



BY JOHN WALSH

# Big Shoes

AFTER HIS  
PREDECESSOR  
WORKED ALMOST  
50 YEARS AS THE  
SUPERINTENDENT,  
A LONGTIME  
ASSISTANT  
GETS HIS SHOT.

*to  
Fill*





**That internship in 1990 certainly paid off: Smith now finds himself as the head superintendent at Canterbury Golf Club.**

**T**here are a lot of turf books out there, but the one on how to take over as superintendent after your predecessor just reeled off almost 50 years as the boss hasn't been written yet.

And why would it be? To be a superintendent at the same golf club for almost 50 years is unheard of in this day and age.

But Terry Bonar did it, and Canterbury Golf Club in Beachwood, Ohio, is better off because of his longevity.

After Bonar retired last year, the club had a decision to make: hire a qualified internal candidate or one of the hundreds of qualified external candidates.

The club chose Ed Smith, former first as-

sistant to Bonar. He had one clear advantage over the other candidates: he knew the course like the back of his hand. He should. He's been there 20 years.

Smith was named superintendent last year and hopes to keep that position for 20 more years.

"I want to make Canterbury the best golf course in Cleveland," he says. "We're making little improvements every day. It's the detail work that will set us apart from the rest of the clubs in the area.

"Club president Tony Asher gave Terry [Bonar] an honorary membership, and I hope they can do the same for me in 20 or 30 years," he adds.

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— ED SMITH

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### **A long-awaited transition**

After working at Beechmont Country Club in Orange, Ohio, Smith attended Agricultural Technical Institute in Wooster, Ohio. While at ATI, he completed an internship at Canterbury in 1990. He's been there since. He worked on the crew and progressed to second assistant, then worked his way up to first assistant in 1998.

When Smith first started working at Canterbury, he thought he'd work there for a short period of time and move on. When he became the second assistant, he talked to Bonar about taking over someday, and Bonar said it was a possibility. When Smith became the first assistant, he thought about moving on, yet he also knew Bonar would eventually retire.

In June of 2009, before the club started the search for Bonar's replacement, Smith told the green chairman that he was interested in the job. He also told him about some changes he'd like to make to the course. In September, the club opened the position locally and received more than 130 résumés nationally. The club's general manager, Eric Rhodes, CCM, told Smith he was his choice to replace Bonar.

"Ed Smith was the guy," Rhodes says. "That's where we were, but membership and the search committee said we owed it to ourselves to see what's out there. Ed was always the frontrunner. He was groomed for that position. He was the heir apparent. Ed showed

loyalty all those years by staying at Canterbury, and I'm glad Canterbury turned around and showed him the same loyalty."

"If they brought someone else in, it could have been a catastrophe because he wouldn't have known the course," Smith says. "I, on the other hand, know all the problem areas, and I get along with the members."

Bonar knew the people on the search committee and spoke with them about choosing his successor.

"They were happy with me and wanted the golf course in the same condition," Bonar says. "I told them Ed deserves a shot at least. He earned it. I couldn't see any reason to hire from the outside. I was confident in him."

Bonar says Smith was the hardest working assistant he's ever worked with.

"I had no doubt he could do the job, except getting through the first year is tough," Bonar says. "It was tough for me. It was an adjustment for me and my wife. It takes more hours. From May through September, I worked seven days a week. I don't know how he's doing it now, but I know the golf course is in good shape because I play about once a week."

Smith hired a second assistant, Brian Hugel, who worked at Shaker Height Country Club down the road and Boulder Creek Golf Club in Streetsboro, Ohio.

The transition from first assistant to superintendent has been smooth for Smith, he says, adding that he's learned a lot by doing more managerial work, such as hiring, budgeting,



**"My main goal is to help Ed succeed," Chris Sulyok, first assistant, says.**

pricing and project planning. But he still mows, rolls and fixes spots on greens.

Smith, who is in charge of all the grounds (140 acres), enjoys the early mornings when there are no golfers on the course.

"It's beautiful," he says. "It's the best office in the world. You can hear the animals, the birds. It's great to be with nature."

Smith likes dealing with employee issues the least.

"You have to be an accountant, turf guy and psychologist," he says. "Sometime the whining and complaining by crewmembers are a bit much."

### Supporting cast

Longevity is commonplace among the maintenance staff at Canterbury. Chris Sulyok, Smith's first assistant, has been at the club 17 years and was named the Northern Ohio GCSA's assistant superintendent of the year for 2010, the first year for the award. One crewmember has been there 36 years. The horticulturist has been there 26 years. Other crewmembers have been there 19 years and 14 years. Some part-timers have been there six and seven years.

"They enjoy the work," Smith says. "They like it here. They know the course."

Sulyok, Smith's right-hand man, makes his job easy.

"Without him, the job would be a lot tougher," Smith says. "Chris takes care of all the irrigation and the mechanical stuff. I get him involved as much as I can because I want his opinion. He has a lot of great ideas for the course, such as bunker renovations and building retaining walls. He does everything. He's a smart guy. I need to surround myself with good people like Chris to be successful."

Sulyok was promoted to second assistant in '05, and when Smith got the superintendent job, he promoted Sulyok to first assistant. As second assistant, he's more involved with overseeing the course.

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“

He's confident  
about what  
he's doing.  
He's done a  
stellar job.  
He's earned  
his right to  
do what  
he's doing.”

— TERRY BONAR

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“My main goal is to help Ed succeed,” Sulyok says.

Sulyok enjoys making the course as pristine as the crew can make it, and every day they do it all over again.

“Membership notices the detail work, and it makes you feel good they notice the small stuff,” he says.

In addition to working closely with Smith, Sulyok helps the crew understand how important they are and helps them see the big picture because they sometimes get caught up in daily tasks.

“I've worked with Ed for a long time,” he says. “I see what he doesn't and vice versa. We fit well together. I can't imagine someone else running the course.”

#### **The first year is hardest**

Even though 2010 was a difficult agronomic year brought on by harsh weather, Smith has

done very well, Bonar says.

“He's confident about what he's doing,” Bonar says. “He's done a stellar job. He's earned his right to do what he's doing.”

Rhodes says Smith has succeeded in his first year because he's been a hands-on superintendent.

“A year in, we couldn't be happier. If you played golf here, you wouldn't know there was a transition,” Rhodes says. “Conditions didn't drop off one bit. It was a seamless transition.”

Smith has come through the first year with flying colors, Bonar says.

“Members ask me how Ed is doing, and I ask them, ‘How do you think he's doing?’ And they say, ‘Great,’” Bonar says. “He's lived up to all the expectations.” ■

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*John Walsh is a contributing editor for Golfdom. He resides in Cleveland.*

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