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POWER OF CONNECTIONS

The most critical element to *Golf Course Industry's* success involves creating connections. The more people who feel and learn something beyond the obvious on our print and web pages, podcastwaves, and social media feeds, the more connections we create. The deeper the connections we establish, the more appealing our content becomes to consumers and partners.

A connection is different than a click, view, impression or mention. A connection can't be measured or bought. Companies focused on connections endure. Companies focused on clicks and quick sales quickly become irrelevant. Connections are why we have outlasted competitors in a crowded media space and why we're one of the few remaining golf-focused publications to distribute monthly print issues.

Our team works incessantly to produce meaningful content connecting golf maintenance professionals with their peers. Partners see the value in those connections and use our reach to help build their own connections. Study the advertiser and names index toward the back of every issue and you'll notice a theme: the industry's leading companies and individuals trust our ability to make connections.

Establishing connections represents a gigantic and evolving responsibility. Without connections, we can't fund a talented team of writers, columnists, editors, sales professionals and graphic designers. A talented team allows our content to stand out in crowded mailboxes, inboxes, feeds and podcast platforms.

Think of it like a golf course that fails to sell tee times and memberships at lucrative rates. Conditions deteriorate and joyous recreational space transforms into a housing development, an overgrown field or an Amazon distribution facility. Your business, like ours, must establish connections to flourish.

Connections are why Venango Valley Inn & Golf Course made this month's cover.

The process of telling the story started with a personal connection: I noticed last January on Facebook that **Jim Cervone** and two partners, including his brother-in-law **Michael Pero**, purchased the northwest Pennsylvania course. I had visited my native region of western Pennsylvania a few times over the years to report on Cervone's current and potential work. His humility and positive relationships with superintendents induced feel-good vibes.

Shortly after seeing Cervone's Facebook post, I reached out via text message to congratulate him on the purchase. I'll be honest, I had never heard of Venango Valley before Cervone's involvement.

I mentioned I'd like to visit the course later in the year and record a *Tartan Talks* podcast about owning a golf course. I waited until fall, knowing owners, superintendents and managers at cold-weather courses are more relaxed in October than June, July or August.

The moment I arrived at Venango Valley, I knew a memorable fall day awaited. The Federal-style inn harkens to simpler times, the parking lots and front lawn were well-tended, and the turf featured appealing hues.

If you visit enough golf courses, you can grasp the culture — positive or poor — in less than an hour. After seeing the initial outdoor and indoor tidiness, and watching the friendly interactions among Cervone, clubhouse manager **Larrie Rose** and customers, I knew I would be producing something bigger than a podcast. Venango Valley emerged as a place where I could spend hours, days, weeks, months and years playing golf, eating, or working, because of a fabulous culture motivated by creating connections.

Venango Valley is one of 11 courses in Crawford County, population 83,351. Previous owners **Durbin** and **Kim Loreno** were masters in creating connections. The connections they created allowed the course and inn to thrive in a saturated, small-town golf market. Credit goes to Cervone for connecting me with the amazing couple. Dedicated owners who treat their people and land with respect — and invest in both — determine the fate of golf facilities in small and big towns.

Venango Valley's story provides insight into how connections can boost a course. Thousands of courses with similar stories make golf a fascinating business to cover.

Our content compass flies in many directions, and we know there's always another course to see and more people to meet. Proactively connecting with us will connect your course's story to an engaged audience.

Our contact info rests on this page. We're always eager to make new connections. **GCI**



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To provide an independent, innovative and inclusive voice for today's — and tomorrow's — golf industry professionals.

Vol. 56 No. 2

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NOTEBOOK

ROLLING DATA

With the U.S. Open fast approaching, Pinehurst No. 2 is all in on the USGA's GS3 smart ball. *By Matt LaWell*

A couple dozen people surround **Eric Mabie** on the 18th green of one of the country's more famous golf courses, some with notebooks and pens out, some with cameras snapping photos or shooting video. Everything about the moment feels so ordinary: Mabie squats, holds a Stimpmeter, eases a golf ball down its decline, jots down a number for reference. Then he eases the ball down the decline a second time. Then a third time. And a fourth time.

Everything about the moment is so ordinary, at least at Pinehurst No. 2, where Mabie, a second-generation turf pro, is assistant superintendent.

"What kind of numbers do we have today?" Pinehurst No. 2 superintendent **John Jeffreys** asks him from the edge of the green.

"Speed is 11.11," Mabie responds. Rather than stop with speed, though, he continues, "Our trueness is 0.91, and our smoothness is 5.84."

Bring out a Stimpmeter and speed is

expected. But trueness? And smoothness?

All are part of the metrics available to golf courses that introduce the USGA's GS3 smart golf ball to their maintenance operations. The USGA launched the ball more than a year ago, toting around duffel bags filled with them at the 2022 Carolinas GCSA Conference and Trade Show, and interest and adoption have increased since. The numbers are still low — Pinehurst No. 2 is one of about 50 golf courses that have purchased the technology, which measures more than 15,000 agronomic benchmarking data points to improve greens and retails for about \$2,750 — but with more superintendents becoming more interested in Big Data, optimism remains high.

"We're on the verge of changing the conversation about what constitutes a quality putting green," says **George Waters**, senior manager of USGA Green Section education. "The golf world has been focused on speed for a long time. Why? Because that was the only thing you

could measure. That was the metric. It became *the number*. And focusing on that definitely had some problematic elements in terms of playability, cost, sustainability. We knew there was more to putting green quality than just speed, but there wasn't a way to have that conversation with golfers and decision makers.

"Speed is one part of that equation, but we're not trying to go faster and faster and faster. Now we can say, *Look at how good our roll is. Look at how smooth and firm it is.* Those are the things that really impact how the course plays."

Jeffreys is an early believer in the technology. After more than 17 years at Pinehurst No. 2 — and almost a decade as the course's superintendent — he will at least try almost anything to help improve the iconic track. He introduced the GS3 on the 13th green, the closest hole to the maintenance facility, and started plugging information uploaded from the ball to the USGA's Deacon course management system into spreadsheets. (The GS3 includes



Dr. Cole Thompson, left, Chris Hartwiger, center, and John Jeffreys discuss the turf at Pinehurst No. 2.

a year's subscription to Deacon. Courses that renew after the first year will receive a new GS3 every three years.)

Then he figured out how to use that information.

"You have the number, but how did you get there?" Jeffreys asks rhetorically. "There are a lot of ingredients: Mowing heights, mowing frequency, fertility, topdressing, aeration. We can talk about what we *thought* we did, but unless we document it and record it, there's no

way we remember. I don't remember what I had for lunch yesterday much less how much topdressing sand we put out August 15."

After venting and rolling greens, for example, Jeffreys studied GS3 data and confirmed that the course's greens were both smoother and faster. "Golfers hated that when we did it," he says, "but we just made it better, and we had a quantifiable number that showed that was the case. We have numbers now that show the

reason we do these things is to make the course better, not to make golfers mad."

The numbers mean almost nothing, though, unless Jeffreys collects reams of data and shares it with other golf course maintenance teams around the county, the state, the country. He says — with a laugh but not at all joking — that he'd like 50 GS3s just in Moore County, where Pinehurst Resort is located. "We would gladly share this information and find out what's working," he says. "And unless others are measuring, we don't know what's working. So we can only learn from ourselves right now."

USGA director of course consulting service **Chris Hartwiger** says he understands it sounds self-serving for the association to spur every course to purchase a GS3. But he wants every course to collect clippings and measure green speeds and record data, too, because he wants them to be able to make informed agronomic decisions.



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“We do a lot of things on putting greens today and we *think* they’re beneficial and we *think* they help, but we really don’t know,” Hartwiger says. “What happens with smoothness and trueness first thing in the morning before we put 200 golfers on it? What do we need to do to restore that smoothness and trueness? What is the impact on scoring at the professional level as they change throughout the day? Does it change regardless of grass type?”

“By getting golf courses to participate, we’ll begin learning some of those things. I can’t wait to provide superintendents with that information.”

Color forms

The GS3 demo was part of a USGA field day at Pinehurst Resort that also featured discussions about the new Greenkeeper Apprenticeship Program and the resort’s revised (and not uncontroversial) approach to water usage.



Pinehurst used to spotlight its “brilliant green turf all winter,” to use director of golf course maintenance **Bob Farren’s** words. The maintenance team even painted the turf for a few years. “We’re weaned off of it now,” Farren says, “because we’ve been able to change the culture of expectations. That’s the key.”

The effort started on No. 2, because, as Farren says, “If it’s OK to not overseed No. 2, then it’s OK to not overseed any of it. And that helped. Now golfers are used to firm and fast throughout the winter.”

Beyond just color, “Dryer golf course play better,” says **Dr. Cole Thompson**, the USGA’s director of turfgrass and environmental research. “They’re truer to the design and you have more fun. If you start to think less about the aesthetic experi-

ence than the playing experience, it’s hard to argue against it.”

“The color of this grass doesn’t help me hit a better golf shot,” Hartwiger adds. “But the density of it does. If it’s brown and it’s a good lie, that helps me hit a good golf shot. The color is irrelevant. But sometimes it takes a while to kind of turn that.”

Training day

The Greenkeeper Apprenticeship Program, meanwhile, is a combined effort with the USGA, Sandhills Community College in nearby Southern Pines and area golf courses to recruit, educate and train anyone for a career in the golf course maintenance industry.

The program launched in late 2022 and recently concluded its first class — referred to as a cohort — that started with 20 people. It weaves together both classroom instruction and discussion with practical course work, along with an

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NOTE BOOK

hourly wage.

"We stay grounded with these students," says **Carson LeTot**, a longtime educator who is both the GAP coordinator and a Sandhills CC instructor. "Their classroom is really this golf course and the golf courses around the area. When they come to me, that's just the icing on the cake. We're reflecting on what they're doing out here and what they're learning from their mentors.

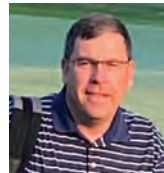
"I don't really have to do a lot of teaching. Folks like John (Jeffreys) and the rest of the crew and the rest of the superintendents around here, they're the ones doing the teaching, and then I come in and I fill in with a little theory and a little critical thinking."

The second cohort starts this month.

Matt LaWell is Golf Course Industry's managing editor.

Tartan Talks 91

Moving roads to build short-game practice facilities. Par-3 courses at venerable clubs. Bermudagrass in the Mid-Atlantic.



▲ Weiman

Joel Weiman is observing a transformation among East Coast private clubs. He's also playing a key role in helping modernize venerable golf land.

After a successful 35-year run guiding design/build efforts for McDonald Design Group and McDonald & Sons, the Maryland-based architect formed Weiman Golf Design in 2023. Weiman's projects remain close to his East Coast roots. And working at the region's classic clubs means finding creative ways to fit amenities today's members seek on fixed acreage.

"We're much more dynamic now," Weiman says on the *Tartan Talks* podcast. "We think outside the box and we're always pushing the envelope. Take it back to the late '90s and early 2000s, and it was definitely regimented. Everybody followed the rules. Clubs are now being rewarded when they don't, and it's a lot of fun to be a part of."

From his days studying the profession at Cornell University to the honest conversations an architect must have with superintendents, Weiman's podcast episode resembles his work: he packs plenty of enduring thoughts into the appearance.

"Right now, I have five jobs in the dirt," he says, "and I can tell you none of those superintendents give a hooey about the other four. But they need to know I'm their partner, they need to know that I'm all in and they need to know that I'm going to take it as personally as they are. If the superintendent doesn't succeed, I don't succeed, either."

