

# RUNNIN' DOWN A DREAM

Bob Farren didn't get to one of the world's great golf meccas by luck

Maybe you've seen Bob Farren. He's the guy who looks a bit like Clark Gable, with a bronze complexion, slicked-back hair and primly trimmed mustache. He's the dapper guy who dresses like a business executive. ¶ "Some people call me 'GQ,'" Farren says with a laugh in reference to the men's style magazine. ¶ Farren chuckles because he finds the label amusing. He'd rather be known for his golf course maintenance skills than his swagger. ¶ And he is. As director of grounds and golf course maintenance at Pinehurst Resort,

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

Farren oversees the massive operation's eight courses. The 52-year-old has spent most of his career at Pinehurst, one of the world's great golf meccas and host of the 2014 men's and women's U.S. Opens. ¶ It seems Farren was destined to be at Pinehurst, but he didn't land there by luck. Farren made it happen. Remember how bad Rudy wanted to make the Notre Dame football team? That's how bad Farren wanted to get to Pinehurst.

**AN ONLY CHILD**, Farren grew up on golf. His dad, Robert, was the superintendent of Big Bend Golf Course in Tornado, W.Va., a small town of about 300 people. The Farrens' home was located about a mile from the course.

"I was the kid hanging out with his dad at the golf course, working on the course and playing golf," Farren says.

Farren can't pinpoint the exact age he realized he wanted to follow in his father's footsteps, but he was old enough to understand. "Whatever age you are when you start thinking about what you're going to do for a living is when the golf bug bit me," he says. "I never considered doing anything else."

Farren attended Marshall University in Huntington, W.Va., where he studied parks and recreation in his goal to become a superintendent. In his fourth year, Farren did an internship at Sleepy Hollow Golf Course, a private club in Hurricane, W.V. It was 1978 and the greens chairman at the club asked Farren if he wanted to attend the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America's trade show and conference in San Antonio. Farren jumped at the chance and headed to Texas on his first plane ride.

During the event, Farren attended a seminar given by Bob DiPenser, then director of golf courses and grounds at Pinehurst. Farren was so taken by his stories of Pinehurst and golf in North Carolina that he was determined to work in the Tar Heel state one day.

"I didn't even know what Pinehurst was," Farren admits. "And I'd never been to North Carolina."

Farren returned to West Virginia, graduated in 1979 and took a job overseeing three golf courses and a few sports fields with his hometown's parks department, a job he held for about three years. He also joined the local superintendent association, and met West Virginia native Lou Metz, assistant

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director of Pinehurst's golf maintenance team, at an association function. Farren told Metz about his dream of working in North Carolina.

And then one summer day in 1982, Metz called Farren and invited him to interview at Pinehurst. While there, the 25-year-old Farren ate breakfast in the quaint dining room of the Pinehurst Hotel. Sitting nearby was golfing legend Raymond Floyd. Farren thought to himself, "It doesn't get any better than this."

Farren got the job as assistant superintendent on the No. 4 course. Pinehurst was in Chapter 11 bankruptcy then, but that didn't affect Farren's decision to take the position. "It was a little shaky at the time," Farren says. "There were a lot of changes going on."

A few months into it, another change occurred — Farren was promoted to superintendent of No. 4 after the

course's superintendent left the resort. Farren also met Kathy Crow, who worked as the events director at the resort. They began dating and soon became engaged. Life was good.

But there was more change in the air at Pinehurst. In June 1984, representatives of ClubCorp began visiting the facility. The banks that owned Pinehurst after the bankruptcy were looking for a buyer and ClubCorp, which owned and operated several exclusive clubs nationwide, was a good candidate to purchase the resort.

"The word was ClubCorp was going to buy us, fire everyone and bring in their own team," Farren says.

ClubCorp did purchase Pinehurst, but didn't fire everyone. However, Farren had begun looking for a new job when the firings rumors began, and he landed a job as superintendent of Berry Hills Country Club in Charlestown, W.Va., one of the top jobs in the state.

Farren was happy with the job and that he'd be near his parents and making more money at Berry Hills. But ...

"I thought it would be a great job, and it was a great job," Farren says. "But from the minute I took it, I wasn't that excited about it. It wasn't in North Carolina. It wasn't Pinehurst."

Farren gave Pinehurst a month's notice after accepting the Berry Hills job. During that time, Farren got to know ClubCorp's Brad Kocher, the new person in charge of Pinehurst's golf maintenance. Kocher was impressed with Farren's abilities when Farren showed him the ins and outs of managing No. 4. Kocher asked Farren to stay.

"We spent many hours together," Kocher says. "The more hours we spent together, the more we realized we were singing off the same sheet of music."

But a torn Farren had already committed to Berry Hills and didn't want to



***Stops esQapes dead.***





**Pinehurst No. 2 will host the men's and women's U.S. Opens in 2014.**

back out. Farren gave Berry Hills his undivided attention as its superintendent. He and Kathy married. But while Farren enjoyed the job, he couldn't get Carolina and Pinehurst off his mind.

Farren and his new wife visited North Carolina often to see her family, and Farren made it a point to stop by Pinehurst to say hello to Kocher. He also kept in contact with him by phone.

And then in June 1985, nine months into his stint at Berry Hills, Farren's phone rang. It was Kocher calling with an offer — a great offer — the chance for Farren to become superintendent of Pinehurst's renowned No. 2 course. Farren didn't have to think about taking it. "I'm there," he told Kocher.

He and Kathy packed up and moved back to Pinehurst that July.

One of the first big projects Farren and Kocher teamed on was to rebuild the No. 2 course's greens and convert them from bermudagrass to bentgrass. The two worked well together.

