

Off The Fringe

The 'Step of Fame'

CC OF MOBILE HONORS ITS VETERAN GOLFERS

By Mark Leslie

Having watched as a major Ron Forse-designed reconstruction of his beloved Country Club of Mobile (Ala.) took place, octogenarian T.J. Bender Jr. thought it a minor thing to ask that a new step be



T.J. Bender Jr. plants his hand in the wet cement of the Country Club of Mobile's new gazebo step, initiating the procedure for a dozen octogenarian buddies.

built at the club's gazebo, where he and his buddies hang out.

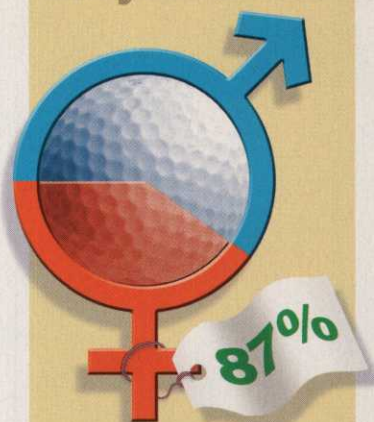
Taking the call from Bender, General Manager Don Vance experienced a flash of brilliance: Bender and his buddies would each plant their hands in the wet cement of the new step and, a la Hollywood's Walk of Fame, create CC of Mobile's own "Step of Fame."

"These 13 gentlemen, all World War II veterans, are part of a tight-knit group and have known one another all their lives," Vance says. "They have shared a common bond, and that is their passion for life, family, friendship and, of course, golf."

The step was built, and the hands were laid on it Oct. 1.

"We poured the concrete step, I

Did you know...



...that even though only 40% of all new golfers are women, they influence 87% of all sales in the golf shop?

SOURCE: NATIONAL GOLF FOUNDATION
ILLUSTRATION: DAN BEEDY

brought some champagne and we had a ceremony," Vance said. "Now it's a reminder of part of our history."

Vance said Bender and his friends are members who "ran the country club back" when they were in their primes. "They are long-time prominent residents of the city and are now taking that step in life down memory lane."

Take the Major Challenge with Deere and *Golfdom*

So you have a brilliant hunch about which Tour players will dominate the Majors this year. You're dreaming about Tiger or Vijay and you've even got a good feeling about Freddie. Here's a chance to play out that hunch ... and maybe even win big.

John Deere and *Golfdom* have joined forces to present the Major Challenge, an online fantasy golf competition for superintendents and other turfheads who want to test their luck against colleagues around the world.

The object of the contest is simple, says Mike Scaletta, advertising manager for Deere's golf/turf division. "You pick the six players you think

will score best in each of the four Major tournaments and their combined stroke score is your score in the Challenge," he says. "You can change players and tinker with your team any time up to the day before each event. It's fun, and it's free."

The Major Challenge contest events are, of course, the Masters, U.S. Open, British Open and PGA Championship. Fabulous prizes await winners

of each of the events, and the grand prize is an expenses-paid trip to stay and play at the John Deere Team Championship in Scottsdale in November.

