



Woods' Work

Legendary
greenkeeper
brought plenty
of knowledge
and dedication to
the golf industry
— and still does

BY ANTHONY PIOPPi ■ CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Walter Woods guides his Audi A4 station wagon out of a parking lot in St. Andrews, Scotland, and weaves his way toward the house he shares with his wife, Caroline, in a section of this famous town that tourists rarely visit.

The radio, tuned to a classic rock station, plays low. Nearing his home, Woods turns to his passenger with a devilish look and says, "Watch this." He drops the automatic transmission to "S" for "Sport" and punches the accelerator, pushing both passengers back into their seats. After a few seconds he slides the shift back to "D" and eases off the gas as he turns left toward his home, giggling.

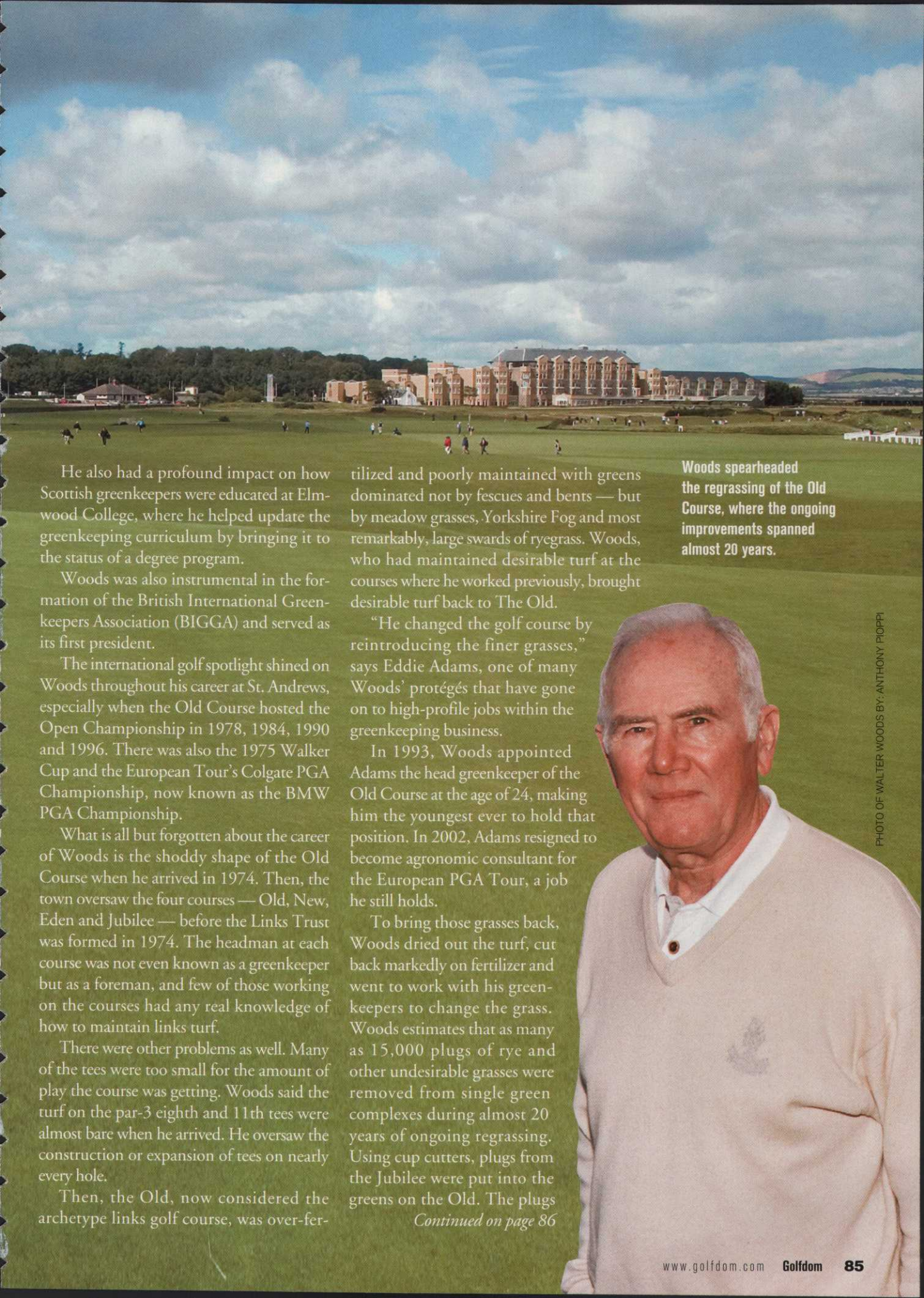
The 73-year-old Woods, the most famous caretaker of the Old Course since Old Tom Morris a century ago, still has youth flowing through his veins. He is adept at running a computer, has his own Web site, travels extensively in his role as speaker and agronomic

