

Ol' Keller Makes Big Comeback

By GARY OLSON
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About two years ago, golfers from Keller Golf Course suggested a review of their course might be helpful. No praise was necessary, or expected.

The once-proud golf scene no longer lived up to its reputation. Not even close. Too many summers of good intentions hadn't kept pace with the quality daily-fee courses that had sprung up around the Ramsey County course in Maplewood.

If the weary, frustrated and just plain angry golfers had been a lynch mob, they would have failed miserably. They had way too much rope from too many years of the give-'em-enough-and-they'll-hang-themselves approach.

Before Keller could be revisited to judge the depth of the despair, the county bosses stepped outside their promote-from-within policy and hired Paul Diegnau, an honest-to-goodness greens superintendent, a guy with nearly a decade of experience growing great grass at the River Falls (Wis.) Country Club.

Even the most impatient among the unhappy golfers begged to give him a chance.

Now, these same golfers are inviting their friends to come back. Keller is back on its feet, perhaps still not as proud as it once was, but better than it has been in a long, long time and moving steadily toward the golf course it used to be.

"It's a treat to play," Rod Magnuson, a regular among the state's top senior golfers, said. "It's not a secret



Keller GC's superintendent Paul Diegnau.

that we had a lot of problems. Now, we're in good shape. Excellent. Amazing.

"To me, the best sign is that the good golfers are coming back on weekends. They stay here to play when there are a lot of options."

George Kappas, another of Keller's better golfers and a member of its men's club for 34 years, said the course is in the best shape it has been in 20 years.

"All of the good players used to look for somewhere else to play," he said. "Now, hardly any of us do. There's grass on the tees, the ball sits up in the fairways and the greens are so good..."

No golf course in Minnesota can brag of its history the way Keller can.

It was host to the St. Paul Open from 1930 to '68, the PGA Championship in '32 and '54, the LPGA Patty Berg Classic from '73 to '80, the Western Open in '49 and the 1931 National Public Links.

It would seem simple to heap all the praise for Keller's recovery on the broad shoulders of Diegnau but he's the first to say that would be too simple.

"A lot of work was done before I came here that we're getting credit for now," said Diegnau, well into his second golf season.

"I decided to come to work here because of Keller's history and its great layout. It's neat when you see the pictures from the past in the clubhouse. Keller has had a special place in Minnesota's

golf history; we want it to be again.

"We're not where we want to be, but we've made progress."

One of the problems Keller has had to deal with is the changing expectations of today's golfers. After they play Willingers, Bunker Hills, The Wilds, Rush Creek and Edinburgh USA, among several quality daily-fee courses in the area, they expect more at their home course.

"We have the history, we have the layout and now we have a product we can be excited about again," said pro Tom Purcell, in his 19th summer at Keller. "You could have Dale Carnegie in the pro shop and a great chef in the clubhouse, but what will bring people back to Keller is the golf course."