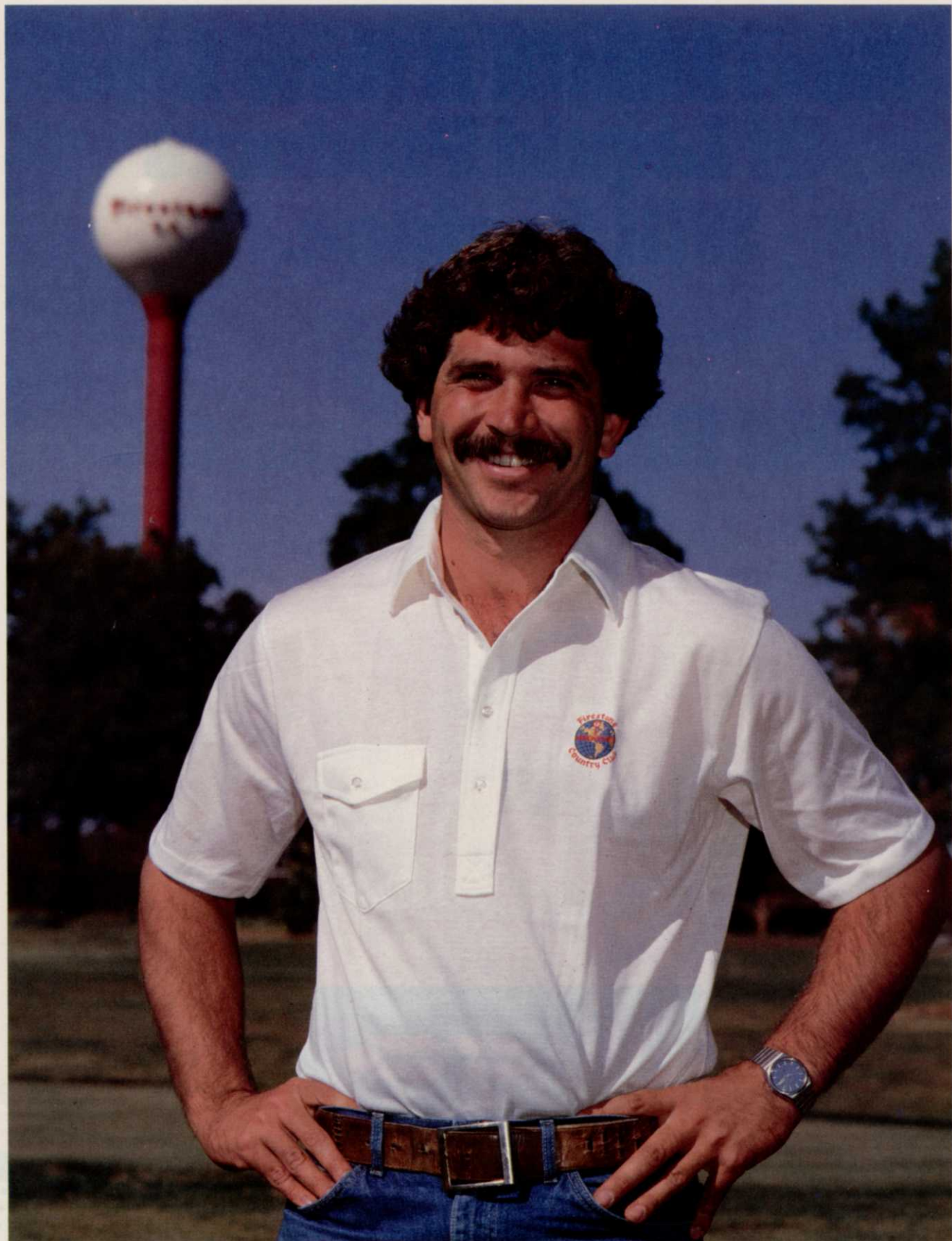


LANDSCAPE PROFILE



Brian Mabie, Firestone Country Club superintendent.

COMING BACK

Thanks to super efforts by Firestone super Brian Mabie and crew, famed Firestone Country Club is primed for better days and the challenge from fresh-faced newcomers.

by Ken Kuhajda, managing editor

They don't manufacture a single passenger car tire in Akron, Ohio, the "Rubber Capital of the World."

