

A photograph of Mark Wilson, a professional golfer, sitting on a wooden bench outdoors. He is wearing a black t-shirt with a 'Ryder Cup Valhalla' logo and light-colored trousers. He is smoking a cigar, and a large plume of white smoke is rising from his mouth. The background shows a lush green golf course with trees and a clear sky.

Give That Man a Cigar

Mark Wilson has a
lot to celebrate
— his 20th
anniversary
at Valhalla Golf
Club and his facility
hosting the Ryder Cup

Mark Wilson lights up a cigar nearly the size of a dynamite stick. He'll likely strike a match to an even bigger smoke in November, when

he celebrates his 20th year as golf course superintendent of Valhalla Golf Club in Louisville, Ky. But Wilson's mind is on something else these days — preparing the course for the Ryder Cup on Sept. 19-21. Wilson's hair shows not a touch of gray and he makes no concessions to the sun as he goes hatless while driving a golf car on a tour of the Jack Nicklaus-designed 18 holes, many of which have been tweaked since the 2004 Senior PGA last brought Valhalla into the spotlight.

"My life's been put on hold for the last three and a half years since we started preparing for the Ryder Cup," Wilson says. "After the 2004 Senior PGA, Jack made a list, and we made a list. I went to the Ryder Cup at Oakland Hills in Detroit (in 2004) and saw how big this tournament has gotten."

It's a Monday morning in late June, 84 days before the big match, and the 52-year-old Wilson is feeling some stress. "Along with having the Ryder Cup, you're in demand right now," he says as he whizzes the golf car to the first tee. "For example, this is the eighth Monday in a row we've had an event."

Wilson had scheduled a mowing crew for 5 p.m. to work around the event, but he's just learned that its start time will be delayed, and he'll have to reschedule his workers.

In its early years, Valhalla's founders — local businessman Dwight Gahm and his sons — opened the checkbook for Wilson to manicure a championship-caliber course, which opened in 1986. When the PGA of America began acquiring a stake in 1993 and after it assumed full ownership in 2000, the emphasis has been on upgrades designed to elevate Valhalla to a ranking among top-tier tournament venues.

Wilson, who is in his 37th year in the business, is asked how he's been able to handle the demands at such an ambitious place.

"Probably in recent years, it's the next

tournament that's driven the machine," he responds, chomping on his stogie. "You do get burned out, but adrenaline-wise, when you're hosting the biggest tournament in the world, it pops you."

"And we've had the luxury here of always being able to make this place better. A lot of superintendents are fighting a battle they can't win because they don't have the resources. They're losing ground every day. At least we're in a progressive mode."

Wilson takes a contemplative puff and then offers an afterthought, "I ain't had enough time in the 20 years I've been here to sit down and write a resume, huh?"

He's plainspoken and punctuates many of his comments with an inquisitive "huh," as if he's willing to entertain an alternate explanation but can't imagine what it might be. Other times he ends a point with a staccato "ha-ha-ha," as if he's letting you in on a private joke.

Wilson takes a call on his cell phone and grumbles to the caller that having golfers on the course until 6 p.m. is messing up his maintenance plans. "If you notice," he says when he returns to this interview, "I don't hesitate to tell people how I feel, ha-ha-ha."

Maybe that's a key to your longevity, it is suggested. He agrees. "It don't build up," he says, and there's that short laugh again.

Since 2004, Wilson and crew — along with various subcontractors — have moved and rebuilt four greens and created eight new tees, all after consultations with Nicklaus. The course now has 65 bunkers, where it once had 43. Length, naturally, has been added. Valhalla could play as long as 7,560 yards, according to the superintendent, but he expects hole No. 2, previously a par 5, to be shortened to 505 yards and play as a demanding par 4. Par would then be 71 over 7,496 yards.

Many changes were also made to the grounds to facilitate spectator sight lines, improve corporate hospitality and media areas, and ease access to and from Valhalla. Aesthetics have been improved with the construction of rock walls, installation of water features and other projects.

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"Adrenaline-wise, when you're hosting the biggest tournament in the world, it pops you."

— MARK WILSON

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Wilson won't divulge the amount spent since 2004 in preparation for the Ryder Cup. When asked how Valhalla will get its money back, he says, "You didn't buy a tent, did you?" The 100-person corporate hospitality tents sold for about \$500,000 and up.

Driving down the first fairway, Wilson notes that after witnessing the energy — and

the crowds — on the first tee in 2004 at Oakland Hills, he took out some wooded areas and lowered mounds to make room for huge crowds to witness the opening shots. He points to the intermediate cut, which has been expanded from the uniform 6-foot width he kept for the Senior PGA as well as the 1996 and 2000 PGA Championships, which Valhalla also hosted. It will be as wide as 40 or 50 feet in some places. "It's strategy," Wilson says. "The Americans can pull out their drivers. We think they're longer, so we'll give them more room to hit it."

At the greens, the grass will be left a little longer. The thinking is that U.S. players are better at lobbing with wedges, while the Europeans' bump-and-run strength from shorter grass will be neutralized. The new green on No. 2 is actually smaller at 4,000 square feet and narrower, with two new front bunkers on the left added to an existing one on the right — making a long and exacting par 4. But Wilson feels no guilt.

"One thing I've learned from my experiences," the certified superintendent says, "is never underestimate how good these guys are."

He's learned about managing people as well during his two decades at one course — lessons like learning to delegate and expecting some hires to fail. "No matter what, it's a numbers game," Wilson says. "Every time I hire five people, I know one of them is not going to work out. You know what I'm saying?"

He no longer orders employees to do extra or overtime work. "We have a volunteer sign-up, and the overachievers always sign up and the underachievers don't. Somehow it always works," he says. "That's why I pay everybody by the hour. Everybody who works more I pay more, huh?"

Another key: Promote from within. All of Wilson's assistants have come from within the staff, and he's seldom gone outside to bring in anyone above existing workers. "The ladder is right here," he says.

The expanded 120-person Ryder Cup staff will include more than 45 former Valhalla crew members — many now superintendents themselves — returning to help groom the course. "They just want to be part of this,"

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Wilson says. "They've put their sweat, blisters and blood in this place already."

Valhalla General Manager Mike Montague, who has been at the club for more than 20 years as well, says Wilson's longevity can be attributed partially to the fact that there are always new levels to achieve in the quest to develop a renowned championship venue.

"He's being constantly challenged, so he doesn't have to look someplace else," Montague says.

Wilson also carries out the overall mission while not straying too far from his troops. "Being willing to do what's asked of him and lead at the same time — that's the challenge," the GM says. "Mark is a team player, and that's what he expects of his crew."



Wilson's mantra is, "No problems, only solutions."

Hole No. 7, a fascinating par 5 with two fairways (one for eagle hunters), had exposed quarry rock between the landing areas four years ago. It is now a 6-acre waterscape with the ability to pump 5,000 gallons per minute. A new rock wall separates the green's edge from water, and a new bunker guards the safe route to the right.

"I don't really want to give you the number, but we've taken down a lot of trees" to improve sightlines, Wilson says, driving along No. 10. "You see this? Seven thousand people could be in there — and that used to be all woods."

Wilson has two sons in their early 20s and a 12-year-old daughter. The oldest, Dane, works for him, and it's made Wilson think

more about his mentoring role. "It's fun teaching," he says.

His mantra: No problems, only solutions.

"To me," Wilson says, "it's turning that doggone thing from a problem to a solution and moving on — taking a negative and saying, 'OK, now it's a positive. Let's move on.'" ■

Allar is a contributing editor to Golfdom.



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