

# Municipal Mae

Mark Woodward rescues Torrey Pines from neglect to showcase a public treasure in his swan song **STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID FRABOTTA, SENIOR EDITOR**

**G**olfers flock to Torrey Pines like St. Andrews and Pebble Beach. But few are as passionate about the San Diego jewel as its residents, who protect their cherished municipal with fervor generally reserved for religion. No one knows that better than certified superintendent Mark Woodward, the director of golf operations for the city of San Diego, which operates three golf facilities.

When he suggested the city should raise user fees at the community treasure, 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."

It might not have been the warmest welcome, but Woodward understood. Where else outside of Bethpage State Park can golfers start filling the parking lot at 3 a.m. to capture the coveted few tee times between 6 a.m. and 7:30 that are reserved for walk-ons?

As a lifelong municipal golf course operator, Woodward was strangely delighted in the fact that local golfers were so passionate about his new domain, and he would need the community's support to accomplish all that was needed for the 108th U.S. Open, set for June 9 through June 15 on the South Course at Torrey Pines.



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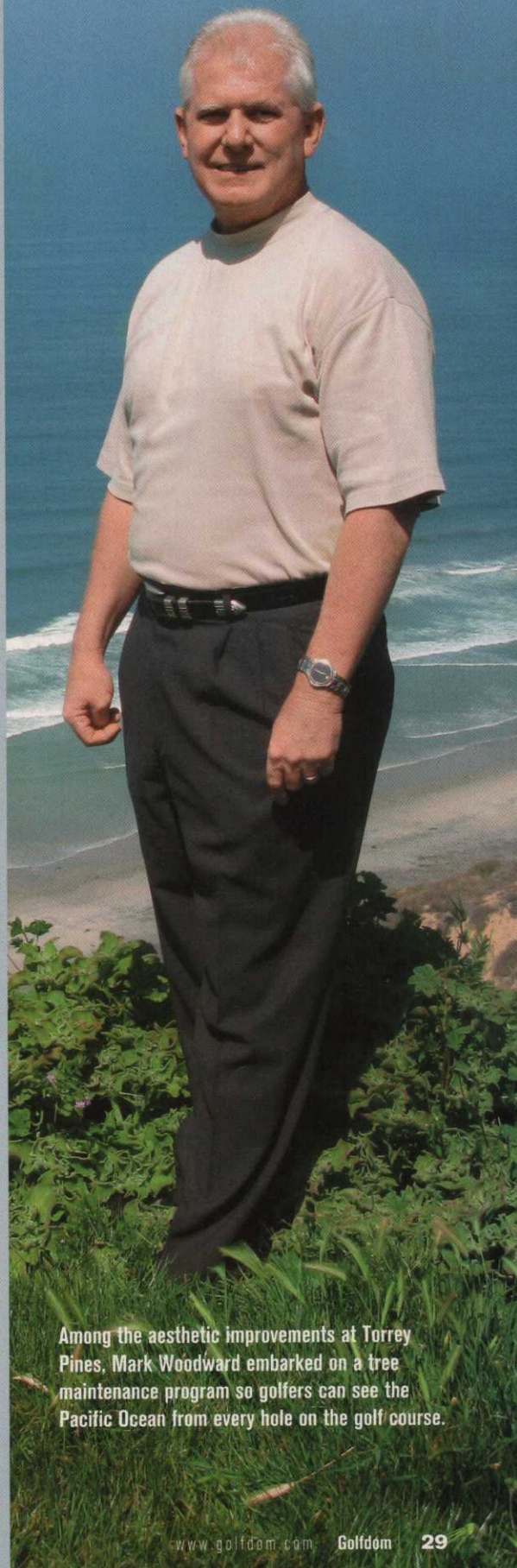
The Open will be his swan song. Beginning July 1, Woodward will become the first superintendent to lead the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America as its CEO.

## Community concern

The area's animosity toward Woodward began when he proposed a five-year business plan, which involved raising some fees throughout the system and staggering major renovations, first at Torrey Pines to prepare for the Open, and then on to the historic Balboa Park complex and rundown Mission Bay facility, the city's other facilities.

