

The Book on Steve Cook

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

After *talking* about it for a few hours and commenting on everything from its celebrated history to how fortunate he is to maintain its hallowed ground, Steve Cook announces that it's finally time to *see* the golf course he manages.

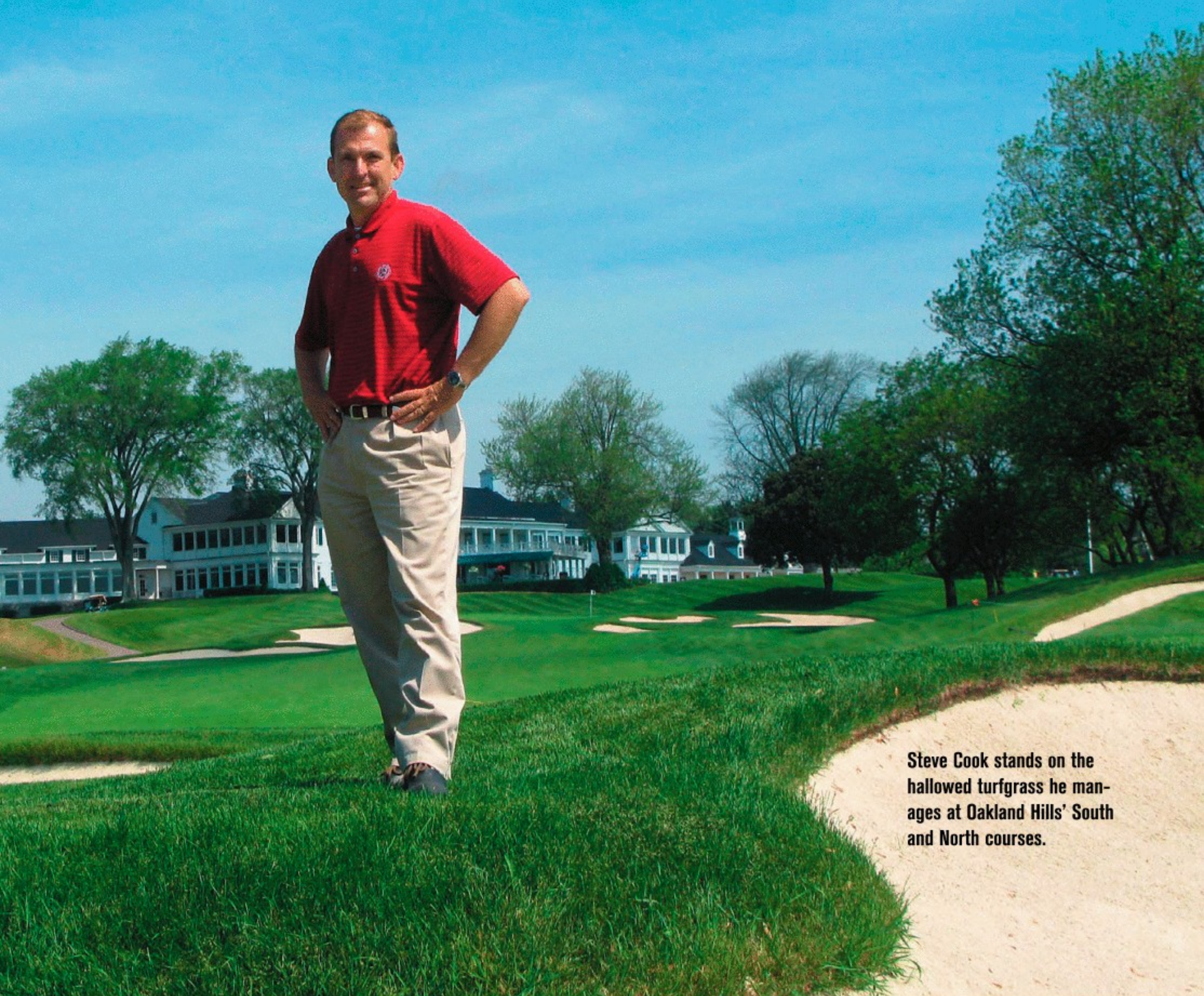
The certified golf course superintendent invites you to take a seat in his golf car for a driving tour of the classic course. Cook steers the golf car down a path behind the maintenance facility and onto the famed South Course at Oakland Hills Country Club in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. You're stirred by the South Course's splendor spilling around you. The 1918 Donald Ross design looks as gorgeous as Greta Garbo in a silk gown on Oscar night.

