

FRANK ANDORKA

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"As far back as I can remember, I've always wanted to write about greenkeeping."

Frank Andorka, Cleveland, OH, 2004

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Continued from page 80

System] transmitter on the vehicle," he says. "On the irrigation screen, you can see where the vehicle is on the map and watch it move in real time. If you want to know where your three fairway mowers are, you can look on the screen and see them move."

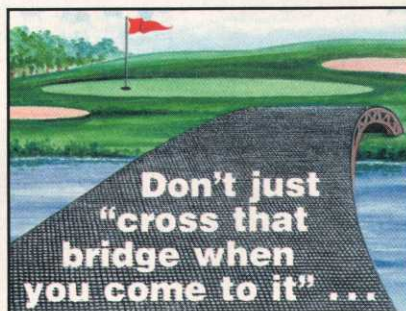
When the vehicle passes within radio range of the computer, Avior can upload information from sensors on the machine. It tabulates how long a machine has been used that day and can predict when a vehicle will need to be serviced.

"It can take water temperature, oil pressure and could [for instance] tell you that your oil temperature is running high and you might want to look at the greens mower on No. 6," he says. "It totally integrates the irrigation and vehicle maintenance packages."

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"Mainly it tracks vehicle locations and pulls up historical records about where vehicles have been," Ferraro says. "That can be important for something like a spray rig, when you're spraying chemicals and want to know where the rig has been and whether it has covered the whole course." ■

Blais is a free-lance writer from Monmouth, Maine.



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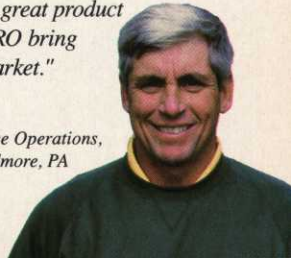
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Matt Shaffer
Director of Golf Course Operations,
Merion Golf Club, Ardmore, PA



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Leaders

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

The following superintendents recently received their certification: **Jeffrey Barlow**, Waupaca (Wis.) Country Club; **Martin Brandt**, The Wyndgate, Rochester Hills, Minn.; **John Carroll**, Cavalry Club, Manlius, N.Y.; **Timothy M. Cunningham**, Atlanta National Golf Club, Alpharetta Ga.; **Robert W. Erickson III**, Prestonwood Country Club, Cary, N.C.; **Gib Fox**, Ol' Colony Golf Course, Tuscaloosa, Ala.; **Blake Halderman**, Trump National Golf Club, Briarcliff Manor, N.Y.; **Paul Hood**, Willow Creek Golf Club, Knoxville, Tenn.; **Thomas Kramlich**, Omni Interlocken Resort, Broomfield, Colo.; **Kenyon Kyle**, Shadow Wood Country Club, Bonita Springs, Fla.; **Richard Todd Lawrence**, TPC at Wakefield Plantation, Raleigh, N.C.; **Andrew Maguire**, Marsh Creek Country Club, St. Augustine, Fla.; **Kevin Neal**, Sea Cliff Country Club, Huntington Beach, Calif.; **David Pawluk**, Fore Lakes Golf Club, Kimball, Mich.; and **Ken Schwark**,

Coyote Creek Golf Club, Morgan Hill, Calif.

West Coast Turf named **John Marman** to regional sales manager for Southern California and southern Nevada.

The National Golf Foundation elected Cleveland Golf president **Greg Hopkins** to its board of directors.

The Golf Course Builders Association of America elected five new officers: **Tommy Sasser**, Weitz Golf International, president; **Tom Shapland**, Wadsworth Golf Construction Co., president-elect; **Rick Elyea**, Tee-2-Green Corp., vice president; **Michael Harrington**, HARCO Fittings, secretary; **Steve Christman**, Eagle Golf & Landscape Products, treasurer.

