

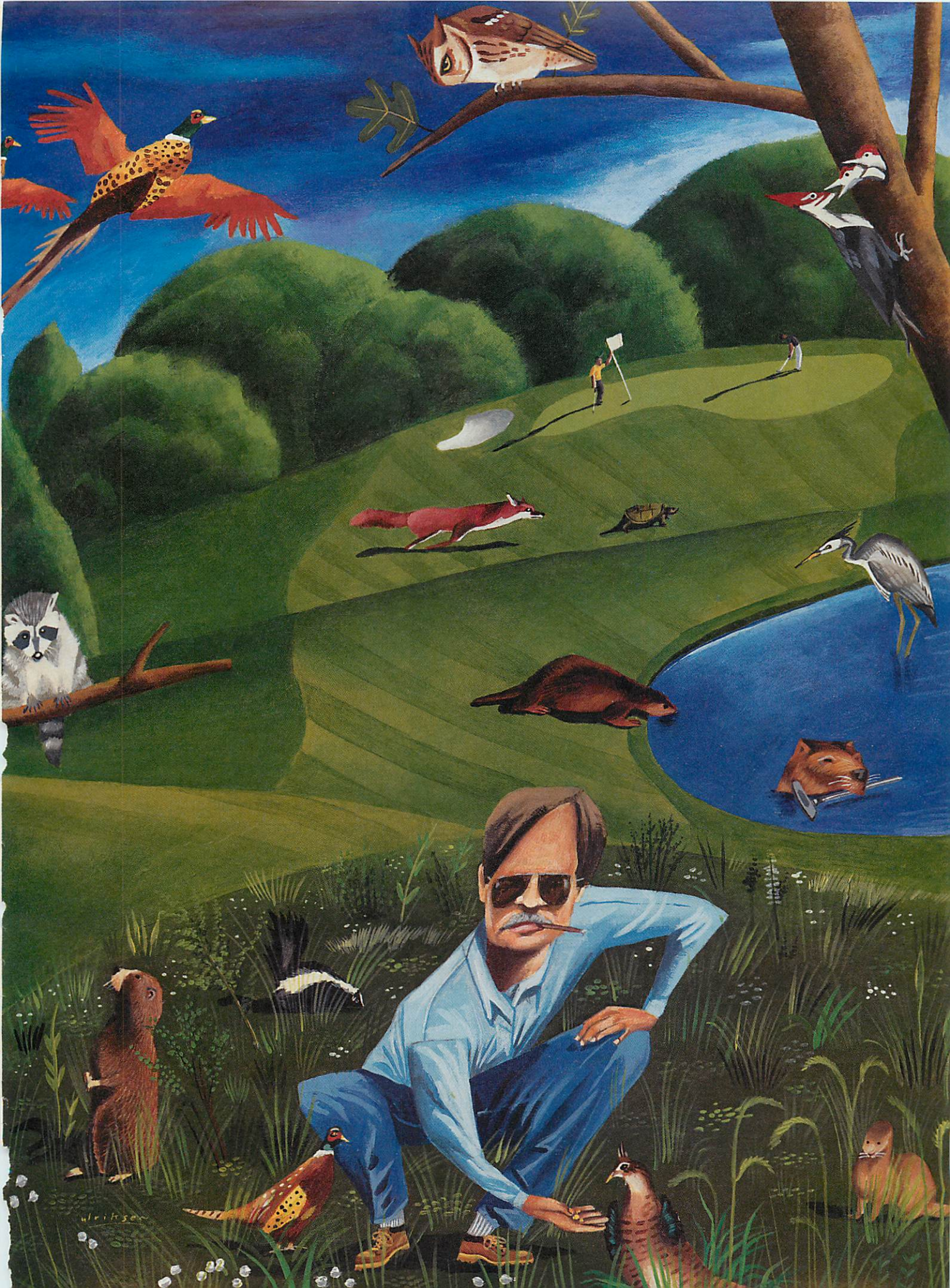
# The Greenkeeper's Tale

The superintendent is the key to any good golf club. Join us as we unearth a treasure of wisdom, commitment . . . and a few quirks