Hosting the PGA Championship is a career highlight, but Oakland Hills' golf course manager gets a bigger thrill out of being a model mentor



Cook stops the golf car and lets you soak in the sight on this sun-splashed summer day. What's astonishing about Oakland Hills is that there's nothing overly opulent about its appearance. The club, much like baseball's Yankee Stadium, is simple in its grandeur. It doesn't need any glitter.

It's hard to tell who's more excited about this Kodak moment — you, because you're seeing the course for the first time; or Cook, Oakland Hills Country Club's golf course manager, because he gets to show it to you. It has been an exciting year at Oakland Hills, site of the recently held PGA Championship. It's also a thrilling time for Cook, who hosted the first Major tournament of his career with the PGA Championship, although he also hosted the prestigious Ryder Cup at Oakland Hills in 2004.



Steve Cook stands on the hallowed turfgrass he manages at Oakland Hills' South and North courses.

While Cook says hosting the PGA Championship was a career highlight, it's not *the* career highlight. That milestone has nothing to do with hosting any tournament. Cook's career highlight — which is actually a work in progress — is to be a great manager of the people who work for him. The 49-year-old strives to be someone who mentors others to help them succeed in their careers.

So when the PGA Championship occurred Aug. 7 through Aug. 10, Cook was proud to exhibit the South Course in front of millions of people. But he was more pleased to showcase his 50-member crew, which helped make the course what it is for the event.

"We have good people here of all ages and nationalities," says Cook, who's in his 12th season at Oakland Hills. "They are fun

to be around. And it's a thrill for me to see them move on from here to be successful in other jobs."

One of the first things you notice about Cook's office at Oakland Hills is the large bookcase looming behind his desk. The left side of the book case is packed with writings on turf management, the right side with books on people management.

"You'd think that after reading all of those books that I'd be really good at what I do," Cook says with a laugh.

Jokes aside, Cook's past and present employees will tell you he *is* very good at what he does.

"Ninety-eight percent of the things I do here

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"I don't want to be one of those guys who says, 'This is the way we did it 20 years ago, so this is the way we should do it now.' "

— Steve Cook

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on a daily basis come from what Steve Cook taught me when I was there," says Jeff Frentz, the certified superintendent of Lake Shore Country Club in Glencoe, Ill., who worked for eight years under Cook at Oakland Hills.

The 35-year-old Frentz began at Oakland Hills as a seasonal employee in 1998 when he was 26. He moved up to superintendent of the South Course in 2001. Frentz says he learned a lot from Cook about everything from turf management to people management.

"I couldn't have had a better mentor," he says.

Frentz was superintendent of the South Course for the Ryder Cup. During that time, Cook instilled such a profound confidence in the crew that its members felt like there was nothing they couldn't accomplish, Frentz says.

"We had a great team," Frentz adds, noting that the working environment at Oakland Hills changed dramatically for the better after Cook was hired. Over time, Cook hired a younger, college-educated staff consisting of people hungry to succeed in their careers.

"It went from a this-is-my-job environment to a this-is-my-career environment," Frentz says, noting that the maintenance

crew employees took it upon themselves to learn from Cook.

Frentz learned about how to manage people with a cool head. He says Cook's composure in dealing with employees created a positive working environment at Oakland Hills. "In the eight years I worked there, I never once heard Steve raise his voice," Frentz says.