You can also win prizes when you "Beat the Big Guy" by pitting your

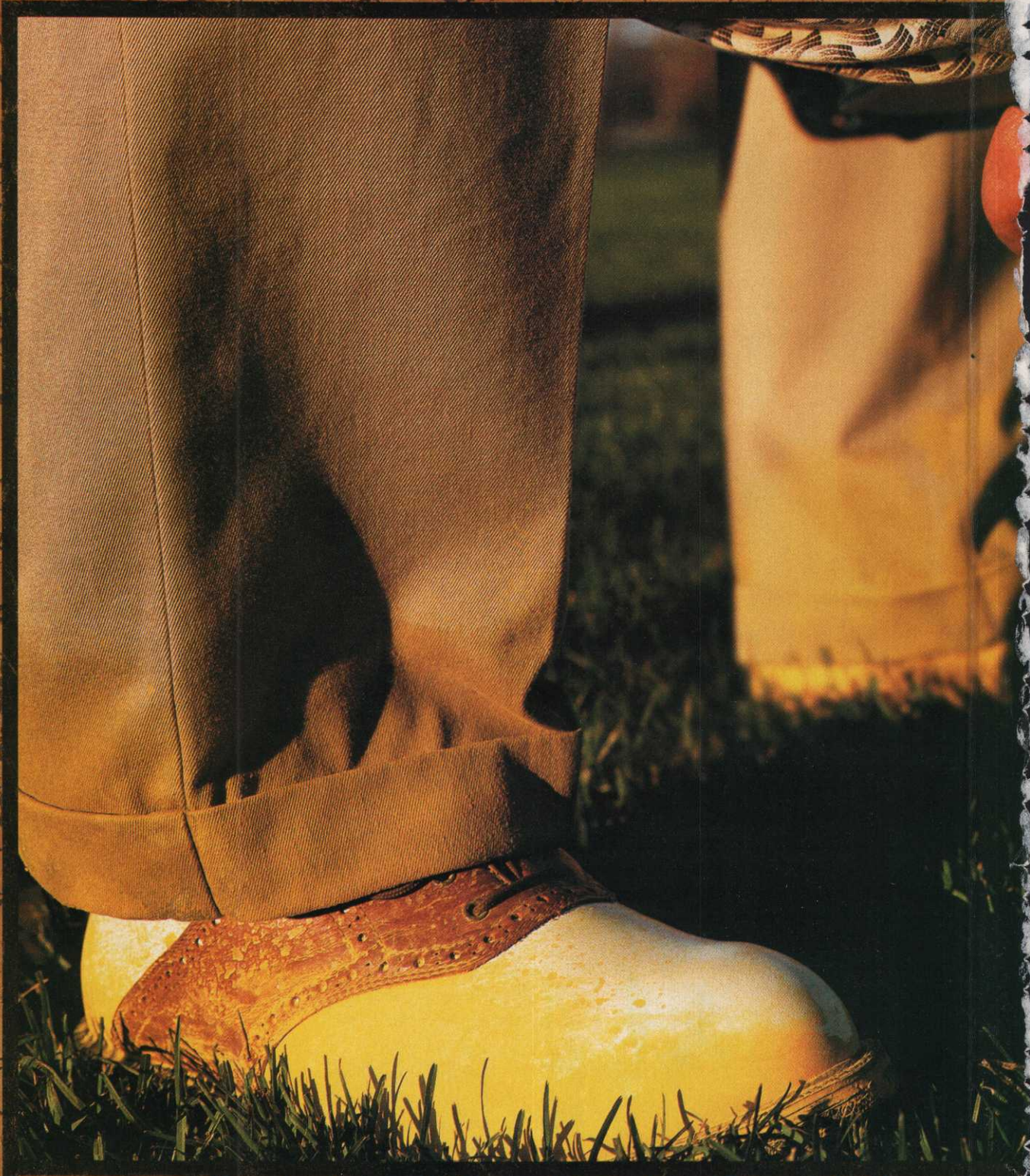
team against teams selected by *Golfdom*'s Pat Jones and Deere honcho Gregg Breningmeyer. In a joint statement, Jones and Breningmeyer said: "You wanna a piece of us? Huh? Bring it on!"

You can register online now by visiting www.majorchallenge.com or by clicking on the Major Challenge link at www.golfdom.com. Contest information, complete rules, eligibility, standings, stats and player information are also available on the site.

