

The Legend of Old No. 5

Being a golf course superintendent means different things to different people, but at the core of the role is taking great care of putting greens.

In my 25-plus year career with Marriott Golf I have been charged with the care of 59 putting greens at two properties. Each green is different in form and microclimate. As you serve your duty as superintendent you come to develop a deep understanding of each green — its strengths and weaknesses and how to best manage the many programs and events that impact the quality, and sometimes survival, of the greens under your care.

Often a green can teach the superintendent many things about the art and science of green keeping. This is true for me and “Old No. 5” at Pinelsle Resort in Buford, Ga.

Old No. 5 was conceived by golf legend Gary Player and golf course architect Ron Kirby. She was skillfully built and seeded in 1972 by Charlie Scott on native clay soils. Charlie handed her off to Allen Baston (former superintendent at Augusta National) who gave her care to Bob Thompson who entrusted her care to me.

I spent 20 years learning and teaching her secrets. Old No. 5 was 31 paces with the shot and 19 paces across the shot. She was tucked into a small peninsula on the shores of the 38,000 acre Lake Sydney Lanier. She was the final proving ground for Pinelsle’s signature fifth hole, a 477-yard par five; the locals call the cove that caused the forced water carries “Cocktail Cove.” She was a true championship green, helping crown five LPGA champions, including the likes of Nancy Lopez, Pat Bradley and Rosie Jones.

Old No. 5 taught me a lot of things about green keeping. She held a steady pH of 6.2 and enjoyed full sun and great air movement. Despite her being referred to as a “push



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up” green she held on to her original Pennncross Bentgrass until 1995 when I was given the task of rebuilding her to modified USGA specifications and gave her a new crop of Pennncross to tempt players with the notion of right edge or left edge.

She taught me that in some cases you can use a floating bunker pump to water a lakeside green and she smiled a bit when I carded my first eagle on her in 1986 after bouncing my second shot off the riprap onto Old No. 5 and sinking a 30-footer. She saw us go from walking

greens mowers to tri-plex greens mowers back to walking greens mowers. She saw mowing heights go from “a fat quarter” .265” (yes, that is how we talked in those days) to .105”. Old No. 5 and I made it through droughts, floods, tornadoes, the storm of the century (1993) and Y2K. She taught me that not all foliar products are equal and that if she is slightly blue in the upper right tier you have roughly 20 minutes to get the hose out for some hand watering before all your agronomic wisdom goes up in smoke.

Old No. 5 was a great green by any measure but she was investigated for steroid use when we installed ins and outs on her irrigation loop.

I left Pinelsle in 2005 to learn 39 new greens at Stone Mountain (Ga.) Golf Club, and I carried the lessons and memories from Old No. 5 with me. They have served me well. In my office there is a great photo of Old No. 5. It hangs on newly installed drywall and fixtures paid for with prize money won from a contest looking for odd events experienced on the course. I told a classic tale of escaping fugitives, bloodhounds and police cars with lights flashing on, you guessed it, Old No. 5.

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