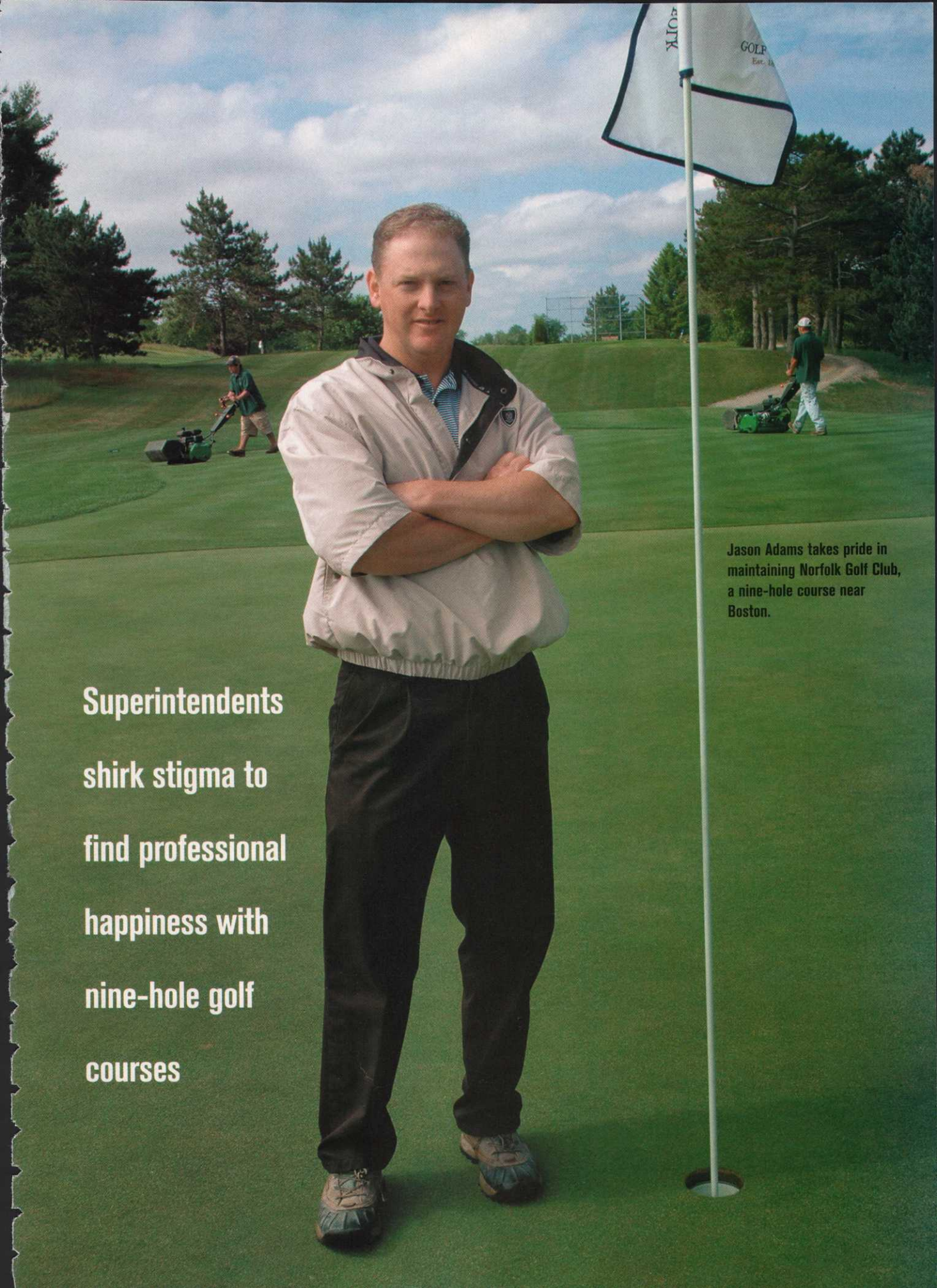
Many golfers and even some superintendents scoff at the suggestion that a nine-hole golf course is a complete golf course.