Weiman's full thoughts can be found on the Superintendent Radio Network page of popular podcast distribution platforms.





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COURSE NEWS

Vineyards Country Club wrapped up its South Course redesign and renovation late last year. The 36-year-old Naples, Florida, club addressed aging infrastructure and incorporated new tech with help from QGS Development and **Kipp Schulties** Design. Key improvements included greens expansion, bunker redesign, and the integration of a technologically advanced irrigation and drainage system. ... Bull's Bridge Golf Club in South Kent, Connecticut, is ready to reveal bunkers renovated during a project guided by Fazio Design and superintendent **Stephen Hicks**. New bunkers were added to eight holes, along with bentgrass fairway and short-cut approach expansion, and new tees on select holes. McDonald & Sons served as the construction contractor. ... Woodmont Country Club in Rockville, Maryland, will host the 2025 and 2026 U.S. Adaptive Opens and the 2028 U.S. Junior Amateur. Elsewhere in the Old Line State, Columbia Country Club in Chevy Chase will host the 2027 U.S. Senior Women's Amateur and the 2035 U.S. Senior Amateur. ... DRC Investors LLC is the new owner of Dismal River Club in Mullen, Nebraska. KemperSports will remain as manager of the club's operations. ... Heritage Golf Group acquired Old Hickory Golf Club, a **PB Dye** design just outside St. Louis, the 34th addition to its roster since the current ownership and leadership team started in January 2020. ... Both Coyote Crossing Golf Club in West Lafayette, Indiana, and The Golf Club at Fox Acres in

Red Feather Lakes, Colorado, picked Landscapes Golf Management for operation needs. ... Audubon International reported that new certifications across all six of its programs more than doubled in 2023 from the previous two calendar years. Most new certifications were awarded in the golf and lodging categories.

INDUSTRY BUZZ

Aquatrols and the turf division of Precision Laboratories merged to form The Aquatrols Company. The new company will continue to offer the full line of Aquatrols and Precision Laboratories soil surfactants, as well as Precision Laboratories tank mix adjuvants, colorants and additives. ... Buffalo Turbine unveiled the Blitz, a stand-on debris blower designed to enhance operational efficiency, reduce labor demands and prioritize operator comfort. ... Heavy-duty site prep attachments and forestry accessories manufacturer Fecon LLC acquired Stumper Industries, which manufactures stump grinder attachments for mini and standard skid steers among other products. ... FuelPro Trailers introduced its FuelPro 990 for refueling and service. The new trailer has a 990-gallon capacity and includes a five-year tank warranty. ... OTR Engineered Solutions introduced its TR-34 tire for farm tractors and ride-on mowers. The new tire is designed to offer improved performance on grass, mud and loose soil, and reduce the risk of turf damage and soil compaction.



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Jan Bel Jan

GOLF COURSE ARCHITECT

Jan Bel Jan grew up around golf. Her father, **George Bel Jan**, was a golf professional who designed and managed a golf course, and three of her uncles were PGA professionals. Bel Jan started working at her father's golf course at 14.

So, it was only natural the game became her profession, specifically golf course architecture.

Today, she heads her own design firm, Jan Bel Jan Golf Course Design, which is headquartered in Jupiter, Florida. She is a past ASGCA president (2019-20). Bel Jan's design philosophy is based on the concept that golf should be an enjoyable game for all, regardless of age, gender or ability level.

She was brought along in the business by **Tom Fazio**, with whom she worked with for more than two decades. Speaking on the *Wonderful Women of Golf* podcast with host **Rick Woelfel**, she related how Fazio's theories on course design impacted her.

"Probably the most notable is, 'There's always another way,'" she says. "There's always another way to route the golf course. There isn't just any one way to do a golf course routing. The routing is what really sets the stage for the rest of the design. The routing has a lot to do with the client as well as with the property."

"If you have relatively mellow land, if not bland, you need to create some excitement, so that people want to come there. If you have challenging terrain, mountainous, rocky, with wetlands, a multitude of restrictions, that really begs you to be creative about routing the golf course to disturb the least amount of area, because the less area you disturb, the less you're going to be paying in maintenance, long-term."

"(But) that doesn't mean not to clear sufficient vegetation and trees. Because if you don't, you'll have a difficult time growing grass."

Bel Jan addressed the task of designing a golf course that tests the expert player but is enjoyable for the recreational golfer. She notes the importance of focusing on making the expert player the priority in terms of design.

"If you're designing for the elite first, you're positioning the tee because they're generally going to be the ones hitting the ball the farthest," she says. "Then it's finding the locations and grading appropriately for the other tees for

the folks who hit the ball not as far."

With that idea in mind, Bel Jan developed and eventually trademarked Scoring Tees, which are tees positioned to elevate the experience of new golfers, or those who don't hit the ball a long distance.

"I'd been thinking about this for some time," she says. "Because, so often, what was the traditional yardage from the most forward set of tees? On the scorecards from the area of (three sets of tees) you'll see the forward set might be around 5,600 yards. The next set might be around 6,000 or 6,200 and the and long set might be 6,700."

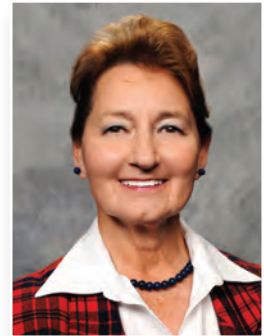
Bel Jan notes that today's playing conditions, notably enhanced irrigation, allows for less roll than was the case half a century ago. To aid the player who finds hitting a tee shot beyond 150 yards a challenge, she has added tees to some of her designs that theoretically make it easier for shorter hitters to reach greens in regulation. The approach creates a course within a course for shorter hitters.

At Pelican Marsh, a Bel Jan design in Naples, Florida, the Scoring Tees are set at 4,050 yards on a course that maxes out at 7,050 yards. At Pelican's Nest in Bonita Springs, the Scoring Tees measure 4,062 yards on a layout that stretches to 6,808 yards.

The Scoring Tees were introduced at both courses in 2014-15, three years after Bel Jan first debuted the concept at Green Valley Country Club in Greenville, South Carolina. "Everybody wants to learn to score better," she says, "from the elite to the most novice." **GCI**



The routing is what really sets the stage for the rest of the design. The routing has a lot to do with the client as well as with the property."



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SMALL BALL

Growing up in a small town in northern Connecticut had its highs and lows, but one of its best features for a kid who needed to be outside and on the move was the 9-hole private golf club set in the middle of a 5,000-acre nature preserve. Litchfield Country Club provided me with a four-season playground for fishing, hiking, boating and running. But most importantly, it was my introduction to golf.

My dad used the club to keep me out of the house, and, not coincidentally, out of trouble. When I was just a little squirt, he made me his “caddy,” really his target dummy during practice. And you wonder why I am the way I am? Let’s just say dad was very accurate with his 3-iron.

Pretty soon I was a real caddy, learning the basics of the game, starting with a simple rule: Show up, keep up, shut up. With experience, I began picking up the nuances, and pretty soon “shut up” became “speak up,” and I became an asset to the members and pro, who turned to me for “special” guest and big matches. As a summer job, caddying also helped me get in shape for high school sports.

When I turned 16, I needed money to help pay for college, so I signed on as a member of the grounds crew. It was still the most fun I’ve ever had on a golf course. There were just four of us, and that included superintendent **Billy Bianowicz**, who over seven summers taught me how to do almost every task he did except spraying fungicides for greens. He also taught me a fierce work ethic that I still try to practice every day.

From that beginning, I’ve forged a career that has taken me

around the world, seeing the best courses, working with the most talented professionals and researchers, and enlarging my “family” of others who’ve made the golf industry their home.

I saw something else in small-town golf that isn’t always on display elsewhere: appreciation. There were four 9-hole clubs within a short drive of my childhood home, and at every one the players truly appreciated what the maintenance crews did to present the best possible playing conditions, keep the turf alive in the summer heat and make things extra special for the big events. Every superintendent wants to be recognized for their efforts, but in a small town — under an extra-sharp microscope — it was particularly gratifying that people noticed.

Life at small-town clubs, many without labor and big-time maintenance budgets, evokes a simpler time, a nostalgia that I often wish golf could re-create. It’s certainly a different feel from what I get at the big-name, prestigious clubs I frequently visit now, where the focus is on “real” championships or over-the-top conditioning.

Which isn’t to say some of the small-town feel doesn’t remain. When I managed municipal courses for American Golf in the City of Miami, I saw the same kind of friendships and camaraderie from the groups of regulars who thought of these public courses as their own private havens. Their weekly beer leagues and the “big money” games (\$500 Nassaus!) were just as joke-filled and pressure-packed

as my dad’s rounds at Litchfield a generation or two before. And as conditioning improved during my tenure, I became “their guy,” almost one of them as Miami Beach police, firefighters, EMS and the local political scene played, ate and occasionally drank a beverage. The stories still ring in my head. They recognized the improvements and always let me know they appreciated our efforts.

During my years at the USGA — where most of the clubs I visited were in the upper tier — I’d drive from championship venue to venue whenever I could. It gave me time to think, but it also gave me the chance to find an out-of-the-way public course where I could hit some balls and maybe tee it up. After worrying about major-championship agronomy to where the grandstands would go, it was a pleasure to pay a few bucks, tee it up with some locals and experience a very different golf community.

One year, driving home from Oakmont Country Club, I got stuck in a bumper-to-bumper backup on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. I got off soon as I could and quickly drove into the parking lot of a “cornfield” golf course and into an outing of the Western PA Lumberman’s Association. Suddenly I became the “new ringer” member of the WPLA, won a few points for my team, and helped them capture the trophy. As we got to talking, it turned out that the guys knew my wife’s grandmother from church — and knew all about her coconut cream pies.

Small-town golf. **GCI**



TIM MORAGHAN, principal, ASPIRE Golf (tmoraghan@aspire-golf.com). Follow Tim online at Golf Course Confidential at www.aspire-golf.com/or on X at @TimMoraghan.

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Small town

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Thousands of courses outside big-city and suburban limits dot the American golf landscape. Few can compare to Venango Valley Inn & Golf Course.

By **Guy Cipriano**

Between the Venango Valley Inn & Golf Course 18th green and the tidiest parking lot on the east side of French Creek, on a comfortable, quarter-zip October afternoon, a half dozen women linger, laugh and demonstrate love for their surroundings.

Tones escalate as **Jim Cervone** and **Michael Pero** approach their final putts on the 519-yard downhill par 5. Pero's mid-length eagle putt slides past the low side of hole. Cervone follows the effort by missing a 12-footer for birdie. The women gently tease the duo as they exit the putting surface near the left greenside bunker.

"We should do this more often," Cervone tells Pero, "*now that we own the place.*"

Speaking via phone a month later from their home on wooded Crawford County, Pennsylvania, land adjacent to the course, **Durbin** and **Kim Loreno** describe their 27-year run owning and operating the blissful facility. "In hindsight," Kim says, "I wish we had taken more time to enjoy it more. Work less, enjoy the time more."

Cervone, Pero and **Tony Passilla** purchased Venango Valley from Durbin and Kim on Jan. 29, 2023. Brothers-in-law in title—Cervone has been married to Pero's sister, **Kelly**, for 28 years and Pero says, "You can remove the *in-law*. We're brothers." — Cervone and Pero celebrated the acquisition with Passilla by popping champagne inside the Federal-style, orange-brick, 185-year-old inn.

Reflective moments have been rare since that slushy day.