consultant, plays golf as often as he can and still enjoys a drink at the St. Andrews Golf Club, located next to the 18th green of the Old Course, where he is a member.

Woods, who has been married to Caroline for 50 years, is well-known and respected throughout the town, but even more so in the international greenkeeping community. For more than 20 years, Woods oversaw the agronomics of the town's courses, including the Old.

His role, though, with the links of St. Andrews is often portrayed incorrectly. He was never the head greenkeeper of The Old; rather, his title was links superintendent.

In that position, Woods ushered in the vast improvements of the playing conditions at the Old, but he also revamped the way all the courses were managed and how the greenkeepers and head greenkeepers were financially compensated in direct proportion to the quality of the work and, eventually, the amount of schooling they received in greenkeeping.



He also had a profound impact on how Scottish greenkeepers were educated at Elmwod College, where he helped update the greenkeeping curriculum by bringing it to the status of a degree program.

Woods was also instrumental in the formation of the British International Greenkeepers Association (BIGGA) and served as its first president.

The international golf spotlight shined on Woods throughout his career at St. Andrews, especially when the Old Course hosted the Open Championship in 1978, 1984, 1990 and 1996. There was also the 1975 Walker Cup and the European Tour's Colgate PGA Championship, now known as the BMW PGA Championship.

What is all but forgotten about the career of Woods is the shoddy shape of the Old Course when he arrived in 1974. Then, the town oversaw the four courses — Old, New, Eden and Jubilee — before the Links Trust was formed in 1974. The headman at each course was not even known as a greenkeeper but as a foreman, and few of those working on the courses had any real knowledge of how to maintain links turf.

There were other problems as well. Many of the tees were too small for the amount of play the course was getting. Woods said the turf on the par-3 eighth and 11th tees were almost bare when he arrived. He oversaw the construction or expansion of tees on nearly every hole.

Then, the Old, now considered the archetype links golf course, was over-fer-

tilized and poorly maintained with greens dominated not by fescues and bents — but by meadow grasses, Yorkshire Fog and most remarkably, large swards of ryegrass. Woods, who had maintained desirable turf at the courses where he worked previously, brought desirable turf back to The Old.

“He changed the golf course by reintroducing the finer grasses,” says Eddie Adams, one of many Woods’ protégés that have gone on to high-profile jobs within the greenkeeping business.

In 1993, Woods appointed Adams the head greenkeeper of the Old Course at the age of 24, making him the youngest ever to hold that position. In 2002, Adams resigned to become agronomic consultant for the European PGA Tour, a job he still holds.

To bring those grasses back, Woods dried out the turf, cut back markedly on fertilizer and went to work with his greenkeepers to change the grass. Woods estimates that as many as 15,000 plugs of rye and other undesirable grasses were removed from single green complexes during almost 20 years of ongoing regrassing. Using cup cutters, plugs from the Jubilee were put into the greens on the Old. The plugs

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Woods spearheaded the regrassing of the Old Course, where the ongoing improvements spanned almost 20 years.