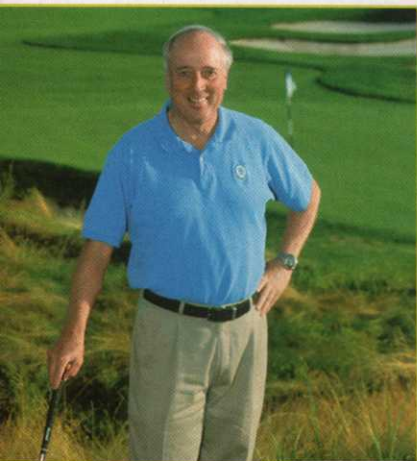
Balboa Park Golf Course, a William P. Bell design like Torrey Pines, was losing almost \$1 million a year when Woodward

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Among the aesthetic improvements at Torrey Pines, Mark Woodward embarked on a tree maintenance program so golfers can see the Pacific Ocean from every hole on the golf course.





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arrived, primarily because user fees were too low to sustain operations. After implementing new fee structures, Woodward cut the deficit in half. He says the deficit will drop even more once the facility installs a new irrigation system along with other upgrades spelled out in the business plan.

Although Mission Bay Golf Course and Practice Center breaks even, Woodward had

## The Good Doctor

Rees Jones is more than the USGA's Open Doctor for Torrey Pines. He's the chief of medicine.

He's tweaked myriad U.S. Open venues, but the considerable time he has spent at the public venues that host the national championship illustrates his dedication to growing the popularity of golf and giving back to its public players.

He coined the phrase "The People's Open"

prior to the 2002 U.S. Open on the Black Course at Bethpage State Park. His complete overhaul of the A.W. Tillinghast layout is well documented. "We had to resuscitate Bethpage," he says.

And before the success of the first People's Open could be determined, Jones was on to his next public tour de force: Torrey Pines.

It was a dream of Jay Rains, a San Diego attorney who spearheaded a private trust of 29 donors that came together as The Friends of Torrey Pines, which eventually raised about \$3.5 million to finance renovations at Torrey. Rains, now a USGA vice president, recruited Jones in 1999 to help woo the USGA to San Diego.

Jones finished renovations in 2001, and Torrey was awarded the 2008 Open in 2002. At about 7,640 yards, it will be the longest U.S. Open in history.

"There was a lot to do to ensure we still had a wonderful public venue but still a U.S. Open venue," Jones says. "We built the bunkers deeper and built a lot of contours in the greens. We built greens on diagonals and put a lot of plateaus on the backs of the greens to make it hard to access for the best players in the game yet with a lot of open entrances to the green so the average public golfer could still enjoy the golf course if he played the safe routes."

Jones donated much of his time the past few years making small tweaks, including moving the No. 4 fairway closer to the bluff that overlooks Black's Beach.

Jones also has been modifying The Black Course to prepare for next year's national championship when it goes back to Bethpage. Among the changes will be new pin locations on No. 14 and a new bunker to guard them, a new championship tee on 13 along with a new fairway bunker, and new or enlarged championship tees on holes three, five, seven and nine.

The changes won't amount to the drastic facelift needed for the first People's Open, but organizers hope it will still generate the groundswell that made the country's first public open a success.

"In order for golf to grow, we need to embrace the public player because there are more public players than private players," Jones says. "With Torrey and then Bethpage next year — along with Pebble Beach (2010), Pinehurst (2014) and now Chambers Bay (2015) in the rotation, there are five golf courses that can be accessed by the public."

Just watch your ball in that secondary rough.

— David Frabotta

to take the boards off the clubhouse windows as one of his first tasks of taking it over. When he visited the facility while interviewing for the job in 2005, he said "golfers were everywhere, but the building had boards over the windows. I wasn't sure what was going on."

You wouldn't think a business plan and renovation schedule would be a hard sell to residents who watched their golf facilities dwindle into disrepair, but Woodward eventually won them over. That's little surprise for those who know him. A self-described type-A personality, Woodward has thrived in the community enterprise throughout his professional life.

His previous job involved a 31-year stint for the city of Mesa, Ariz. He eventually grew to manage two golf courses, parks and a cemetery. He was a fixture in that community, and in just three years his status evolved in San Diego from golf pariah to savior. The Open will generate about \$100 million for the city in addition to worldwide attention.