**BY DAVID OWEN** ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK ULRIKSEN

THE COURSE RECORD AT MY CLUB IS 63, EIGHT STROKES UNDER PAR. It was set in the early '80s by Bob Witkoski, our superintendent. His round is legendary among the few people who know about it, because it included three birdie putts that rolled to the rim of the cup but didn't fall. How those balls stayed out is an enduring mystery, because in that era our greens, which Bob himself maintained, were extraordinarily fast. A friend of mine who was a member then told me, "The grass on the greens didn't really even look like grass. It was just a sort of blue-gray haze." Bob's conception of the ideal putting surface, he explained to me once, is "three inches of compacted dust." In the early '80s, Bob's greens were so firm that when players stood on them in metal spikes you could see sunlight between the ground and the soles of their shoes. "In those days," Bob says, "if you even looked at your ball it would start moving." The touring pro George Burns, who has relatives in our area, was a member of our club for a while. In 1982, he angrily walked in after playing four holes and complained to Bob that the greens were unfairly fast. The year before, he had finished second in the U.S. Open, at Merion.

Many of the newer members of my club don't realize that Bob even knows how to play golf; they have never seen him swing a club. His record-setting round was





day, a single bad swing could make him so angry he would give up the game for weeks. In a round with friends once, he got to six or seven under par after 12 holes, and had a six-foot putt for another birdie. His ball lipped the cup. He stood fuming silently for a moment, his eyes narrowed. Then he turned to the men he was playing with and said, "I don't think I owe you boys anything." He left his ball on the green, picked up his bag, and walked back to the parking lot. I've never dared to ask Bob what happened next, but I picture him sitting in the car alone for the next two hours, staring straight ahead and chewing his cigar. In the end, the only solution was to quit.

Bob did start playing again a little in the mid-'90s, because our pro at that time, whose name was Zane, was an old friend of his. Zane and Bob had played golf together years before, and Zane knew how to coax him into coming out for a few holes late in the afternoon. He also knew the kind of player Bob had been in his prime.

"There was a big four-ball tournament at another club many years ago," Zane told me one day, "and I begged Bob to play in it with me. If I broke 80 in those days, that was a hell of a round for me, but we managed to qualify for the last spot in the championship flight, because of Bob. That meant we had to play the No. 1 team, and one of the guys on that team was the state amateur champion, and the other guy was one of the top local players. We went to the calcutta dinner after the qualifier, and the teams were going for 500, 600 bucks, and the team that we were going to play went for the most, way over a thousand. Then they called our names, and there was complete silence. Before

one of the few serious rounds he has played in the past 20 years. Maintaining our golf course

for almost four decades has ruined his back, and golf makes his back worse. He's also a perfectionist. He was an extraordinarily gifted player when he was in his teens, and I am fairly certain that he believed he had the potential not only to compete on tour but also, possibly, to be one of the best players ever. He worked on his swing late into the night in his room at home, doing permanent damage to the walls and the floor as he rehearsed his fundamentals. To develop strength in his arms, chest and legs, he used to take golf swings with an axe.

The flip side of Bob's obsession was a feeling of fury that overcame him when he hit a shot that didn't meet his expectations. "Sometimes," he told me once, in a lowered voice, "I used to hit a bad shot on purpose." When he did that, I think, he was prodding the demon that haunted him, trying to bring it under his control. But control eluded him, and, in his hey-

## To develop strength in his arms, chest

that, the room was buzzing, people were screaming and yelling and laughing—then, nothing. So Bob and I were kind of hunkered down at our table, embarrassed. Then the guy who was running the thing came over and gave us the bad news, which was that because nobody else wanted our team, we had to buy it ourselves, for 50 bucks. Which we didn't have. I said, 'We'll bring the money tomorrow,' and I ended up having to borrow it from the pro, who was a cousin of mine."

When Bob and Zane arrived on the first tee for their match the next morning, Bob was dressed as he often still dresses: in carpenter jeans—the kind with hammer loops—and a starched blue long-sleeved Oxford-cloth dress shirt. Zane was carrying an ancient set of flea-market clubs, including a putter with a hickory shaft. "The guys we were going to play weren't paying any attention to us," Zane told me. "They were standing over

by the board, looking to see who they would have to play next, as soon as they got rid of us. I told Bob what they were doing, and he said, 'I'll show them who they have to play next.'