Selling the property to Cervone, Pero, and Passilla ensured the course remained in the community. The trio hails from Meadville, the Crawford County seat 10 miles south of Venango Valley. Crawford County sits between Pittsburgh and Erie on Route 19, a busy thoroughfare connecting the northwest and southwest parts of Pennsylvania. Meadville, population

12,716, is the county's largest city.

Fewer than 250 people live in Venango, yet the course attracts around 30,000 rounds and 70 outings per year despite a cold-weather climate and a glut of nearby public courses, including one located just a couple of long par-5s away on the north side of town. The inn — a delectable restaurant, not an overnight resting place as the name suggests — generates four-season activity.

Owning Venango Valley means being too busy to enjoy it. When Cervone and Pero exited the 18th green, neither knew when they would play next their round together, a contrast to the group of women who enjoy the course at the same time, on the same days, every week.

Thousands of small-town golf courses enjoyed by millions seeking close-to-home recreational and gathering spots persist because of dream-seekers who sacrifice what they initially think the dream entails to provide joy for others. It's a cycle that keeps golf thriving in places such as Venango, Pennsylvania, which a young **George Washington** passed through while traveling along French Creek in 1753.

Durbin and Kim Loreno's cycle has ended. Cervone's, Pero's and Passilla's has started.

In addition to staying in the community, Venango Valley remains an industry course. Durbin worked as a superintendent; Cervone also owns a golf course architecture firm.

Paul Erath and **Stan Kemp** are responsible for constructing a layout admired by denizens of Crawford County and beyond, including Cervone, Durbin and current superintendent **Alan Zielinski**. Erath had deep industry connections, juggling superintendent and golf professional jobs simultaneously and helping build famed Laurel Valley Golf Club in southwest Pennsylvania. Erath and Kemp purchased the inn and surrounding Venango acreage in 1968. They built a practical, enchanting course, routing holes along woods and farmland atop ideal subsurface elements due to the land's proximity to French Creek.

The 18 holes and inn are the epicenter of a small-town golf and love story. The land and its people demonstrate why facilities like Venango Valley are the soul of the industry.

"I think all golf courses develop their own community," Durbin says. "People claim it as their own course and they take pride in it, no matter which one it is. This is a gathering place for a lot of people."

THE FOOD MATTERS at Venango Valley. The food led to a relationship that resulted in the course establishing a small-town golf standard.

After purchasing the property in 1976, **Joe** and **Mary Petrucelli** incorporated savory and scalable recipes into the menu. The couple refined their offerings over the years and used daily specials to attract

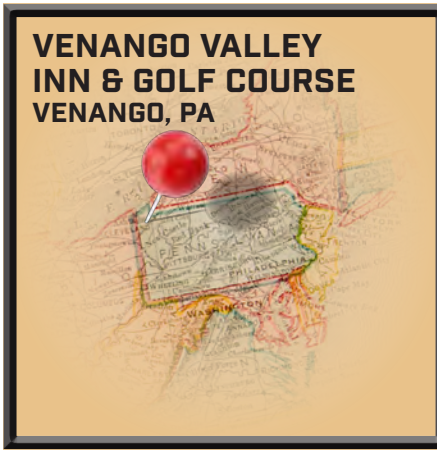
business: Wednesdays, Italian Night; Thursdays, Liver Lover's Night; Fridays, Fish Fry; Saturdays, Pizza Night.

How appetizing was the pizza Joe Petrucci cooked in an oven devoted to the dish? Durbin frequently visited Venango Valley, where he worked on the crew in college, for pizza following Saturday maintenance shifts at nearby Riverside Golf Course in 1986. Kim worked at the inn as a waitress. After noticing her a few times, Durbin asked Kim out following a Pizza Night shift.

"It's funny how one little event in your life can change everything," Durbin says. "For me, it was going to get a pizza."

Durbin and Kim possessed land ethics stemming from their rural Pennsylvania backgrounds. Durbin hailed from Greenville, a small town

**VENANGO VALLEY
INN & GOLF COURSE
VENANGO, PA**



40 miles south of Venango in Mercer County. He grew up helping his uncles build and expand Pine Hill Golf Course, a modest public facility. Kim was raised on a farm two miles from the course she eventually owned.

They started their lives together in a more densely populated place: New York City. American Express hired Kim and Durbin landed an assistant superintendent job at Hackensack (New Jersey) Golf Club, an ultra-private Seth Raynor design, in the late 1980s. Durbin attended turfgrass management

classes at Rutgers University while working at Hackensack. The best training for what awaited arrived during a superintendent stint at Flanders Valley Golf Course. Leading the crew at the busy 36-hole New Jersey municipal facility taught him how to stay ahead of play and provide solid conditions with modest resources.

The couple's retreat from big-city life started with Durbin accepting the superintendent position at Binghamton Country Club, a pleasant upstate New York

private club with an A.W. Tillinghast-designed course. Wherever Durbin worked, Kim usually held side jobs in the restaurant and clubhouse. She was quietly obtaining golf, restaurant and banquet management experience to pair with her business acumen.

Early in Durbin's run as a superintendent, the couple casually sought opportunities to purchase golf courses in a geographic region stretching from New York to Michigan. They had less time to think about owning a course once they reached Binghamton and their family expanded to include daughters **Tori** and **Lily**.

"I ended up with a nice job in Binghamton," Durbin says. "Nice house, great membership at the club. We were pretty satisfied and then *this* came up."

This was a chance to be involved in a group to purchase Venango Valley from Mary Petrucci, who kept a promise to give Durbin and Kim first opportunity at acquiring the 150-acre property and inn. Here's how Durbin and Kim described their connection to the course in a November 2023 phone conversation:

Kim: "You always said you wanted to purchase that course!"

Durbin: "It always had potential. It was on Route 19 and the layout was just a perfect layout for a public golf course."

More Durbin: "We came back, bought it and it was in the worst shape you could possibly imagine."

Venango Valley's condition almost led to Durbin experiencing buyer's remorse before buying the course.

"Here's one of my favorite stories," Kim says. "The night before we were supposed to close on the property, Durbin looked at me at 1 o'clock in the morning and said, 'This place is going to be a mess. It's going to be so much work. I don't think we want to do this.' Being in the business, he knew what it would take, whereas I didn't know what I didn't know. I thought we would be fine."

▼ Venango Valley Inn & Golf Course owners Michael Pero (left) and Jim Cervone (right) with superintendent Alan Zielinski.



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The mess included a maintenance fleet with just one unit to mow greens and tees. An adjustable roller allowed the surfaces to be mowed with the same unit. Fairways were maintained using one Toro Spartan gang mower and were constructed without an irrigation system. The surfaces still lack supplemental irrigation. Coincidentally, never adding supplemental fairway irrigation helped the course financially, as Durbin found cre-

ative ways to provide solid fairway conditions without the expense of installing and maintaining a fairway irrigation system.

The nearly three acres of greens presented maintenance conundrums. The undulating surfaces offered glimpses of the potential Durbin noticed in the course. But that potential was tough to immediately fulfill because of a 3-inch thatch layer. The greens lacked automatic irrigation, so

Durbin started summer days at 2 a.m., dragging hoses in solitude around the sprawling layout bordered by woods and farms. Exchanging lodging and food for labor with a contractor who needed a place to house a crew between projects at prominent private clubs helped Venango Valley receive a new greens irrigation system at a steep discount. A pair of pond expansions increased water-holding capacity.

“The golf course was just a matter of surviving the first few years,” Durbin says. “You couldn’t even mow the greens. They would scalp because there was so much thatch in them. They wouldn’t take any water.”

The inn also suffered from a lack of investment. The dining rooms only accommodated a few dozen guests, the bar barely had space for a half dozen drinkers and employees worked in a crammed kitchen. The main dining room sat atop an outdoor deck, which collapsed following a winter storm in 1996.

Despite thatch slowing greens and constant elbow-to-elbow indoor contact, Venango Valley possessed four critical elements to success: loyal customers, dedicated owners, high-visibility location, and charming golf setting. The warts Durbin and Kim continually noticed didn’t curtail business. “We were surprised by how busy we were,” Kim says.

Business accelerated as Durbin’s and Kim’s vision started formulating. Their accessibility, approachability, and willingness to invest in visible and subtle upgrades transformed Venango Valley. From pre-sunrise to post-sunset, Durbin and Kim — and often both of them — could be spotted at the course. They quickly realized that in a small town customers like to know business owners and employees appreciate bosses who execute the same tasks as everybody else.

“Right away, we worked shoulder-to-shoulder with our people,” Kim says. “Nobody worked for anybody. We worked together. We were in trenches doing the same thing ev-



Fairway fundamentals

Operating without a fairway irrigation system has never hindered business at Venango Valley Inn & Golf Course.

“You really didn’t need fairway irrigation, even in the middle of the summer,” says former co-owner and superintendent **Durbin Loreno**. “After a little bit of overseeding, we hardly ever turned brown, even in the driest years. Plus, people like to get a little extra roll.”

Venango Valley features 23¼ acres of ryegrass fairways. The course was built by superintendent/pro **Paul Erath** and **Stan Kemp** in the late 1960s and early 1970s, an era when building a course without a fairway irrigation system was common. Venango, Pennsylvania, averages around 44 inches of rain per year, with precipitation scattered among all 12 months.

Current superintendent **Alan Zielinski**’s team aerifies fairways in early September to complement the overseeding regimen. The surfaces are mowed at three quarters of an inch.

“They have a great root base, great soil base and they hold up very, very well,” Zielinski says. “There are times we wish we had fairway irrigation, but for the most part, in the middle of the summer, when it’s dry out, the fairways are still green. That’s through the aerification and our fertilization programs. The fact that they are ryegrass means they hold up better too, and we cut them at a little bit of a higher height because we don’t have fairway irrigation. They seem to do very well.”

The fairways also perform well during and following rain. Erath and Kemp constructed Venango Valley on a hilly site across Route 19 from French Creek. Proximity to the creek means the course sits atop gravel.

“It’s the best draining golf course I have ever been associated with,” Zielinski says. “It drains phenomenally well. There are times when other places can’t think about letting carts out and we have them out there running.”

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everybody else was doing—sometimes stuff that was even worse than what everybody else was doing.”

The mentality stabilized the outdoor and indoor staffs.

Durbin relied on relationships from his days working at Venango Valley to build a team filled with retirees and students. The staff Zielinski led in 2023 consisted of 25 employees, but just two other full-timers, **Todd Yenny** and **Jeremy Horning**. Yenny was one of Durbin’s first hires. As he approached retirement and the sale of the course, Durbin hired Zielinski in June 2020 to lead the golf maintenance team.

Zielinski, who spent 15 years as the City of Erie’s golf course superintendent, realized he joined something unique when he started observing employees arriving at 5 a.m. for 5:30 a.m. shifts. A culture of excellence and commitment established by Durbin and Kim inspired Zielinski and aided his transition to a new job.

“To a lot of the people we employ, it’s not a job. It’s what they do,” Zielinski says. “They want to be a part of the team.”

Zielinski has worked in the municipal, private and family-owned sectors of the industry. He considers Venango Valley the best job of his career.

“I think what keeps golf alive are places like this,” Zielinski says. “People want to be a member of a country club, but many can’t afford it. Our motto is we want to have better conditions than everybody else at the same price.”

NOBODY IN VENANGO Valley’s history kept a more frantic pace than Kim, who handled everything from financials to filling kitchen shifts on busy nights. She worked exhaustively until the sale closed last year.

“Every year they did something for the customer experience,” Pero says. “It wasn’t for them. It was for the experience. They were hard workers. Kim never stopped. For most of the years he was superintendent, Durbin was out

there from dusk to dawn. Kim opened the kitchen and closed it for years. Their work ethic won’t be matched.”

