

GOLF & ATHLETIC TURF

Education never ends at Stillwater Country Club

This former teacher takes delight in showing others how to be more efficient and useful.

■ Kevin Clunis, superintendent at Stillwater (Minn.) Country Club, believes in education—everyone's, including his own.

It's only natural: Clunis received a bachelor's degree in education in 1981. He even taught school for a while before pursuing a two-year degree in turf so that he could return to one of the part-time jobs he had once treasured—working on a golf course. He was assistant superintendent at Stillwater for just one month before being promoted.

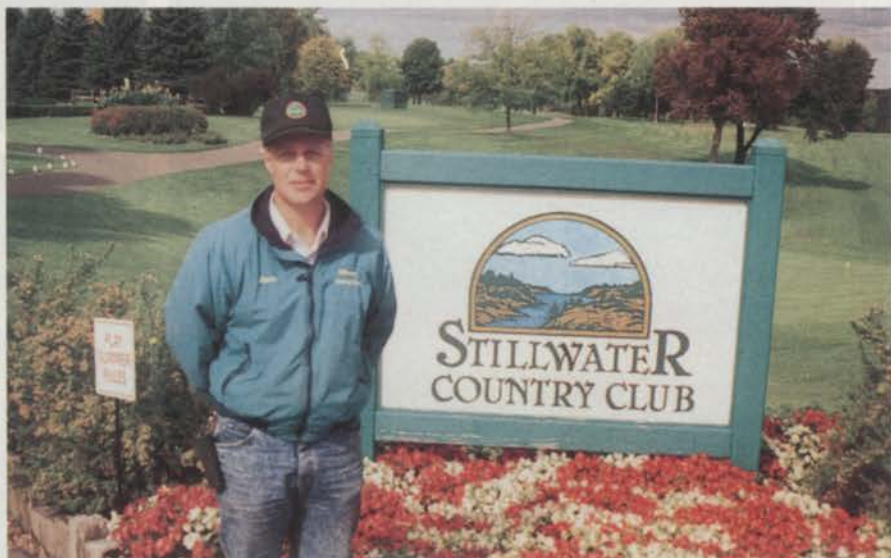
"I enjoy teaching people new things," says Clunis. "Everyone on staff has to know how to operate a weed whip and a walking greensmower. In our profession, you can't stop learning."

The training program Clunis devised is basically hands-on instruction, though videotapes on safety procedures are also used.

He has 19 employees, including a full-time mechanic and a full-time assistant. "I let part-timers do some thinking, and they take pride in that," Clunis reveals.

His assistants are normally hired from the ranks of newly-graduated college students in golf/turf studies. After hiring them, Clunis teaches them everything he knows and, "in two or three years, I move them on" to, perhaps, their own course.

Clunis is also very active in educating



Even after 11 years, superintendent Kevin Clunis still walks out onto the course to watch the sun rise every morning.

his fellow superintendents. He was one of a large group of supers who helped formulate a loose-leaf binder about environmental considerations for members of the Minnesota Golf Course Superintendents Association. The binders were received so well that the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) is considering a similar project on a national scope.

Clunis has a very laid-back managerial style. "I feel very comfortable allowing people to make mistakes. That hits home a lot more.

"I keep a list of jobs that have to be done posted. I let them pick and choose what they want to do. I'm not always a dictator, and they respond to that."

His philosophy of course management is day-to-day consistency, which is work-

ing well. "A long time ago, a member told me that a player should be able to shoot the course record any day of the week," he notes. "I don't know what the greens stimp at. I know I don't get any complaints, so why worry?"

His worst problem is the damage done by snow mold. "You have one chance before the snow comes to apply product. In Minnesota, you don't get another chance," he says. "Plus, the things that go with it are also problems: ice damage, desiccation—things like that."

Clunis closes the course at the beginning of November every year, then he starts evaluating "what went good and what went bad. We plan through the end of the year and make mid-course corrections.

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We stay focused on everything involved."

Stillwater is an 18-hole private club founded in 1925 as nine holes. The second nine was built in 1959.

"I can honestly compare my course to the exclusive clubs," says Clunis. Prospective members have taken note, too. The club's membership cap is 415, but the waiting list is 400 names long, even though it was the last private club in Minnesota to admit females as stockholding members (1993).

Members must live within five miles of the golf course. Membership is just \$750 per year, and every penny of the club's membership dues (almost \$400,000) goes toward course maintenance.

"I get the dues money, and the clubhouse is set up to break even," notes Clunis. "Money from the pro shop, guest fees and golf car rental balances all other expenses."

Members—43 percent of whom are retired—"have done a lot of work for the club," Clunis observes. "Three times last

summer, they had 'seed & soil' days where they seeded fairways for me. They have a lot of equity in the club.

"Compliments are always wonderful. They go a long way toward getting me through the season."

Kevin Clunis is doing what he loves, and is happy and content being what he is. Every morning, he walks onto the course and watches the sun rise. "In 11 years, there has never been a day that I didn't want to go into work."

—Jerry Roche

'Unique' parks coax downtown rebirth

Here's how one community used tropical gardens, floral mounds and fountains to draw people back to a long-slumbering downtown.

■ Exciting parks can help reinvigorate a downtown. A perfect example is Sandusky, a lakefront city of about 35,000 in north central Ohio. Five acres of uniquely landscaped city gardens in the city's Washington Street Park seem to be coaxing its long-slumbering downtown to life again.

Its keeper is Tom Ott, parks and greenhouse director for the city. He and six other city employees design, plant and maintain parks that are as unique and inviting as you'll find in any city.

Ott is a self-admitted "plant" person. He and his family run a small commercial nursery specializing in evergreens on a farm outside the city, too. Although neither he nor any of his co-workers possess degrees in horticulture, he describes them as dedicated landscape professionals. "They really get into what they're doing. They care about really care about our parks."

In his early 40s, Ott is just old enough to remember when downtown Sandusky was the area's cultural and retail mecca. That's when families lined up in front of the city's two downtown theaters after shopping its two major department stores.

Or when teenagers "buzzed the ave." Sandusky Bay on Lake Erie anchored the north end of the downtown cruise; Washington Street Park, with its fragrant gardens, the southern. The kids gathered

at the Frisch's Big Boy Restaurant on balmy summer nights. They arrived in 'Vettes and souped-up Fords, but mostly family sedans. Merchants complained bitterly of the parade of brake lights and polished chrome. Friday night, after all, was a busy shopping night.

But the complaints dried up 20 years ago, as did downtown retail business—just after developers smeared a shopping mall over 40 acres of bean fields about five miles south of the city.

They left behind a shell of a downtown, and incredibly quiet summer nights there.

To hear Tom Ott tell it though, people *are* returning to downtown Sandusky although it'll probably never again be the retail center it once was. About 5,000 turned out for the 1994 July Fourth bash. Many thousands more visit the city's

annual Holiday of Lights celebration in the parks Thanksgiving through New Years. Ott and his small crew put up 35,000 lights in the parks.

Day-to-day evidence of the downtown's rebirth lies in the restored, ornate, 60-year-old State Theater; the trendy new apartments and condos along Sandusky Bay; the renovation of the former Lasalle's Department Store building into county offices. The building overlooks the park's gardens.

These parks are diverse and inviting with their lush gardens of tropical plants (palms, bananas, bird of paradise, elephant ears, castor beans), a Japanese-style sunken garden, succulent/cacti garden, fountains, intricate floral mounds. Many plants are used season after season, like several 75-year-old Phoenix palms.



Tom Ott, Sandusky Parks/Greenhouse Director, spent just \$700 on seeds and plants this season in creating a downtown wonderland.