It seems no matter to them that nearly 4,600 regulation nine-hole golf courses exist in the United States and that nine states have more nines than 18s.

The stories from superintendents at nine-hole courses have a common thread from coast to coast. They easily can recall times when they were slighted for the number of holes they maintain.

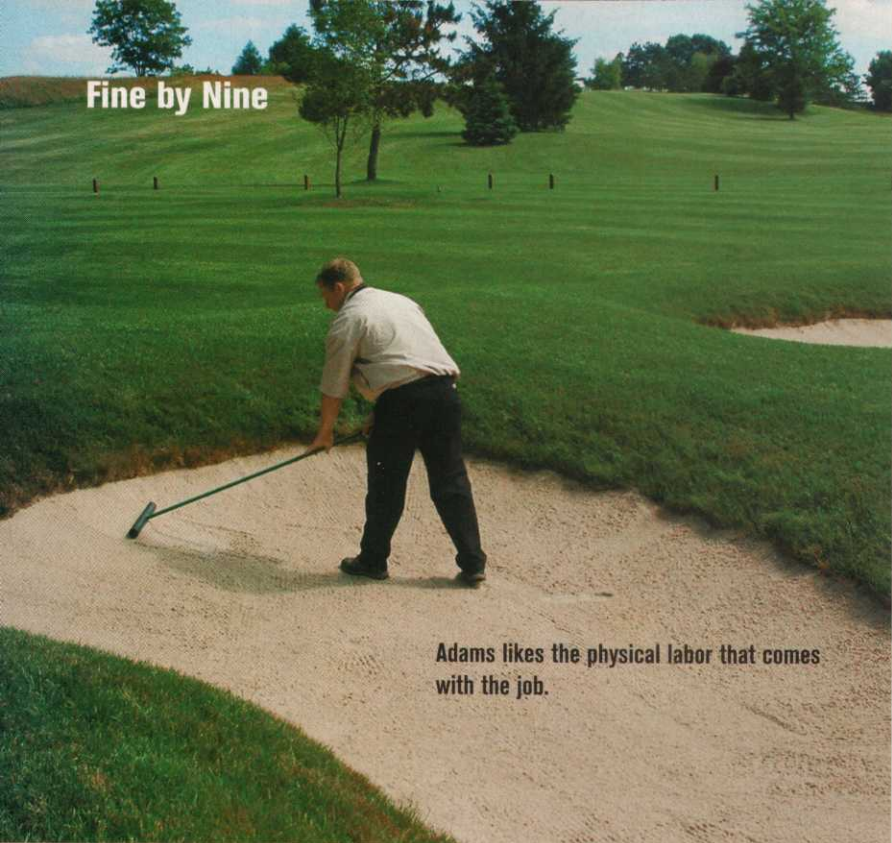
A superintendent who cared for one of the most prominent nine-hole courses in the country tells the story of a heated disagreement he had with a superintendent of a

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**Superintendents
shirk stigma to
find professional
happiness with
nine-hole golf
courses**

Jason Adams takes pride in maintaining Norfolk Golf Club, a nine-hole course near Boston.



Adams likes the physical labor that comes with the job.

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nearby 18-hole layout. The nine-hole superintendent, who wished to remain anonymous, said the argument culminated in a nasty letter he received from his 18-hole contemporary that contained a written backhand. "He told me I was just a nine-hole superintendent."

Adams has encountered that view among superintendents in the Northeast as well.

"The people that don't know me might say, 'Ah, he's at a nine-holer.' But guys that know me view me as I view them," he says.

Ed Bale knows the feeling that comes with maintaining nine holes. He has been superintendent at the Alister Mackenzie-designed Northwood Golf Course, 90 miles north of San Francisco in the Russian River Valley, for more than 20 years. Bale's father was one of a group of locals who purchased the course out of bankruptcy in the 1970s, saving the only Mackenzie nine-hole design from eradication.