Durbin’s and Kim’s business philosophy hinged on indefatigability. Increasing volume produced funds for capital improvements, which were plentiful during their ownership tenure. Enhancements ranging from expanding the main dining room and practice facilities to adding a large outdoor pavilion to accommodate outings created more work for the couple. To help manage outings, the kitchen and other aspects of the operation, Durbin and Kim hired **Larrie Rose**, whom everybody associated with the course praises for her professionalism, affability and organization.

More outings and increased food and beverage sales meant Venango Valley could improve the golf and dining experiences while keeping green fees and menu prices affordable. A weekend round with a cart cost \$40 in 2023 and 62-and-older golfers played 18 holes with cart for \$25 on weekdays. A large bucket of range balls cost \$5.

“It seemed like with all the volume we had, we always had money to spend,” Durbin says. “We could have bagged all that money ourselves. We didn’t take high wages. We just tried to keep the price down. It worked good for us.”

The Lorenos also invested in their employees, offering health and retirement plans and instituting a profit-sharing program. The loyalty of both sides was never more apparent than when Pennsylvania closed golf courses at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. “When COVID hit, a lot of these retired fellas came to us and said, ‘We will work for you for nothing. Don’t worry about us. We’ll come and mow,’” Kim says. “That meant a lot to us.”

“But,” Durbin adds, “we still paid them.”

Customers stayed engaged in the course and restaurant during the shutdowns. Lines extended to Route 19 for takeout food orders. The reopening of the course didn’t alter the golf operation. Unlike many courses, Venango Valley functioned at near ca-

capacity before the pandemic. “We found ourselves turning away more play after the pandemic because we were so busy,” Durbin says.

Durbin and Kim started exploring selling the property and structures in 2018. The pandemic slowed the process, and they waited until the restaurant approached pre-pandemic customer and staffing levels to aggressively find a buyer.

CERVONE AND PERO didn’t meet over pizza. Or golf. Or even after Cervone started dating Kelly, who was one grade behind the pair in school.

They likely met in church or elementary school. They both played sports and considered themselves dreamers. “I don’t know if Mike remembers it,” Cervone says, “but I can recall times being younger, when we were in high school and stuff like that, talking about business and maybe doing something down the line together.”

Growing up in Meadville, a community nicknamed “Tool City USA” because of its tool and die machine shops, satisfied their desires to compete. Meadville High School flourished in basketball and wrestling in the 1980s, a tricky winter double for any Pennsylvania school, especially one isolated from the state’s major cities.

Golf offered summer recreation and competition, and Pero’s mother purchased him a junior membership at Whispering Pines Golf Course in Meadville. Pero and his friends walked the hilly course in the morning, ate a hot dog for lunch and played it again in the afternoon. “I really got the golf bug close to my junior, senior year of high school,” he says.

Pero’s golf passion never waned. He participated in leagues that rotated among area layouts — most





◀ From left: Michael Pero, Tony Passilla, Kim Loreno and Jim Cervone following the sale of Venango Valley Inn & Golf Course.

of them hilly, a commonality among western Pennsylvania courses — before the demands of raising and supporting three sons decreased his free time. Pero has spent his entire life in Crawford County, which has experienced a decline of 7,000 residents from its peak population of 90,289 in 1983. Surprisingly, the county has 11 golf courses.

“It’s a blue-collar community,” Pero says. “A lot of toolmakers are out here in all the leagues and we have leagues with 140 golfers. It’s a tight-knit community. Everybody knows everybody. Meadville, Venango, Saegertown, Cambridge Springs, ... they all blend together.”

Cervone is a golf enthusiast who moved away from home. Unsure of his long-term aspirations, he left nearby Allegheny College after a year and a half and spent a year working construction jobs with his father. He experienced life away from home when he enrolled in

faculty convinced him otherwise.

“I loved it,” he says. “I have never been one to crack books, memorize and study. In architecture, you are drawing and building. I never had trouble spending time doing that. I did really well. But the whole time I was there the professors kept saying, ‘You have no chance of getting jobs. There are too many architects in the world.’”

One of Cervone’s favorite activities in New York sparked a Plan B. “The campus on Long Island was an old hospital,” he says. “There were huge buildings around this campus and inside they had a 9-hole golf course, which you could play as a student for free. It was right outside my dorm window. I played a lot of golf and thought, ‘How cool would it be to be a golf architect?’”

Cervone returned to Meadville for the summer and called the American Society of Golf Course Architects. The society recommended switching majors to prepare for a golf design

career. He contacted Penn State and interviewed with officials from the school’s landscape architecture program. With Kelly in the passenger’s seat, Cervone drove from Meadville to State College to answer questions and present his portfolio. He worked construction as he waited for acceptance into the program.

Three days before the fall semester commenced, he got into Penn State. He deferred enrollment and worked another year of construction.

As a senior, Cervone met **Tom Clark**, a Penn State alumnus who partnered with **Edmund Ault** to form one of the nation’s most prolific golf architecture firms. Clark advised Cervone that earning a job designing golf courses would be as challenging as landing a full-time position designing buildings. “I had no clue at the time how difficult it was to break into golf architecture,” Cervone says.

Clark referred Cervone to an open position at Williamsburg Environmental Group in Virginia. Cervone married Kelly following graduation and he was scheduled to start at the environmental design firm after the couple returned from their European honeymoon. The day before the couple left, Williamsburg Environmental Group co-owner **Ron Boyd** mentioned that **Bill Love** had left Ault, Clark & Associates. Cervone chatted with Clark multiple times on his honeymoon and drove to Washington, D.C., for an interview after returning from Europe.

“It was divine intervention,” Cervone says. “I never put out a single résumé or a single cover letter, and I had two awesome opportunities. I was with Ault, Clark & Associates for eight years, and I haven’t really worked a day since.”

Cervone launched his own suburban Pittsburgh-based golf architecture firm in 2002. He has traveled extensively, designing and renovating courses, yet a small-town public facility near his hometown became one of his steadiest clients.

“Having worked with Durbin and Kim as an architect, I’d always known how special this place was,” Cervone says. “I have worked all across the country, and even before owning this ever became a thought in my mind, I felt like Venango Valley is one of the most impressive public golf courses I had ever experienced.”

Courses offering golf with cart for

◀ Donated wood carvings of some of the game’s greats, including Old Tom Morris, surround the first tee at Venango Valley.



In sight, in mind

Venango Valley Inn & Golf Course forges strong customer impressions from the start.

"We try to keep a very neat atmosphere throughout the course," superintendent **Alan Zielinski** says. "I feel like that's very important, especially around the clubhouse."

Customer eyes immediately drift to the 1800s-style brick inn. The front lawn is mowed with precision around well-defined and colorful ornamental and flower beds. Thousands of daily motorists passing the course on Route 19 see a large sign above a weed-free ornamental bed. The sign features a large wooden name placard hanging from a metal frame. The wood and metal are devoid of paint fissures.

A pair of parking lots adjacent to the inn are smooth with bright lines separating spaces. Regular trimming yields definition between pavement and turf.

The scene is equally impressive behind the inn. A cream-colored starter's hut and neatly aligned pull carts atop a concrete slab sit between the first tee and a halfway pavilion. Wood carvings of **Old Tom Morris**, western Pennsylvania native **Arnold Palmer** and a random golfer surround the tee. A close friend of previous owners **Durbin** and **Kim Loreno** created the carvings using trees that fell on the property and donated them to the course.

Trash is rarely spotted on the front lawn, parking lots, first tee or along the course. Zielinski lauds his crew for keeping an exemplary appearance.

"A lot of guys cut the same greens every day, the same fairways, the same tees," he says. "That's their job, and they want it to be perfect. They will get off their golf cart to pick up a piece of garbage, or if they see a divot in the fairway, they will get off their cart to fix it."

Zielinski's team receives unsolicited assistance from steadfast customers. Grips about trash, unrepaired ball marks and unfilled divots are infrequent.

"The people who play golf here and come to eat here are so loyal," co-owner **Jim Cervone** says. "They have been here so many times that they take ownership in this facility,"

less than \$50 hiring qualified architects to redesign tees, rebuild and reposition bunkers, and manage tree removal are anomalies. Cervone's work trips home epitomized Durbin's and Kim's commitment to continually elevating Venango Valley. Cervone and Durbin routinely engaged in conversations about topics more important than bunkers.

"I told Jim, 'You ought to think about buying this place,'" Durbin says. "And 10 years later ..."

Multiple parties expressed interest in the course, with one group looking to add Venango Valley to a portfolio that included businesses in other industries. When the deal collapsed, Durbin says they became "a little more picky about who we wanted to sell it to. Jim was

the perfect candidate to come along."

Cervone knew an ideal candidate for a potential ownership group. "I wouldn't even consider doing this without Mike," he says. Passilla, another Meadville native, joined the group later.

The transaction featured some uneasy moments, especially for Pero, who left the tool and die business for a job as an estimator that he quickly detested. "I realized it wasn't my cup of tea," he says. "I had a family and I had to pay bills. I was sort of stuck. Jim buzzed me, and said, 'Hey, do you want to buy Venango?' 'OK, let's try.'"

Pero quit the estimator job and spent the final two months of 2022 observing the happenings at Venango Valley, learning as much as he could about the people and the business from Rose, fellow clubhouse manager **Kristina Krizon**, hourly employees, customers, and Durbin and Kim. The business represented a solid opportunity, but the personal stress amplified as 2022 ended without a deal.

"There was a point where I said to Jim, 'I have to move on. I have been holding myself back from doing something else, hanging onto this dream. I'm not getting any younger, I have to figure something out,'" Pero says.

Durbin and Kim were also ready for their next phase. "We have been married for 35 years," Durbin says. "In the golf business, I was gone in the morning when she got up and I would be sleeping when she got home at night. In 35 years, we didn't really spend that much time together."

In 2023, Pero experienced the sensation of spending more time at the course than at home as Cervone split his time between improving other people's courses and operating his own. The duo relished the exhausting year.

Abundant thatch, inadequate equipment, and unsafe structures didn't greet Cervone's, Pero's and Passilla's arrival as owners. They purchased a turnkey business consisting of 150 beloved acres anchored by a practical and playable golf course, 13,000 square feet of cozy indoor

space, an outdoor pavilion with capacity for 150 people, reliable maintenance equipment and carts, and gas wells for free heating. A case can be made they purchased perfection in the form of a vision motivated by giving others something to enjoy.

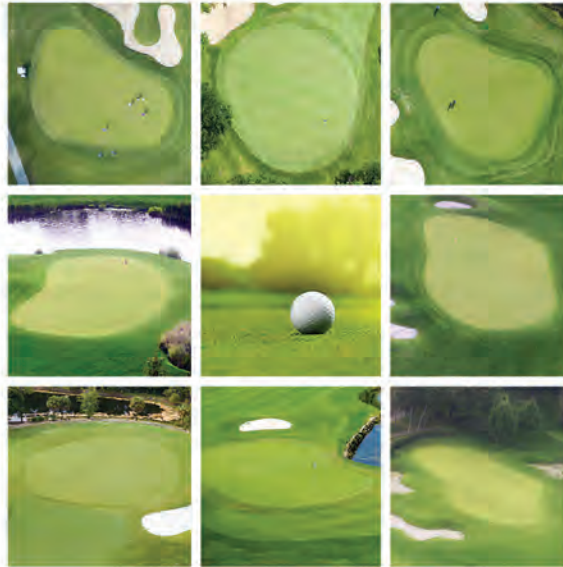
"One thing I loved immediately about it was the 1830s Federal brick building, the historic feel, the classy casual atmosphere, a nice well-maintained golf course, the beautiful vistas," Kim says. "I think that's what we saw, and I think we did OK getting it there."

