

Dynamic Duo

— 2009 —
U.S. OPEN
PREVIEW

Dave Catalano and Craig Currier are making history at Bethpage State Park

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF



When he speaks of Craig Currier, Dave Catalano does so with complete reverence.

When he speaks of Dave Catalano, Craig Currier does so with unabridged esteem.

But neither man talks fondly of the other in an effort to curry favor. The pair speak openly about their mutual admiration because they've earned it from one another by working together for the past 12 years at Bethpage State Park in Farmingdale, N.Y., site of this month's U.S. Open.

Catalano is director of Bethpage State Park, and Currier head superintendent of the park's five public golf courses — the Red, the Yellow, the Green, the Blue and the prestigious Black Course, where the U.S. Open will be played for the second time in eight years. The 61-year-old Catalano, who has spent most of his career at Bethpage, hired the 38-year-old Currier in 1997.

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PHOTOS BY: LARRY AYLWARD



Dave Catalano

Craig Currier

About the Cover

When I saw this photograph of Tiger Woods and the Bethpage Black golf maintenance staff hanging over Superintendent Craig Currier's desk, I asked myself, "How cool would that look on our June cover?" The photograph was taken after Woods won the 2002 U.S. Open. Clutching his trophy, Woods posed with Currier and his cheering staff. Currier gave me the name of the photographer, Larry Lambrecht, and I contacted him and purchased the photograph. — Larry Aylward



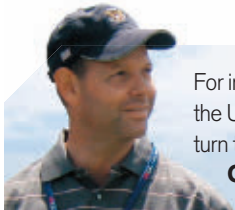
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Ask anybody who knows anything about golf course management, and they'll tell you Catalano and Currier are the guys who make Bethpage's 1,500-acre complex's motor hum like a just-out-of-the-box, high-horsepower fairway mower.

Mike Davis, senior director of rules and competitions for the United States Golf Association, marvels at the two men's dedication to Bethpage. "What's so neat is that they absolutely love Bethpage," says Davis, who's in charge of tournament setup on the Black Course.

Charles Robson, executive director of New York's Metropolitan PGA Section,



For insight into the U.S. Open's setup, turn to the **Mike Davis Q&A** on page 28.

says Bethpage wouldn't operate as well if Currier didn't have Catalano or vice versa. "They believe in each other," Robson says. "They both have the same goal, which is to make it the best place it can be. They're as concerned about Joe Golfer on the Yellow Course as they are about Tiger Woods on the Black Course."

CATALANO IS the first to admit things would be different without Currier around. "Nothing holds him back," Catalano says. "There's nothing I've asked him to get done that he hasn't gotten done — and gotten done better than anybody else I know could get it done."

That's a steep compliment coming from someone who has spent more than 20 years at the Long Island facility and has seen a lot of people come and go.

Catalano goes as far to say Currier is one of a handful of prominent people who has contributed to the "evolution, success and reputation" of Bethpage in its history. Catalano also includes A.W. Tillinghast, renowned golf course designer of the Black Course, among those people.

"I feel that strongly about Craig," Catalano says. "He bleeds for this place."

Catalano was impressed with Currier when he interviewed the then-26-year-old for the job in 1997. Bethpage had recently been awarded the 2002 U.S. Open and much work was needed on the battered Black Course as well as the entire complex, which opened in the mid-1930s. Catalano knew he had to make the right hire. There was little margin for error.

"Craig had a spring in his step and a smile on his face," Catalano says. "He was



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confident he could do the job.”

But Currier was concerned his youth would impede his chances to get the job. He asked Catalano not to hold it against him.

“No, I won’t hold that against you,” Catalano, who was 50 at the time, told Currier. “That’s what you have going for you because we don’t need any more old goats like me around.”

Catalano says Currier had excellent references, including one from Robson, whose opinion Catalano values greatly. Robson knew Currier from Garden City Golf Club, also on Long Island, where he was a member. “I knew he was doing a great job there as an assistant,” Robson says.

Catalano says Currier, like a lot of young people, believed he just needed a chance to show his stuff. He did both at Bethpage. “He hit the ground racing, not running,” Catalano says.

But nobody figured Currier would quickly develop into, as the USGA’s Davis calls him, “one of the best golf course superintendents in the country.”

“Did I know he was as good as this? Absolutely not,” Robson adds. “He was a 26-year-old kid. He could have come in and decided he wanted to party more than prepare a golf course.”

