

PIONEERING PROFESSIONAL

Two words characterize George Thompson: 'pioneer' and 'professional.' He's not afraid to try something new, but whatever it is, it reflects positively on his golf course.

By Hal LeSieur



George Thompson, superintendent at the Country Club of North Carolina keeps the course in good shape despite some "testy" holes.

He's a bigger man than he looks. George Bernard Thompson, superintendent at The Country Club of North Carolina, is unassuming in appearance.

Wearing an ordinary cap, this 48-year-old father of four could easily be mistaken for a Scoutmaster leading a weekend camp-out. Yet Thompson is not only a natural leader, but an acknowledged golf course and turf specialist.

"He's always trying for something new, whatever might do a better job on his course," says Jerry Gerard, president of the Mid-Atlantic Association of Golf Course Superintendents. "George emanates professionalism."

That professionalism may result from years around the game. Thompson started golf as a 10-year old caddy, in western Massachusetts, when he was "no larger than the golf bag."

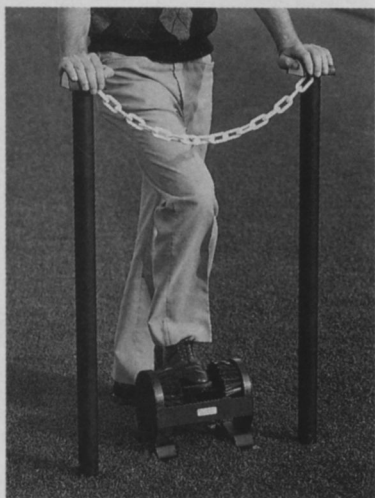
There, his grandfather reigned as the top horticulturist at such estates as the Firestone and Reynolds families. His uncle worked for the National Park Service for 35 years. His aunt was a landscaping authority.

When George Thompson accepted his promotion to the 36 holes of The Country Club, he became responsible for maintaining a deceptively beautiful course.

A testy course

Giving a peaceful exterior appearance—characterized by pines, rolling hills and beautiful lakes—this naturally-elegant course has many testy holes. Many top golfers have played there, including Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player and DeWitt Weaver. Other celebrities who have golfed there include Bing Crosby, Les Brown, Glenn Campbell, Ray Bolger, Andy Williams, Guy Lombardo and Miami Dolphins coach Don Shula.

Thompson has had the duty to prepare the club's Robert Trent Jones course for the prestigious 1985 Southern Amateur and the 1984 Carolina Amateur tournaments. He was an early pioneer, introducing hybrid



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ryegrass developed by Rutgers and Penn State universities into the Washington area.

The water-surrounded 16th hole displays Thompson's pride and joy: an attractive laminated yellow pine arch bridge, built by Thompson, his staff, his former boss—and two cranes.

The course is noted for its canopy of dogwoods, rhododendrons, hollies, magnolias and cedars under long-needle pines.

The Bard

Thompson is also a writer, as revealed by his latest paper "A Yankee's Perspective on Overseeding." Thompson addressed the 25th Virginia Turfgrass Conference last year, revealing how his perspective on overseeding has changed dramatically since moving 250 miles south, from Maryland to North Carolina.

"I couldn't wait to seed into fairways in late August when I worked in Maryland, because the rye was the answer to a good many of our fairway problems in the transition zone," he says now.

Good competition

New rye competes with poa annua in the fall, he says, masking spring dead spot, and persisting well into the summer, especially with chemical treatment to control fungus, insects and weeds.

But "the summer problems can be devastating further south."

So now Thompson, like other superintendents who manage golf courses from Virginia Beach south through the Coastal Plain and Piedmont sections, has almost exclusively bermudagrass fairways.

Rye is only a cosmetic over tight-knit hybrid bermuda, and playing characteristics are seldom good. Dormant bermuda makes an "excellent playing surface which golfers can learn to like and even prefer," Thompson explains.

He admits that some Northerners are happy only when playing off green grass, regardless of season. "Most North Carolinians don't mind, even though our bermuda goes dormant until the third week of April.

"I could probably do intense fairway management here, if cost were no object, but I tend to try and work with Mother Nature."

By this Thompson means that if it doesn't rain for a month, he expects a high fairway crown to turn "a little brown" until it rains again.

Still, he was delighted finally to get two inches of rain in May 1986, after a two-month drought with six to eight

inches below normal rainfall for the year to that date.

"I'm not as relaxed as the Scottish greenkeepers are about turf," explains Thompson. "In Scotland, they don't even have fairway irrigation. If it doesn't rain all the fairways go dormant and turn brown and no one seems to worry about it."

Thompson's ultimate goal (in North Carolina) is not to oversee any fairways. "This may never happen, but we hope it does," he concludes.

George Thompson is noted for his concern for fledgling superintendents from his alma mater, Stockbridge School of Agriculture. Every year for 23 years, Thompson has taken an additional placement student under his wing for an intense five-month internship.

Turf for life

Thompson lost his father, a mechanic, when only 15 years old, but not before he learned to appreciate mechanical equipment.

Thompson graduated from the first turf school in the United States, the University of Massachusetts. To this he has added the C.G.C.S. certification and state licenses as a ground and aquatic pesticide applicator.

He held the president's job for both the Greater Washington Association of Golf Course Superintendents in 1971 and the Mid-Atlantic Association in 1972.

Although too pressed since his arrival in Pinehurst, N.C. to do much more for his industry, Thompson has also been an officer in both the Maryland Turfgrass Council and the Turfgrass Council of North Carolina. As if all this were not enough, he was named Mid-Atlantic Superintendent of the Year.

Like so many other superintendents, Thompson is a frustrated golfer. "I'm not playing much, although I love golf and should play once in awhile."

Feeling that he owes his employer and members an intimate knowledge of the club's turf, which playing golf enhances, Thompson admits that he still feels guilty when out on the course. "But you don't relax on your own course," he says.

In his final remarks to the 25th Virginia Turfgrass Conference, Thompson offered this prophetic bit of advice: "Every golf course is unique and it takes a unique superintendent to interpret members' philosophies, ideals and objectives. You are the person who must produce the end product with the amount of dollars allocated and translate all of it into a pleasurable golfing experience." **WT&T**