



# People of the Year

Without these folks, the golf course industry would be minus a lot of integrity and character

BY LARRY AYLWARD AND DAVID FRABOTTA, GOLFDOM STAFF

**T**he golf course industry needs these people. Without them — without their get-go, their creativity, their kindness, their passion, their fortitude and their humor — the industry would be greatly diminished.

Hence, it's time for *Golfdom* to distribute its annual awards to recognize certain golf industry individuals for their achievements. These awards are not for formal accomplishments, mind you. Our "People of the Year" awards are granted to those whose actions reflect character and integrity.

So, let's get to it. Please hold your applause until all awards have been presented. Congratulations to this year's honorees!

## The "Stand Up And Fight" Award

**MARK ESODA**  
CERTIFIED SUPERINTENDENT  
ATLANTA COUNTRY CLUB

Mark Esoda has been to the meetings and he has heard the grumblings of golf course superintendents complaining among themselves about their outside image as water wasters. Esoda, certified superintendent for the Atlanta Country Club, realizes that superintendents have to stop griping among themselves and go on the offensive to convey the message to the public that golf courses are responsible irrigators.

Esoda is doing his part to communicate that message. Thanks in part to him, superintendents in Georgia are considered irriga-

tion experts. Esoda spearheaded an effort by the Georgia Golf Course Superintendents Association to enact Best Management Practices for irrigation, a move that has benefited the golf industry's image statewide. It wasn't an easy task and it took several years to accomplish, but 246 of the 256 Georgia GCSA member properties stepped up to participate in surveys that documented their water use and irrigation-reduction practices.

Participating golf courses disclosed how they effectively used irrigation systems, new grass varieties, wetting agents and plant



growth regulators to use less water. They also documented their usage patterns and areas where they decreased irrigation during the 2007 drought in the Southeast.

The Georgia GCSA partnered with the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (GEPD) in the project, and their relationship has blossomed into one of respect. "[The GEPD] has realized we were not the water abuser they thought we were," Esoda says.

Esoda and the Georgia GCSA continue to take their message to the public. Esoda says the Georgia GCSA is telling its story to water councils, environmentalists and the general public.

"We want to bring them out to golf courses to show them that we don't waste resources like water," Esoda says.



## The “Never Stop Learning” Award

**SHAWN EMERSON**  
DIRECTOR OF AGRONOMY  
DESERT MOUNTAIN GOLF CLUB

You might consider him an expert in his own right. He’s the director of agronomy for six championship-caliber, Jack Nicklaus-designed golf courses with a crew of 180, including six superintendents and 12 assistant superintendents — a couple of whom are the sons of superintendents.

“You feel pretty good about what you are doing when other superintendents send you their sons,” says Shawn Emerson, the multi-tasking turfgrass guru of Desert Mountain Golf Club in Carefree, Ariz. He’s a son of a superintendent as well.

Emerson has probably grown more turfgrass than anyone in the country, considering he has overseeded about 70 golf courses and then transitioned them back to bermudagrass. He currently maintains 2,000 acres.

Despite his success, Emerson is never satisfied. He’s always looking for better answers to questions that arise at his golf course. So who does one of the most knowledgeable agronomists in the business turn to with his turfgrass questions? He uses the guy who wrote the book on turfgrass maintenance, of course.

Actually, longtime turfgrass professor and author James Beard has written a half-dozen books on turfgrass physiology, nutrition and management practices. His “Turf Management for Golf Courses” is commonly referred to as Beard’s Bible. Emerson also courts opinions from noted turfgrass professors Fred Yelverton and Rick Brandenburg of North Carolina State University.

The amazing part of the affiliation isn’t the combined credentials of his turfgrass consultants. The remarkable part of



the relationship is the constant collaboration that the agronomists share. Let’s face it: Emerson could sail this ship without quarterly visits from his Dream Team of turf consultants, but he wants to get better and excel in his profession.

## The “Ecology of Scale” Award

**CHRISTOPHER S. GRAY SR.**  
DIRECTOR OF GOLF OPERATIONS  
MARVEL GOLF CLUB

He was caring for the environment before hybrid cars and global warming became part of everyday dialogue. His story is a coup for the golf industry as it tries to reinvent its public image from polluting, resource-wasting monopolies of green space to sanctuaries for native plants, wildlife and serenity.

Golf course superintendents, like hunters and anglers, have been basking in nature for centuries — long before hippies set out for the Red Rocks of Colorado and Sedona, Ariz., and even before the transcendentalists went to the woods.

Christopher S. Gray Sr. follows in the tradition of Old Tom Morris and the many superintendents before and after him who cared for creation above the conditions of the golf course. The only difference is that now, technology enables superintendents to provide amazing conditions and still leave the world as unscathed as they found it.

In return for his stewardship, Gray, the general manager and director of golf operations at Marvel Golf Club in Benton, Ky., was recognized as the overall winner of the 2007 GCSAA/Golf Digest Environmental Leaders in Golf Award,

and he’s the first superintendent to win the overall category twice (also in 2003).