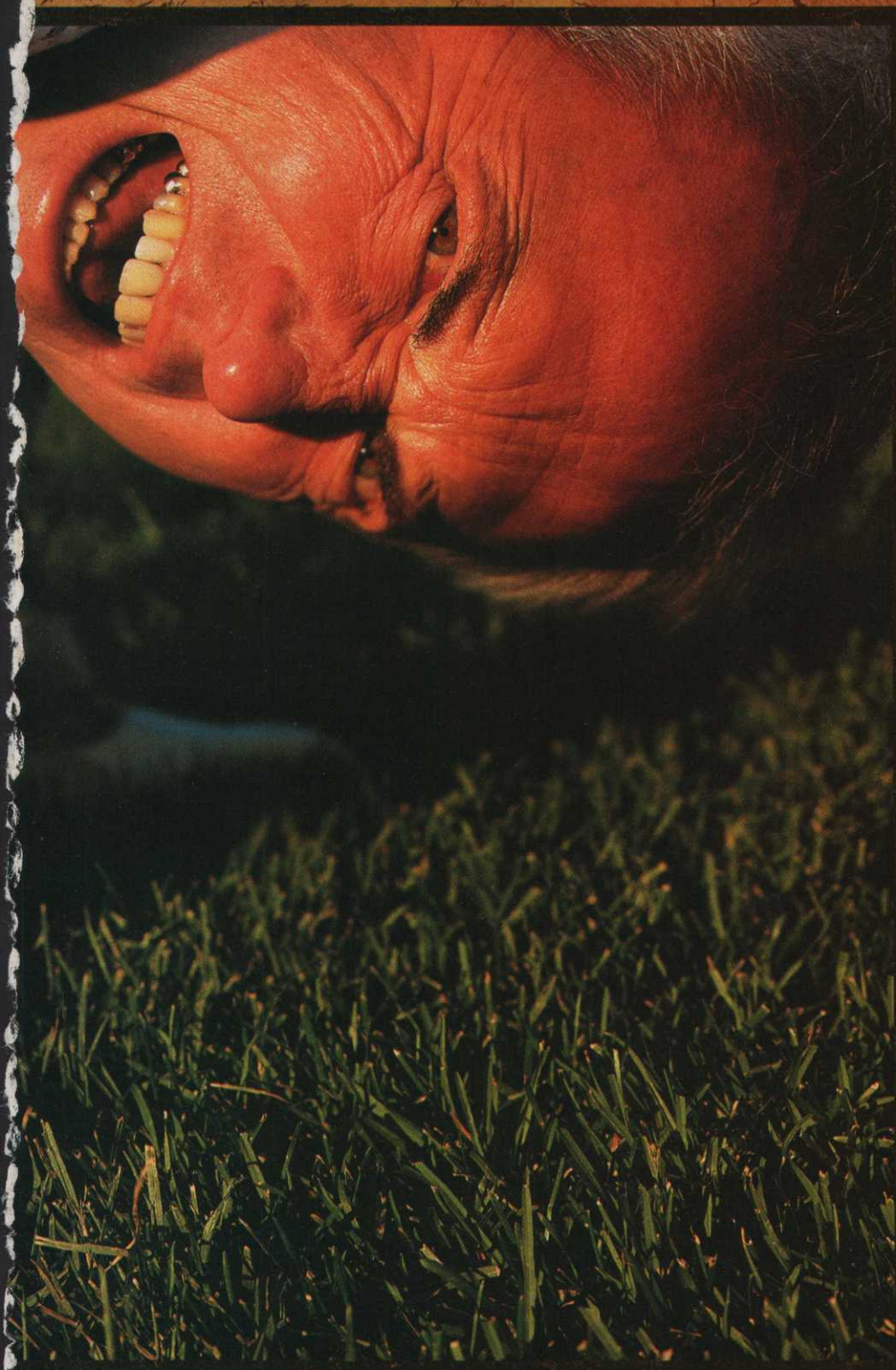
BONUS: You'll receive a special early-bird gift if you register before St. Patrick's Day, March 17, but you can still modify your team before the Masters begins in April. Look for more details in the March and April issues of *Golfdom*.

So log on, sign up, have fun and win.





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The Golf Business Ain't in Great Shape

Q What's your take on the golf course industry's financial state? What's it take for a course to make money?

A Times are tough in the golf industry, at least for management companies and some daily-fee operators — not to mention the golf club, shirt and hat manufacturers.

