

That's Why They Call Them Superintendents

Perhaps they can't fly and they wear name tags instead of a big "S," but in this game they are truly super.

by JUDY BELL

I'M GOING to tell you a little story about Chuck Clark, superintendent at Broadmoor Golf Club, and his crew. We had the Women's Open at the Broadmoor in 1995, and for three years I sort of lived with these guys. I was continually telling them to "bring in that side of the rough 2½ inches and cut this grass around the green just ⅛", and lower that area ⅛." I mean, I'm picky, there's no question about it.

So the day of the presentation ceremony when I thanked the crew, I said, "There's good news and there's bad news. The bad news is, the Open is over and we won't have this excitement next week, but the good news is I will be out of your face." They all screamed and cheered. That's the biggest applause I've ever received.

My dictionary says that super means above and beyond. It also defines the superintendent as one who has oversight of and exercises the charge of something. On the same page, I found the definition of superman and it meant the overman. I really liked that because all of the superintendents I know look over the whole world of that particular course that is your charge.

Last year, the USGA had a sensational championship season. More than 33,000 players entered and more than 600 sites hosted our qualifiers. The national championships for the most part ran on time. And as is the case each year, the supermen of each championship are the superintendent and crew. During our centennial year, the USGA produced three videos called *Heroes of the Game*, which included *Golf's Greatest Legends*, *Golf's Greatest Women*, and *Golf's Modern Heroes*. I'm ready for the title for the next one; it's *Unsung Heroes of the Game — Golf Course Superintendents*.

Just to glance at my own experiences these past years, I'm sure glad to know that these past 28 years have not been a dress rehearsal. I wouldn't want to do it again, but I loved every minute of it! I have really enjoyed working with the



Judy Bell

superintendents and the crews. Many times you make it possible for a championship to finish on schedule or simply finish. You know better than I do about weather and how fickle it is. You know we can't control it, but that's what separates our game from all the others. Weather enhances the experience of playing golf; however, I'm not so sure weather enhances your job. In fact, it can be a real pain in the neck. But maybe it doesn't hurt to make all golfers aware that it is the superintendent and the crew who must react to these outside elements on a moment's notice in a very creative way. It just isn't business as usual each day.

In 1989 our Women's Mid-Amateur was to be played at the Hills of Lakeway Golf Club near Austin, Texas. I arrived at the course the morning of qualifying after I was awakened about 4:30 a.m. by horrendous thunderstorms. Texans call them frog-stranglers. When I arrived, Roger Harvey with the USGA Regional Affairs staff told me, "You're not going to play any golf today." Well, the super-

intendent, the crew, the director of golf, Clayton Coleman's staff, the USGA staff, and the volunteers all pitched in. We had to redefine some of the hazards. The biggest challenge was preparing a place in each bunker on the golf course that was not nearer to the hole where a player could drop her ball. We made it and only lost three hours to the clock. It was a miracle.

In 1982, the Women's Amateur was at the Broadmoor Golf Club. We had heavy rain all week — well, really all summer long. The South Course was terribly saturated even before we began. We had fierce storms every day, and early on Friday, we simply had to call play. We were looking at places to move the Championship to. One more drop would have put us out of business. We did finally finish, only one day late.

Then I take you to the 1987 Women's Open at Plainfield Country Club in New Jersey. This truly was the championship from hell. A tornado and heavy rains literally hit the course. I mean, we were lucky to have finished at all, let alone two days late.

In 1986, at Five Farms we had 11 inches of rain beginning on Thursday, only two pumps, and only one of those pumps worked! In 1989 it was the U.S. Open at Oak Hill and I can remember driving in one morning to see Joe Hahn and his crew and fire trucks pumping water out of the eighth fairway. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought they were emptying a natural lake. It looked like it was impossible. I didn't think we would play. And, as you know, we did.

In 1990, the Women's Open was conducted at the Atlanta Athletic Club with Ken Mangum as superintendent. We brought the players off the course an average of five to six times a day. They were very unhappy campers. In fact, on Saturday, only three groups played 18 holes.

In 1991, the Women's Open at Colonial Country Club was dry as a bone. The thermometer topped 100°F.



Newport Country Club (Rhode Island) lets nature take its course with an irrigation system for tees and greens only.