Simplot Partners hired **Brad Geisler** as a turf sales representative for Arizona and **Craig Hanson** as turf sales representative for the south-

NOTABLE ACHIEVERS

The Golf Course Superintendents Association of Northern California announced its 2004 Award Winners: **Patrick Finlen**, certified superintendent of The Olympic Club in San Francisco — Superintendent of the Year; **Brian Bagley**, superintendent of The Villages Golf and Country Club in San Jose, Calif. — George Santana Distinguished Service Award; **Nick Chcklenis**, Silver Creek Valley Country Club, San Jose, Calif. — Turfgrass Excellence Award (Private Club category); **Tom Bevan**, superintendent, Bayonet Golf Course, Seaside, Calif. — Turfgrass Excellence Award (Public Course Category); **Brian Guance**, DBD Structures, San Francisco — Affiliate Merit Award.

central California market. The company also named **Lee Simpson** as turf sales representative for the central Kentucky, Louisville, Ky., and southern Indiana markets.

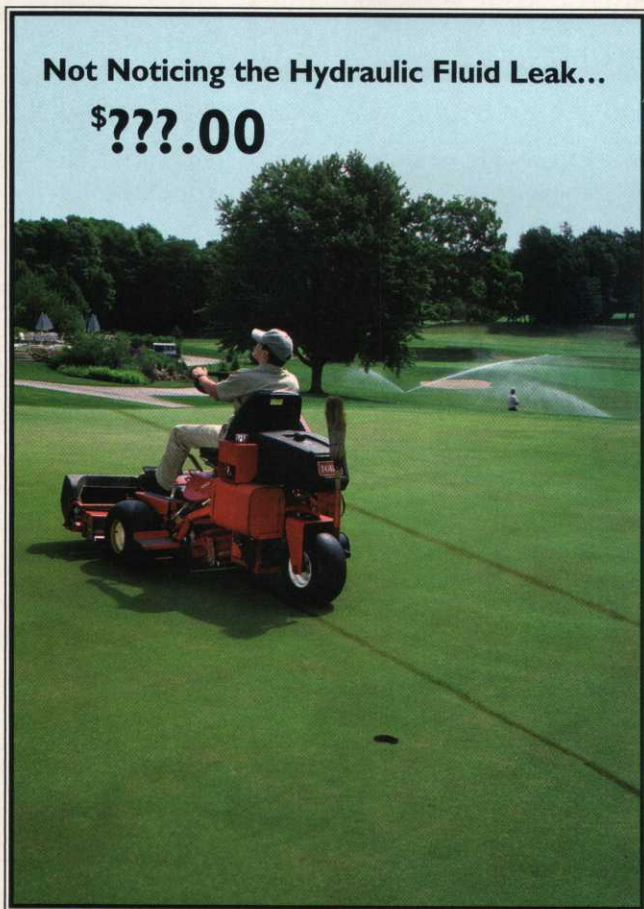
Syngenta Professional Products added **Scott Trbovich** to its sales team in Michigan.

Steve Money was promoted to CEO of Estes Inc., a distributor of agricultural, aquatic, pest control, industrial, turf, and ornamental chemicals.

Bayer Environmental Science named **Bryan Gooch** as business manager for insecticides.

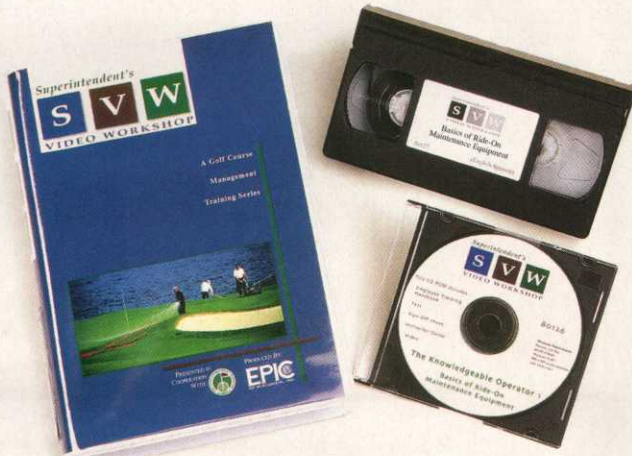
Harmony Products hired **George Frye** and **Ted Horton** as senior advisors.

