

Calm, Co

Superintendent
John Zimmers Jr.
oversees demanding
Oakmont CC with
a level head



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BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

They are a fussy bunch, the members of Oakmont Country Club. They expect nothing but premium playing conditions on their exalted 104-year-old golf course, the site of this month's U.S. Open. And even though the golf

course maintenance staff provides an outstanding setting, the members still find things to fret about.

John Zimmers Jr., Oakmont's grounds superintendent, takes the members' criticism in stride. In fact, he welcomes their myriad opinions about the golf course he oversees.

The thick-skinned Zimmers, who's in his eighth season at the Pittsburgh club, realizes that dealing with the club's 400 members — considered the most demanding fraternity in golf — is an essential part of his job.

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Which brings us to the U.S. Open, whose preparations have also been a vital part of Zimmers' job the past five years. Now, if you're the superintendent of a U.S. Open host course, you're probably under more pressure during championship week than Jack Bauer during an episode of "24." Such tension comes with the territory of staging one of golf's greatest spectacles. Not only are the world's greatest players playing your course, the most hypercritical golf "experts" are scrutinizing its every grass blade.

But Zimmers might be an exception to the U.S. Open pressure cooker. That's not to say the 36-year-old isn't feeling the searing heat to stage a magnificent championship. It's just to say he's accustomed to facing the same loud music from his club's members — every day. So you won't see Zimmers pulling his closely cropped hair out if the world's greatest golfers complain that Oakmont's rough is too tough.

In fact, as absurd as it may sound, the U.S. Open may provide respite for Zimmers from his normal workweek.

"This is a really bizarre thing to tell you, but I actually think there's a little less demand associated with the championship

when I think of what the membership strives to do here every day," Zimmers says.

What exactly do the members strive to do at Oakmont? In short, they want Zimmers to make the course as grueling to play as possible. They want their course to be the ultimate test of golf. If someone shoots par, someone else says, "We can't have that here."

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Of course, the demand for difficult conditions can have Zimmers and his crew walking a tightrope when it comes to the turf's health. Take the greens, for instance, which the members want running at 13 feet on the Stimpmeter. And they want Zimmers and his crew to triple-cut the *Poa annua*-bentgrass greens almost daily and roll them several times a week to achieve their breakneck speed. And, yes, they expect Zimmers and his crew to keep the greens alive despite subjecting them to such stress.

"The members just embrace fast greens," Zimmers explains. "We're more on the extreme of speed versus any club out there."

The greens are so fast that the United States Golf Association plans to slow them down for the U.S. Open. (Is that a surprise?) So you can see why Zimmers might feel less anxiety during U.S. Open week.

But make no mistake: The U.S. Open won't provide a quick getaway to Margaritaville for Zimmers and his crew, who have been preparing fervently for the week of June 11 through June 17 for several years. They plan to make the club's members, the USGA and themselves proud.

"When you prepare a golf course at this level every day, you want to show it off to the world," Zimmers says.

One doesn't become the golf course superintendent at a place like Oakmont without having a passion for work. So it's no surprise that Zimmers comes from a family of hard workers. He grew up in Sinking Valley, Pa., a small town between State College and Altoona in the state's central region. Zimmers says his grandfather, also named John, was his biggest influence in regard to his work ethic.

"He was the hardest-working guy I've

Their time is up.
Starts working in hours — even minutes.



ever met," Zimmers says of his grandfather, who worked for 43 years at a paper mill.

Zimmers' grandfather died last year. His framed black-and-white photograph sits on Zimmers' desk. It serves as a reminder to Zimmers that hard work can get you everywhere in life.

Zimmers' foray into the golf industry came after he answered a help-wanted ad in *The Altoona Mirror* when he was 18. Paul R. Latshaw, the then-superintendent of Wilmington Country Club in Delaware, placed the ad.

Zimmers rarely read the newspaper then, but he did on this day and saw the ad. Zimmers had recently graduated from high school and was working for a local landscaper. He figured he had nothing to lose by phoning Latshaw to find out more about the job.

Zimmers liked what he heard and took the job on Latshaw's crew. He worked for Latshaw, hailed as one of the top superintendents ever, for four years at Wilmington. Zimmers also decided to attend Rutgers University to study turf-grass management while he worked at Wilmington. He received a two-year turf-grass certificate in 1993. Later that year, he followed Latshaw to Congressional



Zimmers' family – including wife Tracey and dog Diamond – mean the world to him.

Country Club in Bethesda, Md., where he became Latshaw's first assistant. Zimmers stayed there for two years before taking the superintendent's position at Sand Ridge Golf Club, a new Tom Fazio design in Chardon, Ohio.

