

# GOLF 'SCAPING

## Pinehurst super sees role evolve

**Brad Kocher is a perfect example of how the maintenance function changes with the industry.**

■ The golf superintendent's role continues to evolve as more courses become part of larger multiple-course owners like American Golf Corp. and Club Resorts.

Such is the case at venerable Pinehurst Golf and Resort, where Brad Kocher oversees the seven courses for Club Resorts.

Kocher, who's been with the company for 19 years, is a regional director of golf course maintenance with five superintendents at Pinehurst reporting to him.

"I probably don't spend enough time out on the golf course," Kocher admits.

"Some days 10 percent, some days 15 or 20.

"I still call myself a golf course superintendent, but the job description goes far beyond what a superintendent on an 18-hole course would do. It's a lot of administration.

"Superintendents here are basically course agronomists," Kocher explains.

"They have probably 10 or 20 percent of the administrative duties of a normal superintendent. Bob Farren (assistant director of golf course maintenance) and I try to deal with sales, personnel, budgets and human resources. That frees them up to be hands-on and eyes-on the golf course, where they can literally look at every green



**To Brad Kocher, being a good supervisor means letting his employees have a lot of latitude.**

every day, and I'm sure some do."

**Budgeting**—Figuring out how much money to ask Club Resorts for, and what to do with it, is one of Kocher's main responsibilities. To hear him tell it, accurate budgeting is one of the reasons for the success of Club Resorts' flagship courses at Pinehurst.

"Our company stresses that we manage things by the numbers," Kocher says. "The numbers tell a lot of stories, and I tie them into how the golf courses fit into the scheme of the whole resort operation."

Every summer, Pinehurst hires students to help—this summer nine of them. Kocher tries to impart some of his experience through weekly meetings ("little talks") with them.

"Last week, I told them that it'd be real easy for us to spend another \$100,000 per golf course," he notes. "I could spend \$200,000 per golf course and, with our staff, we could deliver a much better product. But you have to ask: what lives up to the expectations of our members and our resort guests? And that's where we try to



**Pinehurst's Course 2 hosted the Senior Open this June, and then closed down—as usual—for six weeks to allow the turfgrass to recover from the traffic.**

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position ourselves—just in front of the point of diminishing returns.”

Along with the resort manager and golf director, Kocher also helps determine how much to charge golfers.

“You want your business to grow. You don’t want to price yourself out of the market,” he says. “But you don’t want to leave money on the table.” If the golf operation can show fiscal responsibility, he adds, it is more likely to be blessed with extra money when it’s needed.

“We keep track of the numbers weekly: every Friday, every manager will know how we did through the previous Sunday—all financial considerations, with the exception of capital which comes out about once a month. You always know where you stand.”

**The staff**—Because the Pinehurst golf maintenance department employs up to 135 during peak season, it’s important that those are the right 135 people.

Tenure of the five superintendents ranges from about two to about nine years, and Kocher’s management style is part of the reason.

“I try to give everybody the latitude that I’d want if I were in their shoes, and then the resources to do their job,” Kocher explains. “We set standards of operation and we make the managers accountable. Each of our superintendents knows nutritionally and quality-wise what we’re trying to attain, and then has the latitude to hire the right people and do it.”

Kocher calls himself a cheerleader; he says he doesn’t hound his staff and he avoids using the word “problem.”

“If there’s a level of expectation that’s not met, we’ll talk about it and find out how it can be met,” he notes. “We have a staff of 10 that meets once a week for no more than an hour. If there’s anything that needs to happen during the week, we do it on a one-on-one basis.”

As 1994 was gaining momentum—April/May play is heaviest, followed by October/early November—it looked to be another successful season.

“Pinehurst is thriving on the outside and on the inside,” says Kocher. “We’ve gone from 550 resident memberships in 1984 to about 1700 in 1994. We’ve been able to triple our golf fees since 1984.”

“I have a lot of respect for the head of our company, Robert Dedman, who absolutely and positively believes in re-investing in the properties. You can do that with a thriving company.”

—Jerry Roche

## Stalking Pinehurst’s silent killer

■ Seven courses, 300,000 rounds of golf a year. More than 2,000 pine trees, many of them dating back to the early 1900s. Certainly lots of headaches.

But the major problem with trying to maintain Pinehurst’s seven courses is this:

“The humidity kills us,” claims Scott Lavis, superintendent on Pinehurst’s No. 2 course, site of this year’s PGA Senior Open and the annual North-South Amateur Open. “Penncross can survive the heat. But we’ll have 50 to 60 nights in a row with lows in the 70s and humidity up around 70 percent in the daytime. That’s what really hurts.”