Catalano was impressed with Currier’s leadership skills, which was crucial because Bethpage had a large crew to direct. Currier also had to help lead the Black Course’s restoration. Bethpage had operated on a shoestring budget, but that was changing with golf’s big-top circus coming to town and millions of dollars being invested in the complex by the state and the USGA.

Catalano provided Currier what he needed in people, equipment and supplies and then got out of his way. In fact, Catalano, who was superintendent of Bethpage’s Green course in 1976 and 1977, rarely gets in Currier’s way when it comes to golf course agronomics.

“Obviously, there are budget constraints, and we have frequent conversations about that,” Catalano says. “But I don’t interfere with agronomics. He does that extraordinarily well. He also has an extraordinarily strong supporting cast.”

CATALANO IS IN awe of Currier’s passion for Bethpage. Of course, Catalano shares Currier’s passion, which has made them bond even more.

“Craig is as committed to this place as I am,” says Catalano, sipping green tea while sitting in his office on the second floor of the Bethpage clubhouse. “He takes as much pride in this place as I do. ... I’m thrilled he sees this place the way I see it.”

Catalano pauses.

“You can’t write that into a job description,” he adds.

On a recent brisk afternoon under an overcast sky, Currier is busy putting that passion to work on the Black Course. Like members of his maintenance crew, the strapping 6-foot-5 Currier is dressed to work outdoors. He wears four layers of clothes on his upper body — a polo shirt, a Pittsburgh Steelers (his favorite football team) sweat-shirt, a windbreaker and a dirt-smudged Columbia coat. His well-worn boots have been updated with new shoelaces. A Bethpage ball cap, with his name draped across the back, hugs his head.

“Dave allows me to spend all my time out there,” says Currier, who admits he abhors paperwork. “He makes it easy for me. It seems like a lot of golf course superintendents these days ... half the guys aren’t even on the golf course. They’re too busy doing everything else. I’m the total opposite. I basically spend all my time out here.”

Currier attended the State University of New York (SUNY) at Cobleskill, where he graduated with a bachelor’s degree in plant science and an associate’s degree in turfgrass management. When told that Catalano mentions him in the same breath as Tillinghast, an astonished Currier says it’s Catalano who should be held in such distinguished company.

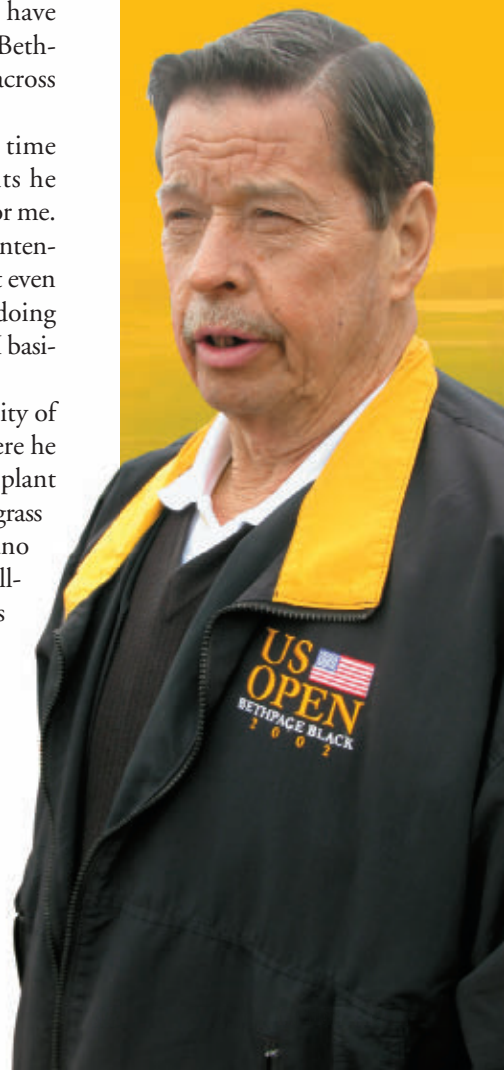
“Without Dave, none of this would’ve happened,” he says of Bethpage’s reformation the past decade.

What Catalano likes about Currier are the same attributes Currier likes about him. “Dave is a no-nonsense kind of guy,” Currier says.

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“ This isn’t a job – it’s a way of life. And it’s a great way of life. This place is in my blood.”