His ecological hat-trick oc-



curred earlier this year when he was named the 2008 recipient of Rain Bird’s Intelligent Use of Water Award. This award is special because he competed against non-golf entities, including the Council on the Environment of New York City, a group that worked with more than 30 community garden groups in neighborhoods throughout metropolitan New York to construct rainwater-harvesting systems.

Gray also powers his diesel turf equipment with vegetable oil and discarded fryer oil, and an oil burner that burns recycled oil from equipment heats the maintenance shop in the winter.

His achievements, by the way, are earned on a budget of about \$225,000.

## The “Survivor” Award

**PAUL VOYKIN**  
RETIRED SUPERINTENDENT  
BRIARWOOD COUNTRY CLUB

The tribe has spoken, and Paul Voykin has been declared a survivor in this crazy world of golf course maintenance.

Voykin retired in September at age 77 after more than 47 years in the business at the same club, the Briarwood Country Club in Deerfield, Ill. That’s nearly half a century at a private club with 200 members and probably just as many opinions on how Voykin should have done his job.

Most superintendents aren’t supposed to last that long at private clubs, especially when one member tells you that the greens are perfect and another says they stink — on the same morning. Such superintendents often get “voted off,” as the saying goes.

How did Voykin manage to stay at the same place for so long, especially a private club? How did he not wear out his welcome? How did the members not



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get tired of him? The answer is simple: It was just a matter of being honest, kind and respectful to everyone, Voykin says. Of course, Voykin also had to be a very capable superintendent to last so long.

Here's to his perseverance and a happy retirement.

### The "Boss of the Year" Award

**MARY LOU FERRIER**

CO-OWNER

WASHAKIE GOLF & RV RESORT

Mary Lou Ferrier is boss of all of the employees at Washakie Golf & RV Resort in North Branch, Mich. And the 80-year-old Ferrier, who operates Washakie with her son Brian, takes good care of her workers.

Every day, just as the clock strikes noon, Mary Lou feeds the Washakie work crew a hearty, home-cooked lunch. She can be seen daily darting around the kitchen of her home, located a short distance from the golf course, readying the



midday meal. One by one, the hungry workers file in the door of Mary Lou's small home and take their seats at the 6-foot-

long dining table adorned with a plastic, floral tablecloth. Mary Lou serves them the plates, and the employees dig in.

"I enjoy having them over," says Mary Lou, who has been cooking lunch for the staff since Washakie, located about 60 miles north of Detroit, opened 35 years ago. "I like listening to them yak. Otherwise, I wouldn't know what's going on around here."

It's a nice fringe benefit for the employees, who consist of the golf course superintendent and his four-man crew, and four women who work in the course's pro shop. But it's more than just a homemade meal for them. It's the

chance for the Washakie staff to convene and talk shop for an hour.

The crew does not take Mary Lou's free home-cooked daily meals for granted. They know they'd probably be eating something made fast and greasy if it wasn't for her.

Mary Lou knows there's nothing like a home-cooked meal to keep employees happy and working hard.

### The "All in the Family" Award

**FRANK GORE**

RETIRED EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT  
CLUBCORP

Myriad task forces, think tanks and even formal entities have been devising marketing initiatives and ad campaigns to grow the game of golf, but the really big changes — like shaking the game of its traditional six-hour obligation — has been largely academic with the exception of a few golf courses.



Thus far, the industry has responded to America's virtual time poverty by building longer, tougher golf courses, which largely have cannibalized shorter, easier layouts. That trend has hampered rounds at public facilities. And private clubs are experiencing a shakeout, too. Fewer traditional country club members are willing to forgo weekends with family to golf as often as they did in the past.

That's a point that Frank Gore understands. Gore was ClubCorp's executive vice president of membership and sales until he retired from the company this year. But before he did, he shared this anecdote with *Golfdom*:

"My father was an avid golfer. I can't imagine the amount of laughter that would have taken place if I asked him to give up his weekend golf to watch me play soccer," he says. "Conversely, my daughter played soccer for six years without ever

scoring a goal, but I never missed a game. It's different now, and we saw a lot of this prioritizing of what's important after 9/11."

In response to the demand for more family recreation time and fewer hours on the golf course, more than 90 of ClubCorp's managed properties began offering a new set of forward tees last spring.

The company's FasTee Course places teeing grounds about 100 yards closer to the green than the previous forward tees, allowing dads to play in about an hour after work and still attend evening obligations or letting kids play along with their dads without holding up play.

The innovation isn't new, but kudos to Gore and other ClubCorp executives for creating a companywide mandate. These initiatives won't succeed without buy-in from the highest levels.