Course 2 is treated differently than the other six. For instance, during the week of the Senior Open June 26-July 3, greens were mowed 19 times, brushed six times and rolled eight times. “The tournament, along with the wet, humid weather, really thinned the grass out,” notes Lavis.

During the summer months, Lavis and his staff tried several methods to limit damage—including the annual process of shutting Course 2 down from late July to early September.

“We close Course 2 down so that when we go into fall season, we’re in good shape for guests,” explains Lavis. “That’s our really busy season. When we kept it open, we were struggling; but now that we close it down, greens respond and do well.”

Pinehurst superintendents generally raise cutting heights, increase topdressing to protect the bentgrass crowns, and closely monitor nitrogen applications in the summer.

Different rollers are also employed.

“In general, in the spring, fall and winter, we mow at .170 inch with Wiley rollers,” says Lavis. “In the summer, we mow at .190 inch with solid rollers.”

“We always go to solid rollers in the summer. The Wiley rollers have grooves that dig down in the turf more and they’re a lot more aggressive on the turf, especially when you get heavy rains. The whole theory with a Wiley is that not every grass

blade gets rolled down before it gets cut.”

About four years ago, the greens started getting a thorough airing out during humid weather, too.

“We’re now up to 30 of our greens with at least two high-speed fans,” says Pinehurst’s director of golf course maintenance, Brad Kocher. “They’re doing a tremendous job. They don’t get rid of humidity, or cool the air temperature, but they create the air movement that makes

the bentgrass plant evapotranspire. If bentgrass is just sitting there in the humidity, it doesn’t look as good.”

Pinehurst’s owner—Club Resorts—has committed to focusing on golf, Kocher says.

“We have upgraded the courses dramatically since 1984. We’ve converted Courses 2, 3 and 5 from com-

mon bermuda fairways to 419 bermuda fairways. We’ve re-done greens on Courses 2, 3, 4 and 6 in the last few years. We built a new teaching center, put a lot more money into maintenance, bought a tremendous amount of equipment, and now we’re getting ready to build a new Tom Fazio course.”

Because seven courses are involved, equipment pooling is not uncommon.

Each course has its own set of frequently-used equipment like transport vehicles, greens mowers, tee mowers, fairway units and Sand Pros. Beyond that—fairway blowers, verticutters, aerators—the courses share.

“We take all six aerifiers out,” notes Kocher, “and we’ll do all 18 greens on a course by 9:30 a.m. We just—wham!—throw the equipment at the job. We can aerify and topdress all seven courses in one day.”

Progress, though, is a never-ending process. Says Lavis: “Everybody’s learning a little more every summer and we’re getting a little bit better.”

—J.R.



Scott Lavis: Every day’s a learning experience, new challenge.

# No brag, just fact: Old pro Spodnik has seen it all

**PGRs and triplex fairway mowers are among the valuable tools available to today's superintendents, he says.**

■ John Spodnik's next project is to build a new putting green. His son Jeff can't wait, since he's the one who'll soon be using it, in his backyard, thanks to his dad.

Spodnik, well-known to many golf course superintendents across the U.S., recently retired as manager of real estate operations for the Westfield Companies. For 34 years, he served as superintendent of Westfield Country Club, Westfield Center, Ohio.

Westfield is a gem of a course, or actually, two 18-hole courses. The first nine links—which would later become half of the South Course—were built in 1937.

**The changes begin**—Spodnik, with his silver hair, ready smile and neatly-pressed golf togs, could be mayor of Westfield Center. In fact, for a time he served the town as councilman. He draws welcome hellos and good wishes from people he meets on the street every day. He and his wife Mary live in a quaint, white wood-frame house next to the village post office.

Spodnik still radiates a boundless energy, and interest in the superintendent's job. He rattles off his own accomplish-

ments—no brag, just fact—and the changes he's seen over the years, with few pauses and much pride.

Spodnik took charge of the Westfield grounds in 1960, after assisting Mal McClaren at Ohio's Oakwood Country Club. It was during the first of the modern golf course booms.

Four years later, he and architect Geoff Cornish expanded the South Course to a full 18 holes. The North Course opened in 1975.

**Duties expand**—Spodnik says he wanted his job as a golf course superintendent to be "more than just cutting grass." Perhaps he had the foresight to know that some day the job would indeed require much more than that—first as the public's demand for the sport grew, and then later, as special interest groups began to target golf as an enemy to the environment.

Early on in his career, Spodnik benefitted from his friendship with other Ohio superintendents. They were, as Spodnik recalls, "a close-knit group." This mutual hand-holding was needed, as they all waited for needed turf maintenance technology.

"Chemical companies didn't have systems, didn't have a lot of the good fungicides or insecticides," Spodnik recalls. "We'd go to meetings and ask each other, 'What did you use for this or that problem? Did it work?'"