– DAVE CATALANO



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The USGA's Davis likes that about Catalano as well. Davis says the superintendent is the most vital person to any U.S. Open operation. But in Bethpage's case, Davis says Catalano is just as important as Currier.

"Even though he's not out there every day doing what Craig is doing, Dave understands it," Davis says. "He doesn't micromanage Craig, but Dave is incredibly supportive of him."

IT'S CLEAR WHY Currier and Catalano connect. Both come from hard-working, blue-collar families.

Currier grew up on a dairy farm in upstate New York in the tiny town of Cedar Lake near Utica. His father and

his uncle operated the farm, and Currier observed and adopted their intense work ethic. "After watching them every day, this job is a piece of cake," Currier says.

Currier says his dad, Clarence, didn't take off much time, except maybe an occasional Sunday afternoon. "It was mostly all day and every day," he says.

Catalano credits his strong work ethic to his upbringing. His father, Charles, worked three jobs to support the five-member family, including cleaning up trash at the Bethpage picnic area on weekends. "The man worked hard his whole life," Catalano says. "And he never complained."

Catalano began working for Bethpage

in the summer of 1967 when he returned home from his first year of college. Like his dad, Catalano worked for the park's picnic area and cleaned toilets and picked up trash, among other duties. He was 19 and earned \$1.19 an hour.

"I can assure you that in 1967, when I reported to work that first day, I didn't have some master plan that I would one day be preparing for the U.S. Open," Catalano says, adding he was simply looking to make some money to further his education.

Catalano worked for the Yellow and Blue courses' maintenance staffs during the summers of '68 and '69. He decided to forgo the rest of college to work full time at the Yellow Course in 1970.

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Welcome to

Bethpage State Park

SITE OF THE U.S. OPEN

2002 AND 2009

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Catalano sometimes feels like Currier is his son or younger brother. Currier sometimes views Catalano as a father figure.

Story and photographs by Geoff Shackelford, Contributing Editor

Davis Shoots the U.S. Open Breeze

USGA's director of rules and competitions waxes on setup, the rough, etc.

Entering his fourth U.S. Open as the United States Golf Association's senior director of rules and competitions, Mike Davis has quickly transitioned the USGA image from staid protectors of par to proponents of interesting, cerebral golf. Davis spoke to *Golfdom* recently about a range of subjects related to the delicate task of course setup and tournament maintenance.

A year after Torrey Pines, you've heard a lot of positive feedback about the setup from players and media. Have you heard of any instances where some of the course setup ideas influenced everyday courses or amateur events? I've heard several comments about people liking the idea of varying the teeing grounds for everyday play. The one real problem with mixing up teeing grounds seems to unfortunately involve how courses are rated for handicap purposes. Beyond that, I believe people in general like variety. Part of me believes that if golfers were a bit less concerned about their score and more focused on the challenge of each shot, they'd end up enjoying their rounds more.

What has the reaction been from golf course superintendents to the idea of variety in setup? At first, I suppose the reac-

tions tended to be, "You're not seriously thinking of going up there and actually using the forward tee for the U.S. Open?" I also think a few of our host venues wondered if we were going to make the setup too easy. But I think we've seen that mixing and matching teeing grounds to certain hole locations or to different drive zones can actually sometimes increase the difficulty because players have to think more. Moving tee markers up also tends to open up more choices of play.

Would you advocate tiered rough for the everyday course? The concept of having less penalty the closer you are to the fairway seems logical, but anything that drives up the cost of course maintenance would not be a good thing. Interestingly at our Opens, it could be argued that the graduated rough might save some manpower and money since less grass gets mowed on a daily basis (i.e., the rough further away from the fairway gets mowed less often). I suppose the same could happen for everyday play; mow the closer-in rough at a lower height and a bit more often but let the other rough go for a longer period of time, which could save on manpower, equipment wear-and-tear and fuel costs.

When you conjure up various ideas, like varied tees and tiered rough, do you consider the ramifications for the everyday game? I'm sorry to say no. It has all been about trying to do the best job possible with the golf course setup. Most of the changes are a result of Jim Hyler (USGA Championship chairman) and me believing we could improve on certain aspects. ... With regard to the ramifications of USGA championship setup on the game, I'll admit

to thinking this probably is not the best message for everyday golf. I'm no fan of playing a course with overly penal rough. I love to play courses with a lot of width. With that said, I would hope that people would rationalize our setup a bit and understand it is one week of the year when the best players encounter tremendously tough playing conditions.