For the first time in his career, Cervone doesn't need approval from an owner, board, HOA or committee to fulfill his vision for a golf course. He collaborated with Zielinski last year to increase the number of tee markers from four to six, reduce fairway acreage, add contouring and bailout area around select greens, eliminate the intermediate cut between fairways and rough, and replace 100-, 150- and 200-yard markers on the sides of fairways with black-and-white 150-yard poles in the middle of each fairway.

Sitting in a cart by the 15th tee on that fall day, Cervone admires his surroundings. He can see most of the back nine, the inn, French Creek and farmland beyond a waterway George Washington traversed. His eyes drift to the 14th green repeatedly during a conversation. The 8,194-square-foot surface features a severe front-to-back slope. It might be the trickiest green between Pittsburgh and Erie. It's near the top of the to-improve list.

None of the women who jokingly jeered Cervone and Pero a few hours earlier mentioned the green. They enjoyed another charming fall day at a meaningful place. Cervone knows thoughtful actions must be implemented to keep them returning. Their predecessors established a small-town golf standard difficult to duplicate.

"We're blessed, we're really blessed," Cervone says. "There are a lot of facilities out there that don't come close to this one. All we had to do was come in and not mess it up." **CCI**



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NO SUCH THING AS TMI

I like knowing things about golf courses I visit and write about. It helps me to understand the site-specific character of the place. Often, I'll go on Google Maps beforehand to determine the high and low points of a course and the elevation change involved. Or when I'm writing up an assessment, I'll count the balance of fairway bunkers and greenside bunkers to get a fix on how the hazards function.

Climate data are also helpful and readily available online, including prevailing wind speeds and direction by month, average precipitation rates across the calendar, and monthly averages of high/low temperatures.

At some point in my data collection, however, I must rely upon the superintendent for details like the average square footage of greens or which putting surfaces are the largest and smallest. Equally revealing would be the square footage of bunkers, acreage of fairways, heights of various turf cuts and average Stimpmeter reads in season.

In the decades since the 1990s, when I started gathering such data for my reviews, these information points are getting much easier to obtain. That's not only a function of enhanced web-based searches, but also because superintendents today are generally far more sophisticated in monitoring and measuring their properties. That's evident in the widespread use of GPS-generated area tracking — a tool, for instance, that is vital to construction management budgeting and billing.

There might be a certain old-world charm embedded in the soles of a greenkeeper's shoes as they are used to determine if a certain

spot is squishy or dry. And back in the late 19th century, when **Old Tom Morris'** topdressing program consisted of telling his lone assistant, "mere sand, Honeyman," the overworked underling did not respond by asking about the precise application rate per 1,000 square feet.

Too much measurement and management can become counterproductive. There's an old adage in management and engineering, to the effect that "you cannot control what you cannot measure." This was a popular saying in the 1950s and '60s, but soon gave way to criticism from within the corps of business that there is such a thing as measuring for the sake of measuring or pursuing information to unproductive ends.

Consider the infamous example of the Stimpmeter, a device initially developed in the 1930s to help greenkeepers achieve consistency in green speeds. Within decades it fell into the hands of green chairmen and tournament managers who weaponize it against superintendents in the pursuit of speed for its own sake. Information is not the problem; the issue arises when the data fall into the wrong hands.

Moisture-level monitors and firmness-measuring devices are helpful when it comes to making decisions about irrigation, drainage and topdressing practices. But if deployed as indices of preferred standards of excellence in their right — as happened with green speeds — they end up contributing to wasteful practices of over maintenance.

A good example of measuring usefully can be seen in the case of labor. By tracking hours spent

on various tasks — like mowing greens, raking bunkers and picking up leaves — most superintendents have a pretty good idea of how their work budget is expended. Likewise, when it comes to the cost of plant protectant applications per square foot. That's how they can anticipate the additional cost of a renovation or restoration project that might add bunker square footage and short-grass mowing while simultaneously introducing expanded greens with more hole locations that will reduce wear and tear and thus reduce disease susceptibility. The result is a multivariate equation of anticipated cost outcomes.

I still remember the amazement I felt some two decades ago listening to **Bob Randquist**, CGCS, when he spoke at a GCSAA conference and showed that the average cost of maintenance per square foot of bunkering was equivalent to what was spent on putting surfaces. From a benefit-cost standpoint, considering dollar spent for shot played, it struck me as a crazy waste of resources. Which was exactly Randquist's point. He would not have known it without careful measurement.

We are rapidly approaching an era of data management in which we will have access to a digital whiteboard of work. Savvy superintendents will be able to develop marginal utility curves for each potential new configuration of the golf course. The next time a greenkeeper is asked to amp up the average speed on the greens, it will be known what the cost is for each additional foot on the Stimpmeter.

There's nothing artificial about that intelligence. **GCI**



BRADLEY S. KLEIN, PH.D. (political science), former PGA Tour caddie, is a veteran golf journalist, book author ("Discovering Donald Ross," among others) and golf course consultant. Follow him on X at @BradleySKlein.

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Trend? Fad? Or TBD?

A trio of golf maintenance leaders describe their experiences with integrating mowers devoid of humans into their respective operations.

By **Rick Woelfel**

Robots have been part of the American psyche for three-quarters of a century as a science-fiction staple. In recent years, they are becoming more a part of our daily lives. Even more recently, they are making an imprint in the turf industry, as superintendents and crews are integrating autonomous mowers into their operations. The technology allows superintendents to utilize team members who might spend their workdays mowing in other areas. It also allows mowing in time windows that minimize intrusions on play. Are autonomous mowers an emerging trend in the industry? Or a passing fancy?

THE WHY BEHIND INTEGRATION

Dan Meersman is the chief planning officer and director of grounds and facilities at Philadelphia Cricket Club just outside Philadelphia. He's responsible for around 420

acres of turf, including 45 golf holes at three separate locations as well as an athletic field.

Meersman received his first look at a prototype for a robotic mower in 2019 and was immediately intrigued by



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► Superintendent Heather Schapals uses a RC Mower to clear heavy brush at Seascape Golf Course.

how little noise it generated. “The first thing that enamored me was the potential for noise reduction on the golf course,” he says.

Meersman, who has been at Philadelphia Cricket Club since 2009, compares the golf-course setting to that of a national park.

“If you have perfection in a landscape, it would probably be our national parks,” he says.

“On a golf course, you’re trying to come as close to that as you can with natural beauty, a natural environment and no artificial noise. Clearly, the landscape is a little artificial. A golf course architect has to do some work to get it to function as a golf course, but from a noise perspective, you’re trying to reduce that. When I first saw the robotic mowers, that was the first thing that really hit home with me.”

Michael Campbell is the director of golf course operations at 36-hole Montclair Golf Club in Montclair, New Jersey, just 20 miles northwest of New York City. Campbell’s curiosity about autonomous technology has been piqued in recent years — in particular, after he attended a presentation on the subject at a trade show.

“I’ve been reading a lot about it,” Campbell says. “It seemed like Europe was kind of jumping into the robo scene a little bit more than us. We’ve been talking about it at Montclair for at least a couple of seasons, but I would say conversations and reading about it has been for the last couple years. Until quite recently, most of the stuff you read about was out of Europe.”

Campbell’s interest in autonomous mowers was heightened following the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We’re a big club,” he points out. “We have 75 acres of fairways, we



have 13 acres of greens, 100 acres of rough. It takes a lot of manpower to cut. We have a lot of grass under a half-inch. We have a lot of rough. So, it’s a pretty laborious property. I really started looking at it in earnest the year after COVID. We were hit with a really bad staffing issue, and it was really hard finding people.”

When **Heather Schapals** assumed the superintendent’s post at Seascape Golf Course, a daily-fee club in Aptos, California, about 80 miles south of San Francisco, in April of 2023, she encountered a unique situation. The course included some sloped areas covered in thick brush. Theoretically, the areas are out of play. In reality, they attract an abundance of golf balls.

The task of clearing out the brush areas was logistically challenging, requiring the efforts of several members of her seven-person crew using string trimmers or a mower that wasn’t designed for the task. Schapals had familiarity with autonomous mowers and observed one up close when she was employed at a 9-hole club in Seattle.

“I thought (the sloped areas at Seascape) could be a real good place for it,” she says. “It was real tight and we definitely needed the help with being able to keep things mowed.”

Schapals set out to find a mower that could handle the job.

“RC Mowers came out and did

a demo of both sides of the slope mower that they have,” she says. “What really interested me is when they brought it for the demo, they left their rough-cut blades on it, and we went through some pretty thick brush and some blackberries. You can cut them down by hand, but it’s a pretty brutal job to go out there, crawl into a thicket of blackberries and cut them all out by hand. That won me over as well as the capabilities on the hill.”

The mower that Schapals eventually purchased, the R-52, requires a remote control. But she cites its ease of operation.

“It is really intuitive for younger people to use especially, because it’s like a big video game controller,” she says. “It’s got a little joystick and a few buttons. It’s got a camera that’s mounted on it in the front so that you can see without having to be right there. So, if you get stuck on something, you can see what it is. If there’s a stump in front of you, the camera will help you see what’s going on with the machine as you’re standing at a distance where it’s safe.”

WHAT THEY’VE LEARNED

At the start of the 2023 season, Campbell introduced the autonomous Husqvarna Automower 550 EPOS on Montclair’s short-game area, including its rough and fairway.

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I think of how nice it would be to have one person out there with a mower, and a cup cutter, and a rake, and say, 'You're taking care of the green areas today,' and they set their mower up and it does what needs to be done while they cut the cup and rake the bunkers."

— Heather Schapals



The mowers typically operate from 5 a.m. to 5 p.m.

"I have them set up to mow all day long, because I want the members to see them," he says. "We can easily set up to where the mowers are never seen by the members and still have everything cut, but I chose to have them out and mowing the short-game area while the members are out and utilizing either the short game-area or the golf course so they can see them. Because not only do I have to get comfortable with it, I think there's a level of comfort that has to be gained with the members."

Campbell hopes this initial step will give him a sense of what the mowers are capable — and not capable — of doing.

"We're just figuring out what the limitations are," he says. "We really don't know what those are yet. It's just our first step. It was a relatively low investment and I think as we're getting comfortable, the technology will continue to improve and help us stay above the curve. Right now, what I'm hoping is that this all goes well on the short-game area."

Two years after seeing a prototype, Meersman was ready to integrate the Automower 550 into his operation.

"We finally decided we were going to try one of these on an activity field in our pool complex," he says. "We had so much lawn furniture around the pool. I moved it to the club-owned home that I live in, so I got to start to see this thing on a daily basis."

Meersman was again impressed by the mower's lack of noise.

"There might be a couple deer back there and they weren't bothered by this autonomous mower," he says.

"I said, 'If a deer isn't bothered by this and isn't spooked by it, surely a golfer isn't really going to care.'"

The technology allowed

Meersman to mow the club's athletic field at any time, day or night. "And I was thinking how good that could be if I could take that to the golf course," he says.

In the fall of 2022 Meersman did just that. He now uses around 30 autonomous mowers in the rough areas at Philadelphia Cricket Club's three courses: two 18-hole layouts plus the nine holes at club's original site. When determining where to deploy the mowers, Meersman took a practical approach, beginning in areas with easily accessible sources of power.

