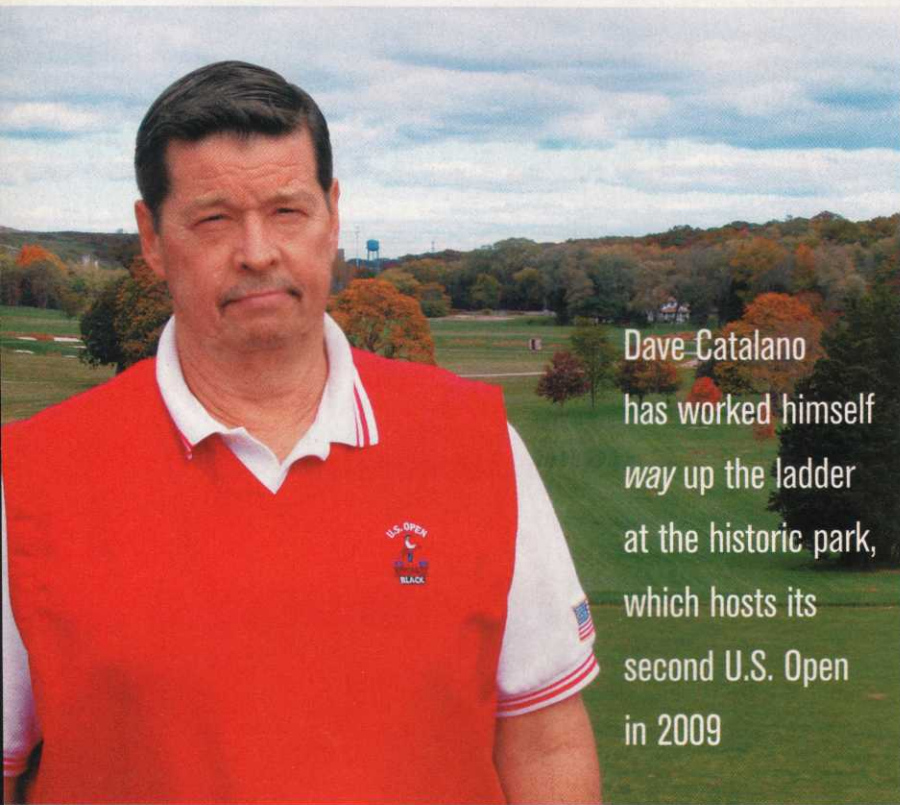


Born for Bethpage



Dave Catalano has worked himself way up the ladder at the historic park, which hosts its second U.S. Open in 2009

BY LARRY AYLWARD

Above Dave Catalano's office door is a sign that reads, "Golf Stories Told Here." It's an appropriate statement, considering Catalano's rags-to-riches story about his career at Bethpage State Park.

As the story goes, Catalano worked his way up from scrubbing toilets in the park's picnic-area restrooms to overseeing the staging of the U.S. Open on Bethpage's Black Course.

Talk about a rise to the top.

Catalano, the director of Bethpage State Park, worked hard to get where he is and says he caught a few breaks along the way to help him progress in his career. The 59-year-old is grateful to begin his 40th year working for the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation this summer.

"My career has been a blessing," he says.

Catalano has spent almost 20 of those years at Bethpage, best known for its five golf courses,

including the Black Course, which hosted the U.S. Open in 2002 and will host it again in 2009. Bethpage also offers picnic facilities, playing fields and other recreational endeavors.

Catalano's office is on the second floor of the golf complex's clubhouse, which sits amid the five courses, all named after colors — Red, Yellow, Blue and Green in addition to Black. His office is adorned with several photos and illustrations of the park's courses.

Bethpage is divided into two divisions, operations and maintenance, both of which Catalano oversees in addition to the pro shop and catering license operation. Bethpage employs six golf course supervisors, including Craig Currier, superintendent of the famed Black Course, who reports to Catalano.

Catalano grew up in the Bethpage area. His father and uncle worked at Bethpage. His great uncle helped build the complex in the 1930s. "I have a family history of working in the park," Catalano says.

He began working for Bethpage in the summer of 1967 when he returned home from his first year of college. Catalano worked for the park's west-side picnic area and cleaned toilets and picked up trash, among other duties. He was 19 and earned \$1.19 an hour.

