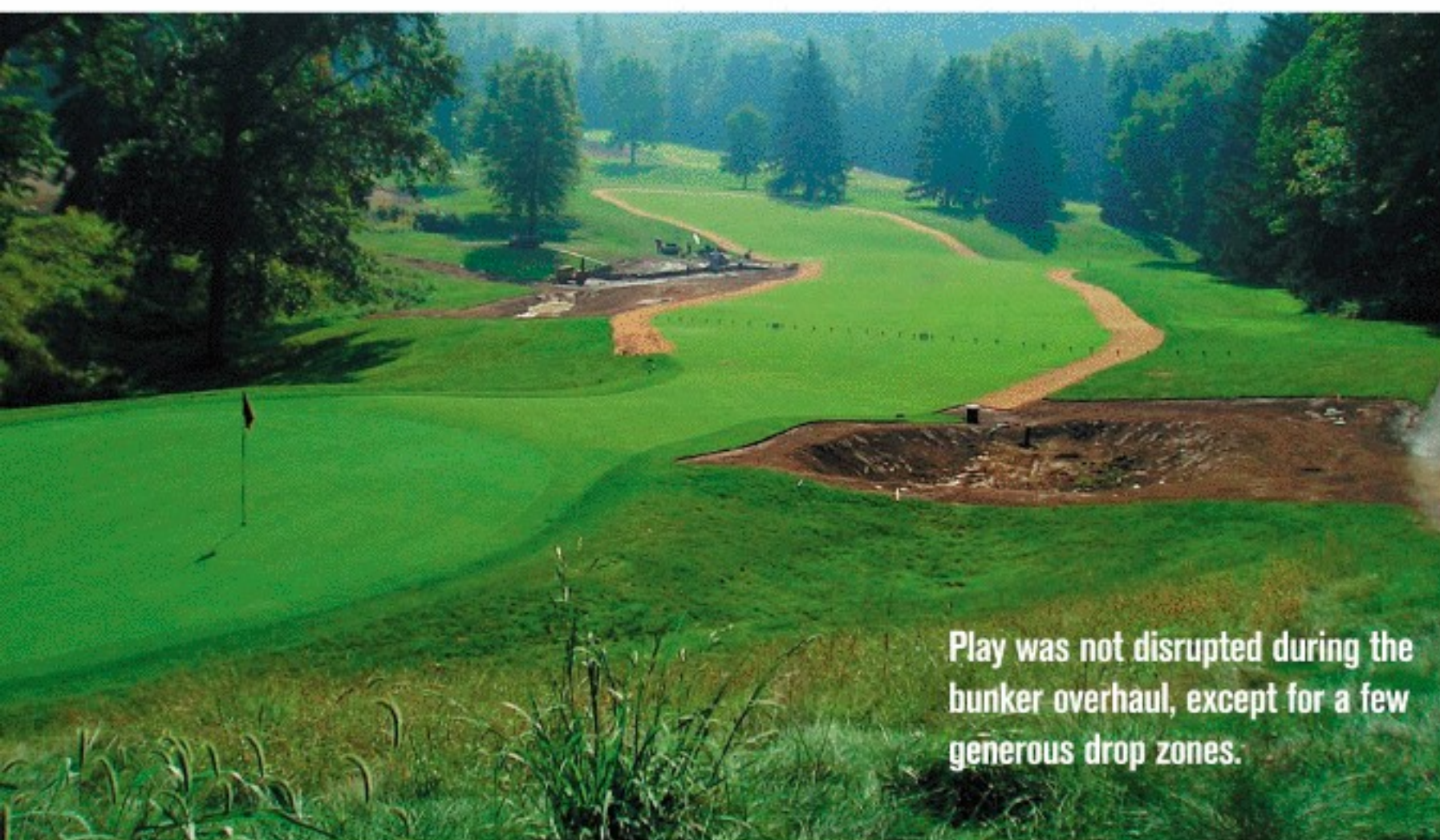




In addition to a complete bunker restoration by Forse Design and Total Turf Services, Superintendent Chad Mark tackled green expansions in-house, and he transitioned the intermediate rough to ryegrass.

Working as One

Management team at Kirtland Country Club unites to sell its master plan to members



Play was not disrupted during the bunker overhaul, except for a few generous drop zones.

BY DAVID FRABOTTA
SENIOR EDITOR

Traditional clubs often have traditional members with traditional attitudes about golf. Attitudes like, “Bunkers are hazards, they’re not supposed to be perfect;” or, “We already have a great golf course, so why should we spend a lot of money to make it better?”