Zimmers says Latshaw taught him most everything he knows about the business. Zimmers says he's also grateful to Bill Conway, owner of Sand Ridge, for giving him his first job as a superintendent when he was only 25 and involving him in the construction and grow-in of one of the top clubs in northeast Ohio.

"I was really fortunate," Zimmers says. "I was able to do things there that I didn't get to do at other places."

But it's not just good fortune that has propelled Zimmers' career. Dedication to improving his craft has much to do with it.

"If you want to be better than anybody else, you have to be willing to put in the time," Zimmers says.

The amount of work he puts in is "mind-boggling," says his wife, Tracey, who is the office manager at Oakmont's maintenance complex. Zimmers is at work by 4:30 a.m. daily to begin his crew on their assignments. He also works weekends. Near-100-hour weeks are the norm.

Sometimes it might seem like John is married to the golf course and not her, says Tracey, his high-school sweetheart

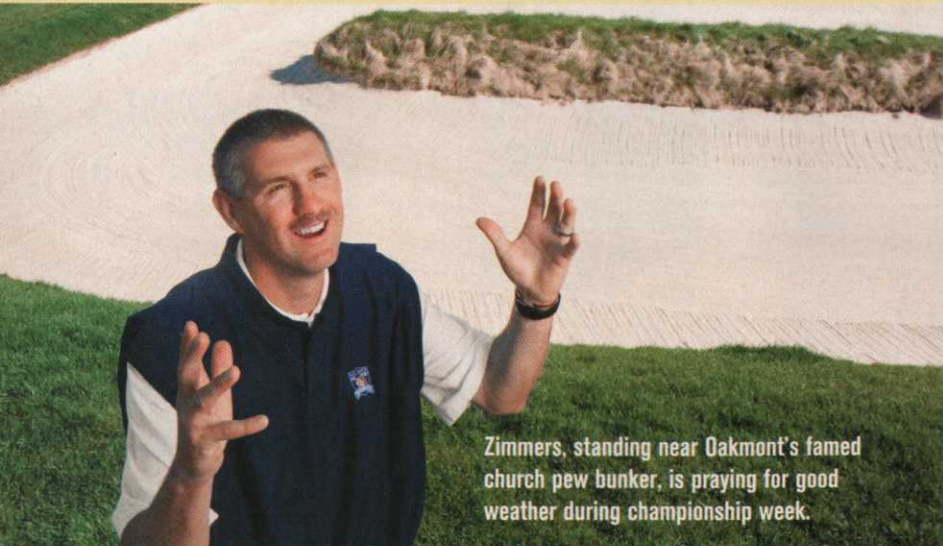
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PHOTO BY: LARRY RIPPEL

**They can crawl,
but they can't hide.**

No buffer zones to worry about.





Zimmers, standing near Oakmont's famed church pew bunker, is praying for good weather during championship week.

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and wife of 17 years. But she understands the commitment John had to make when he became superintendent of Oakmont. The couple has no children.

"It's a way of life for him," she says.

But while his work consumes him, John has realized the importance of family, Tracey says. He is there when family members need him. He doesn't use work as an excuse to miss important family functions.

"Do you live to work or work to live?" Tracey asks. "Sometimes you have to find a balance, and John has. I'm proud of him for that."

With nearly eight years in at one of America's premier golf clubs at such a young age, some people wonder if Zimmers will ditch his pressure-packed job and move on after the U.S. Open.

But Zimmers says he's not going anywhere. Oakmont is the place for him, right now. Besides, the prestige of another Major tournament — the 2010 Women's U.S. Open — is on the horizon.

"It fits my niche of where I'm at in my life right now," he says.

But Zimmers, like any career-minded individual, thinks about his future and is keeping his options open. What

superintendent with a similar resume wouldn't?

But Oakmont's members won't prompt his departure. They have grown to appreciate the superintendent they have in Zimmers, says Tom Wallace, Oakmont's general manager.

"They recognize that he is one of the finest superintendents in the world," Wallace says.

Wallace enjoys telling Zimmers-at-work stories, which illustrate why Zimmers is so well regarded by the members. One summer day a few years ago, Wallace watched from his office window as Zimmers cut a small hole with his pocketknife in the turf on the ninth green. Zimmers then peeled back the cut turf, lowered his face to the exposed area and began to sniff it.

"I thought he was losing his mind," Wallace says.

Wallace left his office and walked down to the green to find out exactly what Zimmers was doing. When he asked him, Wallace got a quick lesson in agronomics.

The weather that summer had been extraordinarily hot and rainy. Zimmers explained to Wallace that rainwater, which

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**They've never
seen anything like it.**

New mode of action catches them off guard.





Construction equipment was a common sight on the course during the renovation.

