



FLORIDA'S BEST

The leading golf course superintendents the Sunshine State are driven to perfection by personal pride and golfer demand for exquisite conditions.



Whit Derrick emphasizes the personal pride he feels when the golf course is looking its absolute best.



Jay Gratton of Orchid Island suggests a younger man come down to Florida to work as an assistant for a couple of years. Then a move up is more likely.

by Terry McIver, associate editor

It's 9:02 a.m., and I'm officially late for my meeting with Jim Ellison at Orlando's Bay Hill Club. That last left turn should have been a right.

I know that two minutes isn't bad for someone bopping around between half a dozen Florida towns interviewing golf course managers. It's just that, to these guys, time is like water; it's a precious resource you always want more of but never seem to have.

The only "slow" time in Florida is during the summer, which provides a slight break in play. But it's still a 12-month season, and breathing room is at a minimum.

My mission was to learn what goes into a "typical" day for these guys, and what an interested Yankee who's tired of ice and snow might face in the Sunshine State. Like the ad says, "This is Florida. The rules are different here."

Unless you've been camping in the

Himalayas for the past few years, you know that golf course construction in Florida is booming. The state leads the nation in number of courses (932) and in courses being planned (53). To belabor the obvious, the climate is always right, and it continues to draw vacationers or second-home buyers from northern locales. The weather, tourism, and the need to live up to the reputation of the perfect golf experience make for busy days and short lunch breaks for superintendents here.

"We're in the business because we love the game of golf," says Ellison, who remains calm in the midst of all the activity around him.

"The most rewarding part of our day is bringing the course to an excellent, well-groomed, well-manicured condition. We're working with nature. Our daily programs are scheduled around the behavior of the elements. When you can accomplish what you set out to accomplish, it's pretty satisfying."

The love of golf is bred into the most successful and concerned managers. Ellison says he "grew up on a golf course" in Jacksonville, Fla., and his father, too, was a superintendent. Schooling at Lake City Community College, the place to go in Florida to study turf, was a foregone conclusion.

The goals of the Florida superintendent are often out of reach due to the sheer number of players who descend on their courses daily. Upwards of 200 rounds (on a slow day) makes goal-setting a game of hit-and-miss if not done well. Ellison admits that in most cases, the satisfaction is short-lived. "But then, with 500 to 600 golfing members, it's a different set of circumstances."

One man, many bosses

That's the great equalizer: the member-owned, equity club. Once a course is sold to resident members, each member becomes a boss. And each boss wants something different.

But Ellison is philosophical about it. "They (members) are demanding, but I'm demanding myself," he reasons. "I know what it takes to accomplish what the members want. We also have several touring pros here, and they have high standards right from the start."

"Private club members are indeed demanding, says Whit Derrick, the well-known superintendent of Sugar Mill near Daytona, "because they want their golf course to be perfect."

"A member may make a request that's hard to justify and follow through with," relates Derrick. It's a situation soon dealt with at monthly meetings. "Ninety percent of the time the member request cannot be met, but you want to be diplomatic about it," explains Derrick, who says giving the members the "straight facts" is the best approach.

Roger Welker runs the Sandridge Country Club, a public course in Vero Beach. Another Lake City graduate, he began his career with a four-year stint at Martin Downs, a private course. He cites amount of play as a major difference between public and private courses. "We play 70,000 rounds a year, and they really beat it down."

Welker describes his customers as a mixed bag of personalities, the same as you'd find at any public links.

"Thirty percent play often and treat the course well, as if they were members. Another 30 to 40 percent play once or twice a week, and treat the course well. Then there are the 'weekend warriors' who more or less abuse the course and have poor judge-



ment."

Summer is a time of intense renovation and catch-up at all Florida courses. Compaction problems require aerification, and the grass itself is tired and worn. "We also require more fertility than private clubs, again because of more play," continues Welker. "We probably put out more nitrogen to grow out of the compaction. At the private club, we'd back off the fertility in summertime; we didn't want to grow that much turf. We wanted it healthy but didn't want to spend all summer cutting grass. Here, we have to grow grass to grow out of the wear caused by constant golf."

Dues at member clubs are based on what it's going to cost to achieve a break-even point in the budget. Welker says this means there can be no more going over the budget, because the developer isn't there to pick up the slack.