Those sentiments were the main chal-

lenges in approving a master plan for The Kirtland (Ohio) Country Club, a 1921 track designed by C.H. Alison.

When widespread renovations were proposed in 2004 — a master plan created by Forse Design — members disagreed on the scope of the project as well as its timing. Some felt that the plan’s initial \$800,000 bunker overhaul and green expansions could be done in-house with a few extra maintenance workers over the duration of several years.

But the management team knew that a piecemeal renovation would disturb the golf course for too long, and the end product could be more expensive and disjointed. The management team soon realized that *selling* the business strategy was as important as *having* a business strategy.

So General Manager Richard LaRocca, Superintendent Chad Mark and Head Golf Professional Tim Bennett worked together to help sell its capital improvement plan through almost continuous member communications that included innovative open houses and town hall meetings.

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TOP PHOTO BY: CHAD MARK; ALL OTHER PHOTOS BY: DAVID FRABOTTA



From left, Head Golf Professional Tim Bennett, General Manager Richard LaRocca and Superintendent Chad Mark disseminated a wall of information so members could get comfortable with proposed golf course renovations and capital improvements.

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RAIN BIRD

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They started at the top. Once the management team could elicit buy-in at the upper levels, then those members could be the biggest advocates for the renovation. So the staff started with the club president and other influential members who knew the golf course had a bunker problem.

Fortunately, the club president and certain committee heads agreed with the strategic plan. It made more sense, both fiscally and architecturally, to complete the project in one fell swoop.

"These are business people, and common sense in business is not to waste money," LaRocca says. "So if we can implement a financial plan, then we are no longer being reactive; we'll be proactive."

After the club had buy-in from various upper levels, it was time to go to work on the rest of its members. As in any club membership, Kirtland had to sell its master plan to golfers with handicaps ranging from two to 20. And like many clubs, some of the oldest members don't golf at all. The club has 600 registered handicaps for its 300 family memberships.

The management team had to tackle the sales process together, beginning by interjecting the master plan during routine operations and financial meetings. When the team felt resistance, it became clear that the plan required its own momentum.

So the team began sending e-mail blasts, newsletters and other member communications discussing the master plan and golf course renovation. They scheduled get-to-know-the-master-plan sessions that revolved around existing events to garner a good turnout.

As the master plan gained traction in 2006,

TIPS TO SELL A PLAN

- Prioritize projects and assign phases to them.
- Create realistic timelines.
- Start small: Court committee heads and club leaders before the broader membership.
- Present a unified front and keep other managers apprised of all member communications.
- Include architects and consultants in town hall meetings.
- Secure "yes" votes before vote time.

the management team turned on the heat with town hall meetings and open houses to discuss the changes proposed on the golf course. Kirtland members began to see the value of the renovation, but they seemed to need reassurance that the scope of the project was necessary and that they were getting a good deal, for lack of a better phrase. Clubs, after all, are filled with savvy businessmen who want to understand how their money is being spent so they are comfortable with the deal.

A tour of the maintenance facility during an open house helped reassure members that the management team was being good stewards of the budget. When members walked through Mark's maintenance domain, they were astonished at how tidy it was. But even more impressive were the hand tools that donned the names of each worker to whom they belonged. The accountability appeared to go a long way.

"If you are going to be efficient and able to pay attention to detail on the golf course, then you need to have an orderly shop," Mark says.

Also part of the tour was a price check: Mark labeled his equipment with price tags to help members understand the cost of golf maintenance equipment and how their money was being spent.