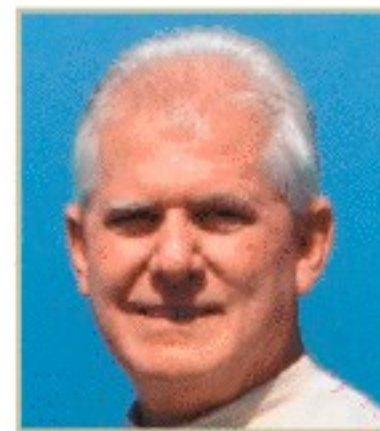
### The "I Won't Back Down" Award

**MARK WOODWARD**

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER  
GCSAA

What if you worked at a public golf course that was so revered by its community that golfers threatened to kill you if you restricted their access or depreciated its conditions?

It happened to Mark Woodward, the new CEO of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America. Earlier this year, he hosted the U.S. Open at Torrey Pines, where he spent three years prepping for the national championship as the club's director of golf operations.



When he first arrived at the San Diego treasure, he suggested the city should raise user fees to reflect the quality of the venue. San Diego residents can play the championship layouts for less than \$50.

Once Woodward's proposal hit the local media, an avid golfer told him: "If I had a



gun, I'd shoot you right now." And his wife was told via e-mail that the community was going to run them out of town.

But Woodward didn't flinch. "I never took it personally. They were just trying to protect their access to their golf course," he says. "People who come here have a certain reverence about it. You just know it's special. When you stand on the clubhouse deck and look out over the ocean, it's almost a spiritual experience."

Woodward never cowered. He championed his business plan in the local media and among the loyal municipal golfers, and he not only turned around Torrey Pines' conditioning, he cut the deficit at historic Balboa Park Golf Course in half.

Balboa, also a William P. Bell design like Torrey Pines, was losing almost \$1 million a year when Woodward arrived, primarily because user fees were too low to sustain operations. He implemented new fee structures, and he says the deficit will drop even more once the facility installs a new irrigation system and makes other planned upgrades.

If Woodward shows the same fortitude leading the GCSAA, then superintendents should be in good hands.

## The "It's Not About Me" Award

### STEVE COOK

GOLF COURSE MANAGER/CERTIFIED SUPERINTENDENT  
OAKLAND HILLS COUNTRY CLUB

His employees rave about him. They say they couldn't have a better boss than Steve Cook, the golf course manager of Oakland Hills Country Club, site of this year's PGA Championship.

"Ninety-eight percent of the things I do here 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. "I couldn't have had a better mentor."

Cook oversees golf maintenance at one of the top clubs in the country. But you won't catch him bragging. Cook didn't set out to be a star superintendent at a headline club. His chief goal is to be a solid mentor to those who work for him.

Cook doesn't take a my-way-or-the-highway approach. Benjamin McGargill, superintendent of the Oakland Hills' 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 have all the answers, and I'm not ashamed to admit that," he says.

Cook's it's-not-about-me approach is refreshing, indeed.

## The "Be As You Are" Award

### BILL MURRAY

GREENKEEPER

DOUBLE EAGLE GOLF CLUB

He was born into this world as Bill Murray. He just so happens to look like — you guessed it — the actor Bill Murray. And he makes his livelihood in the golf course maintenance industry, just like the actor Murray's character Carl Spackler did in "Caddyshack."

This Bill Murray is 43 years old and a member of superintendent Todd Voss' maintenance crew at the Double Eagle Club in Galena, Ohio. It's a coincidence that Murray ended up with the actor Murray's name, who helped put the profession of golf course maintenance on the map in the 1980 film when he was cast as the oddball assistant golf course

superintendent who toked on turf, lived like a slob and displayed a combative side, at least when it came to gophers.

It would be understandable if Double Eagle's Murray distanced himself from Murray's "Caddyshack" character and demanded to be called "William." But Murray not only rolls with the situation, he has a blast with it. "I've had a lot of fun kidding around with it," he says.

He has the goofy Spackler facial looks from "Caddyshack" down to a science. He knows the movie's lines like the back roads home to his house. "My enemy, my foe, is an animal," Murray might mutter to a co-worker. "In order to conquer the animal, I have to learn to think like an animal. And, whenever possible, to look like one. I've gotta get inside this guy's pelt and crawl around for a few days."

In a previous job as a bartender, Murray dressed up as the Spackler character. "I bought a hat, let my beard grow for three days, put some dirt on face and dressed in a raggedy-old T-shirt and some Army fatigues," he says.

One time in the bar, a customer told Murray that he looked like the actor. When Murray told the customer that Bill Murray was his name, the guy said he would give him a 50 percent tip on his \$120 bill if he could prove it. Murray showed him his driver's license and was \$60 richer.

One thing is for sure: Voss doesn't have to worry about Murray going off on gophers at Double Eagle. Murray, who has worked on the crew for about two seasons, is a reliable and capable worker.

"I love having him on the crew because he has seen it all and enjoys all the work on the course," Voss says. "He never complains and works seven days a week."

Voss says he wouldn't be surprised if Murray became a superintendent some day. "Now wouldn't that be ironic," Voss says.

Maybe Murray was born for it. ■