"We started out near each of our clubhouses, started near our maintenance facility," he says. "Also, the club had acquired a home in the last year or two, so we had power at that home as well. That allowed us to reach a part of the golf course we wouldn't otherwise be able to. The combination of three different clubhouses, a centrally located grounds facility and a property located on the perimeter that we owned meant we were able to reach a lot of our golf course acreage."

In addition to the golf courses, the club utilizes an autonomous unit to paint the lines on its signature grass tennis courts at its original site. The presence of autonomous machines allows the Philadelphia Cricket Club team to devote more of its working hours to other matters.

"We have reallocated them to the in-play areas of the golf course the members care about most," Meersman says. "We will spend more time plugging out divots. It will give us a chance to re-roll or re-mow greens every now and again, a little more than we used to. The bottom line is we take that labor and make the greens, tees and fairways all the better."

LOOKING AHEAD

What does the future hold for autonomous and remote-control technology in turf? Numerous possibilities exist.

Campbell will continue experimenting with the autonomous mowers at Montclair.

"My hope is everything goes well with the short-game area," he says. "Once I get comfortable and the members get comfortable and work out any kink that we may find, I'd like to take one of the nines and take the big rough mowers off them and buy a little fleet of (autonomous mowers) and just have the rough being mowed, and then gradually go from mowing rough into short-grass areas."

Campbell enjoys seeing members' reactions to the robotic mowers. "They work very well (the solar panels)," he says. "They run in the daytime hours so we can watch them run and so the members can see them. The members get a kick out of it."

Schapals is similarly optimistic about the mowing future at Seascape.

"I hope to keep going on this track; I'm really excited about it," she says. "I'm not sure how it's going to go with things like crossing a road on their own or being out there completely on their own on the golf course, even if they have to have a babysitter."

"I think of how nice it would be to have one person out there with a mower, and a cup cutter, and a rake, and say, 'You're taking care of the green areas today,' and they set their mower up and it does what needs to be done while they cut the cup and rake the bunkers."

Schapals also envisions autonomous mowers designed for specific jobs or terrain.

"Smaller units for green surrounds," she says. "I feel like that's probably the next area we would need a little help with. I don't have a small (unit) right now. I'm mowing everything with one large rough unit. Also, if there is something out there that could both do some of the slopes and the rough cut, I think our driving range would be a perfect



candidate.”

Meersman has no doubt the industry will expand its use of autonomous mowers. He sees the trend leading to a safer work environment, especially compared to today’s methods of mowing slopes.

“If you think about steep slopes, you’re going to use a larger unit, typically a more traditional unit,” he says. “You’re probably going to get tire damage and mower damage, or you’re probably going to put a human on that with a push mower or a string trimmer. Now you’ve put an employee on a slope with a cutting blade or some-

thing that can injure them, so I think there’s a vast improvement in safety coming when some of these lightweight robots can get on super slopes. So, I’m excited about that.”

Meersman adds that autonomous technology will lead to new industry standards and member expectations. “There will be a new standard

where members will have an expectation on what the height of cut is and it will just stay at that height all the time. There’s really not fluctuation in height of cut anymore once you set your desired height of cut. What I’ve found is that once members

have that standard, they don’t want to go backwards from it. When the members experience that at another club, they’re going to want it their own club.” **GCI**

Rick Woelfel is a Philadelphia-based writer and senior Golf Course Industry contributor.

◀ Montclair Golf Club integrated autonomous mowers into its operation in 2023.

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IMPROVEMENT AS A PROCESS

Everyone wants to get better. The superintendent wants to preside over a healthier, more sustainable course. The 10 handicap wants to be a 9, the 6 a 2. The business executive wants to improve her leadership skills. The heart surgeon wants to save more lives.

Continuous improvement is a goal worthy of our best efforts, whether we are long or short into our careers. If for no other reason, if we're not improving — relative to our competitors or a set of management-imposed expectations — we're falling behind.

The quest to be a little better than we are now, and then a little better than that, has spawned a billion-dollar self-help industry that seeks to answer a simple question: *How?* Let's consider a five-step process:

BELIEVE

First, we should not think that better — even excellence — is a birthright and beyond our reach. Obviously, most 5-foot-3 guys are not going to make it in the NBA (don't tell that to **Muggsy Bogues**), and **Charlie Woods** certainly has some good genes working in his favor. But **K. Anders Ericsson**, author of "Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise," debunks the myth that the main reason the best swimmers, violinists, chess grandmasters and spelling bee champions win at such a high rate is because they were born into excellence. What he found in his research is that champions continued to get better because they practiced more than their competitors and often by themselves after everyone else had headed for the showers.

PLAN

What do you want to improve? The most reliable and successful con-

tinuous improvement is carefully considered and specific. "Trying to get better" is not specific and, thus, not a plan. The keys to effective planning involve defining intentions and understanding why these improvements are important. Some of the questions to consider as part of the planning phase:

- What do we want to improve ... and why?
- Is this a threshold, must-have priority?
- Who will be affected — positively and negatively?
- What's the upside to a positive solution?
- What resources are required to put the plan into action?

DO

The next step is to implement the plan. Enroll in that class. Get up early to attend that seminar. Contact nationally respected figures and ask for their guidance. Meet with your owners and managers to make sure your priorities are in sync. Read what experts have written. Write articles and submit them to publications. In other words, *do*. **Einstein** is credited with defining insanity — and he might have included career inertia in the same maxim — as doing the same things over and over and expecting different results.

EVALUATE

Results of your plan's implementation must be evaluated to determine what worked and why, and what didn't and why not. Evaluating performance and results requires answers to the following questions:

- Who will test the new methods and solutions?
- How will we test the improve-

ments against the desired outcomes?

- What process will we use for collecting and measuring our results?
 - How will we adjust our plan before future implementation?
- In the evaluation phase, there may be a need for more than one attempt and analysis. Seldom does continuous improvement come easy. If it did, most would already be taking this step. To evaluate the new approach, ask the following questions:
- Did it achieve the desired results?
 - Do we need to test other solutions?
 - Can the results be leveraged on a larger scale?

QUESTION

If you implement the change, can continuous improvement be achieved and sustained? To double-check yourself, your intentions and the solution you are implementing, several questions must be answered:

- Will this approach require resources other than those currently available?
- What training will the team need to continue to implement the plan?
- How can we sustain the benefits brought about by this change?
- Are there additional opportunities for improvement?

Many believe the ability to learn faster and better than competitors is today's only sustainable competitive advantage. If that's true, then that makes the work we do to get better more than something that embellishes our résumé — it makes it the top priority. **GCI**



HENRY DELOZIER is a partner at GGA Partners, trusted advisors and thought leaders. He is currently Chairman of the Board of Directors of Audubon International.

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Yes, Sensei!

The top turf pro at an ultra-exclusive Southern California facility uses a simple trick that could change the way you look at grass.

By **Judd Spicer**



The top turf pro at an ultra-exclusive Southern California facility uses a simple trick that could change the way you look at grass.

On average, a golf course has about 80 billion blades of maintained turfgrass. Ever attempt to count them?

At one luxury Southern California retreat, a blade-counting micro-practice is ensuring primo playing conditions for golf guests and providing its turf frontman a key gauge in assessing the seasonal transition to ryegrass.

Founded in 2004 as a private estate property with a golf centerpiece, Sensei Porcupine Creek in Rancho Mirage, California, was long

a unicorn in the golf-rich Coachella Valley. The property was purchased in 2011 by Oracle co-founder **Larry Ellison** (presently charting as the globe's fourth-wealthiest person) and maintained such status of premier, personal estate privature until last year, when the property transitioned to an opulent wellness retreat, bearing the Sensei brand handle first debuted via Ellison's sister property on the Hawaiian island of Lanai.

With the golf course set as the nucleus amid a Sensei think-tank of wellness experts and guest activations, the first year of outside access opportunity

saw a queue eager to enter the gates.

"We had an amazing first season," says **Richard Ruddy**, director of golf at Sensei Porcupine Creek. "The guest feedback was phenomenal, from the course conditions to the overall experience."

Coupled with the property's menu of lavish allures and profound self-terment, the chance to experience pristine fairways and immaculate manicuring amid intentionally low (low) volume is atop the table for high-end playing guests.

"This is the closest you'll get to having your own private golf course," Ruddy adds. "We've had guests come visit from a lot of great clubs around the country, and that is the big, special thing they keep touching on. The end game here is not to just build up volume; we're going to protect that experience of being on your own golf course."

While the Sensei experience may not be in the scorecards of the proletariat, a unique agronomy practice for seasonal overseed appraisal is indeed available to any superintendent who transitions turf to ryegrass come autumn.

Furthering a technique he'd learned at a previous desert property, **Gerad Nelson**, director of agronomy and landscape at Sensei Porcupine Creek, eyes the golf grounds with some seriously microscopic vision.

Following the autumnal overseed of tees, rough and fairways (he's gone to year-round MiniVerde for greens), Nelson assesses his grow-in by cutting out square-inch samples of ryegrass (a half-inch down) and counting the blades, one by one.

"This gives me a gauge of where I'm at," Nelson says. "I'll do it in two different types of locations on differ-



▲ Richard Ruddy



▲ Gerad Nelson



ent parts so the course: I'll do it in an area that looks really good and, early on (post-overseed), I'll also go to an area that looks thin."

From blade to bounty, Nelson's entire overseed process has turned the heads of his Sensei colleagues.

"Just the way he puts seed out, the way the overseed is done, it's like nothing I've ever seen," Ruddy says. "Typically, you have your rate and the spreaders and go out and spray, right? But he has folks going out in teams beforehand, marking lines and making a grid of the entire course. If you were to come out right before or right after we seed, the whole place looks like some geometric map, with crossing grids and different color paints for different spread rates."

The Hoganism of finding the "secret in the dirt" isn't merely limited to those with club in hand.

"These guys don't stop at anything for top quality and, yes, checking grass per-inch is part of that," Ruddy adds. "Gerad gets in there. I've seen him on hands and knees on the driving range staring at grass and really getting a feel for what's happening in that square inch, and then setting a plan accordingly. It's getting in the turf with his pocketknife, cutting out the sample and then pulling apart blades in his fingers ... five ... 10 ... Definitely not something I've ever seen before."

Observing such specified prac-

tice in action is to watch with curiosity and wonder. To wit:

"You just start pulling them out," says Nelson while counting individual blades, "one by one, and just go through each piece of ryegrass. So just look, this one is tiny, here's a spindly one, this one is a decent size, hasn't tillered yet ... here's a nice one, about ready to tiller." He then drops one — yes, one — blade near his shoe, adding, "Darn it."

A count of at least 25 blades per square inch gives Nelson confidence of a sound area, though it's not at all uncommon to palm a sample of over 35 blades.

"If I'm checking, say, three weeks after overseed and the count is under 20, that's concerning," Nelson says. "But that's a good time to check it. You want to check it when you can still get more seed out if you need to, and get it germinated. There's still time. It will be young, but there's still time. After that, guests start arriving, so you can't just turn water on as easily as before. And with water at this point of the process, too much is detrimental and can create issues with wet grass, traffic, issues with the mowers, wet shade areas."

Along with water, timing, and calendar considerations, the technique can pave a distinction between the time and costs of overseed and *over seed*.

"The thin areas are where this is most beneficial," Nelson continues. "When you pull 'em out like this,

Your eyes can be deceived when you just drive by in your cart and look and think, 'Oh, it's thin there.' Yeah, it can look that way, but what's really in there? You just need to get in there. Could be a bunch of ryegrass that still needs to mature."