Oakmont Regains Its Grueling Image

BY LARRY AYLWARD

In preparing for this month's U.S. Open, John Zimmers Jr. helped oversee Oakmont Country Club's massive golf course restoration, which began before Zimmers arrived at the Pittsburgh-area course in 1999 and ended in late 2005.

Thanks to the restoration, which included the removal of more than 5,000 trees, Oakmont has regained its take-no-prisoners image. Of course, that's the image the late Henry C. Fownes sought when he designed his only golf course in 1903.

"He set out to make the hardest golf course in America, and I think he achieved what he wanted to do," Zimmers says.

Oakmont hired Fazio Golf Course Designers to engineer the restoration and builder McDonald & Sons to do the physical work. Zimmers and his staff assisted throughout.

The ambitious \$2.5-million restoration, aided largely by the use of old photographs of Oakmont in its heyday, touched about every part of the course and included a new irrigation system.

"They wanted to put the course back to the original design that Mr. Fownes had," Zimmers says of Oakmont's 400 members. "They have the utmost respect for Mr. Fownes."

There were few, if any, trees on the

course when Fownes designed it, but they accumulated over the next 90 years. Most of the trees were planted in the 1960s as part of a beautification program. But the course became so overgrown with trees that playability suffered and turf weakened because of poor air movement and shade.

Oakmont's grounds committee decided it was time to bring down the trees. Oakmont was designed as a links-style course, not a parkland course, they reasoned. Not surprisingly, the board's decision sparked controversy.

The tree-removal program began in 1995 under the direction of Mark Kuhns, who spent nine years at Oakmont and is now director of grounds at Baltusrol Golf Club. Zimmers inherited the project upon his arrival in 1999. Most of the work was done in-house and in the winter so tree-sentimental members wouldn't witness the severed lumber toppling to the ground.

Zimmers has fielded question after question from media members about the trees, especially in light of the U.S. Open. People, whether from the golf media or not, want to know why so many trees had to be cut down. It was part of the restoration, Zimmers tells them. And because there are fewer trees, "the turf is healthier and therefore we use less pesticides and fertilizer," he also says.

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had become trapped in the turf because it has nowhere to drain, was literally heating up and cooking the roots of the greens. Zimmers told Wallace he could smell dead roots, and that he would have to aerify the greens to rectify the problem.

"He knew it was the middle of the summer and that aerifying at that time would be controversial," Wallace says. "But he did it, and he saved the greens."

Under Zimmers' tenure, Oakmont has soared to another level, Wallace says.

"He has taken a very beautiful diamond and polished it even more," Wallace adds. "That's more difficult than taking a lump of coal and turning it into a diamond."

Zimmers believes he has earned the trust of Oakmont's members because he is honest and forthright with them.

"At no point has the support for John been any stronger than it is right now," Wallace says.

Zimmers doesn't duck the inquisitive members, either. He has learned that if you give those people face time, they are satisfied, even if they didn't get the answers they sought.

Zimmers also explains to members the nuances of certain agronomic procedures in terms they can understand.

"You know he knows more about grass than you ever will," Wallace says. "But he has a way that involves you. So the members don't walk away with their heads spinning."

Tim Moraghan, the United States Golf Association's director of championship agronomy, has known Zimmers since his days at Congressional. Moraghan has watched Zimmers grow into a superintendent who can handle the pressures that come with being superintendent at a top club. Zimmers doesn't get too high or too low, which is the best way to operate at a place like Oakmont.

"It is one of the all-time great courses in this country," Moraghan says. "And John survives it all very well."

Wallace is impressed that Zimmers sur-

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Tim Moraghan, the United States Golf Association's director of championship agronomy, describes the finished tree-removal program as "mind blowing."

"If you had seen the course before 1995 and seen it today, your jaw would hit the ground," Moraghan says.

Oakmont's turf will benefit from the tree removal, says Moraghan, who supported the endeavor.

"Are we there to play golf on quality turf-grass, or are we there to take a walk in the park and look at the birds in the trees?" Moraghan asked. "It's hard to convince people in the environmental community that taking down trees is beneficial. But were not taking down trees in a national park. Were taking down trees on a golf course."

Fazio's Tom Marzolf was the architectural anchorman for the restoration. Marzolf's first order of business upon arriving in 1999 was lengthening Oakmont from the tees. More than 200 yards was added to the course, which now plays about 7,255 yards. A new par-3 tee on No. 8 will make the hole 290 yards for the U.S. Open.

Oakmont's existing bunkers were also restored, and 10 bunkers were rebuilt. Fownes designed Oakmont with 300 bunkers, but many were removed to cut back on overall maintenance. There are about 200 bunkers on the course now.