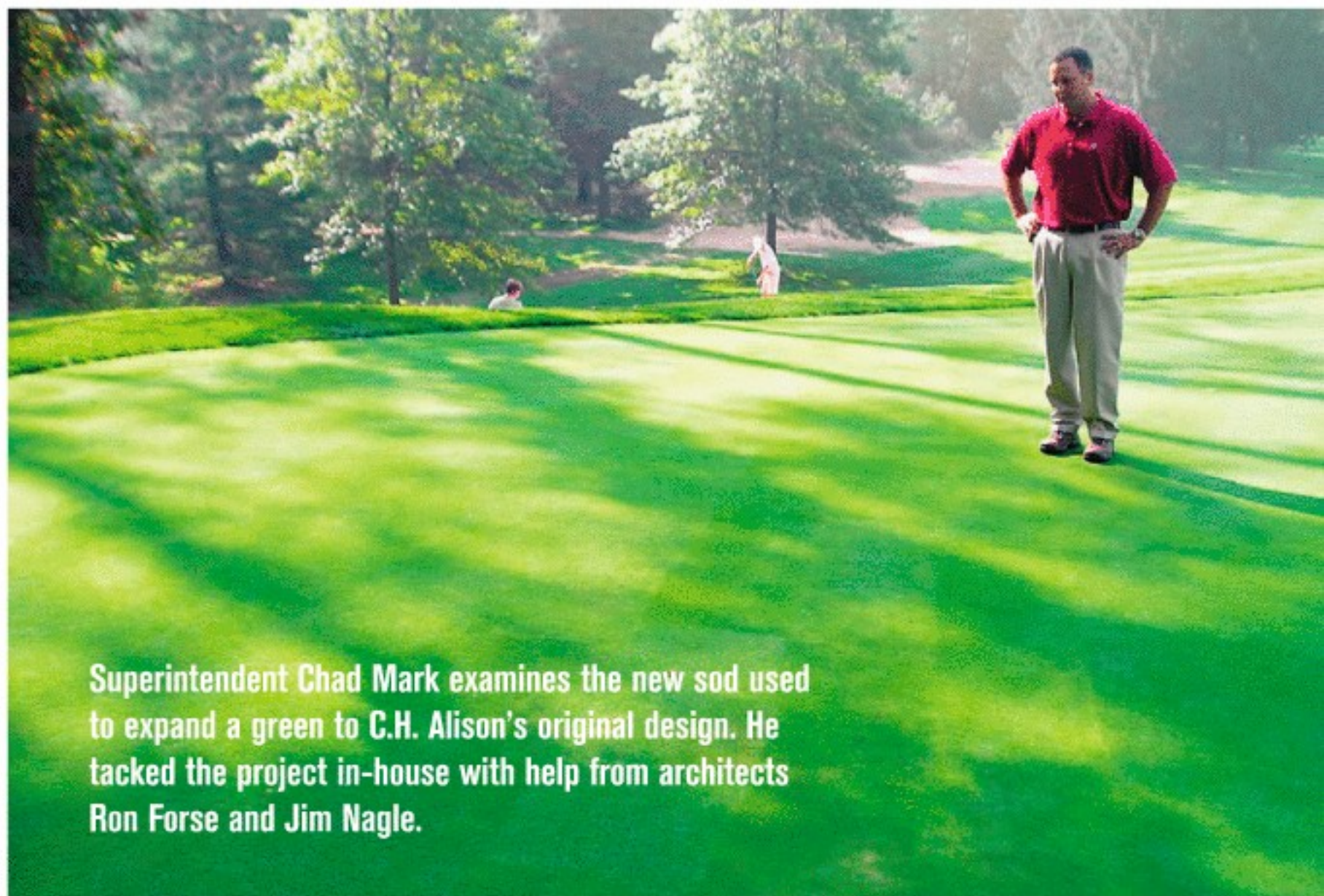
The bunker renovation project and green expansions, which Mark did largely in house with an 86-year-old *Poa annua* and bentgrass mixture cultivated from his practice-course nursery, began late last year. A few holes were finished in the spring, and members, despite their initial hesitation, have been clamoring about it ever since.

Mark is amid a second phase of green expansions and an ongoing tree-removal and maintenance program. The master plan for Kirtland is up to 20 years, including a new irrigation system in 2012.

"When you let things build up, they become more expensive," LaRocca says, citing the almost \$1-million bunker renovation as a perfect example. "We need to be efficient managers of the process to avoid a huge assessment down the road."

And you need to be a pretty good salesman, too. Of course, even though Kirtland's master plans are approved for two decades, the communication from the management team will

persist through each phase as if they needed to approve the process all over again. That's the key to keeping members engaged, apprised and satisfied with the projects on the golf course. ■



Superintendent Chad Mark examines the new sod used to expand a green to C.H. Alison's original design. He tackled the project in-house with help from architects Ron Forse and Jim Nagle.

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An advertisement for Rain Bird EAGLE Series Rotors. It features a large, 3D white number '10' on a green lawn. A man in a white t-shirt and blue jeans stands next to the number, with his hands on his hips. In the background, there are trees and a body of water. At the base of the number '10', there are several broken, rusted metal rotors. Below the image, there is a line of text: "To learn more about the testing, visit www.rainbird.com/NewEagle/index."

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