Kocher, who had begun traveling frequently to other ClubCorp courses, announced he was going to hire an assistant to help him at Pinehurst. Farren expressed interest in the position and was named Kocher's assistant manager of grounds and golf course management while another superintendent was hired on No. 2.

Farren, Kocher and the courses' superintendents worked on several projects, including rebuilding greens and installing new irrigation systems on the courses.

Pinehurst's reputation improved immensely after ClubCorp took over the resort. In the coming years, Pinehurst No. 2 was awarded the 1999 U.S. Open. It has since hosted the 2005 U.S. Open.

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Farren was Kocher's assistant from 1986 through 2000, when Kocher was given a new title, the vice president of golf course management for ClubCorp, which reflected a more national scope. Farren was then named director of grounds and golf course management.

Kocher retired in 2008 when ClubCorp sold Pinehurst to Robert Dedman, who owned the resort previously. Farren calls Kocher a great teacher.

"But he taught me as much as I taught him," Kocher says. "And Bob is very flexible. He's also a very creative thinker."

Farren's department consists of up to 250 people, including four superintendents: Kevin Robinson, Jeff Hill, Steve Wilson and Kyle Brown.

Robinson, who has been at Pinehurst for 18 years and was recently promoted to superintendent of the No. 2 course, says Farren knows how to get the best out of his staff. "He's a great delegator," Robinson says. "He knows how to delegate certain responsibilities to certain personalities."

Robinson is also impressed by the large number of connections Farren has in the industry and how he consults those people to learn new things.

"He knows a lot of important people," Robinson says. "They are his network of knowledge."

**A DAY IN THE LIFE** of Farren begins early and ends late. He works out five days a week at the resort's fitness center before arriving at his office at 7:15 a.m. Farren spends a good bit of his day cruising the eight courses in his golf car. He speaks with members and guests, and lends an agronomic hand to the superintendents.

"It's great to be able to bounce things off Bob to make sure we're on the right page," Robinson says.

It's not off base to say Farren lives at Pinehurst. He not only lives in the village — "I could drive a golf car to and from work, but I don't" — he can be found at work all hours of the day. It's not unusual to drive by the maintenance facility at 7 p.m. and see the light on in his office.

But even if he's at the office that late, Farren says it doesn't feel like work.

"I tell people that I hope I never have to get a job," he says.

But Farren will tell you it's not all pinecones and gravy at Pinehurst, especially the past few years. Pinehurst hasn't been immune to the downturn in the resort business. Its business was off about 20 percent in 2009.

"We had a big challenge last year with budget reductions," Farren says, noting the task his staff faced to spend less on maintenance endeavors without minimizing the golfing experience for members and guests.

In May, Pinehurst's golf maintenance department made headlines when longtime course No. 2 superintendent Paul Jett left the resort and was replaced by Robinson. It was a tough time for Farren, who helped hire Jett 15 years ago. Despite rumors, Jett's departure wasn't about money or circumstances surrounding the extensive renovation occurring on No. 2. It was just time for a change for both parties involved, Farren says.

The No. 2 course renovation by Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore has also made headlines, and Farren has answered a lot of questions about it. Basically, Crenshaw, Coore and their team

are taking the Donald Ross track back in time "to re-establish a more natural feel and playability of the course," Farren says.

"The results will be a far less-manicured course," Farren adds. "The amount of irrigated turf will be drastically reduced."

**OUTSIDE OF GOLF**, Farren is a family man who spends time with Kathy and the couple's two adult children, Kristin and Casey. Farren is also involved in his church and other community functions, including the American Belarussian Relief Organization, an effort created to provide assistance to children living in areas contaminated with radiation from the Chernobyl nuclear plant explosion in 1986.

For almost 10 years the Farrens adopted two children from Belarus, which was contaminated heavily with radiation from Chernobyl. The children spent 10 weeks a year living at their home. They provided the children with clean food, rest and sanctuary in a radiation-free environment to build up their immune systems to ward off cancer and other future ailments.

"It's one of the neatest things I've ever been involved in," Farren says, noting the two children, who are adults now, are like his own.

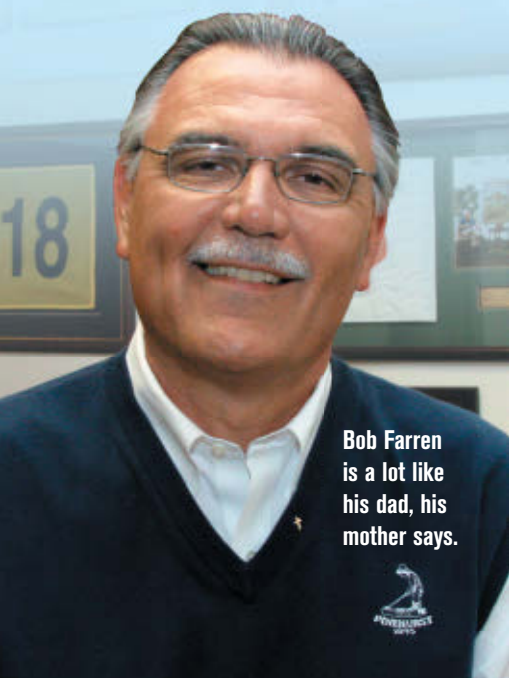
Farren's father, who was his mentor, died in 2000. Farren, an only child, is close to his mother June, who lives in West Virginia but drives to Pinehurst often to see her son and his family.

"Bob is so much like my husband was — he's a hard worker and true to his ideas and values," June says. "He was born to be a golf course superintendent."

While it may seem he was born to be at Pinehurst, Farren made it there because he was determined. He didn't just follow his dream — he ran it down.

"The harder you practice playing golf, the luckier you get," Farren says, quoting Gary Player.

Farren knows exactly what Player means. ■



Bob Farren is a lot like his dad, his mother says.

PHOTO COURTESY: PINEHURST RESORT