The first hole was a 320-yard par 4. Bob hit last. With his 3-wood, he launched a huge drive far beyond the drives of the other players, and his ball rolled up near the green. He chipped it close and sank the putt, for birdie. The second hole was a long par 4, a dogleg to the right. The standard strategy for playing the hole was to hit driver straight down the fairway, past the corner, leaving about a 5-iron to the green. That's what Zane did. Then Bob teed up his ball and aimed to the right, directly toward the trees that flanked the fairway. The trees were tall and thick, but Bob carried them all with his 3-wood, and his ball ended up in the middle of the fairway, just a wedge from the green.

"He stiffed it and made the putt," Zane said. "We had played two holes, and Bob was two under on his own ball, and we were 2 up in the match. And for the guys we were playing, it was downhill from there. I only helped on one hole. Bob drove it through the fairway on a dogleg, and I had to make a par. Bob said, 'Make this putt, and they'll be done.' I made it, and that's what happened. They couldn't believe it. The No. 1 team, and all of a sudden they weren't in the tournament anymore."

### Equipment that endures (sort of)

During the two years when Zane was our pro, he occasionally was able to talk Bob into playing with him in one of the Monday pro-ams that our state golf association conducts. Bob, inevitably muttering, would retrieve his clubs from his garage and throw them into the trunk of Zane's car. Bob's bag is made of some early, abandoned version of vinyl, and his irons are a kind you never see anymore: Spalding Top-Flite Professionals, which he bought in 1965. The blade of his 2-iron is the size and thickness of a jumbo paper clip. My friend Rich says he once watched Bob use that 2-iron to hit the greatest golf

his back began to play havoc with his swing, and between shots he had to brace his spine against the seat of his golf cart. The young pro ended up shooting 64, which was one stroke off the tournament record. Quite a round—although he and Bob had a side match going, and when Bob's back gave out, at the turn, the young pro was 1 down.

### Selective hearing, and a battle with kidney stones

Bob is about 60 years old, and he has a bristly mustache that has gone mostly gray. I could probably count on two hands the number of times I have seen him, during the past decade, when he wasn't smoking a skinny, irregularly shaped cigar. Except for his back, he's in terrific shape. He usually wears a golf hat, a pair of lightly tinted aviator sunglasses with plastic rims and a nylon windbreaker in which embers from his cigars have melted a constellation of small holes. The legs of his pants end above the tops of his shoes, a fashion preference dictated by the hours he spends ankle-deep in wet grass. When he hand-waters a green or a patch of burned-up turf, he doesn't use a spray nozzle on his hose, because he doesn't like what spray nozzles do to the flow of water. Instead, he shapes the stream with his thumb, the end of which, by now, is virtually nerveless and slightly beveled. As he works, he usually keeps his back turned to any golfers who happen to be nearby. Years of handling loud machinery have made him hard of hearing, a condition he supplements with a form of selective deafness that makes it difficult for him to hear anything he doesn't want to hear.

A few years ago, Bob suffered an attack of kidney stones, a recurrent ailment of his. Diane, his wife, was out of town, and Bob stubbornly writhed on the floor of his living room all alone for several hours. Finally, no longer able to tolerate the agony, he crawled to the telephone and called Ferris, who is a former chairman of our golf club. Ferris is the only member of the medical profession who has ever won Bob's trust. When

## and legs, Bob used to take **golf swings with an axe.**

shot he has ever witnessed: a 200-yard hole-in-one in driving wind and rain on the next-to-last hole of a local four-ball tournament. Bob's shot squared the match. According to Rich, you could tell the ball was in the hole the moment it left the club.

All of Bob's clubs have faces that are pitted with rust. They also have leather grips, which look as though they were cut from the straps of old cavalry saddles. Upon arriving with Zane at one Monday pro-am a few years ago, Bob handed his bag to an attendant, gave him a couple of bucks, and said, "Just wipe the mildew off of these, if you wouldn't mind." He wasn't being funny; the grips really were covered with mildew.