Job layoffs have traditionally been good for business at the low green-fee public operations — to a point. A guy will still play your \$15 or \$20 course and drink your \$2 beer while he's looking for work. He's got to do something besides watch soaps. He won't, though, buy much of anything other than golf, and he'll probably walk instead of renting a cart.

And, don't forget, while 2 million new souls have been taking up the game each year in America, more than 2 million leave it — potentially forever. The growth in individuals desiring to play golf has been flat for the past several years, while the industry has added some 3,000 courses to its inventory in the past six years. That's a 20 percent supply increase with a 0 percent demand increase.

No wonder golf operators throughout the country are looking to draft women and children. Somebody has to replace those traditional golfers who left because they can't get around in four hours on your course, can't quit slicing, can't find their balls and can't putt your greens. You know the drill — “Too fast, too slow, too tight, too thick, too dry, too wet . . .”

In the past decade, many entry-level and old-line private clubs consistently outperformed their yearly financial projections. Those days are long gone, however. Other yuppie golfers lined up at high-end daily fees two, three and four times per month, salivating over the chance to pay \$100, \$200 or \$300

Been there, seen that

BY MIKE HEACOCK



for a single round of golf at “member-for-a-day” courses. How overbuilt is that market in your area today?

How do you amortize a \$20 million golf course investment on a \$50 green fee? You could gross \$15,000 to \$20,000 a day if a foursome at rack rate filled every potential tee-time. That amount multiplied by 365 days pushes \$7 million a year, a strong figure. But how many days do you lose to rain or snow, and how many hours per day do you lose to frost? How many rounds can you get before 8 a.m. or after 3 p.m. if you don't discount to \$20 or \$15 or \$10? Everyone's full at 8 a.m. on Saturday, but how about 6:30 a.m. on Tuesday?

Tee times at a public course are like seats on a scheduled airline: Once the plane's gone, the empty seats are gone, and you didn't get any money for them. In order to fill perishable tee times, the question eventually becomes, “Would golfers play at that hour for free?” If the answer is, “Yes,” then you “guesstimate” how much above “free” you can charge for those times, implement those charges and see what happens.

How many rounds do you do at an average green fee of \$25 (rack rate is \$50)? In Southern California, with 20 or 30 rain days per year, you might do 80,000 maximum for a gross of \$2 million, and you're open 365 days a year. In Ohio, you'll do 60,000 for a gross of \$1.5 million, but you're closed in winter with limited expenses. In

California, that \$2 million will just about cover debt service. In Ohio, you'll land \$.5 million short of covering debt service each year. In neither case have you paid any help or vendors. In short, you'll go belly-up quickly.

Let's say you have a great enough golf course operation that you can average \$50 as a green fee, which means your rack rate would be above \$100. Now you're at a gross of \$4 million in Southern California and \$3 million in Ohio. Debt service is still \$2 million, but now you've got \$1 million or \$2 million to play with and pay for the overhead (including the clubhouse and the appurtenances). But there's something else in this picture — somebody owns this deal, and that entity probably wants some monetary return. So you still don't have much for maintenance.

What if your course and your golf market is so great you can average \$100 green fees, meaning your rack rate is over \$200. Now you're in business, right along with Pebble Beach and the other heavy hitters. But is your course Pebble Beach?

Consider: One course in a famous magazine's top 100 list reportedly cost more than \$80 million to build, allegedly sold out of bankruptcy at about 15 cents on the dollar and still didn't make money. But it's a great golf course!

How do you maintain a \$20 million golf course on a \$500,000 budget for everything, including maintenance, equipment, repairs and capital improvements? Some of you are going to have to find out.

Editor's Note: Mike Heacock, former vice president of agronomy and maintenance for American Golf Corp., fields your questions in his bi-monthly column. You can reach him at: mike.heacock@verizon.net or 310-849-5011.



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Count on it.