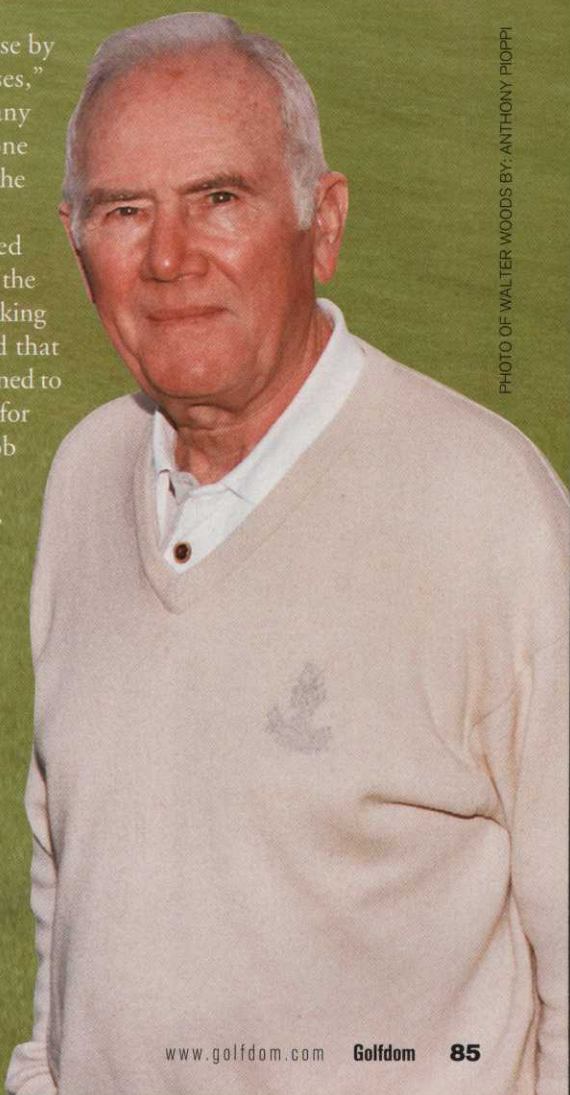


PHOTO OF WALTER WOODS BY: ANTHONY PIPPI

"Walter is a bit of a legend. Rightly or wrongly, he has fought against the Augusta syndrome ... Walter stuck to his guns — less water and fertilizer, lean and mean."

GEORGE BROWN,
GOLF COURSES AND
ESTATE MANAGER,
WESTIN TURNBERRY
RESORT



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came from fairways or rough around the various courses, and plugs from the nursery were used to fill in the Jubilee.

Adams said the plugs were overlapped so that not even the smallest amount of poor turf remained. He said he was part of a group that put 12,000 plugs into the green shared by the sixth and 12th holes.

"We got so bored doing it that around Christmastime we put them in the shape of a Christmas tree," Adams said, chuckling at the recollection.

The process was not welcomed by many of the local golfers.

"As I increased (the plugging), the more complaints I got," says Woods, who remains proud of the accomplishment. "That was the biggest improvement we ever made."

Sir Michael Bonallack, president of BIGGA, was secretary of the R&A from 1983 to 1999 and remembers plenty of backlash against Woods' changing of the turf, a move Bonallack says was the correct one.

"I think it should have caused quite a fuss at the time," Bonallack adds. "Walter is stubborn. If he thinks he's right, he sticks to it, and you can't shift him off of it."

George Brown, golf courses and estates manager at the Westin Turnberry Resort, is one of Woods' oldest friends. Their mutual ribbing has gone on for the 22 years since Brown threw Woods and his caravan off the golf course property during the 1986 Open Championship at Turnberry. Woods had set up his temporary home next to the maintenance sheds without seeking permission from Brown.