But his plight hasn't been easy. Besides death threats and disgruntled local golfers, Woodward has prepared for the national championship amid the South Course's 60,000 annual rounds, dozens of renovation projects and years of neglect that had to be amended (the North Course welcomes more than 90,000 rounds each year).

"It takes three to five years to get ready for a championship of this caliber, and we were probably 15 years behind the eight ball because of deferred maintenance and general neglect of the golf course and the facility as a whole," he says. "I told my boss I wouldn't have given him \$25 for the experience when I got here. It was in that poor of shape."

These were no small projects, either. Although the South Course had a major renovation in 2001 by of Rees Jones, heavy play and poor maintenance created some serious agronomic issues.

First, Woodward had to deal with the traffic, so he created a continuous cart path around the South Course. Neither the United States Golf Association nor the PGA Tour, which runs the annual Buick Invitational in February on the North and South Courses, wanted to take primary responsibility for the

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## ■ U.S. OPEN PREVIEW

**The par-3 third hole will feature new teeing grounds that could make it the shortest par-3 at a U.S. Open in eight years.**

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positioning of the cart paths. So Woodward walked the course himself and dialed in exact locations with a global positioning system.

"By the time the championship starts in June, it will have been 13 months of cart-path only on the South Course," Woodward says. "The difference has been remarkable. There are no bare spots, and there's no compacted areas, so it's come light years."

Once he successfully removed traffic from the turf, it was time to replace it — almost all of it. Woodward used about 1 million square feet of kikuya grass from seven different sources to resod the fairways on the South Course. As the ryegrass dies off in the summer, officials expect fairways to be almost 100 percent kikuya, and the roughs are predominantly kikuya as well, although there will be a fair amount of ryegrass in the secondary rough.

Woodward needed so much kikuya, that he started stripping it out of the North Course and made some calls to area golf courses to see if they could spare any. Lake San Marcos Resort and Country Club, StoneRidge Country Club and Rancho Bernardo Golf Resort all had a fairway or two of kikuya that they were trying out and decided to help Woodward's cause. Woodward, of course, bought his colleagues turfgrass of their choice to replace the kikuya.

"West Coast Turf and Landscapes Unlimited harvested it, and then made the transition in a day or two in each case," Woodward says. "One day they had kikuya fairways, and the next they had hybrid bermuda."

To prepare for the kikuya, Woodward sprayed out the fairways just 18 months prior to the tournament. USGA officials, architect Rees Jones and others were on hand to witness the fairways turn brown less than two years before the big tourney. But no one was worried.

"It looked a little brown," Jones recalls with a laugh. "But I wasn't worried at all. Mark had an aura about him of confidence. He knew what he was doing, so I knew it would be fine."

The greens were completely regressed as well to allow *Poa annua* to take over. Once the decision was made to make the Open a *Poa* surface, Woodward seeded the greens with Pencross so *Poa* could infiltrate, Jones says.

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### The Mike Davis Rules

Setup artist Mike Davis will vary angles of play and distances more than in U.S. Opens of recent past. The USGA's senior director of rules & competitions was instrumental in crafting new teeing areas around Torrey Pines that will give players a unique perspective on many holes compared to the PGA Tour's setup of Torrey Pines' South Course for the Buick Invitational.

Among them, a new championship tee on the par-5 13 requires a 240-yard carry to clear a ravine.

"We are going to use three of the teeing grounds on 13," he says. "I think it's a neat thing to do so it's not the same hole seven days in a row."

The third hole, a par 3 playing toward the ocean, will feature a new tee as well, decidedly shorter than the 195-yard tee used

for the Buick. The new slightly elevated tee will be a wedge shot for most of the pros, Davis says. He hopes that wind conditions allow him to use it two of the days.

"If you can bring different architectural features into play or present different risks and rewards from different teeing grounds, then that's a good thing," he says.

The course will play firm and fast, to be sure, but it won't feature razor-thin fairways typical of previous Opens. Davis narrowed only two fairways slightly, and he widened four of them in spots.