Let us know about your people on the move. Send information/color photos to Golfdom's Frank Andorka at 7500 Old Oak Blvd., Cleveland, 44130. Fax information to 440-891-2675 or e-mail to fandorka@advanstar.com.



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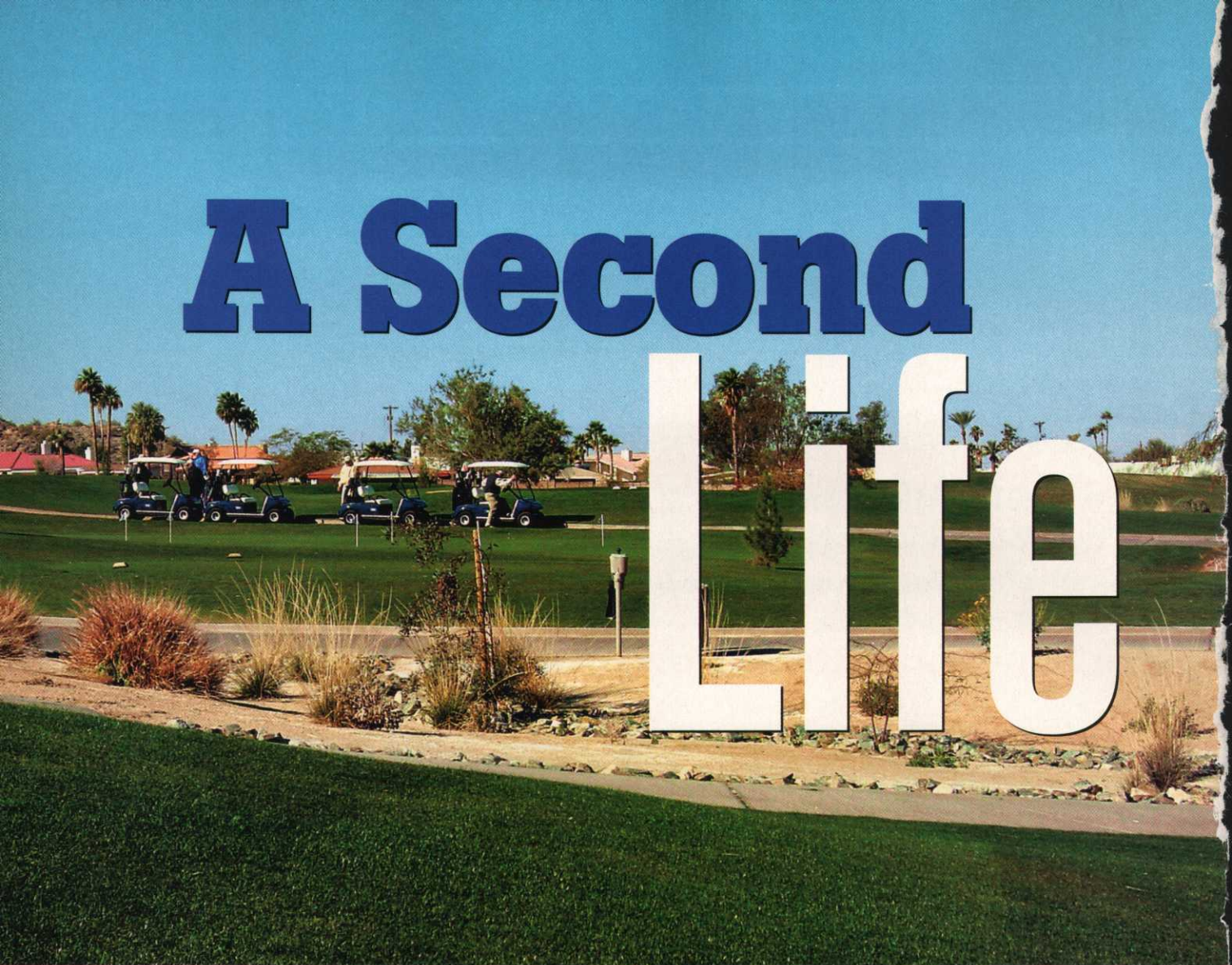
Many thanks for sending me Athletic Turf News. I really enjoyed reading it and cant wait for the next issue. I found it really informative and have downloaded many of the features.