"Walter is a bit of a legend," says Brown, who is heralded throughout the greenkeeping world for his work at Turnberry. "Rightly or wrongly, he has fought against the Augusta syndrome ... nothing against Augusta, I love it. Walter stuck to his guns — less water and fertilizer, lean and mean. We're in the same mold. We both believe the same."

The two men talk at least once a week and recently teed it up at Kingsbarnes and the Old Course.

"We used to play for money, now we play

for Viagra," Brown says, sending himself into a raucous laugh.

Euan Grant, who followed up Adams as head greenkeeper of the Old before moving on to grow in Machrihanish Dunes Golf Club, which is still under construction, remembers meeting Woods and Brown for the first time. It was 1995 in San Francisco at the annual conference and show of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA).

"It was one in the morning at a bar in San Francisco, and Walter and George were arguing whether the East Coast or the West Coast of Scotland was better for growing grass. It was fascinating," Grant says.

The two became friends that day and when Grant went from the head greenkeeper at Forest of Arden to the New Course at St. Andrews, he sought Woods' advice during his tenure there as well as his time on the Old.

"He was always available for an ear on his opinion toward change and traditional greenkeeping practices," Grant says. "His theories are genius."

Woods didn't get his start in the golf industry until he was 22. In 1959, he was working above ground at a coal mine in Tillycultry, Scotland, when he was approached about maintaining the nearby nine-hole Tillycultry Golf Club for the rest of the summer. He liked the job so much he stayed on for two years before moving in 1963 to Braehead Golf Club, where he oversaw the expansion from nine holes to 18 holes, leaving in 1967 for England and Stanton-on-Wolds Golf Club.

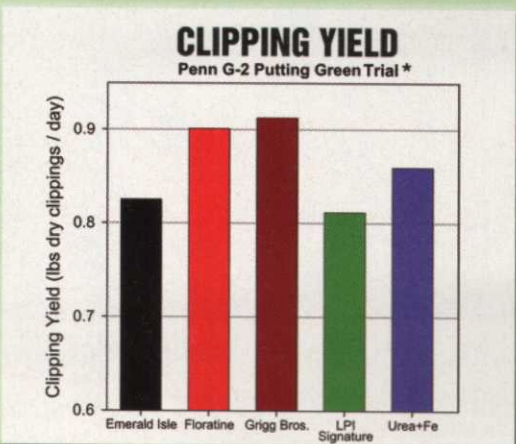
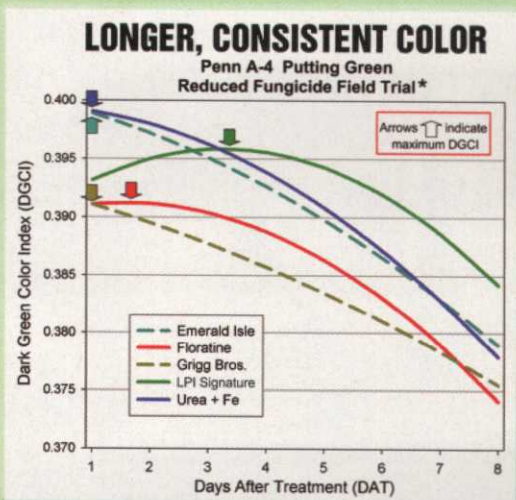
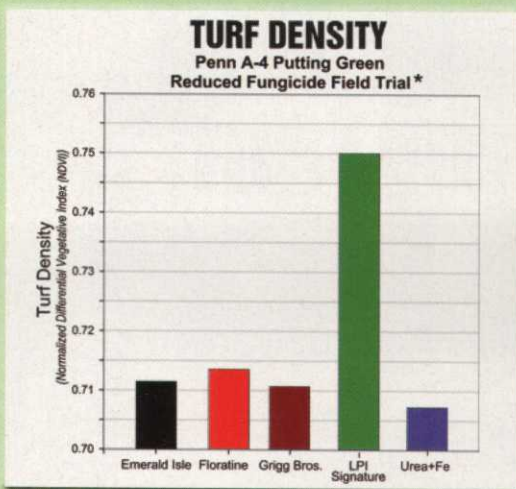
It was there Woods encountered *Poa annua* in his greens and the problems associated with it.