I'm not one of these stupid-intendents," said Dick Howe, a salesman for Reed Equipment, a John Deere distributor in Stockton, Calif. Howe made the remark to me while riding on a bus packed with superintendents during John Deere's annual Golf & Turf Feedback Program last summer. Howe was one of several distributors who attended the program.

Howe later remarked that being a superintendent is a thankless job. "It's similar to being a baseball manager," he said. "You could win the World Series and still lose your job."

With the disdain he displays on his sleeve, you probably think Howe has something against the golf course maintenance field. "Stupid-intendents" is about as ungracious of a label that someone can place on the profession.

On the contrary, Howe reveres superintendents like Cubs fans hail Sammy Sosa. Howe knows the barriers many superintendents must confront — and he's rooting for them.

Howe says what he says about the profession because he knows it well. He was a superintendent for 24 years before joining Reed Equipment about six years ago. Howe quit being a superintendent partly because he was stressed out. He was weary of a lot of things, from club politics to pump station problems.

"There are CGCSs with 20 years of experience, and they're being run around the loop by green chairmen who say they can do things better because they play a lot of golf," Howe says. "It's ridiculous. It's one of the reasons I got out."

When Howe was superintendent at Riverview Golf and CC in Redding, Calif., he watched his assistant and friend, 42-year-old Steve Flatt, die of a heart attack on the 18th green. Flatt had high blood pressure and smoked, Howe says, but his pressure-packed profession probably contributed to his ill health. "That," Howe says of the tragic event, "was an eye-opener." So was Howe's divorce to his first wife. Both episodes made him think about forsaking the profession.

Some stalwart superintendents who bleed green might think Howe couldn't cut it. Howe, however, makes no apologies and is not afraid to admit why he quit. Today, Howe enjoys week-long vacations in the summer with his second wife, as well as stress-free weekends at home. He

'Stupid-intendent' Reflects on Past

BY LARRY AYLWARD



DICK HOWE HAS
NO REGRETS ABOUT
QUITTING THE
PROFESSION . . .
WELL, JUST ONE

admits, however, he still feels nervous when the phone rings on Sunday. His mind takes him back to when he was a superintendent, and he's sure the person calling him is his assistant to report that the course's pump station is down.

Howe says he often reminds his customers — superintendents — to place their families before their greens. He recalls what his two kids told him what they remember about their father the superintendent — that they didn't get to see him much because he was always working.

Howe is quick to point out that being a salesman isn't an easy job. He admits he didn't have much respect for salesmen when he was a superintendent. "But now I have more respect for them than ever before."

Howe also says he has more respect for superintendents than before. Being a salesman for superintendents — and being on the other side of the negotiating table — helped him gain more perspective for both jobs.

Howe may make jokes — "stupid-intendents" — but they're more backhanded tributes to the profession than insults. What Howe means by the "stupid-intendents" remark is that one must be crazy to get into a field that's often embroiled in politics, among other things. He was.

But Howe also empathizes with the passion most superintendents possess. While he's glad he's not a superintendent anymore, Howe will be the first to tell you he misses the job, particularly those times when "you feel like an artist who has just finished a painting." That feeling usually occurred at sunset when Howe toured the empty course one final time before going home.

"You look at the course you've helped to create," he says. "It's almost like a spiritual experience."

There were some good things about being a "stupid-intendent."

Editor Larry Aylward can be reached at 440-891-2770 or lalward@advanstar.com.

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While they may not be a cure all, I am firmly convinced that, along with a solid cultural program, the products can make greens healthier and jobs less stressful.

Floratine has made a believer out of me.