Alan Ferguson
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A Second Life

New owners are trying to put the fun back into a Phoenix golf course beset by a series of setbacks when known as the Thunderbirds Golf Club

**STORY AND PHOTOS
BY REBECCA LARSEN**

Rock music is piped in to set the mood for golfers practicing on the driving range. Enthusiastic valets gather at the bag drop. Golf cars line up at the first tee box on a sunny winter afternoon.

The bustle and sense of fun seem a long way from about a year ago when Vistal Golf Club, then known as the Thunderbirds Golf Club, was on the auction block at law offices in Phoenix, only about 18 months after the course had opened. Part of the newfound success results from a golf club returning to its core support — the local customer.

“We have refocused — not on the destina-

tion golfer but on the local residents,” says Del Cochran, one of the new owners of the club, along with Phoenix businessmen Ernie Garcia and Arte Moreno.

“We’re starting to get a golfers back here again,” adds Drew Hazen, Vistal’s head pro. “We’re getting a lot of repeat business. We try to keep the rates reasonable, and the venue is still at a championship level.”

The story of the Thunderbirds Golf Club is a sad one, but one that says a lot about what happened to the tourist industry after Sept. 11, 2001. But besides being affected by a downturn in travel caused by 9/11, the club

Continued on page 88

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“We’re starting to get a lot of golfers back here again, and we’re getting a lot of repeat business.”

DREW HAZEN
HEAD PROFESSIONAL
VISTAL GOLF CLUB

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was also the victim of an unexpected misfortune that had an impact on golf courses throughout the state.

The golf club is located in south Phoenix, a low- and moderate-income area that has been trying to shed its economic doldrums for several years. The cost of land is cheap there, and new subdivisions are being built nearby. Some other lush golf courses had also been developed in the area, including the Legacy Golf Resort and the Raven at South Mountain. The site of Thunderbirds/Vistal backs up to the rugged slopes of South Mountain, an impressive and scenic landmark.

Thunderbirds/Vistal was developed by a nonprofit business leaders’ group, known as the Thunderbirds, on the site of an old and deteriorating golf club that still had many loyal local players because of its low prices.

The 50-some members of the Thunderbirds are best known for sponsoring the FBR (formerly Phoenix) Open. Through the Open, the group has raised more than \$20 million for charities in the past 15 years. The group’s aim in redeveloping the golf course site was to use profits from green fees to support youth charities. Among the good causes that received money was a First Tee nine-hole course built next door to the new golf club.

With a lot of media attention, the Thunderbirds Golf Club had a splashy opening in the fall of 2001. Some \$12 million had gone into building a target-style desert course, laid out by PGA Tour Design Services with consulting by PGA players Billy Mayfair, Howard Twitty and Tom Lehman. Opening of the First Tee course, designed by Tom Fazio, was marked by a dedication featuring such golf celebrities as PGA Tour head Tim Finchem and Dan Quayle, the former vice president and avid golfer. The 18-hole course was quickly named No. 5 among the top 10 new public courses by *Sports Illustrated*.

After the 9/11 attacks, however, tourism and play dropped



off throughout Phoenix, including at the Thunderbirds’ course. The club’s winter-season green fees — set at about \$100 on weekends and \$80 on weekdays — seemed a bit out of line with the neighborhood, although there were discounts for locals. And it was tough to draw tourists who were staying at Scottsdale resorts, about a 45-minute drive through some confusing highway interchanges.

But the most serious blow came in July 2002 after about 80 teen-agers and others attending a junior tournament at the course came down with a stomach bug, the Norwalk virus. Although the virus is a common ailment from which most victims recovered quickly, one young golfer from that tournament died from it.

After an investigation, health department officials blamed the illnesses on contaminated water or ice dispensed at the course. “It’s a

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common-variety virus that we believe was transmitted through the water at the course,” said Doug Hough, public information officer for the Maricopa County Department of Public Health.

