

The Natural

With an affinity for the great outdoors,
Joe Hubbard was born to be a golf course superintendent

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

Lying on his back in the ice-cold mountain stream, 12-year-old Joe Hubbard shivered from head to toe. While the water running over him was painfully frigid, lying there was something Hubbard had to endure — lest he could die in the California wilderness from a poisonous rattlesnake bite.

Hubbard was hiking in the Sierra Nevada Mountains with his two friends, who were twin Navajo Indian brothers, when the rattlesnake lunged at him and bit his left index finger. The three, who had been camping in the mountains for several days, were about 90 minutes from the nearest town and hospital. The brothers, aware of an old tribal remedy to combat snakebites, told Hubbard to lie in the creek. They knew the cold water would act as a natural antidote to slow the snake's venom traveling through Hubbard's body.

Then the brothers went to work like a couple of emergency-room workers on Hubbard's wound. They opened the cut wider to let it drain and placed a wad of chewing tobacco on it so the tobacco's carcinogens would draw out the poison. They wrapped the tobacco against the wound with spider webs to keep it in place. Then they kept watch over Hubbard, feeding him fresh-caught trout from the stream for nourishment.

My arm turned real red, and I was sick for a couple of days," Hubbard says. "But then I got better."

Sitting in his office at the Broken Sound Club in

Boca Raton, Fla., where he is the director of golf course maintenance, Hubbard recalls his brush with death that summer day in 1969 with a nervous smile. He holds out his finger to reveal the nasty scar from the snakebite.

A lot of people after enduring such a harrowing situation would probably put away the hiking boots and camping gear for good. But not Hubbard, now 51, who loves the great outdoors more than anything the world has to offer. It's precisely why he made the golf course maintenance field his profession — so he could work outside and tend the terrain while overseeing the creatures that inhabit it.

"I truly believe that most golf course superintendents are environmentalists," Hubbard says. "We love being outdoors, and we love seeing the wildlife. We're just visitors here, so we know we must be stewards of what we've been handed."

At the Broken Sound Club, Hubbard has been handed two golf courses to maintain — the Old Course and the Club Course. Hubbard, who's celebrating his 25th year in the business this year, came to Broken Sound in 2004. The profession has landed him in several states, including Idaho, California, Washington, Oklahoma, Virginia and throughout Florida.

Hubbard says he has worked many long and stressful hours to get to his current level. Through it all, Hubbard has always enjoyed the natural

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Joe Hubbard believes that most superintendents are environmentalists at heart. "We're just visitors here, so we know we must be stewards of what we've been handed," he says.

Photo by Larry Aylward

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Vegetation around ponds provides buffer zones for pesticides and fertilizer.

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scenery around him. He is still stirred when he sees a great blue heron flapping its mighty wings while flying over a fairway. And there's nothing like the spectacular sight of the morning sunrise over the pond located on the Old Course's 18th hole.

Hubbard beams when he talks about a pair

of swans that raised their young on the Club Course earlier this year.

"The mother and father just showed up one day," he says. "They had their chicks here and hung around for about a month. They knew it was a safe haven. If it was not an environmentally friendly place, they wouldn't have stayed."

It has been Hubbard's goal to make the golf courses he oversees a safe haven for all plant life and wildlife. The certified golf course superintendent has teamed with Broken Sound's General Manager and Chief Operating Officer John Crean to assemble a sweeping environmental management plan that extends from the golf courses to the clubhouses.

Not only is the Broken Sound Club doing the right thing environmentally, it has taken a leadership position locally for the green movement. And the public relations of doing so has boosted the club's environmental image.

"It's one of the most progressive clubs I've ever seen," Hubbard says.

Case in point: Broken Sound is in the midst of implementing a massive \$13.5 million reclaimed water project, paid for by the city of Boca Raton. The project will be completed on the Old Course in December before beginning on the Club Course next year.

For years, the city of Boca Raton has been dumping about 6 million gallons of treated wastewater into the ocean, which Hubbard says has been a waste of money and resources. Much of that water will now be directed to Broken Sound and used for golf course irrigation, among other things. It will cost Broken Sound about \$300,000 a year in utilities to pay for the reclaimed water.

"This means we won't be pulling water out of the aquifer anymore," Hubbard says. "Every golf course in Florida should be irrigating with reclaimed water."

When he arrived at Broken Sound, Hubbard went to work on the two courses' landscapes. He says he set out to add "texture" to the two courses by adding landscape beds and natural settings for wildlife. The courses are now more scenic and colorful. "We've totally changed the look of the golf courses," Hubbard says.