Ron Bentley, construction superintendent for the PGA Championship who is also Oakland Hills' North Course superintendent, says Cook never reprimands employees if they make mistakes. Just the opposite, Cook urges them to learn from their mistakes.

"And he gives us advice ... he coaches us," Bentley adds.

When he came to Oakland Hills in 1996, Cook says he wanted to be more than just a superintendent who grew grass. He wanted to be a mentor to the young people who worked for him.

Cook arrived at Oakland Hills from the Wakonda Club in Des Moines, Iowa, where he worked from 1992 to 1997 as the superintendent. Cook says he honed his management skills at Wakonda.

"I realized I had to be more flexible," he adds.

'I Don't Believe a Good Superintendent Is Defined by How Many Hours He Works'

Steve Cook, golf course manager of Oakland Hills Country Club in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., is a veteran superintendent with well-thought-out opinions on myriad issues. Here's what Cook, a certified superintendent and a master greenkeeper, has to say about matters ranging from making mistakes to dealing with his club's members to working too many hours on the golf course.

On perfection: "We're not perfect, and we make mistakes. But I tell my guys, let's not get all worked up over mistakes we've made. Let's just not make them three times."

On working at Oakland Hills: "It's a great place to work. The members are kind, cordial and respectful of what we do. They are down-to-earth people, which might be because of the blue-collar working men-

tality here in Michigan. ... Sometimes the top tournament clubs have reputations for higher turnover and being tough places to work, but I have not found that to be the case here."

On hosting a successful PGA Championship: "Our barometer for success is always the members. It's not CBS Sports. It's not Tiger Woods. It's the members of the club. If they're happy, we're happy. That's the bottom line. If they want a pink elephant in the middle of the fifth green ... we will get that done. I don't believe in butting heads with the members."

On dealing with demanding members: "Superintendents get in trouble when they start thinking that members are too demanding for wanting this and that. Well, if I paid \$1,000 a month, I'd be pretty demanding, too. We're here to service members,

whether we're stacking shirts, wiping plates or mowing grass. And if members want something done a certain way, it's our job to figure out how to do that."

On gaining job satisfaction: "When I can go home at the end of the day and know that the golf course is better in some way than it was when I got there in the morning."

On working long hours: "I don't believe a good superintendent is defined by how many hours he works. Let's not be here until 9 o'clock at night. What good does that do anybody? I know I'm most effective working between eight and 10 hours a day. After 10 hours, I start to fade. And after 12 hours, I'm basically sitting here staring at notes on my desk and not doing anything. I don't think that's unusual. I think what is unusual is that I recognize it."

— Larry Aylward

That's what the people who work for Cook say they like most about his management style. Cook doesn't take a my-way-or-the-highway approach. Benjamin McGargill, superintendent of the South Course, says Cook empowers him and other staff members to do their jobs.

"He lets us do our thing," McGargill says. "He gives us the reins."

There are times, Cook admits, when somebody is doing a job one way that he would rather see done another way. But Cook keeps his mouth shut because he has learned that his way is not always the best way.

"I don't want to be one of those guys who says, 'This is the way we did it 20 years ago, so this is the way we should do it now,'" Cook says.

Frentz says Cook always listens to anyone who has an idea how to solve a problem, whether it's a high-falutin' member of the club or a young maintenance worker.

"I don't have all the answers, and I'm not ashamed to admit that," Cook says. "There are guys here who are in their 20s who know more about certain things than I do and see things that I don't see."

Some people in Cook's shoes might flaunt their importance as leaders of an operation like Oakland Hills. But not Cook, who says it's his job to provide direction and then get out of the way.

"It's not even like being the captain of the ship," he says. "It's kind of like being the tugboat and going out to get the ship in the port ... and not hitting anything in the way on the way in. That's kind of what I'm doing."

