

# 4 courses + 6 budgets = 1 team

*At Wild Wing, course playability and course demands blend with budgets, personnel issues, environmental concerns and government regulations.*

By STEVE & SUZ TRUSTY



The team from Cotton Creek Club, Gulf Shores, Ala., won the 11th Annual John Deere Team Championship Golf Tournament. Top row, from left: Andy Johnston, superintendent; Robert Craft, club president. Bottom row, from left: Herman Bloch, representing John Deere Golf and distributor Beard Equipment Co.; John Wright, club manager; Ed Nix, golf professional.

**T**he 1,050 acre Wild Wing Plantation complex in Myrtle Beach, SC, features four golf courses, each with its own style, but similar challenges.

David S. Downing, II, CGCS, Director of Golf Course Operations, oversees over 90 employees. His budget allows for 85 full-time people with as many as 20 part-time employees during the peak of the season. Filling those positions is a challenge.

"The job market here is very tight," says Downing. "I've read that we're now the second fastest growing area in the country. Our unemployment rate is 3.2 percent. Most of the area businesses are in some aspect of the service industry and we're all trying to pay about the same wages.

"It's been a struggle, but we think we're starting to turn the corner.

Our turnover is about 50 percent this year. Before that, we were running about 66 percent. So we've dropped it about 16 percent in one year, a pretty good move. Our wages now are still average in the market but we think we're training people better and making them feel more part of the team."

#### **Delegate authority**

Originally Downing had set up his management system with a superintendent over each of the four courses. Each superintendent had a foreman for that course and their own crew. Recently, several personnel have moved up to higher positions

at other courses. He's currently restructuring and planning on two superintendents and four assistants as well as the Director of Equipment Maintenance.

Downing and his crew have got four courses up and running, which was thankfully a gradual process.

"Before we were operating off of one, fixing one up after grow in, growing one in, and building one, so each course had very different needs. Now that we're actively operating four, we anticipate the reorganization will make our equipment usage more efficient and our communications better. I'll work directly with two people and that communication will flow from there. We anticipate this change will put more focus on team spirit than on the individual courses."

Obviously Downing can't cover all 72 holes himself, so now comes the running of the employment gauntlet. Downing follows three steps:

- ▶ Find good people.
- ▶ Establish definitive quality standards with guidelines on how things should be done, when they should be done and how often procedures should be implemented.
- ▶ Delegate authority effectively.

"Our staff knows what is expected of them and assume ownership of their responsibilities," says Downing. "If I don't get to one course during a day, I'll be there the next, and I'm confident that our people will be taking care of things."

#### **Multiple budgets**

Downing operates with six budgets. Besides a general administration budget and a landscape crew budget, each course has its own individual budget. Along with the ob-

*cont. on page 13G*



*"Our courses are competing against indoor, air-conditioned working conditions and against positions where base salaries are supplemented by tips."*

*—David Downing*

David Downing, center, says more and more kids are playing golf. The game has to be kept at affordable prices.

## Host for manufacturer's tourney

On November 8th and 9th of 1997, the Falcon and Avocet Courses of Wild Wing Plantation hosted the finals of John Deere's eleventh annual Team Championship Golf Tournament. The tournament raised \$19,600 for the support of GCSAA and the Canadian GCSA. Downing says, "The John Deere Tournament is an important event in the golf business, especially for superintendents. It brings together all the people on a course's management team and provides an opportunity, at both the regional qualifiers and the finals, for these key people to get to know each other better and improve communications. It helps emphasize the importance of the superintendent's role in the success of the course and its appeal to the players."

The winning combination of availability, appeal and affordability add up to a solid future for golf.

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*cont. from page 8G*

vious control of funds, the multiple budgets provide a clearer picture of actual expenses, allowing Downing to fine-tune for greater profitability. This also helps train the superintendents and assistant superintendents about the budgeting process and tracking their budget during the year.

### **Weather and competition**

Tourists are a big business for all the Myrtle Beach golf courses. Most, including Wild Wing, work with the hotels on booking play. The increased level of competition from new courses impacts the number of rounds on the existing courses.

Weather patterns also have a huge influence on the amount of tourist play. Downing notes that 1995, the first year all four courses were open, had nearly ideal weather: little rain and mild temperatures. Wild Wing did 175,000 rounds that year.

"Since then we've been closer to 160,000 to 165,000 rounds," says Downing. "The last couple of winters we've had days we were forced to be closed because the ground was frozen. During the summer of 1996, we had two different hurricanes that we evacuated for in mid-week. While these hurricanes missed us, the people that were here for the weekend were gone and didn't come back."

### **The superintendent's role**

The role of the superintendent has become increasingly important as course playability and overall course demands blend with budgeting and personnel issues, environmental concerns, and governmental regulations. Establishing recognition of and support for that role within the course's management team is an essential ingredient in balancing the multiple challenges.

Challenges continue, but the future looks solid for golf, according to David S. Downing II, CGCS, "It comes down to making golfing opportunities available to a wide variety of players - and keeping it affordable," says Downing.

"The Tiger Woods phenomenon exists," continues Downing. "There are more and more elementary age kids playing golf. One fifth grade teacher reports that twelve kids in her class are players. We've never seen that amount of early involvement before. Part of it is the Tiger factor, but part of it is that kid-size equipment is available now. My son Alex is on his second or third set of clubs and he's 9 years old. As he grows, we're either able to find the clubs or get them made." □

*The Trustys write on a variety of Green Industry related topics from Council Bluffs, Iowa. Steve Trusty is executive director of the Sports Turf Managers Association.*