They Wear Many Hats

Speaking of the golf course maintenance profession, Larry Aylward reports in his "Pin High" column on the myriad responsibilities that superintendents have gained beyond just turf maintenance. See page 8.

Bale says there is a small faction in the golf world that looks down at superintendents of nine-hole courses. For the most part, though, Bale says most superintendents respect what he does.

Bale also shows a bit of an inferiority complex inherent in many nine-hole superintendents. It is at the national conference and show, he says, when he is most susceptible.

"You feel less when guys ask how many holes you have," as if his answer of "nine" is somehow wrong.

In his younger days, Bale spent summers working on the Northwood grounds crew. Later, he was on the crew at the nearby 18-hole Santa Rosa Country Club for almost a year.

Bruce Carlson has a bit of a different opinion of how nine-hole superintendents are viewed, but then again he has a unique history. Along with his wife, Sue, he leases and runs the nine-hole Marion (Mass.) Golf Course, the first design of prominent architect George Thomas, who would go on to design Riviera Country Club (among others) and write the must-read book, "Golf Architecture in America." The Carlsons took over Marion in the early 1990s while Bruce was superintendent at the private 18-hole Foxboro (Mass.) Country Club. He would maintain his dual career until 2006, when he gave up the Foxboro position.

Carlson says he has never felt slighted by other superintendents, probably because he was maintaining 27 holes at a time, but said the prejudice articulated by many golfers toward nine-hole courses also affects their view of those who maintain them.

"They think differently about nine-hole superintendents," he says.

That view, says Alan Southward, can act as a black mark against superintendents of nine-holes that are looking to move to a course with more holes. Southward is in charge of the The Dunes Club, the nine holes Mike Keiser built before creating the world-class golf destination in Bandon, Ore. The Dunes Club is easily the best nine holes built during the modern era — after 1959 — designed by Keiser and the father-and-son architecture team of Dick and Tim Nugent.

Southward was originally in sales for

“ I have a better grasp of it all. It’s far easier to maintain nine holes, everything being equal. You don’t miss much on nine holes.”

— Bruce Carlson, superintendent and co-operator of Marion Golf Course.

Keiser’s greeting-card company. After returning to school to get his turf degree, he worked at Congressional Country Club, Inverness Club and then became an assistant at the 36-hole Harborside International, where he was in charge of his own 18 holes. He then returned to work for Keiser, this time as superintendent of The Dunes. If he was interviewing for a superintendent’s job at an 18-hole club, Southward says members would probably say to him, “Oh, you’re only at a nine-hole course.”

It’s not just superintendents at other courses who dismiss nine-hole superintendents as minor league. While it’s a secret that many of them don’t readily admit, many nine-hole superintendents say they didn’t consider nine holes as legitimate courses before going to work at them.

Yakubisin is forthright about his early days at the Rolling Rock Club in Greensburg, Pa. He says a major reason he took the job was the rumor that the club would add another nine holes, and he wanted to be able to list a grow-in on his resume. At that point in his life, Yakubisin’s intention was not be a nine-hole superintendent for the rest of his career.

“I had the nine-hole stigma in my own mind,” the certified superintendent says.