A graduated rough will be used to penalize players based on the degree they miss shots. But don't expect anyone to pull up lame out of the secondary rough. Yes, the kikuyagrass is monstrously thick, but Davis is taking down the height compared to last year.

Davis originally expected the secondary

rough to play at about 5 inches, but after seeing the nasty stuff about a month before the tournament, he told *Golfdom* he's taking it down to 4 inches, and it might come down more closer to tournament time. Likewise, he took the primary rough down a half-inch to 2 1/4 inches.

"Our intent with the first cut of rough is to get it to where it's penal enough to take the spin off the ball but still allow the players to play to the green," Davis says.

They will, however, need to chop it back from the tall stuff, even at 4 inches.

The only wildcard is the weather, Davis says, remembering that an unprecedented fog occurrence cancelled the entire first round of the U.S. Women's Open at Newport (R.I.) Country Club in 2006. "Nothing can make you look sillier than fog," he says.

— David Frabotta



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USGA Senior Director of Rules & Competitions Mike Davis is excited about the transition.

"The greens are basically 100 percent *Poa*, and they look great," Davis says. "We're going to be able to get the conditions we want because of Mark Woodward and the fabulous job he has done turning Torrey Pines around. If we had this Open two years ago, we wouldn't have been able to do some of the things that we're going to do this year."

Woodward also transitioned the aprons and tees to hybrid bermudagrass.

All of the grass changes required rigorous changes in cultural practices. Prior to Woodward's tenure, Torrey's greens were mowed with triplex mowers three to four times a week. Woodward implemented a walking program

seven days a week, and he aerified the greens on the South Course 22 times since he took over in 2005, "which has got to be an all-time record for any golf course," he says. "That's a lot of punching the greens."

He also maintains the approaches like a second set of greens by walk mowing every day and periodic aerification to create firm conditions for the Open.

But the cultural practices didn't end on the golf course. Woodward knew he couldn't just throw money at the new turfgrass and expect the crew to care for it differently. He had to imbue the crew with a sense of entitlement. So he started piling on the amenities.

First, he supplemented the fleet with \$1.5 million in equipment.

"The staff loved that," Woodward says. "Then we gave them a new lunchroom, kitchen, locker room, office and showers so they could finally hang out and feel proud. Then we started noticing the difference on the golf course because we raised the level of maintenance."

The conditions haven't gone unnoticed by the golfing public. Longtime Torrey golfers commonly stop Woodward on the practice greens — a spot you'll commonly find him talking on his cell phone because it doesn't get reception in his office — to tell him that the course has never looked or played better.

Those close to the Open have taken notice as well.

"It really takes one of the best in the business to get the job done with so many players," Jones says. "He has really brought it into championship conditions, and he's been essential to the success of where we are today."

Woodward gives some of that success back to the community of San Diego, its golfers and all of the Open supporters that have made the 2008 Open a success.

"The merchandising and corporate sales are setting records," he says, adding that the attendance should be the second highest in Open history behind the 1999 tournament at Pinehurst. "And I guarantee that this Open is going to be one of the greatest Opens ever. It's going to be hugely successful in every way, and it's extremely special for me because of my background as a municipal operator." ■



## Transplanting Torrey Pines

The Torrey Pine tree is the rarest native pine in the United States with about 7,000 specimens that grow along the San Diego coastline. So when you prune, transplant and manage them, people take notice. Especially if you use a crane, as was needed to transplant some of the larger specimens around the golf course and renovated parking lot.

"They are very special trees, and I'm very proud to say we've transplanted them with a 100 percent success rate," says Mark Woodward, golf operations manager for San Diego.

A Torrey Pine has a distinctive five-needle leaf structure, and needles can grow to be more than 1-foot long. It can reach heights of almost 100 feet and has the largest seed of any known pine.

Large eucalyptus trees also populate the Torrey Pines Golf Course in large numbers.

The tree-maintenance program was part of Woodward's overarching plan to open up the golf course to take advantage of the vistas of one of the country's most remarkable golf properties.

"One of the primary benefits of being on this location is the ocean," Woodward says. "People come to see the ocean, so I wanted to see the ocean on every hole, and now you can do that."

— David Frabotta