

Boots . . . you know, like you wear on your feet

By FRED TAYLOR
Mankato Golf Club

After many years of service to Mankato Golf Club, Irwin "Boots" Fuller Jr. will retire following the 1993 golf season. Known to be one of the most colorful and gregarious superintendents around, his charisma and charm have livened many meetings and outings. In this interview, Boots adds some insight into the man and his background.

I first met Boots as a cub superintendent while doing an interview for an introduction to horticulture class from the University of Minnesota/Waseca. The assignment was to interview someone in my intended profession to get a feel for the job. I picked Boots because he was convenient—right in my home town. That was October, 1976. Little did I realize then what a long and meaningful working relationship we would enjoy. It seems fitting that now, some 16 years later, he and I reflect on some of those questions and concerns.

Q. Boots, you've become somewhat of an institution among the ranks of Minnesota superintendents. How long have you been at the Mankato Golf Club?

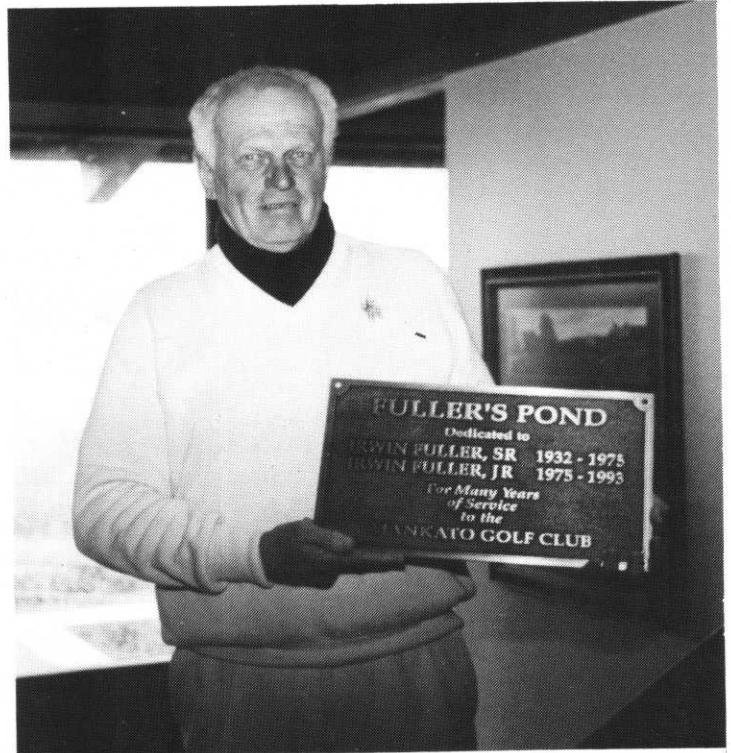
A. I came back to the club in June of 1975 after teaching school for 17 years. My dad, Irv, was then retiring from the club after 43 years. He had recommended that I be hired to take over as the superintendent after working under him during the summer of '75. Unfortunately, in July of that summer, he became ill with cancer, and was not able to return to work. So basically, I was put in charge right away.

Of course, my first experience was working for Dad when I was in high school. I started hand-raking the bunkers (there were no power rakes) and push-mowing greens (the mower didn't have an engine) in 1945 for \$.35 an hour. I worked summers through high school, and then came back on furlough from the service in 1952 to help with the construction of the new nine holes. After my stint in the Air Force, I returned to Mankato to go to college at Mankato State. During the summers of '55-'60, I did the night watering on the old manual water system. In '55, my wife and I actually lived right on the course in an old cottage that was originally built for the pro back in the '20s.

Q. What are your first memories of the club?

A. The first vivid memories I have are of the old caddy shack. All of us kids from the north end of town would routinely gather up there to get a caddy job for the day. We'd hope like hell that old John McCrae, the pro at the time, would pick one of us to go out on a round. I think we got paid \$.25 a round, plus a tip if the guy shot well. So on a good day, we'd make \$.50. That wasn't a bad wage for a kid in the late 1930s.

Q. Your dad was really one of the true pioneers in the industry. He was respected by his peers not only in Minnesota, but nationally too. To this day, I still



"Boots" Fuller shows off his new pond plaque.

hear stories and accolades from some of the older superintendents around. He obviously impacted your life a great deal. What is the one thing about Irv that impressed you the most?

A. I guess it was his continual search for knowledge. He constantly was reading and studying to better himself. He only had an eighth grade formal education, but through his own studies, he became very aware and informed on a variety of subjects. He came to the golf club from a road construction job in 1930. He had no turf or ag background, but through his own readings and trials, was able to become an authority on greenkeeping.

