

Life Is An Occasion

By Bob Wolverton

As a golf course superintendent in the northeast, there's nothing better to cure the winter dull drums than a trip to Augusta National for the Masters. Each year since being employed there in 1999, I have had the opportunity to go back and work on the crew for the week of the tournament. The golf course and aura that surrounds the tournament is like getting a shot of Red Bull when you get there. The place is so green and everyone is super excited, like bees in a hive of perfectly manicured ryegrass. For me it's not about the golf per se, I really don't care who wins, I'm always rooting for the course. No, for me it's about seeing the people I only get to see one or two times a year. Over the past nine years, I have had the privilege of working along side some of the most extraordinary and influential people in the golf course maintenance industry. Some have been my peers and others close colleagues, but all have been great friends and have helped me take what I do to the next level. I know people throughout the entire country and from all over the world. These times are for

one's youth. All my friends were off on vacation and I was sent off into the fields to pick corn and tomatoes that we would sell at the roadside vegetable stand in my parent's front yard. Don't get me wrong, my family took one day off a year to go to the Jersey shore and the rides at the Farm and Horse Show were the best, but work always needed to be done. The plants never stopped growing and we always had to pick rocks, weeds or some type of vegetable. Realizing, year after year that it was the same-old, same-old, I vowed to do something different with my life.

During my senior year in high school, I got a job at a local bank and subsequently went to college to get a degree in finance. The seven years that I worked in the banking industry lead me to play a great deal of golf and really invoked my devotion for the game. All my close friends had gone to college to study turf management and we too played a great deal of golf when we could. However, my career path in finance seemed as confined as the cubicle I resided in.

For as much as I wanted to deny it, it was great getting back on a tractor!

It never dawned on me that when I entered this area of expertise, that it could ever be this time consuming. Cut the grass, rake the bunkers, and go fishing – right! WOW was I wrong. For some reason I went from aspiring to be the superintendent of a public course in Vermont to striving to be the host of a U.S. Open on some of the most hallowed ground in the industry. In order to achieve this monumental goal, I knew I needed the right resume. The first step of my grand plan began by positioning myself at all the places I thought would give me the greatest exposure to tournaments. The next five years lead me to places like Saucon Valley CC, Augusta National GC, Ridgewood CC and Winged Foot GC. In the past ten years, I've had the privilege of working the: U.S. Open, Senior U.S. Open, Senior PGA Championship, U.S. Amateur, 9 Masters, LPGA Championship, the Memorial and several Tour stops. To well round the list of tournament accomplishments, I employed myself with the Empire Golf Management group and owner and developer Eric Bergstol. Eric hired me to be the grow-in superintendent of Hollow Brook GC, a private eighteen-hole course in Westchester County, New York and then to my current residence at Bayonne Golf Club in New Jersey. Bayonne is an eighteen hole, private course built on a landfill/contaminated land site right on New York Harbor directly across from lower Manhattan.

As an architect, Eric has some of the most unique and creative visions I have ever had the opportunity to interpret. When I interviewed for Bayonne and was brought down to observe the site, I wasn't quite sure what to expect. If you can picture a mountain of "gray matter" in the heart of an area you would expect Tony Soprano to ditch a body at, surround it with loading cranes that looked like they just came out of a Star Wars movie and border the landscape with gigantic white oil holding tanks, you would have Bayonne. Eric envisioned a links golf course right on the bay, overlooking New York, no carts, no trees and only towering fescue dunes to separate the course from the rest of the town. Funny as it may seem, I did see what he was talking about and knew how incredible this place could and would become. Looking back on all that took place during construction, I think we would all agree that it turned out better than expected!

The help of good leadership is invaluable with an undertaking like we had here at Bayonne. We had to properly close a landfill working with the Department of Environmental Protection, install a methane and



11th Hole - "The Nook" - view to Manhattan.

sharing our experiences linked with the hectic schedules, high expectations and the demands of our individually unique golf courses. Augusta for me is a giant think tank of new ideas, improved technology, and the latest and greatest. We all benefit from the week, distribute cell numbers and email addresses and return home. As one patron said to me this year 'You guys have the greatest job in the world' and I replied by saying 'yeah this week, until we go back to our own course next week and you ask us why "WE" don't look like Augusta!'

Life is an occasion and we have the choice to rise to it or let it pass us by. Growing up on a farm in northern New Jersey was not the most idealist way to live

A trip down to Augusta National to see my friend made me question whether or not banking was the right career for me. In the summer of 1997, I went to Rutgers to help a friend that needed some assistance with a big project he was working on with the USGA. When he explained what the project consisted of, I realized that this was the change I was looking for. He detailed a way in which I would be able to get my degree and work on the Turf Farm at the university in order to make some extra cash. It was at that point that I left the banking industry and two years and 96 credits later; I graduated from Rutgers University, Cook College with a degree in Plant Science with Honors. My Uncles would repeatedly say as I was growing up 'once a farmer, always a farmer'.



