

Sweetbriar GC grows

New holes, a new clubhouse, a housing development and plans for better turf management give Bill Prest plenty to do at this Ohio course that's looking for an upscale image.

by TERRY MCIVER
Editor-in-Chief

Bill Prest was very relaxed as he moved back and forth in his swivel chair in early May.

By his calm demeanor, you wouldn't know he was a) new at Sweetbriar Country Club; b) was soon to begin a major construction project and c) was about to begin work on renovating tees and greens.

That must be what 32 years experience does for a superintendent. He may be faced with a daunting new project, but the time put in before that gives him an edge in the confidence department.

Prest began at Sweetbriar CC, Avon Lake, Ohio this year after 32 years at Springvale CC in nearby North Olmsted. He was a do-it-all superintendent at Springvale, to the point where he was even running the banquet facility. His total

management experience will come to the fore at Sweetbriar, but his priority will be the course reconstruction and grounds management.

The plan: golf and housing

Prest and owner/builder Barry Koff have 300 existing golf course acres in use for Sweetbriar's present 27 golf holes. Another 200 acres surround the golf course. This fall, construction will begin on the surrounding acreage to build six new, upscale holes, which will be incorporated into the original 18.

"The first redesigned six holes will be up this fall. Next fall, we will reroute the original 18 and incorporate the new six into it, with a net loss of nine holes."

"Then we start construction on a housing development in conjunction with what will by then be a new, 18 hole golf course," says Prest.



Tee renovation begins with core aerification, followed by heavy sand topdressing.

The entire project is expected to last at least three years, and the course will be open during construction. The plan is to make it one of the area's better public facilities, with a new, upscale look, with wall-to-wall irrigation; bent-grass greens, tees and fairways; three or four heights of cut.

"A true country club style of design," says Prest, the kind of look he was successful at bringing, here and there, to Springvale.

But the new Sweetbriar will be very playable and, affordable, though Prest does expect to lose some players with a hike in greens fees.

A 600-seat banquet facility will also be built, to be catered by a major Cleveland restaurant chain.

A local contractor is handling the earth-moving, Prest's crew will do shaping.

"I've never been involved in a total construction project, so I'm looking forward to it."

Prest is trying to get Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary certification during construction.

"We're going to look at environmental aspects right off the bat. In the new construction, some of the existing holes will stay, however, they will be reconstructed; we do have some very large pin oaks and white oaks we are going to try to save.

"I have some background there in developing some sensitive areas in construction zones which will be kept free of large equipment. I think trees are one of the most highly neglected resources on any golf course. I think it's changing at high-end courses, but a low-end facilities not much thought has been given to tree management."

Prest says a new tree care program by The Davey Tree Expert Company will be



Prest: being outdoors is where it's at.

a beneficial addition to the course's tree care plan.

New approach

Prest says his transition at Sweetbriar has been fairly easy which is fortunate since he came on with different ways of doing things and saving time, and since relatives of the ex-superintendent continue to work there.

Prest is a hands-on manager, who is getting his people used to his style and showing them just what he

wants done and how.

"Some of the new programs I've developed have been well accepted," he says.

"I changed the mowing philosophy. They did a lot of the mowing with high school and college kids. This meant that in spring and fall the remaining staff put in a ton of hours. We're trying to convert the mowing to retired people. That includes greens, tees, fairways and approaches and roughs."

The time they spend is minimal: greens require 21 hours/week; fairways require 18 hours/week; roughs require two on 40 hour weeks.

Prest seems to have a handle on employee retention. He's a 'nice guy' who knows how to talk to people, and knows the importance of mutual respect.

"There are a lot of kids out there that love to do this type of work, it's just a matter of finding them. You go through quite a few high school kids to get a crew."

The summer Sweetbriar

crew totals 22, and 10 are full time. Prest plans to go to a 30-person payroll by the end of 1999.

Prest's full plate is easier for him to handle since he now has a clean-cut job description: "golf and grounds, period."

"There's lots to do here, and I no longer have to deal day to day with the public aspect of other management duties."

To speed up the greens, Prest began a four-time/year aerification program. Also, he's been topdressing greens lightly each month, and he rolled the greens in spring. The standard aerification program combats compaction; same thing for tees.

"We're trying to develop a more aggressive stand of bentgrass."

Before this season began, Prest wanted



Trees that are to come down are marked with stripes.

to make "good first and last impressions" on golfers playing each of the Sweetbriar nines. Tees were thus overseeded with perennial ryegrass and Pennncross at 2 lbs./1000 sq. ft. The fairways on the first and last holes of all three nines were aerified first, and seeded with ryegrass at 5

lbs./1000 sq. ft. The ryegrass mix is a 39/39/18 mix of Legacy II, Linedrive and Assurance, purchased from Lesco. Pennncross bentgrass is Prest's choice for the greens and tees.

He knew what he wanted

Prest's golf course career began when he was in high school, working part time at Springvale. After that, he tried an indoor job that lasted 20 minutes.

"I signed up to go to a community college, and applied for a position as a night porter at Fisher Foods. The first night I got in there, they start showing me what to do; I was there 20 minutes and left.

"I went back to Springvale and told course owner George Biddulph I didn't have money to go to college. George ended up sending me to University of Massachusetts."

Prest has participated recently in the RISE/PLCAA/GCSAA "Ambassadors" program, which means to educate the public about the benefits of turfgrass and pesticides, and bring favorable attention to the expertise of Green Industry professionals.

"It's fun, it really is," says Prest of the Ambassadors program. "I've probably given 15 to 20 talks, and my experiences have been very, very positive."

Prest is one of a growing, but still small group of Green Industry "ambassadors". These golf superintendents and lawn care professionals speak in front of civic and school groups within their communities. They explain their professions, and talk about products and equipment they use.

Prest says audiences seem to be gen-



Tree damage from mowers helps explain why it's better to have one person at the wheel regularly.

uinely interested in his message. Even so, he acknowledges that some of the people he's spoken to "have some real concerns" over the use of pesticides.

"These concerns are usually unfounded, but they're there," he says. "You have to be prepared for this. Most people don't realize the education a superintendent has," says Prest.

"We're not all just 'grass cutters'".

Prest is managing the Sweetbriar course to improve it, not just to keep it in a holding pattern until new construction is completed. After being a general manager, he says it's good to get back on the course. □

Green, tee program

Bill Prest plans aerify and lightly topdress the Sweetbriar greens four times annually. Greens will be topdressed apart from aerifying another five times per season to keep them "tabletop smooth."

He wants to aerify and topdress tees at least twice during the playing season. Topdressing is done with straight masonry sand.

Par 3 tees are aerified a little more often because of heavy iron club use off the tee.

"On tees, I'm concerned about layering. So we core aerify the tees, leave the plugs, topdress, verticut, chop the plugs and mix in the sand." says Prest.

When aerifying and topdressing, Prest takes the opportunity to overseed tees with bentgrass and ryegrass to convert to bentgrass in three years

The pushup tees are heavy clay, so they must be careful not to end up with a layering and drainage problem

Bill uses Pennncross because he believes it is one of the most easily established and one of the most aggressive varieties available.

Prest says the LESCO ryegrasses are three of the most drought and disease tolerant ryegrasses available

"With 60,000 rounds per year you need something that will fill the divots"

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