The factories have all moved from the rust belt to sunnier places. Gone is the prosperity of yesteryear. Gone is a part of the population.

But there's good news. The "Big Three" rubber companies—Goodyear, Goodrich, and Firestone—maintain their corporate offices in Akron. The city is making a gradual transition to a service-oriented economy.

And the area's many quality golf courses are still thriving.

Perhaps the best of the lot is the famed Firestone Country Club, just south of Akron. Along with rubber and the Goodyear blimp, Firestone is most associated with this northeast Ohio city.

Although Firestone has lost some of its luster—300 elms were devastated by Dutch Elm disease in the late 1960s and the greens have suffered in recent years—it remains one of the country's most famous courses.

Firestone has had its share of bad breaks. The latest—a case of bacterial wilt in the summer of 1984—has been handled smoothly. Firestone is on the comeback trail.

Brian Mabie was aware that the famed South Course's greens had the disease when he took the superintendent's job in June of 1985.

He had to control by bactericide through the annual NEC World Series of Golf (held Aug. 22-25), and then worry about replacing all 18 greens.

The Penn State grad never doubted that he was up to the task.

Respect but not awe

Mabie spent five years at neighboring Silver Lake Country Club before joining Firestone. Silver Lake is a fine local course, but without Firestone's reputation.

(Interestingly, Silver Lake also had a bacterial wilt outbreak the summer of 1985.)

Although Mabie downplays the transition ("It's Firestone but the turf doesn't know the difference. It'll die just the same."), he realizes he's jumped to the big time.

He was recommended by several Silver Lake members who also belonged to Firestone. They liked his work. So did Firestone general manager Don Padgett II, who hired Mabie after three interviews.

"He was the right guy at the right time. He's enthusiastic and has the technical knowledge," says Padgett. "We're highly pleased with him."

A long history

Prestigious Firestone hosted its first of three PGA Championship Tournaments in 1960, when little Brian was five-years-old. That was the beginning of big-time golf in Akron. The American Golf Classic (with its field of four) began the next year, followed by the World Series of Golf in 1976.

Intimidating? Not for Mabie. Not even maintaining a course with greens crumbling under the weight of bacteria wilt.

His consistent personality is perfect for the conditions he faces at Firestone. He admits to occasional moodiness but most times, remains calm. The ups-and-downs of grooming a diseased course didn't break his spirit.

At least not outwardly. "I'm 30 outside but 56 inside," he confesses.

With curly moustache and weathered good looks, he could pass for a soap opera star, though he projects modesty to an outsider.

He has a "gee-whiz" attitude to the attention he gets as Firestone's superintendent. After all, turf is turf, no matter if it lays at Firestone Country Club.

During the height of greens

replacement last fall, Mabie was putting in 14-hour days, six to seven days a week. One Saturday night he finally found the time to take his wife, Terry, to dinner.

He fell asleep at the table. "At least I took her out," he says with an air of accomplishment.

For a time, he was married to the South Course, replacing the diseased *Nimisia bentgrass* with the ever-popular *Pennncross*. At the same time other subtle changes were made.

Firestone, designed by Robert Trent Jones and built in the 1920s, looks its age: parallel fairways, repetitious bunkering, poor drainage, poor spectator vantage points.

Mabie and crew altered some correctable flaws hoping to modernize the course without losing its distinguishable characteristics.

During the 1986 World Series of Golf, pros will still wail away at the 7,100-yard course. The fairways are still parallel. The course is still long. Break out the low irons.

But it's a good bet the winning 14-under-par total posted by 1985 World Series of Golf champ Roger Maltbie won't be duplicated in 1986.

The soft greens that made for such low scores will be gone in 1986.

However, making the course tougher isn't the goal of the facelift, says Mabie. "We really have given up on toughening the course for the pros. If they've got the skills to post low scores, then let them do it," he says.

Rather, the subtle changes have brought the course up to USGA specs, improved drainage, and enhanced spectator space. (See related story.) The result may make things a tad more difficult for the tanned boys of summer.

"It will be interesting to hear what they say this year about the changes we've made," says Mabie.

A fine support staff

Sitting in his office exchanging playful banter with workers, Mabie comes across as just another Cushman driver. That "I'm-just-one-of-the-boys" attitude seems to work for the young superintendent.