- Fred Theus, Superintendent
Ocean Forest Golf Club
Sea Island, GA (Walker Cup, 2001)

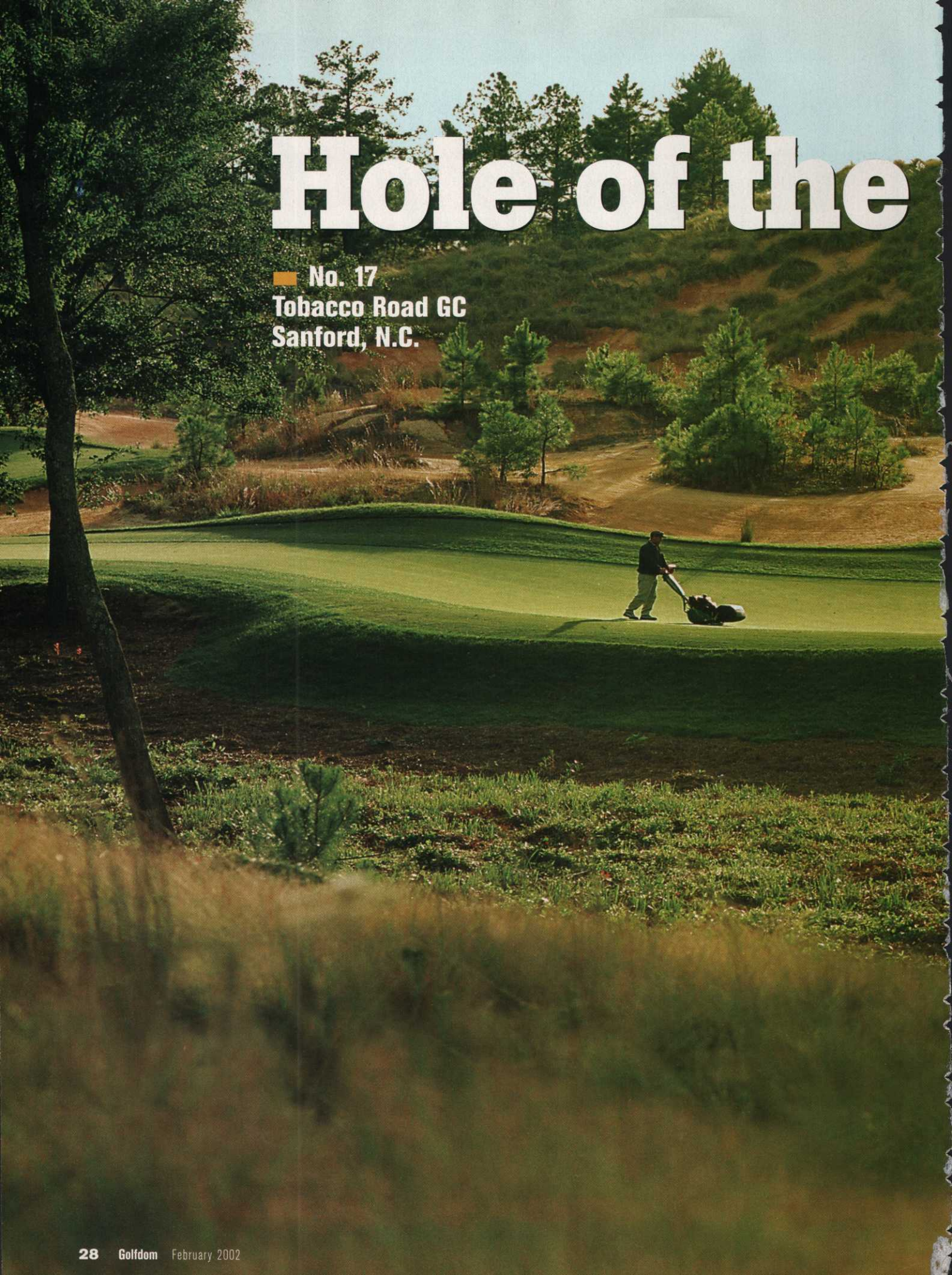


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Hole of the



■ No. 17
Tobacco Road GC
Sanford, N.C.

Month

Challenges Abound

Tobacco Road GC challenges every facet of a player's game. It also challenges many facets of a superintendent's maintenance capabilities, says Perry Payne, director of golf course maintenance.

"The mind is used more than the muscles," Payne says of playing the course. Of the course's maintenance, headed by Payne and superintendent Morgan Stephenson, Payne says, "It's never boring because the architecture is so distinctive and unusual."