As a result, county inspectors visited all the 157 golf courses in the area and required 96 to change how they supplied water and ice to golfers. Changes ranged from sanitizing water containers at least once every 24 hours to cleaning up ice machines.

The crisis proved devastating, and business dropped to a near standstill at Thunderbirds/Vistal. It was also the heat of summer when rounds normally decrease.

In mid-September 2002, less than a year after opening, Bank One, the lender for the project, had a court appoint a receiver to run the course. Scott Henderson, the Big Chief of the Thunderbirds, acknowledged then

that the project might have been a mistake.

“We are first of all a charitable group, and it’s hard for us to continue to fund the losses,” he said. “If we were a for-profit group, we might have tried harder to make a turnaround in four, five or six years. But it’s time for us to get back to our nonprofit function. It’s not part of our goals to fund a daily-fee golf course.”

So in early 2003, the course was sold to three Phoenix-area investors for about \$4.8 million, a bargain in terms of the usual prices for courses. “When we bought it, it was really at the bottom of the market in terms of play,” says Cochran, who was one of the founders of the Grayhawk Golf Club in north Scottsdale.

But Vistal seems to be headed toward a happy ending. The new owners have concentrated on improving service and luring locals even in the high season, although they

Continued on page 90

Golfers are returning to the former Thunderbirds Golf Club after management refocused on attracting local players.

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“Heavy damage in roughs from animals feeding on grubs and fairway decline from black turfgrass atenaeus forced me to use knockdown treatments on the affected areas,” says this seasoned Wheaton, Ill., superintendent. “But I realized I needed to do more in 1996 when Cantigny hosted the Illinois Amateur Championship. Though I wasn’t using a preventative, I knew I needed a more proactive solution. That’s why I started using Merit.”

He says Merit took a big weight off his shoulders. “After I put it down, I don’t think about grubs for the rest of the season. I sleep a lot easier at night.”

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A Second Life

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still seem to want to attract tourists who stay at resorts in south Phoenix. Lower prices are part of the equation — as low as \$35 at midweek during the high season in midwinter.

One of the investors, Moreno, is a nearly a billionaire who made his money with a billboard company called Outdoor Systems. He and his partner sold their conglomerate in 1999, and Moreno ended up on the *Forbes* list of the 400 richest Americans. He was also part owner of the Arizona Diamondbacks, an interest he has since sold. According to staff members, Moreno plays frequently at the course.

A few months after buying the course, Moreno made a more stunning purchase — the Anaheim Angels. He became the first Latino to acquire a Major League Baseball team when he bought the Angels from the Walt Disney Co. for \$184 million. Among his first moves with the Angels was to cut beer prices and ticket prices for children.

So not surprisingly, green fees at the golf club have dropped as well. The name of the course was also changed. The word “Vistal” is a loose translation of the words “view of the village” in Spanish. That’s a tribute to the fact that you can see the skyscrapers of downtown Phoenix from Vistal on clear days. In addition to offering cut-rate green fees, Vistal also reduced prices on merchandise, beverages and food, Cochran says.

There has been some obvious cost cutting at Vistal the past few months to make for those lower fees. The GPS units were removed from the golf cars. The tee boxes dropped from five sets to four. The clubhouse is still a temporary mobile unit.

During the fall, Vistal waited as long as possible to spread its ryegrass so that it could lure more players while other courses were already closed for overseeding. As a result, the winter rye sprouted in spotty fashion. But extra watering brought it back. Overall, one can feel the optimism and camaraderie among the Vistal staff members about the course’s new life.

“We try to have fun here,” says Hazen, who came to Vistal from the Desert Mountain Club complex in north Scottsdale.

The future looks a lot brighter at Vistal, says Ben Keilholtz, marketing director for Intrawest, the firm that briefly served as the receiver for Bank One.

“It seems to be reinvigorating its roots as a hometown local course where people in the area can play golf,” he says. ■

“It seems to be reinvigorating its roots as a hometown local course where people in the area can play golf.”

BEN KEILHOLTZ
INTRAWEST GOLF