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## Got Gusto?

*Continued from page 70*

So Alex shaped the right side. When Dye returned, he was ecstatic about the work and left it as is. "That's the way he did things," Alex says with a shrug.

Sawgrass was the first TPC course and as a result the PGA bigwigs were often around, including then-PGA Tour Commissioner Dean Beaman, whose idea it was to create TPCs. Alex made fantastic connections within the golf maintenance world, even being offered a chance to forgo his last year of college to move on to another course construction project in Florida. He intended to take the position, until he phoned his father with the news.

"He told me to get my butt home and finish school," Alex says.

Alex returned home to finish school and he graduated from UMass in 1981. He returned to Sawgrass shortly after and stayed until June of 1983. He was the acting superintendent for six months at Sawgrass before he left for the opportunity at Grand Cypress and was replaced by Bobby Weed. (Weed would later join Dye's firm as a designer before forming his own architecture company. Weed has since made numerous alterations to Sawgrass.)

Also on the TPC staff was current USGA Championship Agronomist Tim Moraghan, who had come to Sawgrass from Pinehurst, where he was a superintendent. Like Alex, he too is from northwest Connecticut.

Alex left Sawgrass for another grow-in. Initial clearing at Grand Cypress had just begun when he took the job. Alex says his intention was to build the course and keep moving on, but Orlando has been home since. In that time he's grown in a third nine holes, a teaching center and the 18-hole New Course, all Nicklaus designs.

While Alex was tending to the turf, he was also cultivating new superintendents. He says teaching people is as important to him as tending turf. Alex takes pride in the fact that so many of his former employees are now superintendents — a number of them, not coincidentally, at Nicklaus-designed courses throughout the southeastern United States.

One of those, Mark Heater, is the superintendent at The Loxahatchee Club in Jupiter, Fla. Heater had already been a superintendent when he came to Grand Cypress, but his work experience had been at a small-budget facility, nothing like Grand Cypress.

"I had never seen an operation like that," Heater says. "When I saw how good the golf course was, it opened my eyes."

Heater, bursting with enthusiasm about his job at 44, says he fed off the same attitude from Alex.

"I loved working for him. It was a blast for me," Heater says. "He's the person who made me discover my own work ethic."

Chris Neff is superintendent at Timuquana Country Club, the oldest course in Jacksonville. He was not sure what he was going to do after college but discovered his calling about a week after going to work for Alex. Alex helped Neff to nurture that enthusiasm.

**Alex's intention was to build the Grand Cypress course and keep moving on, but Orlando has been home since.**

"If you showed interest in what he was trying to accomplish, he showed interest back," Neff says.

This is not to say it was all fun and games under Alex's guiding hand.

"At first he was a tyrant," Heater says. "He's very disciplined and regimented in getting the job done."

Neff concurs. "You're going to take your chewings. You're going to learn from him and not make the same mistakes again."

Michaud's golf course maintenance career began under Alex in 1984. He says Alex was a great teacher and motivator.





**People who have worked under Alex are impressed with his sense of urgency to get things done.**

"He always had a sense of urgency," Michaud says. "Everything we did on the course every day was im-

portant, and it was urgent that we get things done the best we could."

Neff says Alex set the standard for golf course maintenance, not just in Orlando but for most of Florida.

Alex says that's a direct result of working for Nicklaus, who demands excellent course conditions but also provides the tools to make that happen. Alex says Nicklaus wanted low heights of cut across the boards at Cypress — lower than any course in Orlando at the time — but made sure the greens were USGA spec, the irrigation system was top of the line and drainage was superior.

The goals Nicklaus wanted were met and are continuously improved upon by Alex, who in turn has forged the reputation as one of the best and most innovative superintendents in Florida, even having Grand Cypress used as a test facility for companies like Rain Bird Irrigation.

Alex remains at Grand Cypress — not surprisingly, Neff points out — because he values loyalty so highly.

"Who knows how many jobs he's

been offered through the years?" Neff speculates.

