

HOME COURSE Advantage

The team at Congressional CC treats the course like home because *it is*, and the crew like family because *they are*.

The crew at Congressional Country Club is quite comfortable being at work. One could say it's like a second home to them, but that isn't the case.

It's simply... *home*.

The comfort level among the maintenance team at Congressional CC, site of the 2011 U.S. Open, is amazingly high. At comparable facilities around the nation, there might be

tension in the air. Not at Congressional.

It might be because the team has worked together for a long time. Somehow even the summer interns have experience at Congressional — for seven of the nine, this is their second summer at the course.

It could also be because much of the team not only works at the course, they also live at the course. Superintendent of greens and

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STORY AND PHOTOS
BY SETH JONES,
EDITOR IN CHIEF



The team at Congressional CC: (L to R) Tom Turi, James Hayes, Mike Giuffre, Derek Trenchard, Dave Hutchinson, Justin Bradbury, Dave Burdette and Shahid Bhatti.

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grounds Dave Hutchinson lives less than a pitching wedge from the maintenance building in a house provided by the club. The same goes for Gold Course assistant superintendent Ricardo Quijada, except he's more like a long putt from his home. Michael Giuffre, director of golf course maintenance, does drive to work from his home — but, hey, he drives his golf cart.

But perhaps the most likely reason for the good mood at Congressional CC is that this team has developed into a family.

"When the interns leave, the good environment is what they remember," says Quijada. "Hutchie and Mr. G, they're the ones who set up the good environment. That's the thing that stands out about Congressional: Hutchie and Mr. Giuffre look out for you."

Launching pad

The crew is led by "Mr. G," who has been at Congressional Country Club in Bethesda, Md., for 12 years. Giuffre is a soft-spoken gentleman with the good demeanor of an elementary school teacher. He speaks at a steady pace, never rushed, and quick with a smile.

Giuffre considers his start in the turf business as "lucky." A friend's dad owned the local 9-hole muni course in Traverse City, Mich., so Giuffre worked summers there beginning in 1979. The course added 9 holes and then was bought by a developer, who eventually turned the course into a 72-hole golf resort now known as Grand Traverse Resort & Spa.

"I got to watch (it grow)," Giuffre says.



Congressional director of maintenance Mike Giuffre.
"You're never going to meet a guy who works harder," says Hutchinson.

"I got into construction and everything else. I started there when I was 18. That was my launching pad."

Giuffre graduated from Penn State's turfgrass program in 1985. This year's

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Hutchinson and Trenchard on No. 18. "Everybody's pretty easy-going," says Trenchard.

Open will be his 16th professional tournament, but none so big as the Open.

"The difference between a U.S. Open and a regular Tour event is that you have to make it as challenging as possible," Giuffre says. "It's the nation's No. 1 event."

Helping him achieve this goal is Hutchinson, who hails from South Africa and recently became a U.S. citizen. He's proud that he's made it this far in the industry and that he'll soon be able to say he hosted the nation's biggest golf tournament as a citizen.

"I know (the U.S. Open) means a lot more to the players (than a regular tournament), and if you think of it that way, and what it means to them — it means the same for us," Hutchinson says.

"Hutchie" says the reason for the success of the team at Congressional is the experience. One member of the staff, Wayne Burdette, even worked on the maintenance team during the first Open for the course, way back in 1964.

"Over the years, we've been asked to add things to our plate, but we haven't necessarily added staff," Hutchinson says. "Even our seasonal staff is experienced."

Of course, a little hard work also goes a long way. Hutchinson says they lead by example at Congressional.

"You're never going to meet a guy who works harder than Mike Giuffre," Hutchinson says. "He's the kind of guy who will be out here helping us do whatever we have to do, then he does his administrative work in the evenings."

But family matters.

"The other side of Mike is that he always tells you to take time to spend with your family," he says. "I'm really lucky, living on the property, I have access to my family all the time. I'm in an ideal situation where I work long, strenuous hours... but I also get to spend a lot of time with my family."

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See each other all the time

Shahid Bhatti, equipment manager at the course, says he likes to bounce around from job to job. That was until he started working at Congressional during the 1997 season, just before the course hosted its second U.S. Open.

"I've got a great boss, great people to work with, and great equipment to work on," Bhatti says. "That's why I'm still here."

It would be a tough place to work if the team didn't get along. Imagine the scene at Blue Course superintendent Derek Trenchard's on-course house if co-workers didn't get along: the two superintendents, Trenchard and Gold Course superintendent Tom Turi live with three of their assistant superintendents.