— Gerad Nelson

you see the leaf stages, and the ryegrass plant has two or three leaf stages. In a thin area, let's say you pull out the sample and count 20 or so plants. Then it's, 'OK, I don't need to get crazy and waste a bunch of seed and put more down, because I know there's grass there.' But if you pull out the square inch and there are about 10, then it's, 'OK, let's touch it up and reapply a bit more seed.'"

In the Palm Springs region and neighboring

Southwest desert golf surrounds, superintendents hang their hat on a quality overseed season. An experienced understanding of ryegrass germination timeline proves crucial, as does full grasp of the tillering characteristic of ryegrass, which essentially sends out another plant from the original plant.

"This year, before the ryegrass had tillered and matured and gotten big, I'd find somewhere between 36 and 42 seedlings, maybe at the two- or three-leaf stage," Nelson explains. "But, obviously, when it matures, the plant is gonna grow and spread and some of it will die out and fill the space. So, you're not necessarily always going to have that 42 number; you may have outcompeted some of it."

Working with a taut weather window in fall-to-winter before reopening to guests — where temps can swing from triple digits in early October to the low 40s in late November — is a key calendar consideration.



the blade-count technique is applicable to turf managers guiding any manner of public or private grounds.

“I think it’s a great tool,” he concludes. “It’s worked well for

me and kept me in check, because I know I don’t have to get crazy and reapply seed to areas that don’t really need it. While it may appear that way to the eye, getting in there and pulling it out proves it.” **GCI**

Judd Spicer is a Palm Desert, California-based writer and senior Golf Course Industry contributor.

“When it’s still warm, it can be tough to tell with the Bermuda and the ryegrass, because, of course, they’re both still green,” Nelson says. “You just need to dig in there and make certain it’s your rye, or if you’re still seeing a lot of Bermuda.”

Though Nelson oversees a spotless property, that doesn’t mean his own hands aren’t dirty.

“Your eyes can be deceived when you just drive by in your cart and look and think, ‘Oh, it’s thin there,’” he says. “Yeah, it can look that way, but what’s really in there? You just need to get in there. Could be a bunch of ryegrass that still needs to mature.”

And while Sensei is a singular when it comes to a canvass of affluence, Nelson firmly believes that

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TURFCO

Start of a movement

The Cradle has been a hit since opening day. It also inspired a compact trend.



Iconic sporting venues fill North Carolina from the mountains to the coast.

Durham Athletic Park opened in 1926 and remains the country's most famous minor league baseball stadium thanks to the 1988 movie *Bull Durham*. Longtime Duke basketball coach **Eddie Cameron** grabbed a napkin back in 1935 to sketch plans for the indoor stadium that eventually carried his name. Reynolds Coliseum in Raleigh and Carmichael Arena in Chapel Hill both stir memories for Wolfpack and Tar Heels fans of a certain age. Concord and Rockingham and North Wilkesboro are home to speedways that hosted NASCAR races during that sport's transition from boot-

legging to bright lights.

A more recent addition to the list of the state's top athletic attractions sits just off Beulah Hills Road at Pinehurst Resort, in full sight for everybody heading toward what is billed as the Home of American Golf.

The Cradle.

Nine holes.

789 yards.

More fun than you can imagine.

To hear **John Jeffrey**s tell it, expectations for what The Cradle might become were relatively modest when **Gil Hanse** and **Jim Wagner** were laying out the short course in advance of its 2017 premiere. Situated near the clubhouse atop the old first holes of No. 3 and No. 5, Pine-

hurst Resort officials figured it could provide another entry to the game for new and young golfers and allow older golfers a graceful shift from more traditional lengths. It could also encourage resort guests to hang out after their rounds. And it could be fun. It *would* be fun. Just make it fun.

Then the course opened.

"It started selling out and demand exceeded what we could provide, and it was like, *Whoa*," says Jeffrey, the longtime superintendent on No. 2 who was involved in The Cradle's development and whose team added the short course to its maintenance schedule around Thanksgiving last year. Expectations soared like a wedge shot from 70 yards out and the

most pressing question turned to: *What have we got here?*

Resort officials realized the compact layout, the loose atmosphere and the right price all contributed to buzz and satisfaction. Not every round needed to stretch across 7,000 yards and five hours. Music can play on speakers and golfers can hit the bar after the third and sixth holes. A daily green fee of \$50 is more than enough — though the tee sheet is now so full that replays are no longer guaranteed.

Also, holes in one are fun: The first two were recorded within hours of each other that opening week — the first by an elementary schooler, the second by an octogenarian. “You can’t make this stuff up,” Jeffreys says. Nearly 2,000 more aces have followed over the last seven years, every one honored with a commemorative marker handed out at the starter’s hut.

“It becomes a focus of somebody’s visit,” Jeffreys says. “They book their round on 2 and then they book their round on The Cradle immediately following. And there’s real disappointment when The Cradle is out of commission for aerification or a project or a group has it rented out. People are genuinely disappointed when they don’t get to play it. It’s part of the bucket list rota: 2, 4 and The Cradle.”

Pinehurst veteran **Curt Proctor** tended to the course until last year, when he moved to superintendent for both No. 1 and No. 4. and Jeffreys and his team rolled it into their schedule. Jeffreys leads a team of 42, which includes more part-timers than full-timers, a quartet of recent graduates of the first USGA Greenkeeper Apprenticeship Program, and at least 10 people with a turf degree or another marker

of continued turf education. Eight interns will start later this year, five of them returning from previous Pinehurst stints.

Jeffreys is quick to mention many people on his team, including assistant superintendents **Eric Mabie**, **David Chrobak** and **Andrea Salzman** — who spends about 80 percent of her time on The Cradle, the Thistle Dhu putting course and the croquet grounds — assistants-in-training **Alex Almaraz** and **Hunter McLamb**, a former intern-turned-new spray tech **Jake Brazinski**, and foreman **Arlindo Lagunas**, who started out on the Coore & Crenshaw construction team in 2010 and never left. “He’s an amazing shaper, builder, irrigation, drainage, jack of all trades. He’s an all-star. He can build a tee in a day,” Jeffreys says. “All of our team has talents like that. I’m lucky to be just a small part of the all-star team that we have.

“It makes things like hosting the U.S. Open more comfortable when you know you have that many talented people.”

About the U.S. Open: The Cradle did not exist when the tournament last came to Pinehurst No. 2 in 2014, and it will not technically exist during the months leading up to tournament week this summer. As soon as the last frost lifts some time around the middle of April, Jeffreys and his team will start converting the short course into the U.S. Open driving range.

“We have to figure out how do we pick balls off of The Cradle with the vast amounts of sand wiregrass areas and bunkers and putting surfaces and all that,” he says. “We have to convert some native areas to sod to allow the picker to have more room to run. We have to put some kind of fabric or liner in the bunker to keep the

balls from plugging in the sand and allowing them to accumulate in the low area so we can pick them up quicker. And the use of some autonomous pickers for the putting surfaces in the field will make it more efficient.”

Naturally, all that work will be squeezed into as few days as possible: the course is too popular to shut down. The rush after the Open to return it to its normal state will be just as frenzied.

The Cradle wasn’t the first short course — and it wasn’t even the first in Moore County. Longleaf Golf & Family Club in neighboring Southern Pines opened its 6-hole, 448-yard Bottlebrush in 2016, a year before The Cradle opened. But The Cradle has provided a snapshot of what golf can offer. At least seven high-profile clubs have formally dispatched groups to The Cradle — owners, general managers, head professionals and superintendents — to tour the course and draw inspiration for how to grab some of the magic for their own properties.

There are still challenges. Some golfers complain about noise levels and party atmospheres. Trash is more likely to wind up on the turf there than at any other course at the resort. But the problems are minor considering how positive The Cradle has been for both the resort in particular and the game in general.

“There are very few sad faces when it comes leaving The Cradle,” Jeffreys says. “People are in a better mood when they come off The Cradle.

“It’s been a daggone home run.” **GCI**

Matt LaWell is Golf Course Industry’s managing editor.

By the numbers


The Cradle’s compact layout lends itself to low scores and fast rounds. Here are some of the more mind-boggling course records, some of which were set during annual winter solstice events — shortest day, shortest course — from sunrise to sunset.

- COURSE RECORD: 18, **Jackson Von Paris**
- MOST HOLES PLAYED IN ONE DAY: 505, **Tripp Pendergrast**
- FASTEST ROUND: 6 minutes, 46 seconds, **Erik Stauderman**
- HOLES IN ONE: 1,970 (as of January 16)

MAKING A *Lovely* TURN

Close to the sea and framed by venerable trees, a Myrtle Beach-area course designed by a major name completes its first significant renovation.

By **Guy Cipriano**



The 16th hole of Pawleys Plantation Golf & Country Club begins inside a tree-lined corridor. It ends with an unimpeded view of an opening to the sea.

From tee shots through a chute of oaks and pines to approaches, pitches and putts along saltwater marshes, the hole demonstrates the appeal of South Carolina Lowcountry golf. The challenging-to-play, tantalizing-to-observe hole also personifies the transformation of the 36-year-old course.

Designed by **Jack Nicklaus** following the hullabaloo of his 1986 Masters triumph, Pawleys Plantation underwent a significant renovation in 2023. The effort resembled most Myrtle Beach-area projects, as crews hustled to minimize disruption to lucrative spring and fall golf dates.

Nicklaus Design associate **Troy Vincent** guided the effort, collaborating with Henderson & Company, the Founders Group International construction staff, and the Pawleys Plantation team to meet a rigid deadline. Work involved restoring greens to original sizes and installing TifEagle Bermudagrass on the surfaces, reducing, reshaping and

modernizing bunkers, incorporating native areas into the design, and thinning and pruning trees. The course closed May 22 and reopened Oct. 2. “It was the longest quick renovation we’ve ever done,” says Founders Group International **Steve Mays**, whose company owns 21 Myrtle Beach-area courses.

The 16th hole presents idyllic golf theater for comprehending the scope of the project. The par 4 plays 440 yards from the back tees and doglegs left through an enlarged passageway. A marsh lurches into the right side of the fairway at the 130-yard mark. Modest bunkers, one on the left and one on the right, guard the green. A singular oak with eight sturdy extension branches rises behind the green.

Unobstructed views of saltwater marshes and Pawleys Island emerge from the green. Yes, Pawleys Island is an actual place. The desirable Lowcountry ZIP Code occupies attractive coastal land between the marsh and the Atlantic Ocean.

A strip of low-cut turf connects the 16th and 13th greens. The 13th and 17th holes, a pair of memorable par 3s playing over marshes featuring tees atop a narrow bulkhead,

border the 16th green. Smaller bunkers and fewer trees make sightlines more dramatic and the hole less cumbersome to play and maintain.

“During the renovation, I came around with a golf cart, made that turn left and saw this new view that we didn’t have,” Mays says. “The marsh opens up and you can see Pawleys Island in the background. It reminded me of why we were doing the renovation and why this place is so special.”

The process of refining Pawleys Plantation stems from a 2018 Nicklaus visit to celebrate the 30th anniversary. Nicklaus arrived on Pawleys Island in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence. “The intent was not to have them come back and renovate the golf course,” Mays says. “The intent was let’s have them come back to celebrate 30 years. We had just gone through a major hurricane, and it was a good way to bring attention to Pawleys and Myrtle Beach, and say, ‘Hey, we’re open and everything is fine.’”