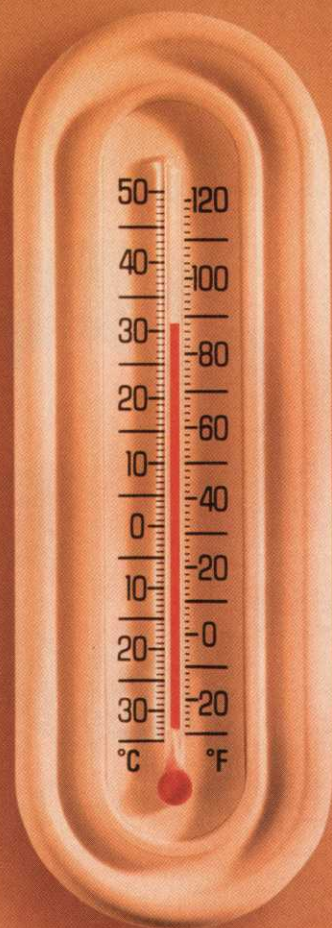
How many jobs he's helped fill is another question. For years Ed Etchells was head of agronomy for Nicklaus Design. The company was responsible for most of its projects and Alex often received calls from Etchells looking for recommendations, which explains why so many of Alex's people moved on to other Nicklaus designs.

According to Alex, Etchells preferred superintendents who already understood how to maintain a golf course to standards that Nicklaus demanded.

Alex has confidence in the people he recommends but understands there's not much else he can do for them once they leave Grand Cypress. "You can help a guy get his first job, but you can't help him keep it," he says.

Alex's track record proves there may not be much else he needs to do. From south Florida to eastern Long Island, Alex proteges are firmly in place at some of golf's best layouts. And they've made their employers — and their mentor — proud of their accomplishments. ■

*Golfdom's Larry Aylward contributed to this story.*



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# Get a Grip

When it comes to handheld equipment, safety is an absolute. Less clear is whether to fix the ol' blower or purchase a new one

By Thomas Skernivitz, Managing Editor

In cases of mechanical mishap, Jerry Coldiron Jr. makes a pit stop at what he calls his "graveyard of handheld equipment." There he finds just about every used doohickey imaginable.

"If one thing goes haywire, we can pull a lot of parts out of there," says the certified superintendent at Boone Links and Lassing Point golf courses in Boone County, Ky. "We cannibalize a lot of parts, and we can rob Peter to pay Paul."

But not every component is as replaceable as a toggle switch or carburetor. Far more susceptible, Coldiron says, are his employees' parts, specifically their eyes and ears. And with any overview of handheld equipment — chain saws, blowers, trimmers — the heart of the matter is safety.

Superintendents and mechanics at one time were negligent of this. Coldiron mentions, with slight remorse, that his hearing isn't so great after failing to wear earplugs during 25-plus years of operating noisy equipment.

And there's still the mindless urge to grab a string trimmer for a simple touch-up job without donning protective glasses.

"We weren't trained, we didn't know, we didn't pay attention," Coldiron recalls. "But certainly the guys today are much more cognizant of the safety issues."

Many superintendents and mechanics now not only purchase eyewear and throwaway earplugs, they do so in bulk. Steel-toe boots and

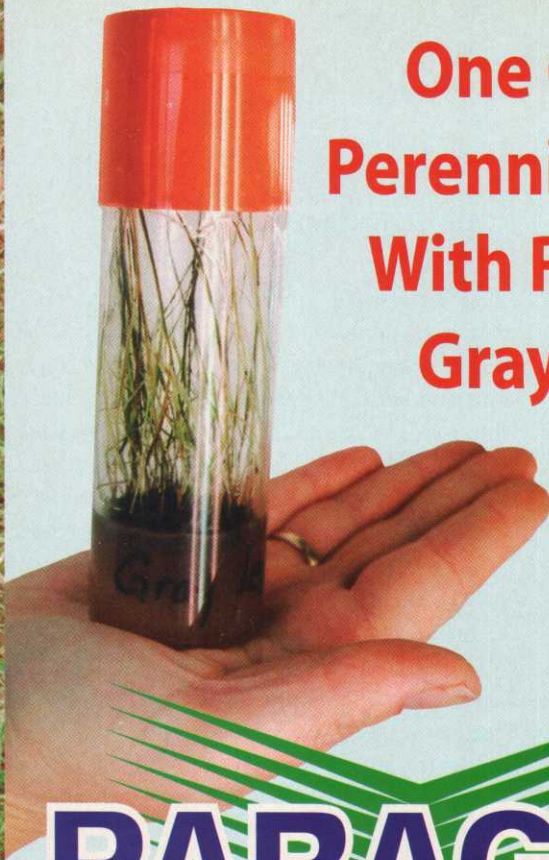
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Paragon GLR<sup>TM</sup> Perennial Ryegrass



## Get a Grip

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heavy-duty chaps are mandatory for all course employees who operate chain saws.