**No 'civil war:' John Spodnik with Steve Numbers, top, and Mark Jordan, supers for Westfield's North and South golf courses.**

"It was the school of hard knocks."

Away from the course, Spodnik has served as secretary/treasurer of the Northern Ohio Chapter of the Golf Course Superintendents Association for the past 35 years. It's the largest GCSAA chapter in the nation with 368 members.

"That's why we've had so many presidents in the national (GCSAA) association," says Spodnik. "We have more people, and more of those people are willing to become involved in association work."

This year, Spodnik received a Distinguished Service Award from the GCSAA for his contributions to the industry.

**40,000 rounds**—The Westfield links see their share of use. The North and South courses host more than 40,000 rounds a year combined.

But Spodnik says the courses are in good hands. Steve Numbers is the superintendent at the North Course, and Mark Jordan manages the South 18. But that's where the Civil War reference to dueling territories ends. They're good friends, and partners in golf course excellence.

Numbers and Jordan are both in the midst of major projects. For Numbers, its total bunker renovation, a trend among



**This new water feature separates Westfield's North and South courses.**

courses everywhere. "We're lowering the profile, so that when it rains, the water percolates through, and there's no standing water," says Numbers. "Even with a light rain, we're unable to rake traps. With new sand and lower profile bunkers, the rain and raking won't disturb playability."

Jordan's latest accomplishments include installing a Rain Bird Maxi System on the South Course—complete from pump house to sprinkler head.

A 35-million gallon reservoir was dug at Westfield after the devastatingly dry summer of 1988; and in 1990, holes 2, 3, 5, 8 and 9 on the South Course were remodelled to accommodate additions to the entertainment center.

A new irrigation system is planned for the North Course, and should be installed within the next year or so.

**Trends**—As superintendents change, so do trends in golf course maintenance, as all three men attest.

Spodnik and Numbers view plant growth regulators (PGRs) as one of green industry's major developments in recent years. "I swear by 'em," Numbers says, of PGRs on fairways.

"If you time them right," adds Spodnik,

"the superintendent still has the color he wants, and there's enough growth for turf to recover, without the problems of excess growth.

"At one time, we didn't have many choices; we had growth 'retardants,' which worked for some people. (The improved) growth regulators have been great."

Spodnik notices what he calls the "full-cycle" of equipment trends, in which—in some cases, anyway—everything old is new again.

"The triplex greens mower was a blessing," recalls Spodnik. "When I started, we cut every green and tee with a 22-inch walk-behind mower. Now, we're going back to the walk-behind. (Supers) want them cut so close, without tracks from the machines—the 'triplex circle'—on the aprons."

They all see more interest in using out-front rotary mowers in roughs, again in pursuit of a neater cut.

Spodnik, Numbers and Jordan shoot for consistent green speed rather than tournament-like stimpmeter readings.

"We want green grass all the way around," insists Spodnik. "(Superintendents) are backing off their fertility levels



**Aware of the importance of community involvement, Spodnik often led lawn care seminars for local civic groups.**

and are running into moss problems, disease problems, turgrass decline problems."

Spodnik plans to keep in touch with his friends at Westfield, whenever he and Mary aren't travelling.

But first, there's the matter of that putting green...

—Terry McIver

## 'Charting' equipment use & wear

■ Bob Rogers of Carolina Country Club, Raleigh, N.C., has his crew track every single hour equipment is used and the daily service record of each piece of equipment.

Each mower, aerator—whatever—has its own "key chart," so called because the ignition key for each piece of equipment is kept with

each chart.

The chart is printed on a 28x45-inch piece of poster board. The number next to the equipment name is the manufacturer's recommended hours of use between each oil change.

When an operator uses the equipment, he fills in the date, his initials, number of hours he used it, and a check mark after he's checked the oil and greased it.

The advantage, Rogers says, is that the mechanic can see at a glance how long the equipment has been in use and how it's been cared for.

"This gets us away from the 'rainy day oil change' system," in which the job is done sporadically, usually on days when the weather keeps you indoors. "You can damage mowers, especially the smaller mowers, that way," he says.

Charts are covered with plastic to keep them clean, and notes are written in grease pencil for easy erasing.

KEY CHART					
TORO 450-D 100	OPERATOR	TM	JR		
	DATE	8/3	8/4		
	HOURS USED	4	2		
	OIL/GREASE	✓	✓		
CUSHMAN #1 60	OPERATOR	RH	RH		
	DATE	8/2	8/3		
	HOURS	6	4		
	OIL/GREASE	✓	✓		
JACOBSEN GREENS KING 30	OPERATOR	LK			
	DATE	8/3			
	HOURS USED	5			
	OIL/GREASE	✓			