Cook is an avid reader of management books. He says Steven Covey's "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" had a major impact on his management style. So did "First, Break All the Rules: What The World's Greatest Managers Do Differently" by Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman.

Cook says he has become a seasoned manager because of experience. He says he has made and learned from mistakes that are "too numerous to mention." Hence, his aim is to impart his been-there-and-done-that



wisdom to others to help them not make the same mistakes. But Cook doesn't just look to impart his wisdom on others; he aims to learn from them as well.

"I've learned something from every person that has worked for me," Cook says. "They have taught me to be a better manager, superintendent and person."

For instance, Cook learned to become a better communicator by watching Frentz deal with people. "Jeff is very good with people, a lot better than I am," Cook says.

The modest Cook is also willing to admit something few managers would concede. "I try to hire people who cover up for my weaknesses," he says.

But finding the right employees doesn't come easy. That's why Cook places a premium on the hiring process. He believes matching the right people to the right jobs is vital for a sound operation. Job candidates endure a series of rigorous interviews, first with Cook and the club's two superintendents and then with the second assistants and the mechanic. Then the entire staff meets to rank and discuss potential employees.

Cook hires employees mostly based on their behavior, attitude and personality. He says work experience is "fourth or fifth" on the list. After hiring them, Cook has them fill out a questionnaire that asks myriad questions, from their favorite hobbies and favorite books to the jobs on the course they would like to perform.

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Benjamin McGargill (left) and Ron Bentley (right) say Cook (center) has taught them many things about being the best golf course superintendents they can be.

The Book on Cook

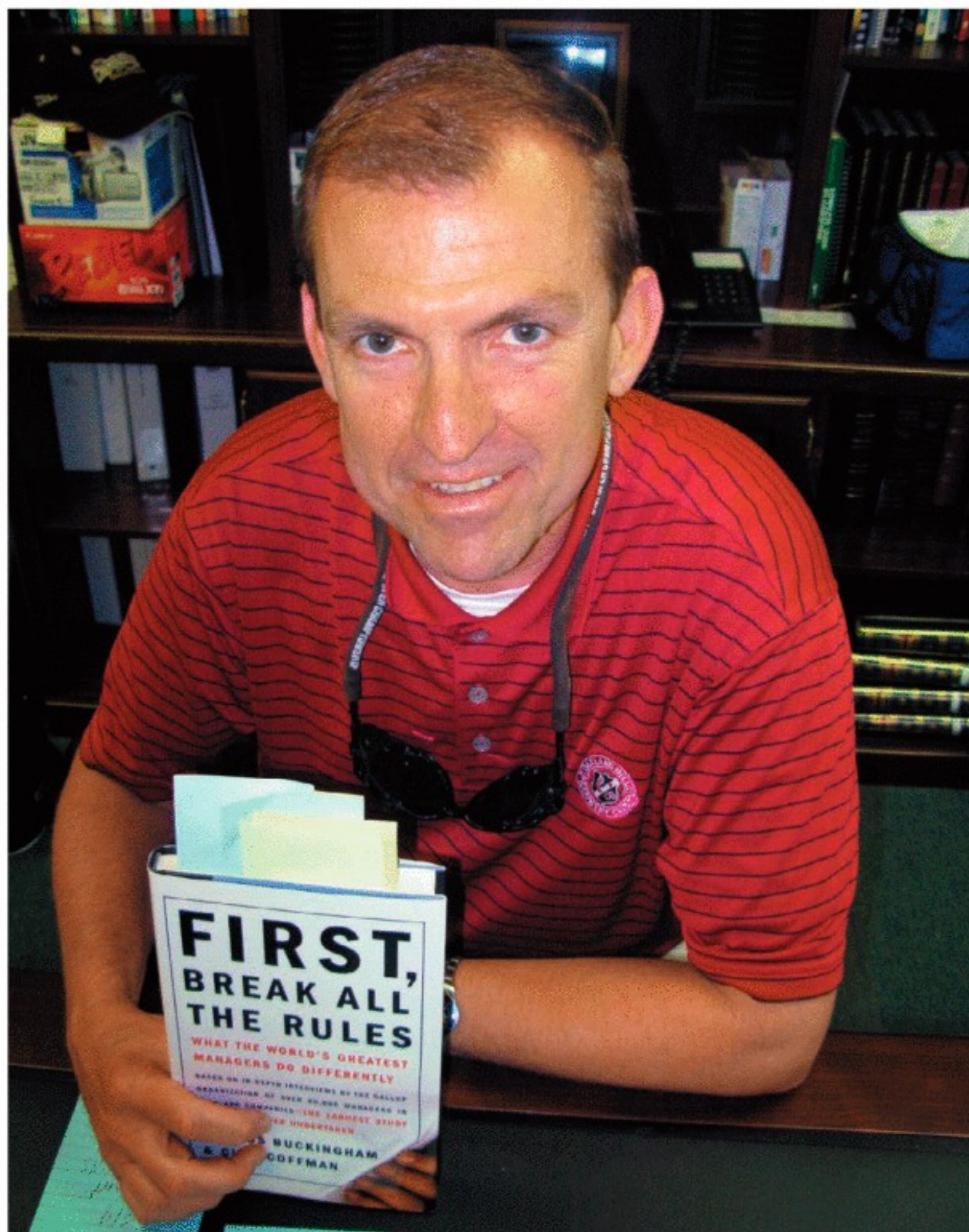
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Ultimately, Cook wants to find out what employees are good at and put them in roles accordingly. "Because if they're good at something and they enjoy it, they will excel at it," he says.