Meanwhile, manufacturers have also helped to increase consumer awareness. Coldiron and his chief mechanic, Tom Woodall, swear by Stihl products, in part because of the company's informative and entertaining presentations. "The seminars are a highlight for our guys. Stihl brings in the guy who can carve out just about anything with a chain saw," Coldiron says.

Joe Fahey, the vice president of marketing at Echo Inc., says his company can't stress safety too much. Owners manuals and safety manuals are available online. Training videos accompany some products.

"If you have one injury, that's a bad thing," Fahey says. "Sometimes people try to over-

ride safety elements that have been added to the product, and we strongly recommend that that not happen."

As for technological advances, Coldiron cites the emergence of compression-release chain saws as one example of improved safety. Chain saw operators who once risked injury while trying to start the device can now expect a "smooth start" or "smooth pull," Coldiron says, instead of a dangerous kickback.

"Starting a chain saw is where a lot of injuries happen," Coldiron says. "That kind of improvement from the manufacturing standpoint is very positive for the industry."

### Less is better

When it comes to emissions, decibels and ounces, manufacturers are in an ever-present reduction mode. Unfortunately, those three objectives don't

always go hand in hand, according to Fahey. Some manufacturers, in order to meet increasingly tighter emissions standards, have moved from two-stroke engines to more complex — and hence, heavier — four-stroke and two/four-stroke engines,

"There are times when you have to compromise, and the manufacturers that have gone to the four-stroke or the two/four have compromised, because that technology just weighs more," Fahey says. "This runs counter to what the superintendents want, but it's an outcome of regulations. Fortunately, we've been able to stay with two-stroke."

Echo has continued to do so despite emissions limits that have been reduced 80 percent in the past six years. As of Jan. 1, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA),

following the regional lead of the California Air Resources

Board (CARB), requires handheld equipment to operate at an emissions level of 37 grams per horsepower-hour of hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides, down from 74 grams last year.

"That's a significant mandate," Fahey says. "Manufacturers have really been scrambling the past two years over how they were going to achieve this."

Superintendents need not worry about the emissions police knocking at their doors, as their equipment is grandfathered. But the issue does dictate the look and performance of future products and is something superintendents "need to be aware of," Fahey says.

As for noise restrictions, there are no national requirements, although some municipalities are trying to ban or restrict the use of blowers.

"What we try to do as a manufacturer is educate the municipalities that there are low-noise blowers available," Fahey says. "We have several models that are rated at 65 dBA (A-weighted decibels). Some blowers go up as high as the low 70s. The dBA scale is logarithmic, so if you go down six dBA, the sound is cut in half."

Coldiron substantiates any noise-reduction claims, saying, "Certainly the engines are quieter now and the screens that they have in mufflers are quieter."

Improved efficiency is also evident, he adds, in that

*Continued on page 78*



You'd have to be "whacked" out to not wear eyewear while operating handheld equipment on the golf course.





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## Get a Grip

*Continued from page 76*

machines now run on easy-to-mix two-cycle fuels. "They have dye in them and they have stabilizer in them," he says. "In the old days you had to measure everything out, but now you just take a small container — and they're all marked pretty well — and load and unload the fuel."

Not that there isn't room for improvement.

"If we had a wish, we'd wish that they'd (implement) electric start for some of the things we use all the time," Coldiron says. "We don't have any handheld equipment that has electric start, but I know that technology is getting close."



Fahey answers that there have been electric-start products in the past, but they were not successful in the marketplace. "The problem is that ... No. 1, it's more weight. And No. 2, it's more cost," he says.

### Fix or buy?

Blessed with a quality maintenance staff and facilities, or cursed by a substandard budget, superintendents might choose to visit the "graveyard" and repair a string trimmer themselves rather than buy a new one. Coldiron and Woodall have been using some of the same blowers for more than a decade, and one Stihl model is 15 years old.