Tobacco Road was designed by Mike Strantz and opened in 1998. The 142-yard par-3 17th hole is one of the course's more distinctive holes. The green is about 85 yards wide and 20 yards deep, making for diverse putting angles.

A major maintenance challenge on the course, including the 17th hole, is caring for waste areas, especially after heavy rains.

"A normal course doesn't have as much sand and waste area as this course," Stephenson says. "So we spend more time raking the waste areas as needed!"

Golfdom's Hole of the Month is presented in partnership with:

www.johndeere.com



JOHN RILEY

What's that old adage about sausage? Oh, yeah — people like to eat it as long as you don't tell them what it's made from.

I realize you're asking yourself: What does that adage have to do with golf course maintenance? For starters, both sausage and golf start with links. (Insert your own rim shot here.)

I contend golfers are like sausage eaters. They love to play the game, idolize the legends of the game and buy the latest and greatest equipment and all the latest game-improving gimmicks. They don't really want to know what goes into the maintenance of the courses they play. They only want to gorge themselves on the finished product — and to heck with the details.

In that sense, the art of golf course maintenance is like making sausage. It often isn't pretty. The ingredients and preservatives must be managed carefully for quality control, and it can be downright messy at times (not that verticutting and aerifying are anything like meat grinding).

But sausage eaters — er, I mean golfers — don't give a kielbasa about the process as long as they can savor the final flavor of the links. Details about water restrictions and water quality, and the removal of the latest pest-fighting ingredients from the superintendent's pantry are ignored or overlooked because golfers don't want to know — just like they don't want to know which cow and pig parts have been stuffed into the sausage casing they're enjoying with their sunnyside-up eggs.

Negative stories in the newspaper or on TV that allude to the use of dangerous, toxic pesticides on golf courses are all too common. Yet how many times have you seen golfers write letters to the editors supporting their golf courses when they're under attack? Not often, I'll wager.

One of the reasons golfers don't rally to our defense is they don't know if the story is true or not. I guess most of them have that sausage-for-brains mentality that what they don't know won't hurt them.

According to Frank Rossi, assistant professor of turfgrass science at Cornell University, a survey of golfers about how they view their health and safety on golf courses provided

Golfers Are Like Sausage Eaters

BY JOEL JACKSON



GOLFERS DON'T
WANT TO KNOW
WHAT GOES INTO
GOLF COURSE
MAINTENANCE.
THEY JUST WANT
TO ENJOY THE
FINISHED PRODUCT

some disturbing numbers. It showed one-third thought there might be something to the negative media claims; one-third thought they were safe; and one-third had no idea whether they were safe or not.

Those numbers bother me. What they tell me is that two-thirds of the golfers think there could be a health or environmental problem, and yet they still play the game. Two-thirds aren't educating themselves about what we do.

If I was a rank-and-file golfer, I'd like to know that the course I play was operating by the rules for applying pesticides. I'd like to know that there are labels which govern the use of pesticides. I'd like to know those products have undergone years of research and testing before they ever made it to my golf course. I'd like to know that the people handling and applying those chemicals are licensed and trained.

If I knew all that and then I saw newspaper and TV stories that sensationalize pesticide stories, I'd be angry that the media and the anti-golf groups get so much air time and headline space for spouting off a bunch of tripe about the game I love and enjoy. Maybe if I was informed about my golf course, I'd write a letter to the editor and tell those cranks and hacks to stuff it.

They say knowledge is power. So why isn't our side of the business as powerful as the sticks-and-balls group when it comes to capturing the public's attention? We could use their help, but it seems golfers, tour players, owners and developers don't really want to know what goes into making a golf course green and enjoyable to play.

For these people, ignorance is bliss and silence is a golden brown-and-serve sausage — the ingredient list be damned.

Joel Jackson, CGCS, retired from Disney's golf division in 1997 and is director of communications for the Florida GCSA.