At that same tournament, Bob and Zane were grouped with a terrific young player, who is the head pro at a Donald Ross course in our area. Bob played comfortably for a while; in fact, he birdied five of the first eight holes. Then a stabbing pain in

Bob's back is really killing him, he will sometimes drive over to Ferris' office and ask him to take a look. Ferris is a veterinarian. Among the records in the files at his animal hospital is a chart on which the name of the patient is listed as "Bob," and the name of the patient's owner is listed as "Diane Witkoski." (On the night of the kidney-stone attack, Ferris took Bob to the emergency room of a hospital for people.)

### Learning on the job

My club hired Bob to be its superintendent in 1965. He was just out of high school, and he had acquired the sum total of his golf-course-maintenance experience the summer before, when he worked as an assistant to the superintendent of another nine-hole course in our area. My club sent him to agronomy school at a big university in a neighboring state. When



looked in the 19th century, when a local farmer kept sheep there. You wouldn't even have noticed a difference between fairway and rough, because the club's rusting gang mower cut all the grass to the same height.

One of the first things Bob did was to plant trees. He planted hundreds of them—white pines, blue spruces, oaks, maples, willows, birches, cherry trees, apple trees, pear trees and others, and he planted rhododendrons, mountain laurels and other flowering shrubs. (The club had no capital-improvement budget in those days; the trees were paid for by a couple of wealthy members.) Bob didn't just stick the trees anywhere; he used them to define the course, and to create a strategic logic for the holes. Sometimes after playing one of those holes for a while, he would change his mind and move a few trees around. Today, all the trees Bob planted are mature. They seem so much like a part of the course that I almost can't believe there was ever a time when they weren't there, even though I've seen old pictures.

Bob's extensive plantings also, in time, made our course a compatible habitat for a diverse assortment of wildlife. If you yank a 3-wood into the oaks along the left side of the sixth fairway, half a dozen flashes of blue and orange will sometimes burst from the canopy: bluebirds. One year, a ruffed grouse took a liking to Bob and would emerge from the woods near the ninth green whenever he walked past; once, it followed his daughter into their house. Bob fed it cracked corn from a jar, which he kept under a blue spruce beside the back tee on 6. (Sometimes, one member of a foursome playing from that tee would have to distract the bird while the other three teed off.) At various times, I have spotted screech owls, snapping turtle hatchlings, red-tailed hawks (one of which often hangs out in a maple that Bob planted beside the seventh green), ring-necked pheasants, red foxes, jack rabbits, deer, a day-old fawn (which was curled up in the scrub to the right of the sixth fairway), mink, raccoons, possums, beavers, woodchucks, skunks, great blue herons and a pileated woodpecker.

## He told me that **destroying that green with his 7-iron** was the most fun he ever had hitting practice balls.

Bob returned, he faced an impossible task. Our course—which covers just 40 acres, or a little more than half of the U.S. Golf Association's recommended minimum for nine holes—looked very much the way it had looked when it was first laid out, in the early 1900s. The property was rolling, open pastureland transected in a few places by old stone walls and narrow streams. There were wooded areas beyond the perimeter and alongside one of the streams, but the course itself was mostly just a large empty field. On the one big dogleg, a par 5, the members were essentially on their honor to stay within the lines. If you had removed the flags from the greens, the property from a distance would have looked very much the way it

One summer, my friend Tim and I saw a bald eagle snatch a fish from the pond on 4 and fly in low circles above the fairway with its meal gripped in its talons. The year before, I watched from the practice tee as a bobcat nonchalantly circled a flock of wild turkeys, which were loitering nervously in the middle of the driving range.

Bob loves the wildlife on our course, but he is merciless toward any creature that threatens the turf. One summer, a friend of mine was talking with him near the upper tee on the third hole. Bob froze in mid-sentence, got out of his cart, and began to creep slowly down the steep, brush-covered hill that separates the upper tee from the middle one. At the bottom,

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he stood motionless for a moment, then leapt forward, jammed his heel into the ground, thrust a screwdriver into the turf and flipped out a mole, which for several days had methodically been ruining the tee. "Got the bastard," Bob said. He kicked the corpse into the weeds, wiped the blade of his screwdriver in the grass, and went back up the hill to finish his conversation with my friend. (Late one afternoon, I ran into Bob and Diane, who were taking a walk on the course. Bob was carrying a wide-mouthed iced-tea bottle, in which he had imprisoned a live star-nosed mole. In deference to his wife, Bob had somehow managed to capture the mole rather than skewering it at the end of its tunnel.)