His workers seem to have a genuine like for their boss. He respects their work.

"You can't get too involved in telling people what to do," says Mabie. "The people here have experience and expertise. They

understand a lot about their jobs. I don't need to watch people work—I critique when the job's finished."

In a short time, Mabie has established a solid communication line with Padgett, his immediate superior. They speak daily.

Club Corporation of America, Firestone's owner/operator, was generous with budget support in combating the bacterial wilt, says Mabie. "They understand the business—they're aware that if you have a pythium outbreak, you're going to have to spend money."

While the South Course chewed a chunk of the yearly budget, the less-famous and younger North Course, built in the late 60s, saw more action. It's long and features a more modern layout, says Mabie, adding that he has no personal favorite. "They're both perfect," he says with an ornery grin.

He utilizes identical maintenance procedures on both courses. He has no magic formula.

His first year at Firestone, with the exception of fighting the wilt, has gone smoothly. The weather was

good; rain was not a problem. "I like everything about the job. I haven't found a bad point yet," says Mabie.

When he runs into a problem, he enjoys the luxury of discussing alternatives with experienced assistant superintendents.

Jim Skelton, former head superintendent who resigned last spring, has stayed on as assistant super. Roy Conner is North Course super while Jerry Turner heads the South Course.

Their advice is invaluable, says Mabie.

The future

GCSAA member Mabie says keeping in touch with the rapidly changing world of golf course maintenance is vital.

He sees his breed as a sort of guinea pig. "We don't have 10 years of research to go on. Some of the things we're doing are not time-tested," he says.

"Our industry is moving so fast and so many of the programs are untested, but you've got to keep yourself updated," he adds.

"Some of the studies look really promising in the laboratory, but when you try them on the course you find out if they really work."

At Firestone, Mabie has just two short-term fears: equipment age and quality of the irrigation system.

On equipment: "We've got a lot and it's in good shape, but we're getting some fatigue problems like cracked welds. But if it's fixable, Randall Pope (Firestone head mechanic) can fix it."

On irrigation: "Our irrigation system is adequate, but not where I want it to be." Look for an upgrading soon, he says.

At least during Mabie's tenure: he plans to stay at Firestone a long time. Unless he doesn't answer what he says is his biggest challenge: readying the South Course for next year's World Series of Golf.

"I better have it ready or somebody else is going to be doing it."

Mabie just may bring famed Firestone back to where it used to be. **WT&T**



Firestone didn't waste any time in battling the wilt. Left, number 18 just after all greens were removed in September. A month later, greens were mowed. That's number 10 at right.

CLEANING UP FIRESTONE CC'S WAR ZONE

Back in September, Firestone Country Club's South Course looked like a war zone. Mounds of dirt, craters, and brown turf (superintendent Brian Mabie turned off the irrigation system when work began immediately after last year's tourney) violated the South Course.

But by this spring, all will be a memory, provided Mother Nature smiles. By early June, the 300 or so members will be back on the course, encountering several minor changes.

The greens now have a drainage system. Several greens were resloped and number 17's contour was severely altered. Tifton, Ga., resident and greens shaper emeritus Ernest Jones was called in for the job.

Jones brought the greens to specs suggested by Golforce Inc., a Jack Nicklaus company. Golforce architect Tom Pearson spent several days at Firestone consulting with Mabie and suggesting workable improvements.

Mabie has great respect for Pearson. "It was a tough thing Tom did—we've tried to improve the course without losing the characteristics that make it Firestone," he says.

Number 5, previously a 234-yard par three, now measures 200 yards, a more realistic distance for a par three, says Mabie.

Both the pond and fairway at number 16 (625-yard, par five), the famed "Monster," are broader. The wider fairway, says Mabie, is a realistic solution to a minor problem. The old fairway was too narrow, he says.

The finishing hole, number 18 (464-yard par four), has a new green measuring half of what it was, providing more spectator space.

The "new" South Course provides improved spectator vantage points also. Spectator mounds add to what was previously a poor course to watch a golf tournament.

From those mounds, fans can view a general rebunkering throughout the course.

—Ken Kuhajda

Top, workers install drainage pipes on the South Course. Below, contractor Jim Zinni (left) and greens shaper Ernest Jones.