After the U.S. Open was held at Oakmont Country Club in 2006, you wrote a memo to U.S. Open superintendents about easing back on rough. What was that about?

The message was about a few things. First, we have seen a gradual thickening of the rough over the last couple decades due in large part to triple-row irrigation. I believe heavier fertilization and over-seeding have also been causes. This has translated into much more severe rough, even when cut at a lower height. Second, we have seen rough become more uniform and consistent so that virtually every lie is the same. Gone are the days of having to look down at a lie and ascertain what the ball will do. We have also seen a trend towards wanting roughs to be only one type of uniform grass in the name of "fairness." That's too bad, as one of the joys of golf is sizing up a lie and thereafter trying to execute based on that lie. Furthermore, rough that is overly dense also has added to costs — more water, more fertilizer and more mowing — and slower pace of play. None of those things in my mind are good for golf or for our national championships.

With apologies to the golfers of New York, Bethpage Black seems a bit over-rated to me as a design. The greens have little interest, there are no really dramatic risk-reward holes and the finishing hole is downright awful. Tell us what you love about it? Well, I value my life so I'll watch how I answer this one because New Yorkers love their Bethpage! It is true that the putting greens have less pitch and contour than most

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Mike Davis

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other U.S. Open venues. However, when they get speedy the movement truly does "come alive." As far as risk-reward, I've been pleasantly surprised after careful study just how many options the players will have. While there is not as much water or other dramatic risk features as some other courses, I think we'll see plenty of excitement. As for the closing hole, I would agree that it's not your typical difficult Bethpage Black par 4. It is a relatively short hole with a large green. For that reason, we recontoured the fairway to give the players a choice off the tee and will set it up so birdies are a realistic possibility.

Does the TruFirm device aid in your preparation work? (Editor's note: *TruFirm, developed by the USGA, is a system that allows the superintendent to measure and analyze the firmness of turf and bunker sands over the course of a tournament.*)
If we're fortunate enough to have a cham-

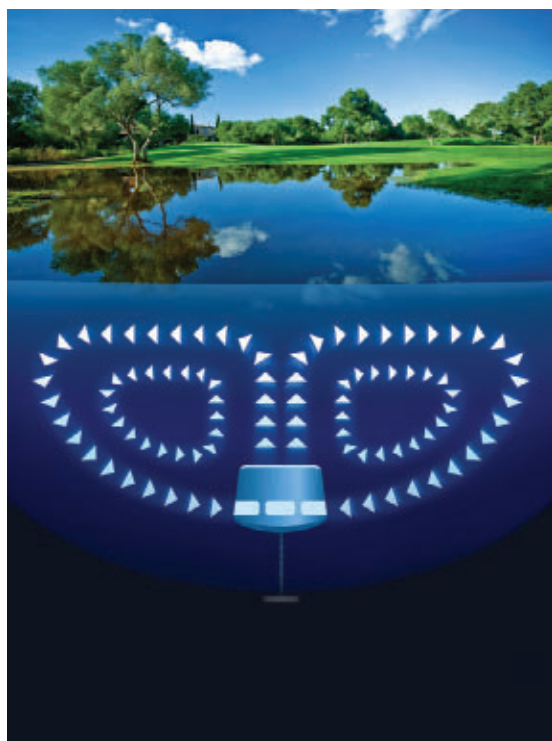
pionship that is dry, water management becomes the most important aspect of course setup. Our scientists who test balls and clubs invented a wonderfully useful course setup device that measures ground firmness. We now measure firmness of putting greens, green approaches and sometime fairways. This allows us to prep the course so there is more consistency. Based on the data, we very carefully work with the grounds staff that hand-waters greens. Some greens might not get any water in the evening or morning; others (or just portions of them) might get a little or a lot. The end result is that, hopefully, there is a good consistency with firmness from green to green. It also helps eliminate over and underwatering when the superintendent sees the data with his own eyes.

Do you think it's something that will help the everyday course or is more of a device only for major championship set-ups? Or is it the next Stimpmeter? Excel-

Mike Davis (lower left corner) watches Tiger Woods tee off at last year's U.S. Open.



lent question — and one we are not sure of yet. The USGA Green Section has discussed this very issue in depth. I think it's fair to say there are pros and cons to everyday usage. It surely is a fabulous championship setup device and can most definitely help everyday play if used with the proper intent. But some fear that if used improperly, it could become a hindrance to the superintendent. With that said, one true benefit beyond firmness consistency would be the potential for less water usage. We all know that issue will be more and more important in years to come. ■



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“The work here is endless – it’s a big place. But that’s what I love about it.”