Pawleys Plantation represented Nicklaus’s first Myrtle Beach-area and fourth South Carolina design effort. Nicklaus designed the course during an era when concepts such as tough



and difficult dictated numerous decisions, including the placement of giant bunkers hugging fairways and greens. The original layout possessed bentgrass greens; TifEagle replaced the bentgrass around the turn of the century.

As he toured the course in 2018, Nicklaus offered ideas for modernizing his work to fit evolving golf maintenance and playing standards. “That was the big seed that was planted,” Mays says. “We thought, ‘Hey, we can make this property better.’”

Nicklaus Design started formulating renovation plans in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic then delayed the process. According to Mays, Founders Group International saw enough positive signs in the golf tourism and Myrtle Beach markets by 2022 to solidify renovation plans for Pawleys Plantation.

Before its formal work with Nicklaus Design, Pawleys Plantation used the winter of 2021-22 to replace the original hydraulic irrigation system with a new Rain Bird IC two-wire system. Longtime irrigation technician **Timmy Guiles** pulled the final plug on the old system and the first switch on the new system. “As soon as we flipped that switch, we were probably saving around a million gallons a night,” says **Chris Allen**, the superintendent involved in the renovation. Allen’s team spent the remainder of 2022 in maintenance mode, which was interrupted by Hurricane Ian cleanup efforts.

Founders Group International officially unveiled the schedule for the Nicklaus Design-guided renovation in February 2023. Vincent, who lives in

Augusta, Georgia, made weekly visits to Pawleys Plantation throughout a project marking the first major renovation in the course’s history.

“Most of the greens had shrunk substantially, with some of them shrinking by as much as 10 feet,” Vincent says. “The bunker lines had changed, and the tree growth was incredible, which really started impacting Chris’s ability to grow healthy, viable turf. The course was ready for a renovation.”

Hulking live, laurel, pin and water oaks bunched closely together hampered agronomics and playability. The result of calculated tree removal and management are immediately apparent, with golfers receiving a wider corridor on the par-5 first hole. Tree work revealed hidden features such as a 135-year-old laurel oak with a 12-foot trunk along the right side of the hole. “I honestly didn’t even know that tree was in there,” Allen says.

Visible connections between the first and ninth holes developed as the tree management plan progressed. Sandy native areas now cover plots between oaks and pines. “It went from woody and having no shot to the ninth green if you went left — and we’re only talking 30 yards from the center of the fairway — to having four or five signature live oaks with space to develop with these native white sand areas under it,” Allen says. “It looks super sharp.”

The optics of progress motivated crews through the sultry South Carolina summer. None of what they encountered was unexpected, because of honest conversations between

Vincent and the onsite teams. The conversations eliminated surprises as the early fall deadline approached.

“He wanted to make sure I was ready for the short timeframe,” says Allen, who left Pawleys Plantation in late 2023 for a territory manager position with Plant Food Company. “A month before we closed, I brought our crew into a meeting and said, ‘We’re going to have a construction team here, a contracting team here, FGI’s construction team here. But all of us, at some point, are going to step it up to a level we haven’t done yet.’ Our crew was phenomenal. It wasn’t even three weeks in, and we started to really see, ‘Wow, we’re up against it.’”

The renovation reclaimed nearly 40,000 square feet of putting surface and crews started realizing the project had reached the back nine when they sprigged the first green on July 21. Watching TifEagle emerge proved fascinating, especially for Allen, a sprigging process rookie.

“You’re freaking out a little bit because you’re not expecting it to look as bad as it does on Day 3,” he says. “And then, sure enough by the second week and third week, they started to look phenomenal. It was an emotional roller coaster.”

The course reopened to members on Oct. 2. The course reopened to the public on Oct. 3. Everybody associated with the renovation expresses confidence Pawleys Plantation will return to a prominent spot in the Myrtle Beach market. Their confidence expands when making the left turn on the 16th and admiring what Nicklaus envisioned in the late 1980s.

“When I think of Pawleys, I think of 13 and 16,” Vincent says. “Those are iconic holes, and you always see photos of those holes. We cleaned those up, reestablished them, and we’re really excited about people seeing them. Pawleys had great success with a number of recognitions and awards, and then it tailed off. Our goal is to put Pawleys back on the map again and get it the recognition we think it deserves.” **GCI**



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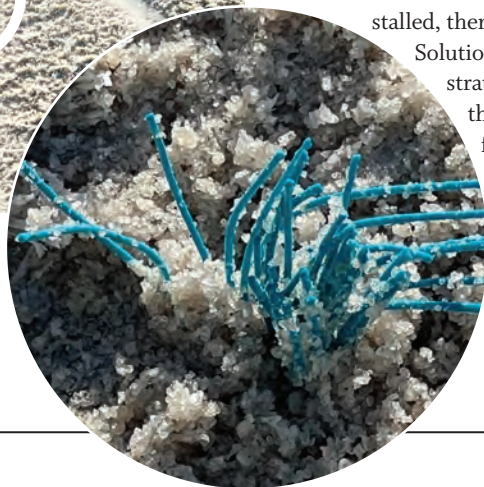


Globetrotting consulting agronomist **Terry Buchen** visits many golf courses annually with his digital camera in hand. He shares helpful ideas relating to maintenance equipment from the golf course superintendents he visits — as well as a few ideas of his own — with timely photos and captions that explore the changing world of golf course management.



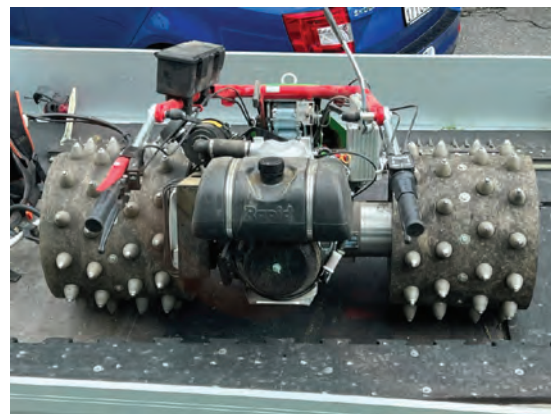
MONITORING BUNKER SAND DEPTHS

Surveyor Marker “whiskers,” available in a variety of bright colors in packets of 25 for less than \$10 at Amazon, are being tested at the 36-hole Fiddlesticks Country Club in Fort Myers, Florida. A test bunker had the usual 4-inch perforated drainage tile and drainage pea gravel installed, then the entire bunker floor was covered with a Bunker Solutions bunker liner. The 6-inch-long whiskers were then strategically placed 4 inches deep into the subsoil on the bunker bottoms. G-Angle Bunker Sand, available from Golf Agronomics, was placed at a settled depth of 4 inches. Once the bunker sand shows about a 2-inch depth, the whiskers become easily visible, alerting the maintenance staff to redistribute or add new bunker sand. **Gabe Gallo** is the director of agronomy. This excellent idea originated on X (formerly known as Twitter).



SWISS VERSATILITY

I was visiting Switzerland last June and came across this Rapid Monta M141 single axle walk-behind tractor sitting on the back of a flatbed truck. Like a Swiss Army Knife, it is very versatile — e.g., it is a sheep’s foot roller. It has many optional front-mounted attachments, such as a sickle bar, snow plow, rotary broom, eco-mulcher, fertilizer spreader, drilling seeder, flail mower, harrow, leveling harrow, hay rake, hay maker, mini cargo bin, rotary weed brush, rototiller, snow thrower, stone burier, twister hay rake and even a pull-behind trailer. There are many sized tractors available with 7-14 horsepower gasoline engines, all with hydrostatic drive. The “sheep’s feet” come in different sizes and with variable spacing available — and the drums come also in varying widths and designs. This machine reminded me of the versatility of the Steiner Turf Equipment here in the U.S. The Rapid is made in Switzerland and it has distributorships throughout Europe. Each tractor size costs less than 20,000 euros.



Terry Buchen, CGCS, MG, is president of Golf Agronomy International. He’s a 51-year, life member of the GCSAA. He can be reached at 757-561-7777 or terrybuchen@earthlink.net.

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TRANSITIONAL GUIDANCE

Matthew Gourlay, CGCS, MG is a close friend and trusted colleague. It was great to catch up with him and learn about his new position at Hillcrest Country Club in Boise, Idaho, and the decisions behind the change in scenery. Considering it has been nearly one year since I left a position after a significant number of years in service, I thought it would be helpful to get his insight.

Here's Part 1 of our conversation. The second part will appear in the March issue.

What were the factors that led you to pursue another opportunity?

After dedicating 24 years to Colbert Hills Golf Course, my decision to explore new career opportunities stemmed from a combination of factors. The desire for significant career growth, learning opportunities and a chance to assume more responsibilities were compelling reasons. Additionally, the prospect of better compensation, improved benefits and a more competitive compensation package played a role in my decision. Wanting to work in an environment that aligns more closely with my personal values, work style and preferred company culture was another contributing factor.

I sought opportunities that would facilitate skill development, allowing me to acquire new skills, gain experience in different areas and engage with emerging technologies. The quest for heightened job satisfaction, fulfillment and a deeper passion for the work being done also influenced my choice.

Furthermore, considerations related to leadership and management, including a desire for a change due to issues with the existing leadership or management style, were factored into my decision. Ul-

timately, a sense of dissatisfaction with my current role, encompassing aspects of job duties and the work environment, prompted me to embark on this new professional journey.

Describe the process for which you just successfully applied.

I submitted my application, including a cover letter, résumé and portfolio, for the golf course superintendent position at Hillcrest Country Club. Following this, I had a phone interview with general manager **Nolan Halterman**, CCM. A few weeks later, I traveled to Boise for an in-person interview, during which I spent two hours touring the golf course with a seasoned turf team member. Subsequently, I had a comprehensive two-hour interview with the search committee and the general manager, followed by a 30-minute interview with the leadership team at Hillcrest Country Club. Shortly thereafter, I received an offer for the position.

What do you believe set you apart from the other candidates?

During the interview process for the golf course superintendent position at Hillcrest Country Club, I strategically distinguished myself through:

Relevant achievements: Showcasing specific accomplishments with tangible impacts in previous roles, using concrete examples to demonstrate my skills and qualifications.

Unique skills: Emphasizing distinctive skills, specialized training, certifications and expertise relevant to the position that set me apart from other candidates.

Cultural fit: Underscoring my

understanding of Hillcrest's culture and values, aligning my values with the organization's, and sharing positive contributions to team dynamics in prior roles.

Passion: Conveying genuine enthusiasm for the golf course superintendent role and the industry, aiming to express authentic excitement about the work involved.

Problem-solving skills: Showcasing my problem-solving abilities with examples from past experiences, demonstrating critical thinking and adeptness in overcoming challenges.

Strong communication: Articulating thoughts clearly, actively listening and conveying complex ideas concisely, recognizing the value of effective communication.

Thoughtful questions: Preparing and posing thoughtful questions about Hillcrest Country Club and the golf course superintendent role, showcasing engagement, and aiding in evaluating the company's fit for me.

Leadership: Providing relevant examples of leadership experience, discussing team leadership, successful projects and contributions to organizational growth.

Professionalism and preparedness: Demonstrating professionalism through thorough research on Hillcrest, understanding the job description and readiness to discuss how my skills align with Hillcrest Country Club's needs.

In essence, by tailoring my approach to the specific requirements of the golf course superintendent position at Hillcrest and effectively communicating my unique strengths, I aimed to significantly enhance my chances of standing out during the interview process. **GCI**



MATTHEW WHARTON, CGCS, MG, is the superintendent at Idle Hour Country Club in Lexington, Kentucky, and past president of the Carolinas GCSA. Follow him on X at @IHCCGreenkeeper.

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