"But that was good by me," he says of the pay.

The next summer Catalano began working for the Blue course's maintenance staff. He moved over to the Yellow course for the summer of '69.

Catalano decided to forgo the rest of college to work full time at the Yellow course in 1970. In 1976, he was named superintendent of Bethpage's Green course. He left the Green course in 1978 to become superintendent of New York's Caleb Smith State Park Preserve in Smithtown, N.Y., about 20 minutes from Bethpage.

Catalano left Caleb Smith in 1981 to be superintendent of Sunken Meadow State Park. He

was promoted to the state parks' regional headquarters in 1982. He stayed there 13 years and was promoted to director of operations.

"Then I had the opportunity to come back to Bethpage in '95, and I've been here since," Catalano says.

Catalano says he always fancied working outside, so he pursued a career in parks and recreation. He took civil service exams to gain promotions at the state level. But hard work also helped him climb the career ladder.

"He's one of the smartest guys I've ever met," Currier says. "He's the heartbeat of the park."

It's no surprise that Catalano lives in a house on the 14th hole of the Black course. He says his job consumes much of his time.

"This is not a five-days-a-week-and-40-hour-a-week job," he says. "You can't possibly consider working in that type of fashion and hope to be even remotely successful to deal with any of the problems you need to deal with that come up on a daily basis. So the job becomes a way of life."

Catalano patrols the park in his utility vehicle during the evening. He also fields work-related phone calls at night. Others might balk at having to work during their off hours. Not Catalano.

"I guess I've convinced myself that I was born for this place," he says.

Catalano likes conferring with the courses' agronomic experts, including Currier, who Catalano says is one of his best hires.

"He's as committed and dedicated as anybody I've ever known," Catalano says. "There's nobody I know who works harder, and there's nobody I know cares more about this park."

Earlier in his career, Catalano learned about turf maintenance mostly through "the experience of others."

"I have a broad general background on turfgrass, but I don't involve myself in the daily decisions on spraying and fertilizing," he says.

Catalano says he prefers to function as the park's resource person. "It's my job to provide my staff with the resources they need to accomplish their jobs," he says.

Currier says Catalano is the most "resourceful" person he has ever met. "He gets me everything I need to do my job — personnel, money, equipment, you name it," Currier says.

Currier says Catalano has an uncanny ability to cut through the red tape, which is a little thicker at a state-run operation than it would be at a private one.

Final decisions often rest with Catalano, but he prefers to get others involved in the decision-making process. "I spend a lot of time discussing things with my staff," he says. "I try to make decisions on a consensus basis. I don't go out there and tell people what to do."

Catalano marvels at what Bethpage has become. The place is always packed with golfers. Tee times have been sold out since 1958.

"There is a fluctuation in rounds, but that fluctuation is either driven by weather or operational schedules," Catalano says.

Catalano is thrilled that golfers from all walks of life can come to Bethpage and play the A.W. Tillinghast-designed Black course for a mere \$50 during the week and \$60 on weekends if they are state residents. Green fees at the other courses are even more affordable.

"It's the best bargain in the game of golf," Catalano says. "There's a lot of satisfaction in watching people come to this place, enjoy this place and recreate in this place."

When the Black Course hosted the U.S. Open in 2002, it was the first time a public course of its stature had hosted the tournament. Bethpage spent millions on the Black course and the clubhouse to ready it for the Open. It was such a success that the course was awarded another U.S. Open.

"Looks like I'm fortunate enough to have it twice in a lifetime," Catalano says.

So, what does a guy who says his job is "a way of life" do for fun? Occasionally, Catalano goes fishing or bowling. He also collects football cards. But his job is where his heart is.

"It's fun," he says of his work.

It's hard for Catalano to believe that so many years have gone by.

"I remember when I was the youngest guy on the staff," he says. "Now I'm the oldest."

Catalano has no desire to retire, but he's thinking about it. He turns 60 in September. The 2009 U.S. Open could be his swan song.

"I love this place," he says. "I'm fortunate to be here."

Bethpage is fortunate to have him. "He's an icon for this state park," Currier says. ■

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— DAVE CATALANO