Quite understandably, Bob is especially protective of our greens, and he takes their health personally. (Bob and Diane were married, in 1974, in front of the fourth green, which he had just expanded. Many members attended the ceremony. It was conducted by the club's president, who happened to be a justice of the peace.) Bob seldom had access to heavy equipment when he first began; his principal green-building tools in those days were a shovel, a rake and the trunk of his Rambler sedan, which he used to haul topsoil. Once he had shaped the contours in the way he wanted them, he used his boots to tamp down the soil until it was "foot-tight," he told me once. Several of our greens are steeply sloped from back to front, but there is no trickery in any of them: You can see the break; do you have the nerve to putt it? Bob always did. "Even in the days when greens were like Formica," he once said, "I always wanted to be above the hole." He is a frighteningly good putter still, when he plays. One Sunday morning a couple of years ago, he played along with my regular group, using only a 60-year-old adjustable club, which he had set to the loft of a 6-iron. He used that club for every shot, including putts. If we hadn't ungraciously disqualified him after the fact, he would have won two skins.

One of Bob's biggest projects involved our third green, which had to be moved

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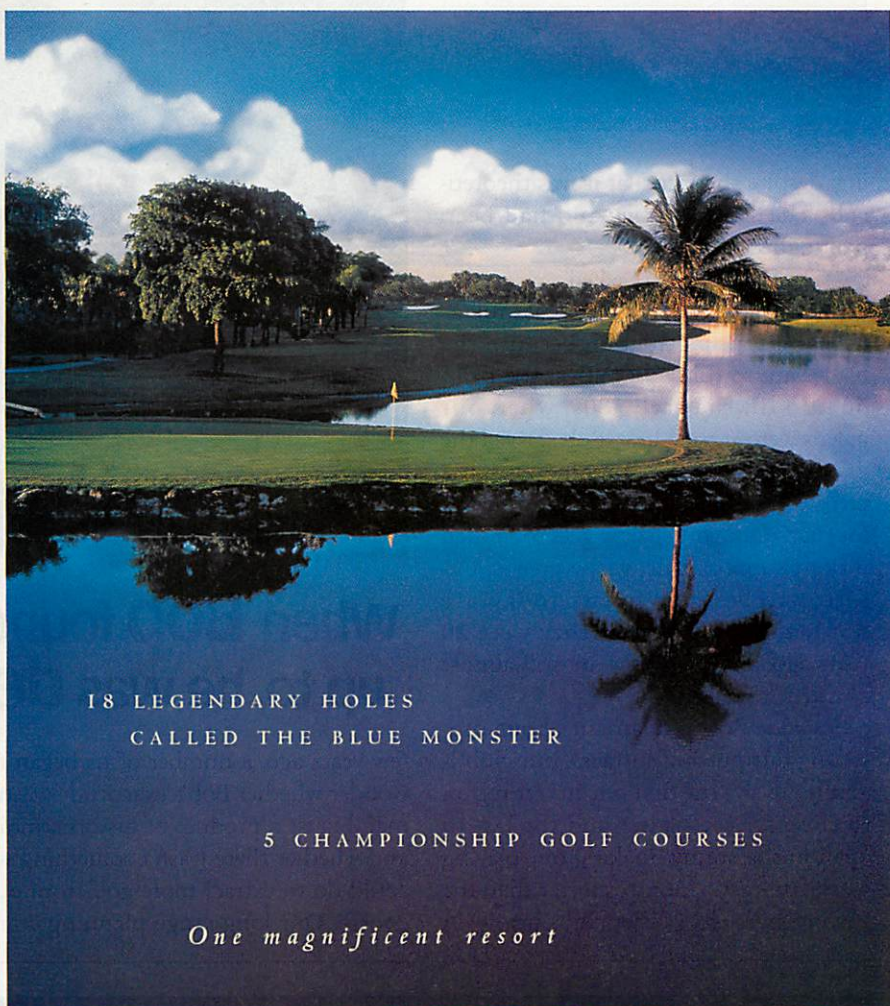
PATRIOTS POINT

30 yards to the left because it continually came under bombardment from slicers teeing off on the second hole. I once asked him if he had transplanted the sod from the old green to the new one, and he told me he hadn't. He had no use for the old turf, he said, so he brought down his 7-iron and a large supply of practice balls and methodically flayed the original putting surface to the exact depth of his swing, hitting sweet shot after sweet shot, and littering the fairway below it with perfectly rectangular divots. He told me that destroying that green with his 7-iron was the most fun he ever had hitting practice balls.