The project included the refurbishing of the church pews bunker, one of the most famous bunkers in golf. Over the years, the church pews bunker floor had accumulated so much sand that it had become raised. The floor was lowered and the bunker's bottom was rebuilt. Two additional pews were also added to each end of the bunker.

Oakmont's other hazards — its ditches — also were repaired. Oakmont has no water hazards, but the ditches act as functional hazards and provide good drainage on the course.

Oakmont's push-up greens, which hadn't been disturbed in 102 years, also needed renewal. They were restored to their original size. Oakmont also installed the XGD, or Existing Greens Drainage, on all of its greens. Developed by T.D.I. International, XGD is a subsurface drainage system that removes surface water more rapidly and lowers the water table in the green, thereby improving turf drainage.

Zimmers has worked closely with Moraghan on course setup for the U.S. Open. "Hard and fair" is how Zimmers describes how the course will play.

Oakmont is known for its fast greens, which members prefer to run at 13 feet consistently on the Stimpmeter. The USGA plans to slow them down for the U.S. Open.

Oakmont's members, who love a tough test of golf, will take pride in that, Moraghan says. "They'll be boasting, 'We have to slow down the greens for [the pros]!'" Moraghan says.

Oakmont's members like to brag about their course. They have plenty to talk about considering that this year's U.S. Open marks the club's eighth national championship, more than any other establishment.

Usually, a course closes a few weeks before U.S. Open week so divots and ball marks can heal, and loose ends can be tied up. Oakmont's members are not giving up their course to the championship until a day before the first practice round.

"That tells you how passionate they are about their golf," Zimmers says. ■

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rounds himself with employees who are just as apt as he is when it comes to agronomics. Other superintendents might feel threatened by such employees.

Zimmers is the boss, but he doesn't bark instructions like a Paris Island drill sergeant. He's more like a coach with his crew, taking time to explain the details of a chore. Zimmers doesn't run the show from his comfortable office. He's on the golf course as much as he can be. He's not afraid to grab a shovel or a broom and get down and dirty with the others.

Zimmers' affinity to attract top talent for his staff is evident by the number of assistants he has lost during his tenure. Five of them have moved on to superintendent jobs at prestigious clubs, including Jason Hurwitz, who left Oakmont late last year to become superintendent of nearby Fox Chapel Golf Club.

"He is my only mentor," says Hurwitz, who worked under Zimmers for three years at Sand Ridge and for seven years at Oakmont. "I have always admired how focused and motivated he is."

It's too early in Zimmers' career to begin talk of how he will be remembered in the golf course maintenance profession. But some people are already talking about his legacy.

"John is a credit to his profession," Moraghan says. "He makes those around him better."

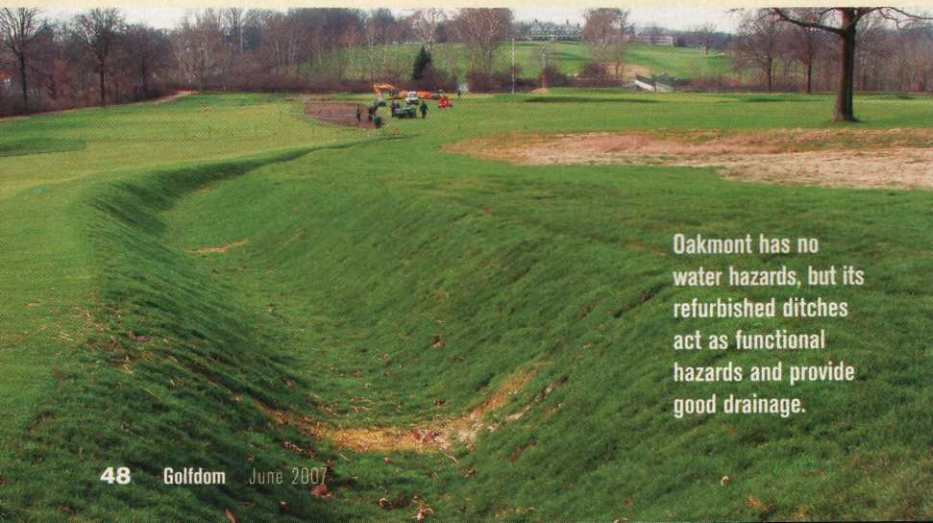
Oakmont member Bob Wagner, the club's former grounds chairman and president, calls Zimmers the nation's top superintendent.

When asked how he would like to be remembered, Zimmers talks more about being a team player than a team's star player.

"Somebody ... that if you were putting your team together, I hope I would get your call," he answers quietly.

Oakmont's members are glad they called on Zimmers to be the club's superintendent. Zimmers has lived up to their demanding expectations.

And *that* is something he'll be remembered for. ■



Oakmont has no water hazards, but its refurbished ditches act as functional hazards and provide good drainage.