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annual flowers and plants dotting the two courses' landscapes upon arriving at the club. "It didn't make sense to me," he says. "With annuals, you only get a couple of months of bang for your buck. Annuals also require a lot of upkeep and water."

Hubbard decided to plant perennials instead. Now the courses are highlighted with shrubs, fountain grass and cordgrass. "You can file that change under the environmentally fiscal category," he says.

Hubbard is also an environmental opportunist. He points to an army of native palm trees dotting the side of a fairway on the Club Course. "Those were slated to be ripped out of a parking lot at the Old Course," he says. "I didn't want to waste them, so we had them transplanted over here."

Hubbard points to a dead tree, which was splintered by a hurricane. He says what might seem like dead wood to some of the club's 1,600 members provides sanctuary for wildlife.

"One day, a member was telling me to take it out, just as a woodpecker was pecking on it and throwing bark everywhere," Hubbard says. "I said to him, 'You'd have to go to the zoo to see something like this.'"

Hubbard has also taken his environmental initiatives to the turf. He recently regrassed the Club Course's bermudagrass tees with Sea Isle 1, a variety of seashore paspalum, which is known for its environmental attributes.

"Seashore paspalum doesn't require as much water and fertilizer," Hubbard says.



Several dead trees still stand on Broken Sound's property and provide a haven for the many bird species.

"There's also no overseeding with it."

Weeds are a constant problem on the two courses because of the never-ending warm temperatures. Hubbard prefers to remove bigger weeds manually. He and his crew spot spray for smaller weeds. "We haven't boom sprayed a herbicide out here in two years," he says.

While Hubbard is an environmentally minded superintendent, he's not anti-pesticide. He lives in the real world of golf course maintenance, where demanding golfers desire course conditions like the kind they see on TV Sunday afternoons.

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He's Got Game

When he was a kid, Joe Hubbard got a job on a golf course so he could play free golf. The practice helped.

Hubbard evolved into an excellent golfer, and was a two-time high school state champion in Idaho.

Hubbard attended Florida State University and Boise State University on golf scholarships. He has won about 100 amateur tournaments.

While he doesn't tee it up much anymore, Hubbard says he still plays to an 8 handicap.

"Golf has afforded me the ability to open doors," says Hubbard, who counts Arnold Palmer as one of his friends.

— Larry Aylward

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In fact, Hubbard says “it was a travesty” that diazinon was banned in 2004. He says “you could put down 2 ounces” of the organophosphate insecticide and it would kill 40 different insects. “But there were a couple of yahoos who misused it, and all it takes is a couple of bad apples to give us a bad name,” he adds.

In Florida, “Everything grows bigger, badder and more of it,” Hubbard says. Hence, superintendents must rely on pesticides. But Hubbard has implemented a sound integrated pest management program at Broken Sound.

“The approach we take is you do what you have to do, and you don’t do any more,” says Phil Peterson, Hubbard’s superintendent on the Old Course. Peterson also says he’s impressed with the newer pesticides the courses

🦶 **Little blue herons are a common sight at the Broken Sound Club. Hubbard photographed this heron and its reflection from a placid pond.**

uses that contain less-toxic active ingredients and require lower use rates.

At the two clubhouses, Crean is spearheading an ambitious movement to go green. Both buildings no longer use Styrofoam cups and have reduced use of plastic bottles. The clubhouses have also switched to biodegradable corn-based plastic cups and recycled paper cups and have introduced filtered water stands to replace bottled water.

Crean, who came to Broken Sound in 2003, also struck a deal with a local sanitation company to have its paper and plastic garbage picked up for recycling. The company is actually paying the club for the garbage to recycle it.

Broken Sound also invested about \$77,000 to install nine solar-powered hot water heaters, which will save up to \$2,000 a month on energy. And the club receives a tax credit for the installation. Crean, who realizes they don’t call Florida the “Sunshine State” for nothing, is studying the feasibility of switching to solar-powered golf cars.

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The club's latest environmental endeavor involves composting all of its organic material — including grass clippings, tree branches and food waste — to put back onto the golf courses. The club, which spends about \$65,000 a year transporting the waste to a landfill, is testing a bio-digester that will compost the waste.

"Compost helps bind nitrogen into the soil," Crean explains. "So when you put out a fertilizer on the golf course, it will stay in the turfgrass and soil longer, which will help the turfgrass' roots take up the nitrogen longer. That means we can reduce our fertilizer use over the long term."