– CRAIG CURRIER

Catalano and Currier don’t view their jobs at Bethpage as work. Both men live on the Bethpage property — Catalano on the Black Course’s 14th hole, and Currier near the Green Course.

“This isn’t a job — it’s a way of life,” says Catalano, who sports a black sleeveless U.S. Open sweater over his white polo shirt. “And it’s a great way of life. This place is in my blood.”

Says Currier: “The work here is endless — it’s a big place. But that’s what I love about it.”

It’s clear to others who know them how much Catalano and Currier value working at Bethpage.

“If it was just a job, Craig would have gone someplace else and made more money, and Dave would have retired,” Robson says. “It’s more than a job for these guys. They’re committed to seeing this place be the best public golf course facility in the world.”

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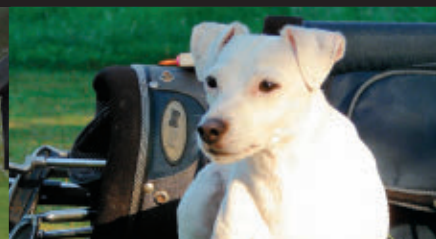
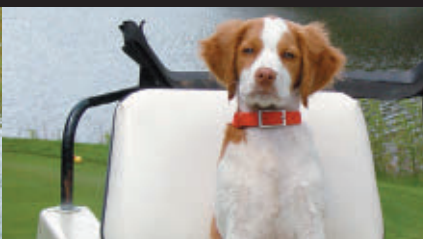
Catalano was promoted to superintendent of Bethpage’s Green Course in 1976. He left the Green Course in 1978 to become superintendent of New York’s Caleb Smith State Park Preserve in Smithtown, N.Y., about 20 minutes from Bethpage.

Catalano left Caleb Smith in 1981 to

be superintendent of Sunken Meadow State Park in Kings Park on Long Island. He was promoted to the state parks’ regional headquarters in 1982. He stayed there 13 years and was promoted to director of operations. “I had the opportunity to come back to Bethpage in ’95, and I’ve been here since,” says Catalano, who grew up four miles from the park.

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Because they spend a lot of time together and share many ideals about their profession, Catalano and Currier have grown close personally. Sometimes Catalano, who has two daughters, views Currier as a son or a younger brother. "That's how strongly I feel about him," Catalano says.

The feeling is mutual. "He has been like a father figure to me," says Currier, who lost his dad when he was 22.

Sure, Catalano and Currier might argue on occasion. And they're constantly ribbing each other.

"Craig brings a smile to my face 99.9 percent of the time," Catalano says. "The other one one-hundredth part of the time I'd like to give him a pop on the head."

EVEN THOUGH he loves his work as few do, Catalano is pondering retirement after 43 years of working for the

state's park district. But he's not thinking about retirement because he doesn't want to work anymore; he just knows he's slowing down. "I would argue that I'm a little less sharp," Catalano says. "Does that mean I'm doing a poor job? No. And it doesn't mean I need to be replaced. It's just reality."

Catalano could retire now and make almost as much money from his pension as he does his current salary. "So why am I still working?" Catalano asks. "Because I love it."

Catalano also admits it's the people at Bethpage who keep him going. "I'm not ready to retire because I'd miss Craig," he says.

The remark sounds like a wisecrack, but it's not. "I'd miss the people I work with too much," Catalano says softly.

Currier knows Catalano is contemplat-

ing retirement. While he won't try and talk him out of it, Currier laments the day his boss and confidant calls it a career.

Currier's peers keep asking him when he plans to leave Bethpage. They figure he can write his own ticket and go anywhere he wants and make more money after hosting two U.S. Opens.

"I have no desire to leave," Currier says, adding he looks forward to a possible third U.S. Open at Bethpage.

Davis, who has come to know Catalano and Currier well over the years, says he cringes to think about Bethpage without Catalano, Currier or both.

"Not that anybody isn't replaceable, but there's a part of me that says I would hate to go back to Bethpage if there's no Craig or Dave there," Davis says. "It just wouldn't be the same."

Catalano and Currier will someday be engraved in Bethpage's storybook history.

In fact, they already are. ■



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