During the years of World War II, he was able to stay in Mankato with the family by getting a defense job at Kato Engineering, a manufacturer of electric generators. By going to night school and studying the books, he became the chief tester in the quality control area. During this time, he also was consulting for the pro at the golf club, who, by default, became the greenkeeper during those war years.

Q. What was the most important lesson that you learned from your dad?

(Continued on Page 37)

Boots—

(Continued from Page 4)

A. Don't ever give up. No matter how bad it gets, stick with it. I remember that first year back from teaching, when Dad was in the hospital, I'd be frustrated with the crew or the members. I'd go up to get some advice, or just to vent my frustration, and he'd say, "Just stick with it, Boots. Do your job, and don't let them get to you. It'll get better." There was more than once that he talked me out of calling my former school superintendent to ask for my old teaching job back.

Q. You obviously learned a lot of your golf course management skills from Irv and by jumping in and doing the job. What is your formal educational background?

A. I have a Bachelors degree in History Education from Mankato State, a Masters degree in History from Mankato State, a Masters in Economics from the University of Missouri and a Counseling degree from the University of Wisconsin/Whitewater. My education in turf has been through seminars and conferences conducted by the state and national organizations, and by the "school of hard knocks."

Q. With all those degrees, what made you return to the golf club?

A. As trite as it may sound, I think this profession does get in your blood. I enjoy being outdoors, and the diverse areas of expertise that are required to maintain a golf course seemed to be the perfect challenge for me. There were many friends and acquaintances that I had made earlier through my dad, and those people seemed so genuine and inspired that I knew they were on to something. There was also a great deal of pride in knowing that I would be carrying on a tradition by following Irv. On the other side, it seemed to be a good time to get out of teaching for a number of reasons.

Q. Let's see, your dad was at the club for 43 years, and you have been there for 19 years plus many seasons prior to that. Is there any disappointment that one of your children didn't aspire to take over for you when you retire?

A. Not really. I knew from my background in teaching not to direct the kids in any certain direction. All of the boys worked for Irv or myself as night waterman. My oldest, Rick, had given some thought to pursuing the profession, but he opted for a degree in law enforcement. I also had two nephews who watered at the club, but neither of them was interested in golf course management as a career. My only concern was that the job be filled by someone who cared a great deal for the club—you know, they had a place in their heart for this golf course.

Q. What has been the most rewarding part of your tenure?

A. Meeting and working with people in this industry. I can't say enough about the friendships and relationships that I've made over the past umpteen years with other superintendents, salespeople, educators and allied professionals, who genuinely care not only about the industry as a whole but about each other individually. The tremendous camaraderie that exists in this profession is truly unique. Just knowing that if you need help with something that there will be someone willing to assist; or conversely, that someone may need assistance from you—leads to a great deal of satisfaction in this job.

Q. What has been the biggest challenge in your career as a golf course superintendent?

A. The greatest challenge is trying to keep up with the changes in the industry. The pace at which technology advances are determining the way we manage our courses is staggering. Also, the pool of information regarding the plants, pests and pesticides and how they interact is growing very fast. Decisions that once were made by instinct or "gut" feeling are now made from studying scientific data. Laws and regulations are being formulated on an almost daily basis, and keeping up with them seems to be an endless task.

Q. There have been a lot of rumors and speculation as to the status of your health, Boots. Can you give an update as to how you're feeling?

A. As you know, I was diagnosed with a form of Lymphoma last April. I've been through 12 chemotherapy treatments since then—each four weeks apart. Unlike many of the stories you hear, I felt pretty good all through this period. There were days when I'd get tired easily, but there wasn't any of the severe nausea that can be associated with the chemo treatments. At my last check-up, the doctors could find no signs of swelling in the lymphnodes. For this reason, they believe that it is under control, and I'm not going to need any further treatments unless there is a change. I can tell you that I feel as good now as any time that I can remember. So for today, things are great.

Q. What are your plans for the future?

A. One thing is for sure, and that is I'll be traveling a lot. I plan on getting to Mexico again next year, and also to Alaska. I will continue to live in Mankato, and I may work in some capacity or another just to stay busy. I've never been one to sit around and vegetate, so don't look for that in my retirement. I will be active.

Q. Boots, I would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank you for being a great mentor, coach and friend. I personally owe you a great deal of gratitude for expanding my horizons and knowledge. I've learned many things from you, but I think the thing that you've instilled in me is the spirit of dedication...dedication to the club, to the association and to staff members. Thanks.