If all goes as planned, Crean and Hubbard expect the city of Boca Raton to help the club get a permit to purchase the bio-digester for about \$400,000.

"This project could change the way golf courses get rid of refuse in the future," Hubbard says.

Many of the environmental initiatives cost money, but Crean says the club is also saving money by introducing them. "The benefits will come back to the club 20-fold," he adds.

They already have. Members have told Hubbard how much they enjoy the golfing experience, thanks to his environmental doings. The compliments are like a bird's sweet-singing music to his ears.

"It has been said that people just came here to play golf before," Hubbard says. "Now they come to enjoy their rounds by looking at the scenery."

Superintendents and the Environment

Golfdom has profiled several environmentally minded superintendents and golf courses over the years. You can read about them in *Golfdom's* online archives at www.golfdom.com.

The Man With the Environmental Plan 🌿 Pat Blum helps Colonial Acres become the first golf course to navigate the EPA Performance Track.

Speaking Naturally 🌿 CourseCo's Ray Davies walks the talk when it comes to golf's role in the environment.

Natural Wonder 🌿 Sand Ridge Golf Club was built and is maintained to function in harmony with the environment.

Doing the Right Thing 🌿 Paul Emling has transformed Arcadia Bluffs' image with a golf course maintenance program based on his genuine appreciation for the environment.

Ivan Snyder, Broken Sound's former green chairman and a member of the club's executive board, says he's impressed with Hubbard's accomplishments. "He has transformed the facility," Snyder says, noting Hubbard's knack to use natural elements such as trees to add depth perception to the courses.

Snyder has belonged to Broken Sound for more than 15 years, and says wildlife has vastly increased on the courses.

"The wildlife we have is spectacular," he adds. "One of our members is an avid bird watcher, and he gives early-morning bird-watching tours on the golf course."

If Hubbard believed in reincarnation (he doesn't; he's a devout Christian), he might tell you he was a bird or a bear in a previous life. Or a fish.

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🌿 There are several alligators on the two courses, and Hubbard has given them names. Meet Al-e-gator. But don't bother him while he's having lunch.

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Hubbard says he set out to add “texture” to the two courses by adding landscape beds and natural settings for wildlife.

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The first thing you notice about his office at the Club Course maintenance facility is the four walls, which are covered with fish — big fish. They are replicas of lunkers landed by Hubbard over the years.

When Hubbard is not working, he’s probably fishing. His favorite fishing spot is the wilderness of Washington state. That setting takes Hubbard back to his youth, when

he and his friends would traipse through the wild and live off the land for weeks. They would catch and cook fish for their food, eat ponderosa nuts and drink water from the cool mountain streams. It was the late 1960s and nobody made a big deal out of kids taking off for the wilderness for a few weeks. It was like summer camp to them.

Hubbard also discovered back then that he had an affinity for animals and that the feeling was mutual. “I’ve always sensed that animals aren’t afraid of me,” he says.

It’s amazing how close Hubbard can get to animals with his camera. Some of his photos, including close-ups of birds, insects and alligators, would be good enough to publish in “National Geographic.”

Among the wildlife at Broken Sound, Hubbard counts almost 70 bird species, including the American bald eagle. There are also foxes, armadillos, snakes, lizards, iguanas, alligators and the Cuban anole, “a lime-green lizard that’s probably about 24 inches long and looks ferocious,” Hubbard says.

The numbers of birds on a golf course are the best indicator of its environmental proficiency, Hubbard says. “When you see 70 bird species, you’re not just in harmony with Mother Nature, you’re accentuating Mother Nature,” he says. “You’ve created more space for birds to feed, live and survive.”

While Hubbard wears environmentalism like a patch on the sleeve of his Broken Sound Club polo shirt, he still believes in the philosophy that man is above beast. For example, Hubbard will not hesitate to have an aggressive alligator dispatched from the golf course. Once, when he was the superintendent of Jonathan’s Landing Old Trail in Jupiter, Fla., an 11-foot, 350-pound gator chased Hubbard and his young daughter on the golf course. The gator was gone the next day. “You know you have to get rid of them when they start chasing people,” Hubbard says.

As much as he loves and appreciates nature, Hubbard has the utmost respect for it. He knows it could kill him — and it nearly has on several occasions, including the time Hubbard was snipped by a snake.

On the other hand, it is nature that has provided Hubbard with a zest for life. 🌿

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