"We try to evaluate (fixing

vs. buying) all the time," Coldiron says. "It all depends on what you paid for the equipment, how old it is, what kind of shape it's in all-around, and what it costs to fix. I don't know if there's any true answer. It just comes down to having a good understanding of what makes it work."

As repair rates increase and technology advances, superintendents may become more reluctant to repair, Fahey says.

"Various manufacturers use different technologies now to achieve these emissions regulations. So a trimmer isn't just a trimmer anymore, and the superintendents are going to have to deal with this," he says. "Suddenly, you're working on a very complex small engine with 30 parts vs. one with six. That changes the equation or it moves the (transition) point for repair vs. replace."

At Bent Creek Country Club in Lititz, Pa., comfort and familiarity go a long way in determining whether to buy new, according to Assistant Superintendent Mike Bair and Head Mechanic Tim Landis.

"Sometimes it is difficult to stop using the old standbys," Bair says. "And most of the time, the new stuff is too expensive initially, and it does not look like it is strong enough structurally. But most (superintendents) will wait a year or so, when the bugs are engineered out and the general opinion is favorable, and then we will make the change."

Other superintendents choose to bypass the fix vs. purchase debate altogether and purchase "throwaway"



equipment. They buy a lesser product with a goal of never having to worry about maintaining it.

"We've never been that way," Coldiron says. "We always try to buy a brand product and take care of it and try to make it last two, three or four seasons. But I do know some guys have different philosophies."

Adds Fahey: "It depends on what your economic model is. We like to think that professionals would buy a product they can rely on day in day out. Everyone has to decide what the cost benefit is and make their own determinations."

Jim Loke, the certified superintendent at Bent Creek, sees the continual evolution of handheld equipment as a vicious circle of sorts.

"Our members think the cost of our equipment is out of control," Loke says. "But part of the problem is the industry is looking for new gadgets to sell, and superintendents are coming up with newer and newer ideas and requests for the manufacturers to produce these tools. And I don't know where it's going to stop. The standards we are producing are kind of fueling this cycle."

"As we make improvements and improve the quality of the golf course, we're continuously looking for ways to make it even better." ■

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# On the Trail of Gray Leaf Spot



By Anthony Pioppi,  
Contributing Editor

**T**he most recent epidemic of gray leaf spot came in 1998, but it was a more localized outbreak two years later that could lead to having the biggest effect on combating the disease that hits perennial ryegrass the hardest but also damages tall fescue, centipedegrass and St. Augustinegrass.

In 2000 the University of Rutgers department of plant biology and pathology found gray leaf spot on its perennial ryegrass turf plots in Freehold, N.J., according to Stacy Bonos, an assistant professor and researcher for the department. When the plots were hit, almost the entire faculty went out to have a look, not exactly sure what they were seeing, although the prevailing opinion was gray leaf spot. Much to their delight, tests revealed it was gray leaf spot and

almost immediately department members, including Bonos, went to work breeding naturally resistant varieties. Four were on the market by 2004 — Palmer IV, Paragon GLR, Repell GLS and Protégé. More are on the way and should hit the marketplace in the fall of 2006.

Using resistant cultivars found in the plots, Bonos and others, including Bruce Clark, the director of Rutgers' Center for Turfgrass Science, developed the strains by intercrossing, also known as population improvement. Ironically, earlier attempts by the department to inoculate perennial ryegrass with gray leaf spot so the disease could be studied proved ineffective.

By the end of the first year, Bonos said, researchers had come up with some resistant turf, and seed providers were hot for the improved varieties. That was no surprise, considering that the pathogen has been found as far north as Long Island and also made its way into California in the past two years.

According to Peter Dernoeden, a professor in the University of Maryland plant science department, the number of new or renovated courses using perennial ryegrass in the Mid-Atlantic states since the 1998 outbreak has dropped dramatically with many courses converting fairways and tees to grasses other than perennial rye.

While the disease-resistant grasses scored well in the 2004 National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP) tests, long-range effectiveness has not been determined. There is some concern because, as Bonos pointed out, the gray leaf spot pathogen is also the pathogen that causes rice blast, the most destructive disease to one of the world's largest food crops, which is classified as a grass. Scientists have bred disease-resistant varieties, but the

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