Cook is also a firm believer in giving second and third chances. He's that way because he has received his share of chances from many people, beginning with his parents. "I wasn't the best teenager in the world," Cook says, "but my parents kept faith in me."

When he was in college at the University of Illinois in the early 1980s, Cook worked the summers at the Lincolnshire Fields Country Club in Champaign, Ill. Cook, who admits he wasn't very career-minded then, credits the club's superintendent,

Cook says the book, "First, Break All the Rules: What The World's Greatest Managers Do Differently," had a major impact on his management style.



Frank Stynchula, for not giving up on him. "He could have [fired me], but he didn't," Cook says. "He hung in there with me, and gave me a couple of sincere talking-tos."

Cook also spent four years at Medinah (Ill.) Country Club, where he worked as a superintendent under the legendary Danny Quast. "[Quast] had patience with me and helped me," Cook says.

Cook also credits Oakland Hills Chief Operating Officer Rick Bayless for "taking a chance" on him and hiring him from a relatively unknown course, Wakonda Club, to lead the turf maintenance team at Oakland Hills. "He could have hired someone from a top-100 club, but he gave me an opportunity for which I will be forever grateful," Cook says.

Bayless says he "knocked it out of the park" when he hired Cook. He says Cook has filled a void by establishing a solid and respectful relationship between the turf maintenance staff and the club's members. Cook's mentoring skills are also not lost on Bayless.

"He really enjoys seeing people grow within the organization," Bayless says.

Speaking of which, there's a good chance Cook could lose his two superintendents — McGargill and Bentley — to other golf courses. The two men plan to use their experiences of preparing for and hosting the PGA Championship as leverage to move on to bigger and better things. Cook would hate to lose them, but he'll also do everything he can to help them move forward in their careers.

"If I brought my resume to work, he'd probably critique it," McGargill says.

While Cook has no plans to move on from Oakland Hills, where he says the job continues to be fun and exciting, he has already made plans for his retirement. Cook plans to travel, but not to see the world.

"I envision taking a big road trip when I retire," he says. "I'll get in my car, drive across the country and visit all those people who previously worked for me."

Certainly, Cook's proteges will roll out the welcome mat for their mentor. And they'll probably showcase their respective courses to him with the same passion he does for Oakland Hills. ■