

Something New at *Newport*

BY ANTHONY PIOPPi



NEWPORT COUNTRY CLUB IS A PLACE where if time has not altogether stopped, it sure seems to progress at a much slower pace than the crazy world around it.

From the grandeur of the famous clubhouse to unirrigated fairways where the golden turf shines in the Rhode Island summer sun, Newport appears to have changed little since A.W. Tillinghast created the current layout in 1923.

Unbeknownst to most of the

golf world, though, something did change at the course in May of this year. Bob Reynolds, who had worked at the club for 34 years — 30 of them as superintendent — was gone.

Reynolds was only the third person to hold the position of superintendent at the club in the last 87 years.

Taking Reynolds' place is his longtime assistant, Chris Coen, a Newport native and resident.

Reynolds, originally from Jamestown, R.I., and his wife, Beth, will retire to Florida, where they have a home. Because most Newport members would not have been back at the club for Reynolds' last day, they feted him in the summer of 2010, presenting him and Beth with an Alaskan cruise.

As superintendent, Reynolds prepared the Newport course for major tournaments. Between 1981, Reynolds' inaugural year as super-

After 34 years, Bob Reynolds leaves this classic Rhode Island course to his former assistant.



intendent, and 1990, there was the *Golf Digest* Commemorative Pro-Am, which drew former PGA Tour players to the course in what was a precursor to the Champions Tour; the 1995 United States Amateur, where Tiger Woods won the second of his three consecutive U.S. Amateur titles; and the 2006 U.S. Women's Open, where Annika Sorenstam nabbed her third Open and last major title in an 18-hole playoff Reynolds will never forget.

A 10-cent bet

It was not divine intervention or even dumb luck that brought Reynolds to one of the most hallowed courses in the United States. It was 10 cents.

After graduating from the University of Rhode Island with a degree in resource management, Reynolds went looking for a full-time job in the golf course maintenance field. He had spent the two previous summers working at Millbrook (N.Y.) Golf and Tennis Club. At the time of graduation, he was employed at a farm in Jamestown, selling flowers at a greenhouse and vegetables from a roadside stand.

Then two offers in the golf industry came Reynolds' way: Point Judith Country Club offered him \$2.90 an hour, while Newport offered him \$3 an hour. Reynolds went for Newport and never looked back.

"It was a great place to work. I was supported by everyone I knew — friends, peers, the members and the board," Reynolds said.

The club's firm, fast fairways and slick greens today are vastly better than those that greeted Reynolds when he arrived at the club in 1977. Back then, the golf season lasted only three months.

"We'd put the shutters on the clubhouse the day after Labor Day and wouldn't open until Memorial Day," Reynolds recounted.

When Reynolds took over as superintendent in 1981, the superintendent's office had no heat, the men's room was the bushes and "the greens were like lush carpets," mowed at about a quarter of an inch, Reynolds said. "You couldn't hit it across a green. You couldn't swing hard enough."

New maintenance regime

Shortly after Reynolds was named superintendent, he began making improvements.

"The first year I took over we aerated like crazy, lowered the height of cut and topdressed (the greens)," Reynolds said.

He punched holes three times a year the first few seasons in an aggressive attempt to reduce thatch.

At the same time, the executive board wanted to lengthen the course, so trees came down to make room for new tees. A black pine disease forced the removal of more trees, and long-forgotten vistas were reclaimed. A decades-long effort to restore NCC's links was underway.

Worst week ever

For nine years, the *Golf Digest* pro-am was a hit with Reynolds and others. For two days each summer, golf's greatest players teed it up, and Reynolds and his wife could mingle with legends such as Gary Player, Garner Dickinson, Dow Finsterwald, Lee Trevino and Chi-Chi Rodriguez.

Then there was the 2006 U.S. Women's Open. No matter how hard he tries, Reynolds will never forget that week. It was part of the crew, having volunteered to mow fairways.

The course had been in perfect condition just two weeks before, but it "was burned to a frazzle," for the event, Reynolds said — the result of a relentless heat wave and drought. Despite the scorching, the tournament was still a success.

"The worst week of my career," Reynolds said without an inkling of regret.

It began with 3.5 inches of rain on Sunday of tournament week. The downpour flooded holes 10 through 17, as well as the driving range. Bunkers became ponds and fairways lakes. Fire trucks and gasoline pumps were brought in to expedite the water flow off the course. For hundreds of hours, Reynolds' crew, volunteers and NCC members manned squeegees, soaking up the massive amounts of water.