"Yes, it is different," says Welker of the growing conditions, but adds that

it can eventually be learned.

"There are different grasses, diseases and pests. But basically, grass is grass. Once you understand the grass you can adjust."

Job changes common

Welker and others estimate that the average, aggressive Florida superintendent might change jobs every two to four years, for one of three reasons.

"The development might close due to money difficulties. Also, at private clubs you have to deal with greens committees, and a lot of supers can't handle that. And then there's the search for the perfect assignment," which to Welker just doesn't exist.

Keep in mind the heat, the higher cost of living and the 12-month season. "And be prepared to put in 55-hour weeks," warns Derrick. "The more prestigious the club, the more the work. Sometimes it's a seven-day week."

Despite the demands these jobs can place on personal time, openings don't last long. They're filled quickly, often over the phone. Jobs must be filled quickly for the sake of the course, and competition is fierce.

Ray Hansen, current vice president of the Florida Golf Course Superintendents' Association and superintendent at the Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo, began his career in New Jersey.

He agrees that working as a Florida superintendent has its pluses and minuses. "You can keep your crew year-round and give them more benefits, paid vacation, and so forth," says Hansen. "But as far as play, it's easier to keep the course open all year round

NOT SUCH A GOOD IDEA?

Tim Hiers of the John's Island Club most adamantly suggests that superintendents from the northern U.S. should stay where they are. His reasons are valid, and it's something he seems to have given much thought. What would a Northerner who is sharp, smart, and wants to explore opportunities in Florida have to do to make it down there?



Tim Hiers

"He could have an IQ of 200, a degree from Cornell in business administration, and a turf degree from Penn State, and it would be a mistake to come down here and take a job as a superintendent," Hiers says. "This is not a place that you can take as a training ground. You have to understand mole

crickets thoroughly, understand that the fertility program is totally different, the grasses are totally different."

"Treating people is the same," he adds, "especially in light of environmental situations, which are totally different here."

"I wouldn't recommend superintendents from the South going up North either," he continues. "I've seen and heard of guys who've come down and have tried to apply the same standards and they're not very successful."

"And I'm not saying that to be smug. You don't get a week's rest to work on equipment; you don't have a tear-down period. We have four greens seasons. Our basic grass is bermuda, then we have transition into overseeded grass. Then we have to maintain the overseeded grass on top of the base grass; then we have transition from overseeded grass back to the base grass. Up there they stick with one grass."

—Terry McIver □

than it is to open and close it, prepare for snow mold, et cetera.

"In South Florida, we don't have to overseed. Generally speaking, you don't have many disease problems in bermudagrass. But you've got to know irrigation."

Voice of experience

Roger Harmony, superintendent at Meadowood Country Club, St. Lucie, spent 30 years tending courses in Connecticut and New York before heading South. His successful move to Florida was prompted by a desire to escape from Northern winters.

"The biggest challenge," he explains, "has been maintaining the bent greens under the intense heat and humidity, which can last for eight months." (Most Florida courses have



bermuda greens. Meadowood is an exception.)

"The 12-month season plays havoc with equipment," continues Harmony. "Equipment turnover occurs

every three to five years rather than every five to seven years."

Harmony began his Florida career at Martin Downs, a job he found by looking around during a visit. Harmony's advice echoes the others: "Don't expect to land a super's job. Spend a year working under someone as an assistant, probably two."

But first, come down and see for yourself. Harmony says he often receives visits from interested Northerners, and he's happy to advise. His final words: "They need Class A irrigation people and top flight mechanics. Otherwise, the project will fold."

Development picture

Derrick describes opportunity in Florida as "almost unlimited. The state is growing so fast, it can't keep up with

BUILD A COURSE, BUILD A LIFE

This April's opening of DeBary Plantation in DeBary, Fla. marks the end of superintendent Mike Kenovich's journey from hard times to greener pastures.

His story is one of a man's determined effort to build a better life when it gets rough. Mike Kenovich has been re-incarnated.

Until 1982, Kenovich had been a steel worker in Pittsburgh. The steel industry had begun to rust; Kenovich lost his job to 25 percent unemployment, and life became a struggle. Kenovich did his best, and kept his family together by working a variety of side jobs.

On the invitation of his father-in-law, Kenovich and family moved to Florida to start over.