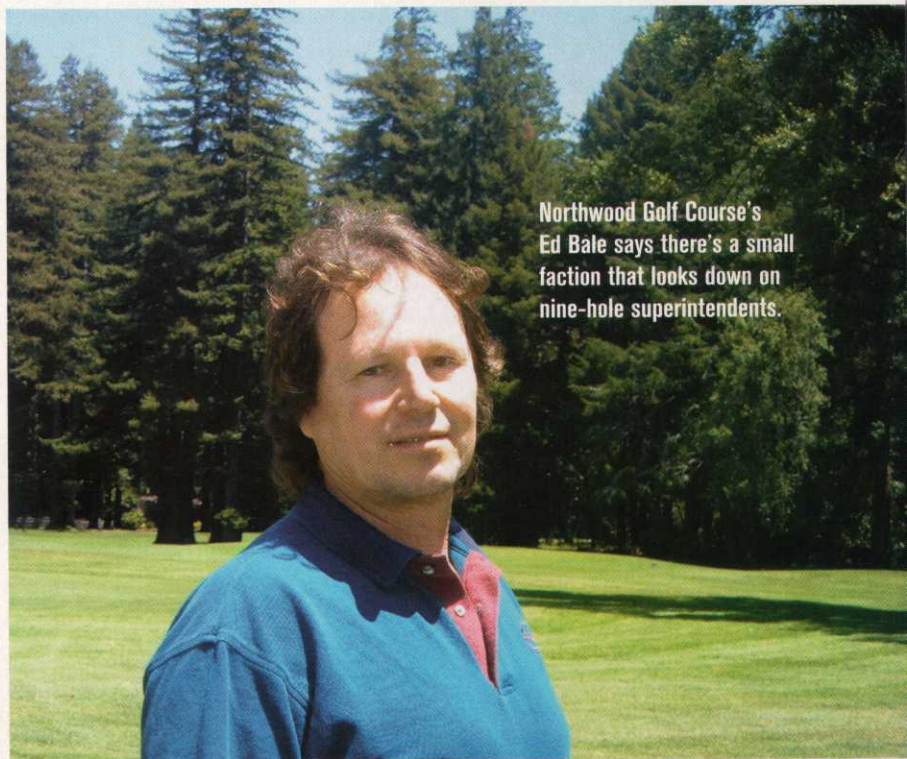
His thinking was that nine holes “could catapult me to a better position. And if (the grow in) didn’t work out, I’d move on and go back to 18,” he says.

Yakubisin was at Rolling Rock for more than five years before construction on the new nine holes finally began. But at that time Yakubisin made the decision that he was not going to leave the course anytime soon, even if it wasn’t expanded to 18 holes.

It’s ironic that anyone even remotely familiar with golf would hold nine-hole courses and their superintendents in a low light considering the history of the game and the realities of the job.

Many of the early golf courses in the United States began as nine-hole layouts. Newport hosted the first U.S. Amateur and U.S. Open held within weeks of each other in the fall of 1895 as a nine-hole course. Myopia Hunt Club, considered the first world-class layout built in the United States, was the site of a U.S. Open as a nine-hole course. Shinnecock Golf Club began with nine holes, too. And for nearly a decade, the Seth Raynor/Charles Blair

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Northwood Golf Course’s Ed Bale says there’s a small faction that looks down on nine-hole superintendents.

Fine by Nine



Alan Southward is superintendent of The Dunes Club, the best nine holes built during the modern era.

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Macdonald-designed Ocean Links Golf Course hosted an invitation-only amateur event that featured some of the best players in the world.

In reality, almost every celebrated Golden Era architect designed nine-hole courses, including Donald Ross, A.W. Tillinghast, Perry Maxwell, Stanley Thompson and the team of William Langford and Theodore Moreau.

At first glance, it might appear that superintendents of nine-hole courses have less work to do. But the fact is they are often more well rounded and more hands-on than many of their counterparts at 18-hole courses.

Carlson gives his perspective.

"The biggest difference is I don't do any of the work with 18 holes; I just direct," he says.

At Foxboro, Carlson's crew consisted of four people year-round and an additional 20 during the peak season. At Marion he has one year-round employee and five seasonal workers. And he does a lot of the work, from mowing to repairing.

At Norfolk, Adams has three year-round workers, including himself.

"We're forced to wear many hats," he says.

Adams says his assistants receive intensive on-the-job training in many areas. They turn wrenches, grind reels and repair electrical systems.

Bruce and Susan Carlson are proprietors of Marion Golf Course, where they "wear many hats."

With Norfolk's seasonal crew at 10 and each member working between 30 to 35 hours a week, Adams can have them hand mow approaches and hand rake bunkers every day. A few years ago, he and his crew rebuilt all 24 bunkers in house, converting bland sand bowls into appealing hazards.

At The Dunes Club, Southward can be found changing cups and spraying, jobs that many 18-hole superintendents don't do or don't care to perform.