16th Hole "Heaven's Gate" - view to clubhouse



7th Hole "Beach Rose" - view to clubhouse

leachate recapture, transfer and processing system, construct a public access walkway that circumferences the site, create 16 acres of mitigated wetland habitat, build a ferry dock and heliport and design a links golf course. The old landscape that was dead flat now had 90 feet of elevation gain derived from the processing and placing of 5.5 million cubic yards of dredge, 2.5 million cubic yards of clean fill and 100,000 cubic yards of plating sand. That was hard part; the easy part was growing the golf course in given a time frame of five months! Oh, by the way, it turned out to be the hottest and driest summer on record in New Jersey and the only available water source we had to work with was from two fire hydrants at either end of the property.

The most valuable lesson that can be learned during construction is to be patient. There is plenty of time for hard work, decision-making, delegating, question and answer sessions and issues that need immediate attention but most importantly one has to maintain composure no matter how bad it gets. If it's bad chances are nine times out of ten, that it will only get worse. I always try to instill in the people that work for me that 'there are no problems, only alternatives and solutions', so keep trying. Sometimes they get it and other times they don't. The most important thing I found out after growing-in Hollow Brook is that you should always surround yourself with good people. You can always teach someone something if they possess the desire to learn. I have had the most positive experiences with assistants, interns and full-time crew staff when they take pride in the work they do, have a commitment to excellence and a sense of urgency when completing tasks. I'm a "hands on" leader so if something needs attention on the golf course, I'll be the first person to pick up a string trimmer or a bunker rake and get it done. I would never have even been given the chance to do what I'm doing now if I wasn't able to perform every job on the golf course. We get involved with so many things on

a daily basis, especially during construction that it's hard not to work hard. I credit the success for completing the construction on schedule to my staff and all the hard work and dedication they gave during that time. It would not have been possible to do alone or with people that didn't "get it". As a confirmation of the dream Eric had and the work that my staff and I performed, we were rated number 32 in Golf Weekly's Top 100 Modern Courses for 2008. I can only hope that as the course matures and fills in that it will only get better!

I have really enjoyed simply maintaining the golf course the past two years. When I say simply maintaining I really mean cutting and rolling the greens daily at .110, verticutting twice a month (tees, approaches, fairways and greens), topdressing one area (tees, approaches, fairways, greens, rough) each week, cutting fairways and approaches four times a week at .300, cutting tees three times a week at .285 and hand watering the greens. By the way, there are no cart paths so we walk everywhere. We hand mow greens, tees and approaches. Topdress with push spreaders and during aerification (three times a year) with shovels and brooms. When we complete course set-up in the mornings we split the course in two and walk to change the cups and tee markers. As for watering the place, we drag hoses around the fairways and each green has a hosed stashed high on the dunes in the fescue that is pulled over and used to prep the greens in the mornings and syringe in the afternoon. The course is split into three "sixes" for the afternoon wilt watch and we walk from hole to hole, maintaining the appropriate areas we are assigned to. The hills are so steep and high that we are unable to move directly from hole to hole with equipment so the logistics of completing tasks ahead of golfers is crucial. The greatest advantage of the course is that we are allowed to let it brown out. I'm not talking a little brown, I have a membership that appreciates golden footprints in the fairways from walking through wilt and greens so well managed that the velvet bentgrass actually goes into a state of dormancy!

I never realized the importance of hard work, dedication and perseverance when I was growing up on the farm. The vegetables never stopped growing and neither does the grass. The same-old, same-olds really weren't as simple as I thought they were. It's amazing how smart we were when we were younger and how uneducated we feel as adults. There's always something new to learn and we never have all the right answers. I teach on occasion at Rutgers to the newest crop of turf students and I try to give back to the people that have helped me become successful. One thing I've learned over the years is to remember to always ask the stupid question to make sure your not skipping a step. Above all else I am grateful for the people that have influenced my life. Without sharing thoughts, ideas or even equipment, I could not have accomplished the goals I set out for myself. The camaraderie of friends and colleagues is priceless as is a good phone list. I really enjoy the opportunity to get out to different courses, either during a tournament or just a drive through, and pick the brains of fellow superintendents. We are each individually

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talented, but as a group I can testify that I've seen some really amazing things transpire on a golf course. I feel very fortunate to have such a great group of people to support my efforts and help me achieve my goals.

I love what I do and I am proud to be a part of a family of people from all over the world who are as dedicated and devoted as I am to improving themselves and this industry. The Golf Course Trades is always a key part of the quiver of valuable tools we use each day to help us make decisions and improvements to our courses. Without the support of our colleagues and or vendors none of us would be as successful as we are. I thank all the people that have been there to help me become who I am and I wish you all much success in the future. See you on the Links!



Bob Wolverton (& Candi), Superintendent Bayonne Golf Club, Bayonne, NJ

All pictures including cover shot taken by Bob Wolverton



"World Trade Center Tribute of Lights at Ground Zero" View from "Heaven's Gate" (16th hole) on September 11th



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*16th Hole "Heaven's Gate" - view to Manhattan
Bayonne Golf Club, Bayonne, New Jersey*



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