Tom Warner, the superintendent, was on every news and sports show in town showing his crew covering the greens with ice cubes to lower the temperature. You'll have to ask him if it worked. In 1992, the Women's Open was again at Oakmont. Thank heavens the greens were firm to begin with because Mark Kuhns and his crew, along with crews from nearby courses, squeegeed greens and pumped water out of bunkers more than once from the thunderstorms. And then in 1990, at the U.S. Amateur at Cherry Hill in Denver, and Dan Pierson will tell you that I am not exaggerating, we had a severe hailstorm with hailstones the size of baseballs hit the course four weeks before the championship. It was a disaster. And even you would say the course couldn't be brought back, but they brought it back in spades. Without the work of Chris Haig, his crew, and even the club's members, at the 1993 Women's Open at Crooked Stick in Carmel, Indiana, we never would have been able to play the final round after high winds, severe storms, and heavy rains knocked down trees and saturated the

course. I tell you this is the most damage that I have ever seen.

And for more heroics, how about last year's U.S. Open at Oakland Hills in Michigan? This course had conditioning as close to perfect as it could be, and then the day before the event, a severe storm hit. Just for starters, there was flooding, wading pools created everywhere, washed-out bunkers, and a lot of squeegeeing that had to go on. And I'll tell you, by Thursday morning, bunkers were back in shape, restored, and ready to go. The destroyed bunker on number 18 actually looked like it had been there forever. I think it was a better design than what they started with.

These are some of my experiences, and I'm just one of the many people who believe that you, as superintendents, are the real heroes of the game.

You may know I am from Kansas, where the GCSAA headquarters is located, and sometimes, just as in Dorothy's odyssey, my journey in golf has really been on a yellow-brick road. If this were the land of Oz and I could make three wishes, this is what I would

wish. First, I would wipe out the fixation golfers have with green speed. Where did we ever get the idea that a putting surface has to produce double digits on the Stimpmeter® to be good? Who says that faster greens are more difficult to putt? An argument could be made that on fast greens, all a player has to do is to get the ball rolling on the right line. Slower greens call for judging how hard to hit the putt, as well as judging the line. I'll tell you one thing — we were able to get firm greens at Shinnecock, but not lightning speed and — I rest my case — Corey Pavin was dead level par in winning.

Byron Nelson was asked what is the biggest difference in the game since he played. His answer was, "The lawnmower." Our Green Section did a survey of green speeds at noted golf clubs in the mid-1970s. The average was 6.5 feet on the Stimpmeter. At the 1985 Walker Cup Match at Pine Valley Golf Club, you'll be interested to know that the fourth fairway was a six on the Stimpmeter.

Secondly, I would get rid of soft greens. The firmness of greens is



At The Country Club of Brookline, the importance of having a quality superintendent and crew when reacting to unexpected events cannot be overstated.

critical, particularly when it comes to the best players in the world; otherwise, we are playing dart golf. This idea isn't new; over the years firm greens have caused players to develop more shots around the greens.

For my third wish, I would bring the fairway, the closely mowed area, up around the green wherever possible. I do believe that the U.S. Open setup with four- to five-inch roughs around every green has influenced the setup for many courses around the country. This ring of high grass serves as a backstop for shots that are too long. Why shouldn't the ball end up where you hit it rather than being trapped? I agree with the philosophy that around the green the farther you are from the target, the worse lie you deserve, but that's not true when you have this five-inch rough just off the green. The player who hits that almost perfect shot could be six or seven paces from the hole, yet deep in tall grass.

The U.S. Open rough around the greens has caused the pitch-and-run shot to virtually be lost. At Shinnecock, however, we moved the grass to fairway height around 13 greens and you will see even more at Pinehurst in 1999. At Shinnecock it was dicey; as nay-sayers claimed, the course would be softer. The truth is, players had choices to make — a chip shot, a pitch shot, a lob — all could be hit with a variety of clubs. After all, shouldn't choices be part of the examination? Besides, on so many courses across the country, it's doing what comes naturally to bring the fairway-length grass up around the green. It's much less contrived.

This game, as we know it, is all about imagination. It should be part of the championship test and it should be part of the everyday game. It's elusive; it's like a butterfly; you never quite catch it. But, you know, that's part of golf's charm.

The writer John Updike said, "All it takes for a golfer to attain his happiness is a fence rail to throw his coat on and a target somewhere over the rise." Well, that is the pure delight of golf.

As you know, though, the players at most courses are looking for a bit more than a target somewhere over the rise. They want your course to be as smooth and green as Augusta National, and, by the way, they also want their greens to be as fast as Augusta. Any member who owns a lawnmower is likely to think he is the one to give you the best advice.

One school of thought has it that today's equipment is making some very great old golf courses obsolete, and it's true that certain players hit the ball further, but does everyone? The throttle isn't wide open. The USGA does have rigid standards and limitations on the ball and the equipment. The relationship between improved distances and scoring on these great old courses comes from three factors — the player and the course both being in better condition and some technical advancements within the standards.

