

# 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.