At Northwood, which is open year-round, hands-on for Bale involves scaling the massive Redwoods and Douglas firs from which the course is carved to perform limbing of epic proportions. He also fixes equipment and restores bunkers. He recently finished a 12-year drainage project.

Bale had no formal education in turf when he became the Northwood superintendent, but over the years he has read voraciously and taken enough classes through the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America to become a certified superintendent.

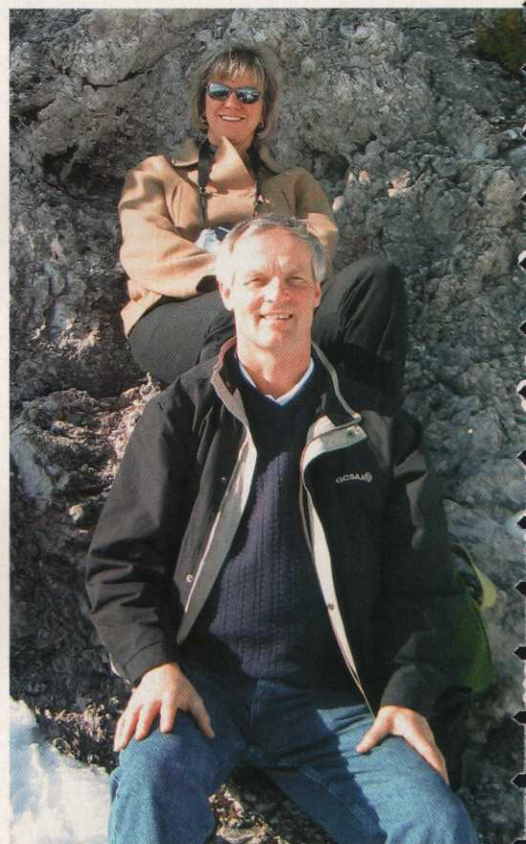


PHOTO COURTESY: ALAN SOUTHWARD (TOP); BRUCE CARLSON

“It was the school of hard knocks, and I have a degree in grease, dirt and dead grass.”

— Ed Bale, certified superintendent of Northwood Golf Course, on his education process.

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“It was the school of hard knocks, and I have a degree in grease, dirt and dead grass,” Bale says.

Nine-hole superintendents also say they are more in tune with what’s going on throughout their entire courses.

“I have a better grasp of it all,” Carlson says. “It’s far easier to maintain nine holes, everything being equal. You don’t miss much on nine holes.”

For instance, he says at the 18 holes of Foxboro where every hole is tree-lined, “you could work for a month and not see the whole golf course.”

Yakubisin had nearly 10 years of being a

nine-hole man at Rolling Rock before the club added nine more holes under the guidance of architect Brian Silva.

“I was into being out there and doing some of the physical labor,” Yakubisin says of his early years. “Now it’s more administrative.”

The fact that superintendents at nine-hole layouts are not spending the majority of their days filling out paperwork and attending meetings — but rather working on their courses — is one of the biggest attractions of the job and a reason many stayed and found that happiness can come on nine holes.

Before tending to Northwood, Bale spent years trying to make it on the San Francisco music scene, reaching regional fame as the drummer of the band Freestone. He went back to Northwood to help out his father, learning the superintendent business along the way. Although he still plays in two local bands, Bale has settled comfortably into his job there.

“I realized as things went on that this is the place to be,” he says.

For Carlson, his love for Marion grew as he uncovered the deep history of the course.

“It holds a real special place for me,” he says. “I don’t ever want to leave it.”

Golfdom Contributing Editor Anthony Pioppi is the author of the book “To the Nines,” a celebration of notable and memorable nine-hole golf courses throughout the United States.

We Want to Hear From You

Are you fine by nine holes? If you’re a superintendent of a nine-hole golf course, we want to hear from you about your experience. Do you feel looked down upon because you only have nine holes? Are you happy tending to only nine holes? Send e-mail messages to dfrabotta@questex.com

“I had the nine-hole stigma in my own mind,” John Yakubisin of the Rolling Rock Club admits.