In working on course setup for many championships, I rode shotgun with the late P.J. Boatwright, former Director of Rules and Competitions for the USGA, for almost ten years as he did advance work and hole locations during the championships. As you can imagine, I finally got the paint can in

my hand and I've stayed involved ever since. It really is my favorite thing, and a big part of it has been that I've had the opportunity to work with superintendents and their crews and to get to know them. I think there is absolutely nothing better than being on a golf course at daylight with the mowers going, the fresh smell of cut grass, the dragging of fairways, holes being cut, tee markers being placed, and the sun coming up right over the hill. I learned from P.J. that the ultimate goal is to set up a fair test, and provide an examination for the players that calls for them to use every club in their bag and every shot they have. You know very well we can call for a certain setup, but you make it happen; you're the ones who get the work done.

At the USGA we strive to be good listeners. As I see it, the challenge is working through all of the technology, the information highways, and commercialism, while preserving that wholesome, simplistic side of the game. It's up to us to stretch our best minds and resources to preserve and protect golf's future. We need to encourage building courses where everyone can afford to play and where it takes less time to play. We just can't have too many little courses. In Summit, New Jersey, they have a nine-hole, par-3 layout. The registration fee for the season is \$15, and it costs \$2.50 a round. It operates 30 weeks a year to the tune of 41,000 rounds. It's not unusual to see a match consisting of a family or four 11-year-olds.

Our USGA education initiative focuses on turfgrass education, and, as

you may know, we support the largest private turfgrass research effort in the world. Since 1983 the USGA has funded nearly 100 research projects at 33 major land-grant universities at a cost of nearly \$15 million. The goal remains the same — to develop better grasses that use less water, fewer pesticides, and require less maintenance. And I'll tell you, our USGA agronomists are perhaps our best educators, supporting superior playing conditions and sound environmental practices. When it comes to a labor of love, I'll challenge anyone to match this group. It's no accident that Stanley Zontek got the Don Rossi Award and Jim Snow is the *Landscape Management* Person of the Year. I'm so proud of what they do and I salute each one.

I have to keep in mind, and you do too, that a typical golf course covers 150 to 200 acres. On the average, the rough and the out-of-play areas occupy about 70% of that land. With this statistic, it isn't any wonder that most of us end up hitting our ball in the rough a good share of the time. The statistic, however, presents great potential for golf courses to serve as suitable habitats for a lot of species other than golfers. Through our Wildlife Links

Program, I had the pleasure of meeting a red-cockaded woodpecker at the Mid-Pines Club, and at the same time, Bruce Babbitt, Secretary of the Interior. All of the USGA efforts have one central idea, and that is to ensure suitable playing conditions while providing a beautiful, healthy environment in which the game can be enjoyed.

We plan to expand our youth and education grant program this next year. Last year we made 31 grants; one went to build a series of holes in Kansas City, Missouri, where kids can learn to play the game. Tom Watson, who's involved in the project and told us about this opportunity, said we don't need elaborate bunkers, contouring, and spectator mounds; we just need a course where kids can tee up a ball and hit it into the hole.

Superintendents are all very talented, and every season you battle the elements that are beyond your control. At least you can say your job is full of surprise. In your work, more is not always better. In fact, my favorite irrigation system is at Newport Country Club in Newport, Rhode Island. When a member complains, Bob Reynolds, the superintendent, can honestly reply, "Just talk to the man upstairs!" because

there isn't an irrigation system through the green — it's just tees and green.

Many of you are pressured to push golf courses right up to the edge. Sometimes you're standing there on that limb by yourself, and the people who suggested you push it right up to the edge sort of fade into the background when it goes over the edge. At the USGA we want golf courses to allow the superintendent to be the communication link and the major player when it comes to decisions that affect the course. I mean, that's such a basic concept of good management.

We must remember that we didn't invent this game; we're just here to look after it, and you're the ones charged with looking after the playing fields. I've always appreciated why you're called super, which means above and beyond. Believe me, you are the unsung heroes of the game and we just couldn't play this game without you.

JUDY BELL has supported the USGA as a volunteer for more than 28 years. She was elected president of the USGA in January, 1996. She also fills her time as a successful businesswoman in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and has been actively involved in many civic activities.



Oakland Hills experienced a severe thunderstorm less than 24 hours before the start of the 1996 U.S. Open. The grounds crew reacted with speed and precision, and had the course ready to go for the championship the next day.