"I thought, what the heavens is this?" he says. "At that time my education was, cut it and have strong back."

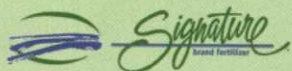
Woods left there in 1970 and went to Notts Golf Club, commonly known as Hollinwell, the town in England where it is located. This was Woods' one experience at a high-end private course — it had 300 members at the time — and with it came a large maintenance staff and a virtually

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Woods' Work

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unlimited budget to keep the heath-land course in perfect condition.

"If you wanted something, you got it as long as you maintained it they way they liked it," Woods says. "You felt like you were in heaven when you worked in a place like this."

A few weeks before we chatted, Woods was sent by the R&A to Hollinwell, which was hosting the Jacques Leglise Trophy, a youth tournament pitting Britain and Ireland against Europe. Looking more than 30 years into his past, Woods said it might have been the wrong decision to move on.

"Even today I regret leaving there." In fact, he is not sure why he left, other than to say, "There was something biting at me."

His decision came on a whim.

"One day I went home and lifted a golf magazine and saw the advertisement for St. Andrews," he says.

From his earliest days in the business, he did everything he could to educate himself. Woods joined local and regional greenkeeping associations, attended classes, read and later traveled often to the United States to the GCSAA conference.

"There was something that inspired me to learn. I was never the cleverest chap," he added in his usual self-deprecating humor.

At the time, Woods said America was 20 years ahead when it came to educating greenkeepers. It was with that fact in mind that he helped to change the curriculum at Elmwood College in Cupar, just outside of St. Andrews.

One of the great lessons Woods taught Adams was a trait that can't be learned in school: the ability to stand up to the relentless criticism and second-guessing at the hands of the St. Andrews residents and the members of the St. Andrews Golf Club where Woods and Adams belong.

"St. Andrews ... a town with 14,000 greenkeepers who all know more than the man in charge," Adams says. "You would hear people say things to him that I would cringe at."

For his part, Woods said he learned to ignore the uneducated.

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ACROSS THE POND

ABOUT THIS FEATURE: We've heard from golf course superintendents that they're interested in what their peers are doing overseas. This new feature, which will run occasionally in *Golfdom*, will spotlight European course managers and greenkeepers and their golf course operations.

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EDDIE ADAMS,
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EUROPEAN PGA TOUR

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"If you go into the club, don't listen to the locals. They are the biggest complainers," he says.

Woods weathered the barbs and turned the Old Course around. He was there for the building of the Strathclyde Course and reworking of the Balgove and Eden courses, all overseen by the Links Trust. After retiring in 1994, he became a consultant and highly sought speaker in the UK, Europe and the United States.

The Links Trust, though, does not utilize his expertise. He has not been called on to consult there since retiring. He does keep his eye on the Old, however, and has his opinion of how it is managed. He says the Links Trust allows too many rounds a year onto the course, and that there must be days when the course is shut so greenkeepers can do their work. The Old is closed to golfers on Sundays except for the Dunhill Links Championships, but it's open to the public as a park.

"When I play the course now, I notice the greens are softer," he says. "I would say the greens are changing slightly, but they are still putting well. I think change in turf is inevitable," Woods added, pointing out this was an abnormally wet year in Scotland.

He also offers some advice.

"They are not aerating enough for the amount of play they are getting," he says.

While it might bother him that his expertise is not valued in his hometown, Woods does not dwell on it. He prefers to look back on his career, the places he's been, the people he's met as well as the opportunities still afforded him and the fact that his knowledge is still sought after. He is amazed by it all.

"I'm the luckiest guy in the world," he says. ■

*Pioppi is a contributing editor for **Golfdom** and editor at large for **Golfdom Europe** magazine, where this story first appeared in January.*

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