"Everybody's pretty easy-going. We

"The 18th at Congressional is one of the best finishing greens," Rees Jones says. "It's going to be a difficult finish where anything can happen."



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all live here, we all see each other all the time,” Trenchard says. “When you’ve all been here this long, we all develop the same ideals.”

Trenchard says he and his housemates typically have dinner together or maybe just a beer after work. Off-time activities include horseshoes, football, baseball, and for the foreign guys, cricket. If there are any pranksters in the house, he won’t name names.

Trenchard and his housemates — none married — can view their living arrangement as fun and convenient. Quijada, who comes from a rough D.C. neighborhood, sees an unquantifiable value in having his three children living in the upscale Bethesda, Md., area.

Before he and his wife moved their kids to Congressional, they had problems with break-ins at their apartment. One break-in occurred while his wife and children were at home. Naturally, his wife is relieved to live behind two different gates at Congressional.

“I have three beautiful kids, and I live on-property, so they all get to go to the (local) school system, which is great,” Quijada says. “The kids now are in a great school system. To me, I’ll do anything for their education.”

Course renovations

Despite the great personal stories and victories, when the greatest golfers in the world ascend on Congressional CC in June to compete in the 111th U.S. Open, they’ll be looking past the crew and at the work they did.

Key among the projects the course took on was a reconstruction of greens in 2008. The reconstruction was at the behest of the course, not the USGA.

“Originally we had *Poa* greens on a mix that wasn’t a good mix. We learned that during the 2007 AT&T National in July,” Giuffre says. “The *Poa* just didn’t hold up well in the heat of summer to tournament standards.”

The course was originally designed by Devereux Emmet in 1924. Robert Trent

Jones revised the course in 1959. Rees Jones came in and revamped his father’s work 30 years later in 1989. For the greens reconstruction in 2008, Rees Jones took care to keep the contours he installed in 2008. The course also installed SubAir systems on all the Blue Course’s greens.

The fairway widths were narrowed

throughout the course, from an average of 33 yards to an average of 25 yards. Giuffre says most of the fairway narrowing was the artwork of Hutchinson under the direction of USGA executive director Mike Davis. Meanwhile the heavy lifting was done by a local contractor.

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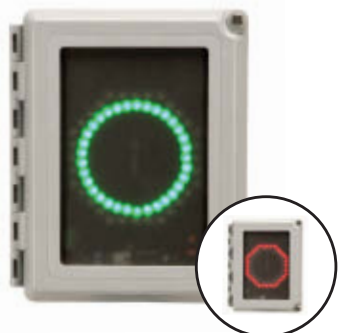
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"I've surrendered to the fact that we can't keep up with the damage," Quijada says of the massive infrastructure being built on the Gold Course.

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"Since we have bentgrass fairways, it's not just mowing (new) lines, you actually have to lift sod and change sod out," Giuffre says. "We're real fortunate to have a great contractor in McDonald & Sons (Jessup, Md.) that did all the work for the greens renovation and the fairway narrowing and tee construction. They've done a lot of work at top 100 courses, and it just so happens that they're right in our backyard."

The most significant change to the course came in 2006, when the original par three 18th hole was converted into the current 10th hole. The old No. 17 now plays as 18, while the new No. 10 now plays in the opposite direction of its old self.

Not to be forgotten are the nine lost holes on the Gold Course, swallowed up by U.S. Open infrastructure. Previously, for the AT&T National, the Gold Course didn't lose any holes.

"Everything you see on this course is above and beyond the AT&T," Giuffre says.

He says communication is the No. 1 key to his success. In this case, it means communicating the damage the Gold Course will incur.

"We have to get the word out — newsletters, our website, the internet," he says.

"Once you think you've communicated enough, go back, communicate again."

Get the job done

These last weeks leading into the U.S. Open are always anxious days for the crew. Cool, wet weather in the early spring made the turf "slow to wake up," but Giuffre says the weather's been as good as he could hope for.

An envelope is passed around at the maintenance facility. The collection is for cash for a barbecue that evening. They'll do it up right there at the maintenance facility, then most will walk or take golf carts home.

"It's crucial we don't burn out before the event," Hutchinson says.

But is the event to fight stress?

"We're just busy," Giuffre says, his mellow tone not hinting at the gravity of the event that is weighing on everyone.

Rees Jones laughs when asked to describe the team's demeanor at Congressional.

"It's just a great team. Low-key. Get-the-job-done," he says. "They just know what they're doing."

If the comfort level at Congressional is high, it's for good reason: they have home course advantage. ■

Seth Jones is editor in chief of Golfdom.