

The Spring Creek Ranch Encounter

A PARTNERSHIP
BETWEEN A
SUPERINTENDENT,
A GM AND A
SUPPLIER HELPS A
GOLF COURSE
TRY TO STAND OUT
ABOVE THE REST.

BY KEVIN MARKS

IT ALL BEGAN with a chance encounter on a hunting trip between a celebrated Memphis ophthalmologist, Dr. David Meyer and golfing legend Jack Nicklaus. Meyer invited Nicklaus out to see the 1,000-acre tract of land near Memphis that was once home to his thriving cattle ranch.

During the trip, Meyer explained his vision of a golf experience founded on the pure beauty within the rural reserve area of Collierville, Tenn. Nicklaus, appreciating Meyer's passion for nature and golf, agreed to turn 320 acres into one of the most coveted golf courses in Tennessee.

The vision was of an uncomplicated, uncrowded private facility for members and guests and a high quality golf club unencumbered by housing around the course.

With the help of a young team and some unique partnerships, they're achieving that goal.

Hello, Newman

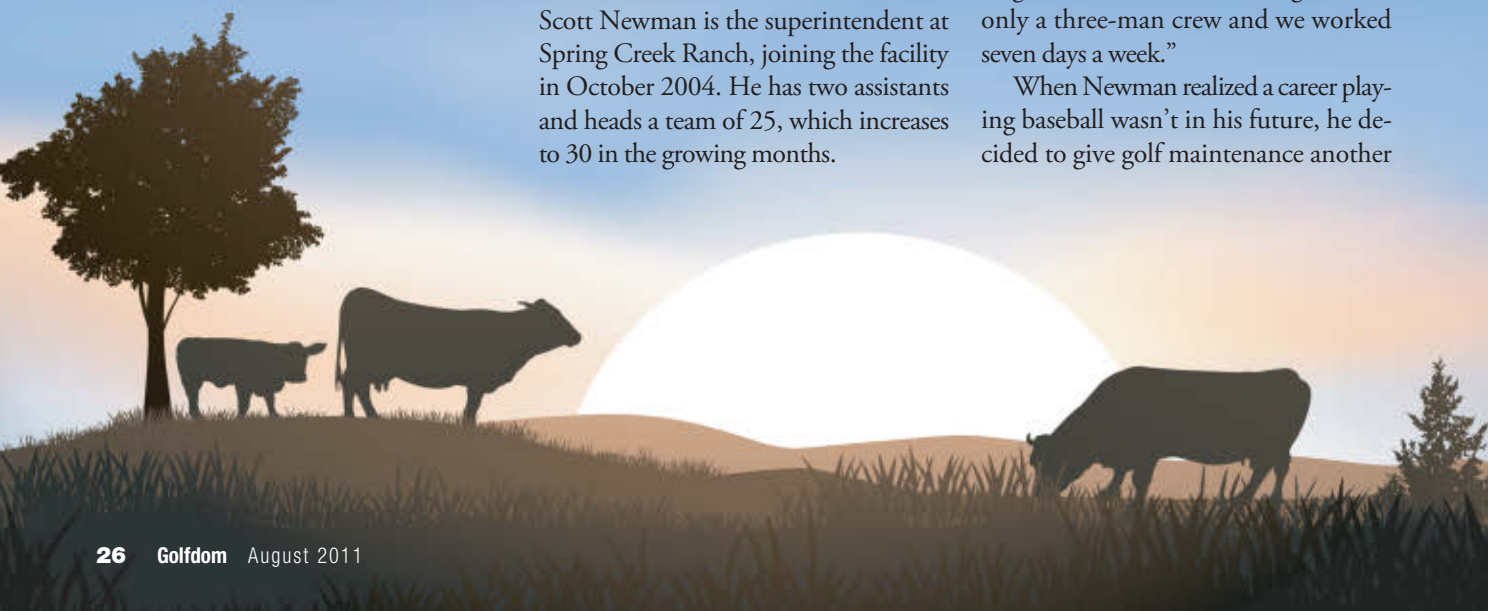
Scott Newman is the superintendent at Spring Creek Ranch, joining the facility in October 2004. He has two assistants and heads a team of 25, which increases to 30 in the growing months.

Newman started in the golf business at an early age, and reluctantly. He grew up the grandchild of an old-fashioned golf pro/superintendent. Back then, that pairing of jobs was common, especially where Newman came from. His father worked on the golf course growing up and they lived on the facility.

At age 15, Newman began working on a golf course at Franklinton Country Club in Louisiana and worked there for three summers. Through high school he played baseball, but being a golf pro's grandson, he couldn't escape from the game of golf.

"After my first summer I swore I'd never work on a golf course again, because I was the junior guy, the one with no cart," Newman laughs. "We didn't have a budget, it was only a three-man crew and we worked seven days a week."

When Newman realized a career playing baseball wasn't in his future, he decided to give golf maintenance another





Spring Creek Ranch features zoysia fairways and Champion bermudagrass greens. (Lower left) Old shacks from the cattle ranch days are used today as comfort stations for golfers.



chance. This time, he saw how good a job it can be when you're high enough up the ladder to warrant a cart.

"I got a job at Moneyhill Golf Club (in Abita Springs, La.) and immediately saw the golf course business in a totally different light," Newman says. "I got to see what the super got to do, the range of skills he needed."

That summer he decided to enroll at Mississippi State University on an agronomy degree course, which was a shock to his family, because they all grew up LSU fans.