The course was so wet that spectators were not allowed on the grounds for practice rounds and players were not allowed on the 17th and 18th holes until the tournament began. On Wednesday, another three-quarters of an inch of rain fell. The bunkers that had been pumped out and

Continued on page 30

Moving on

Continued from page 29

rebuilt, the fairways and putting surfaces that had finally drained off, were again disaster areas.

We worked feverishly through the day and well past sunset to have the course ready for play Thursday. But our frantic efforts were all in vain.

Fog rolled in overnight. Sunrise revealed a course shrouded in a gray haze so thick even the clubhouse was barely visible.

Finally, on Friday morning, the tournament began. For the next three days the course was packed as golfers continuously played off the first and 10th tees as long as there was light in an attempt to have the event finish on time. Attendance exceeded all expectations.

The days were long. Friday night's dinner, pizza and sodas, were delivered to the fairway mowing crew in the rough between the fifth and seventh holes. We congregated there for perhaps 10 minutes then resumed our assigned tasks. Many of us had a steering wheel in one hand and a slice of pizza in the other.

Friday, Saturday and Sunday were sunny and windy, and we couldn't meet our goal of finishing Sunday evening.

Congregated around the last green, we watched in disbelief as Annika Sorenstam's 22-footer for birdie missed its mark. After four rounds, Sorenstam and Pat Hurst were tied. That meant they had to play 18 more holes on Monday.

"The tournament that wouldn't begin became the tournament that wouldn't end," NCC president Barclay Douglas Jr. said then.

"It was absolutely insane," Reynolds said, shaking his head.

On Monday, in beautiful conditions, Sorenstam made quick work of Hurst, claiming the championship.

Time to move on

Reynolds' Newport Country Club memories don't all revolve around turf conditions. For him, the club was also home. Reynolds and his family lived in a house

so close to the golf course that anyone falling down the front stairs landed on the 13th tee.

He and Beth raised two children in that house. Reynolds' daughter Kathleen, 26, recently earned a nursing degree. Son Ryan, who worked on the crew and was an accomplished golfer, passed away unexpectedly in 2005 at age 22.

"It was lonely for the kids in the winter but in the summer you can't beat it," Reynolds said.

One of his favorite moments came in 1991 in the aftermath of Hurricane Bob, which had brought the angry ocean up and over Ocean Drive and onto the course.

"The kids were swimming in the bunkers on 4 as I tried to flush saltwater off the green with the irrigation system," he said with a large smile.

Reynolds first met his successor Coen through his children. For not only was Coen's girlfriend at the time working in the clubhouse, she also was babysitting for the Reynolds family. Coen filled in as babysitter when needed and soon found himself working summers on the golf course. Eventually he was offered a full-time position. That was 20 years ago.

After working at the club for 10 years, Coen was promoted to assistant superintendent. When Reynolds announced his retirement, Newport gave Coen a trial run in the top slot throughout 2010. For Coen, 2010 was a test, as he essentially made all the agronomic decisions. He passed.

"It's nice knowing my assistant is going to take over. I take a little pride in that," Reynolds said. "He knows the golf course as well as I do. He knows the idiosyncrasies. He knows what's going to happen in advance. He doesn't have to learn through trial and error."

Coen is looking forward to being in charge, and he's confident he is up to the task.

"Last year I took on a lot more responsibility. It was a lot," he said, but not too



"It was a great place to work. I was supported by everyone I knew — friends, peers, the members and the board." — Bob Reynolds

much. "I know this place like the back of my hand."

Coen does not have an agronomic degree, although he did attend the University of Massachusetts Winter School program and always takes part in seminars at the New England Regional Turfgrass Show and Conference. The club wants him to continue his education. This year he went to his first GIS.

According to Coen, he's been attending class for the last 20 years with Reynolds as the teacher.

"I couldn't have asked for a better person to work for," he said.

Douglas surmised that the change would not be a monumental one.

"I see a lot of similarities between Chris and Bob," he said. "They both are the superintendent that will get in the ditch and get dirty."

Coen said his plan is to combine what he has learned from Reynolds with his own ideas. "Take everything he taught me and add my own little pizzazz," he said.

Last year that meant a new light and frequent topdressing program on greens, of which members approved.

The modifications Coen made are fine with Reynolds, too. After 30 years, the Newport Country Club is no longer his. In succinct New England style, Reynolds sums up his feelings.

"It's time to move on."

If Reynolds ever does come up North again, he will always be welcomed at Newport.

"The door is always open," Douglas said. "It's family." ■

Pioppi is a contributing editor to Golfdom.