"I started by working one year for the Melbourne Public Works Department, making \$4.25 an hour," Kenovich remembers. "I had always liked golf, and that led me to answer an ad for golf course personnel at Sun Tree Country Club."

It was three months before a Senior PGA tournament, and the course needed men. "Ron Andrews was the superintendent," remembers Kenovich, "and he took a chance on me. He trained me on fly mowers and weed whackers, and I'd do a variety of clean-up chores."

Kenovich was kept on after the tournament, and over the next year became familiar with all types of golf course mowing.

After an eight-month stint as a buyer and assistant grower for an Orlando nursery, Kenovich was back in golf.

"Whit Derrick, who had been the assistant superintendent at Sun Tree, became the superintendent at Pel-



Mike Kenovich has plenty to smile about. He knows life can begin whenever you want it to.

ican Bay. So I came to work with Whit."

"Mike's strongest asset is his dedication," says Derrick (now at Sugar Mill), who has known Kenovich for seven years. "In fact, he is the most dedicated employee I ever had. He has outstanding potential as a superintendent."

Kenovich was charged with reconditioning one-half of Pelican Bay that had been out of use for months. The course was opened in January of 1985. He was then trained as a chemical technician. For 18 months he did all spraying and record-keeping, then moved on to learn irrigation systems.

"In April 1986, I went with Whit to be his assistant at Sugar Mill. I was in charge of a crew there for three years. I was then contacted for this position at DeBary."

The Mike Kenovich story is a perfect example of determination and goal realization.

"The keys to my success," he says quietly, "have been that I applied myself, was aggressive, did a good job and had some good breaks. There was also good timing and luck."

Kenovich is thankful for his success. He has an extremely positive attitude and easy-going nature. In the midst of all the noise and bustle from earthmovers and bulldozers, Kenovich remains calm. He knows the job will get done; no problem.

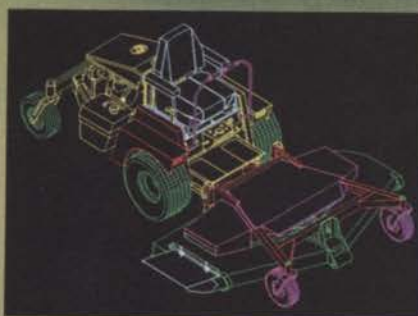
Kenovich's success is magnified by the fact that he has had no formal turf education. Night classes were desirable, but never materialized because of family commitments. So Kenovich studied on his own. He attended seminars and read all he could: books on turf, trade magazines, cooperative extension material, and various USGA articles. "I also realized that each job was important," he says, "and that it had to be done right."

Epilogue: Nothing fancy

Lessons to be learned from the Mike Kenovich story are simple and older than the game itself: fortitude, persistence and taking risks are keys to success. And with the continued growth of golf, similar opportunities continue to appear for anyone who wants to play.

—Terry McIver □

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itself."

Derrick says the resort/home course market is "region oriented." More public facilities are in demand, but the trend is toward equity award clubs. Five have been built in the Orlando area alone in the last two years.

"The population growth in Florida is tremendous," marvels Tom Alex, superintendent at Grand Cypress Resort.

"Developers are using golf courses to lure people into buying," he explains. "Some are using name player/designers as an added attraction. And local architects such as Lloyd Clifton are producing excellent golf courses.

'Yes, private club members are demanding, but I'm demanding myself; I know what it takes to accomplish what the members want.'

—Jim Ellison
Bay Hill Club

"It's a buyer's market," says Alex. "If you're in the golf course construction business and aren't busy, you'd better get out."

There is indeed a need for many more public golf courses in the state. But most say that building a public course and paying for it with green fees is very difficult.

"What's going to happen in the future with public golf courses," predicts Alex, "is that they're still going to be tied up with developers. And you might run into situations in which the developer might give somebody 150 acres of land and say, here, you put a golf course on it. Yes it can be a public facility, but I'm still going to put houses around it. But the days are gone where somebody buys the land, puts a golf course on it and pays for it, unless they have out of pocket cash."

Take your best shot

No one down here suggests quitting a job before you find a job; experts in any profession would say the same. But given the opportunity throughout Florida and the profession overall, a well-planned search could be successful for the qualified candidate.

The best advice is to plot your career goals, have confidence in your ability, realize the vast differences between North and South, and be willing to work your way up. **LM**