While at MSU, Newman focused on getting plenty of work experience and had two internships, the first at The University Club at Baton Rouge. The

superintendent at Baton Rouge then got the job at Highlands Plantation Golf Club in Starkville, Miss., where MSU is located. For the next two summers Newman worked there, before completing a six-month placement at New Orleans Country Club, three as an intern and three as an assistant.

Newman was hired at Spring Creek Ranch in 2004 as an assistant and accepted the job of head superintendent in February 2007, when his former boss, Scott McNeer, was promoted to general manager.

Sharing the course

Spring Creek Ranch, a Jack Nicklaus Signature Course, is situated on 1,000 acres, of which only 200 acres are maintained turf. Construction began in 1997 and was completed in 1999. The natural contours, mounds and existing trees were used to the full extent with minimal earth movement. The course is a natural tree farm, and mature trees are removed with the club's tree spade and replanted as necessary.

During construction, a 6-inch sand
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A Quest to be the Best

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cap was spread over the entire golf course area, covering the natural clay/loam mix that is indigenous to this area. The move was effective, and the ranch's members are rarely required to remain on cart paths.

Since completion in 1999, the course has undergone three major projects. The first, in 2002, saw 100 acres of rough completely regrassed, from tall fescues to palisade zoysiagrass; then in 2005 all the bunkers were completely rebuilt and a new maintenance facility was constructed. In 2006 the course rebuilt and added bunkers, narrowed fairways and added five new championship tees.

"We had a perfectly functional maintenance facility before," Newman says, "but the owner wanted to relocate the facility to the extreme northeast corner of the property, which was in keeping with his vision for Spring Creek Ranch. So now we have a state-of-the-art agronomy

center with many modern upgrades and a fantastic workshop."

During the last course renovation, a company out of Nashville, The Turf Company, and Eagle One Golf from Houston, were employed to remodel the course. The staff helped while the course was shut down for eight weeks.

One change made to the course was a switch from bentgrass greens to bermudagrass. Jim Lipe of Nicklaus Design was called in to assist with the regressing, from G2 bent to Champion bermudagrass, the same grass last month's PGA Championship was played on at Atlanta Athletic Club.

The reason for the change was simple, Newman said.

"We are in the transition zone and July through September the (bentgrass) greens get a little moist and are not as firm as some members may like."

During that time, the course struck up

what it feels is an innovative relationship with Jacobsen.

"We're not immune to the economic situation and we had to make a smart purchasing decision," Newman says. "We also wanted some added value, which would be beneficial to both sides of the partnership, because we wanted it to be just that, a partnership. We'd make a substantial commitment to the machinery and in return we

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Scott Newman was promoted to superintendent in 2007.



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A Quest to be the Best



The goal, Newman says, is to host a Ryder Cup or PGA Championship in the next 20 years.

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were open to suggestions when it came to added value.”

Ladd’s, the local Jacobsen distributor, came up with the idea of making Spring Creek Ranch an experience like Sage Valley (Graniteville, S.C.), where the company could bring in customers to tour the facility, play a round of golf and enjoy the atmosphere.

“We still want to keep Spring Creek Ranch a low-key, select golfing experience, but because we’re extremely proud of what we have here, we were open to the idea of sharing it with our peers,” Newman says.

Showcase your ability

The goal of the facility is to host an event like a Ryder Cup or a PGA Championship in the next 20 years. With the team they have in place, Newman says that goal is attainable.

“We’ve renovated this maintenance facility because we want it to fit with the rest of the property. It says a lot about the golf course. We take great pride in keeping the facility up to the high standards demanded,” Newman says. “I welcome members and their guests here and know they can sit down anywhere they choose, without getting their pants dirty.”

Newman, 31, feels fortunate to have



a GM in Scott McNeer who knows what it’s like to work in the maintenance facility.

“I speak to Scott because he’s my mentor and I can bounce ideas off him knowing I’ll get an honest reply. We speak the same golf language and can have more in-depth conversations because we both have agronomy backgrounds,” Newman says.

“I miss the hell out of (being superintendent),” Scott McNeer, the GM, says. “There is so much reward in agronomy — that feeling of accomplishment. But Newman is doing a fantastic job. The day is going to come that we’ll be a top 100 course. But our No. 1 goal is to host a major.”

Newman also feels fortunate to have such a strong relationship with his supplier.

“Ladd’s as a company went out of their way to excel,” Newman says. “The proposal arrived and they came up with a very good offer, but what really impressed us was their proposal to

help us raise our profile.

“(Ladd’s) came up with the concept of the Spring Creek Ranch Encounter, formulating a new Sage Valley-type experience; beneficial to both sides. We saw it as an opportunity to raise our profile and that was the deciding factor.”

A quick look in the immaculate maintenance facility showed the extent of the new fleet, with orange-and-black Jacobsen products as far as the eye can see.

“From a selfish point of view, it’s

a great opportunity for all of us to showcase our ability; our ambition and desire to excel. Ladd’s have a territory that encompasses Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee and parts of Arkansas and they are bringing supers, technicians, golf pros, club members and owners from across the South to Spring Creek

Ranch,” Newman says. “My guys will be introduced to these visitors and when they want to move on, there’s a good chance that they’ll be known to prospective employers from these ‘Encounter’ experiences.”

Newman is indeed fortunate to be working for a very special owner with a unique vision; one who has assembled a young team who shares that vision, determined to deliver that very private, uncomplicated, uncrowded, high quality golfing experience for members and guests. He’s one of the new breed of young superintendents, vital to this industry, full of enthusiasm and the desire to be the best.

And if it plays out according to his plan, someday the golfing public will get to experience Spring Creek Ranch in a whole new way: in high-definition television on the Sunday of a major. ■

Kevin Marks is a freelance writer based in the United Kingdom.