

# IT'S NO JOKE

The numbers are growing...and women golf course superintendents are not only surviving, but thriving, in what was once considered a man's job.

by Heide Aungst, associate editor

It's a typical scenario: A golf course superintendents' meeting. The speaker gets up to the podium and starts to expound on his dry wit. "Did you hear the one about the guy who..." He glances around the room, and suddenly stops.

Oh no! There's a woman in the room.

"It's great, I know half of so many dirty jokes," says Sandy Bemis, superintendent of Renwood Country Club in Round Lake, Ill. "They see me sitting there and stop in the middle. Some day I'll have the guts to say, 'Never mind, I've heard this one.'"

Bemis knows a good sense of humor is the best ammunition in the male-dominated profession. "When an invitation says tie required, I put one on," she says.

The Golf Course Superintendents Association estimates 25 to 100 women golf course superintendents for 12,278 courses nationwide. GCSAA total membership is about 6,900.

It's difficult to pinpoint the exact number of women supers.

The GCSAA membership roster lists 40 women with distinctly female names. Another 40 people are listed by initials only, and about 70 have androgynous names.

"I thought about just using my first initial. That way they can't tell when you apply for a job," says Jo-Ann Eberle Ward, superintendent of Sunset Valley Golf Course in Pompton Plains, N.J.

Bemis and Ward both work at municipal courses. "No one has really broken into a Winged Foot or any of the conservative old clubs," says Shirley Talmadge, assistant superin-



Sandy Bemis, superintendent at Renwood Golf Course in Round Lake, Ill., repairs a tractor.



"She can already say 'pesticide' and 'irrigation,' and she can swing a golf club too," Jo-Ann Eberle Ward says of daughter Kate. Ward's husband John helps with the golf lessons.

tendent of the prestigious Winged Foot Golf Club in Mamaroneck, N.Y.

Talmadge has struggled through management changes at Winged Foot to work her way to second in command. "If I had brains in my head, I would have left," she says. "But because I'm a woman, I'm older and I'm on my third career, I felt the fastest way to get to the top was to stay with a top club."

## Getting there

Women superintendents don't fit into any particular stereotype. Talmadge, at 37, is more than a decade older than

Bemis, 25. Ward is 32. Ward's husband John works in the industry, as a resort landscape manager. They have one daughter, Kate, almost 3.

Bemis's husband Ken is a flight instructor. They don't have any children.

Talmadge has never married.

The thing all three women do have in common is an avid love for the outdoors, and a determination to work there. But the paths which led them to the golf course are as different as greens and roughs.

"My mom wanted me to be an airline stewardess so she could get free



**It's been tough for women to break into private clubs, says Shirley Talmadge, assistant superintendent at Winged Foot Country Club.**

trips," says Bemis. "My dad didn't care what I did, as long as I didn't get dirty."

At 15, Bemis landed a job as a gardener on a golf course. The experience prompted her to take horticulture classes at a local vocational school.

Bemis excelled in floral design, but "went crazy" trapped inside a florist shop on nice days. That led her back to Midlane Golf Course as a seasonal worker for five years.

Then she got an assistant superintendent's job at Heather Ridge Golf Course. After three years there, she accepted a job at Renwood as an assistant. Within six months, the super left and she took over his responsibilities.

Today she oversees 138 acres on the 18-hole course, and two staffers.

### No yelling

"At first it was real hard because you're telling men what to do," Bemis says. "So I didn't tell them, I asked them."

Bemis also finds golfers react differently to her than they might a male superintendent. "Folks out here are kind of surprised," she says. "They'll say 'I want to talk to the man in charge.' I get talked to rather than screamed and yelled at. They're more hesitant to yell at a woman."

Ward started as a secretary at the Playboy Resort and Country Club in northern New Jersey. But she wanted to work outside and applied for a job on the course. "When I first went for the job, I didn't realize it was male dominated," Ward reflects. "The superintendent said, 'I'll put it to you this way, kid. If you're crazy enough to want to work outside, I'm crazy enough to hire you.'"

After taking turf courses at Rutgers University, she became assistant superintendent at High Mountain Country Club in Franklin Lakes, N.J. Later

that year she became assistant superintendent at the Americana Resort and Country Club, where she worked on 27 holes and more than 700 acres of golf course and hotel grounds. The extra holes qualified Ward above other male candidates who applied for the superintendent's job at Sunset Valley, which she took in '84.

The course is 150 acres, with about

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*'My mom wanted me to be an airline stewardess so she could get free trips.'*

Sandy Bemis  
Renwood Country Club

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300 rounds of golf played daily. She supervises seven full-time employees and usually three more during the golf season.

She says she's never had a problem supervising men. "I've made it clear that what I say goes, but they're entitled to their opinions," she says. "They know if they have a problem they can come to me."

Talmadge started in the pre-med program at Vanderbilt University in 1967. The pre-med experience gave her a solid chemical background which later helped her get her pesticide license.

She got a degree in anthropology and psychology, worked overseas in the importing business, and eventually ended up back in New York.

There she worked on a golf course for spending money. She fell in love with the job.

In 1981, she went to the University of Massachusetts for a two-year de-

gree in turf management. She completed her five-month work program with Ted Horton at Westchester Country Club. In 1983, she took a job on the crew at Winged Foot.

Several changes in superintendents left her in line for the assistant's job in late '84. But, she says, superintendent Bob Alonzi was hesitant to give her the title. "He said the foreman and crew wouldn't take orders from a woman," she said. "The first time he left, I had to tell them myself. I did all the records without the title. I had to prove myself over and over again."

The crew has nine full-time workers, with more than 20 in the summer. *Golf Digest* (Nov. 1985) ranked Winged Foot the fifth-best course in the country.

### Getting physical

Greens committees are often hesitant to hire a woman superintendent. They argue that a woman can't handle the physical labor involved.

Women superintendents argue in return that it's like any other job—some women aren't cut out for it. But, then, some men couldn't handle it either.

"It's a crazy idea I've always had that if a guy can do it, I can do it too," Bemis says.

And, of course there's the "problem" of women becoming pregnant. "I dug up an irrigation break when I was six months pregnant," says Ward. "I worked up until a week before Kate was born."

Kate was born on Christmas day, "during the off-season, of course."

"I always say she'll be the second woman golf course superintendent," Ward jokes. "She can already say 'pesticide' and 'irrigation,' and she can swing a golf club, too."

Ward has a house on the golf course, which makes it easier to balance career and home. John drives more than two hours to his job, so Jo-Ann can keep her job.

Bemis also plans to have children and keep her job as superintendent. "In this day and age, unless you're really lucky, both people have to work. It's just another job," she says. "We'll just mount a child seat on the back of the tractor."

Women supers still have a long way to go. But Bemis, Ward, and Talmadge all advise starting as a crew member, getting an education, being involved with professional organizations like the GCSAA, and working within the system. "If you're going to be sensitive and try to fight intellectual white-collar battles in this field, you're not going to get anywhere," Talmadge says. **WT&T**