When Bob had to expand or rework one of our greens, he didn't follow the

**Bob** is especially protective of our greens, and he takes their health personally.

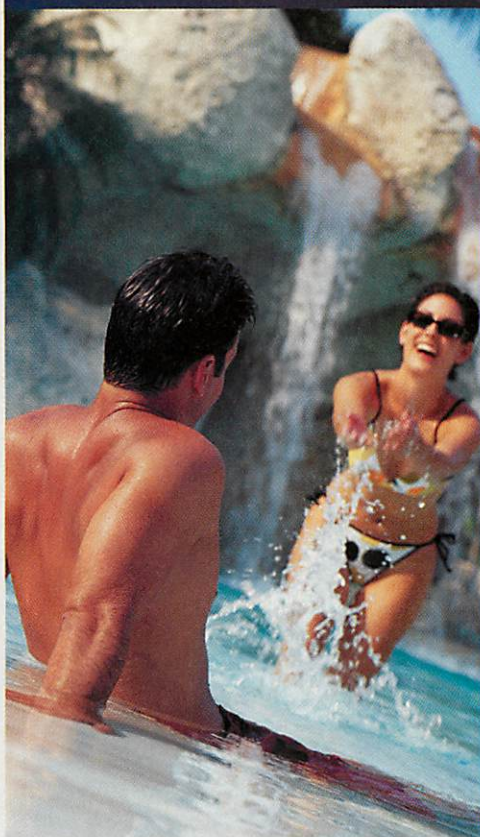
USGA's specification for putting-green construction—a sort of standard blueprint that is used by golf-course builders all over the world—because he thought it was misguided. (One of his complaints was that the original specification called for what he believed was too much sand. He felt gratified, years later, when the USGA apparently reached a similar conclusion.) Bob also disapproves of almost all modern turf strains. As a result, some of our greens are living museums of heirloom grass varieties, each of which Bob has patiently nursed along for decades. Several years ago, when Bob was doubling the size of our practice green, he showed me what he doesn't like about modern grasses. "The blades are too fat," he said, pulling a tiny clump from the new section and holding it up next to a similar clump from the old. I could easily see the difference. The new grass was greener, plumper and more robust-look-



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ing, despite the fact that it was theoretically the same species and had been maintained identically.

"Why is that bad?" I asked.

"You can't make the new grass roll as fast and true as the old, because the blades are so thick they affect the ball," he said. In the early '80s, when our greens were at their best, Bob starved the grass to pale wisps, like the nap on a piece of felt. Modern turf is too hearty for that. (Our course now gets too much play to support pale, wispy greens, unfortunately. Our greens today are nowhere near as fast as they were 20 years ago, although they are still almost as true.)

Because Bob is adamant about protecting our putting surfaces, our club is almost always the first one in our region to close for the winter and the last to open in the spring, making our playing season at least a month shorter than the playing seasons of other clubs nearby. A



## When **Bob** found out what we were up to, he was **deeply affronted.**

few years ago, a number of us began to wonder whether Bob's exactitude wasn't mainly just a product of his orneriness, and whether there wasn't something we could do to extract more golf from our course. Our long-range planning com-

mittee, of which I was a member, hired an agronomist from the Green Section of the USGA to inspect our turf. What we wanted the agronomist to tell us was that there was no reason to close so early and open so late. When Bob found out

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what we were up to, he was deeply, though quietly, affronted.

At the beginning of the inspection, the USGA agronomist, who was quite young, gave a brief introductory speech, during which Bob took many shallow puffs on his cigar. Then the agronomist turned to Bob and asked, "How often do you aerify your greens?" Aerification is a standard golf-course maintenance procedure. A machine that looks a little like an enormous lawn mower is used to punch thousands of holes in each putting surface. The holes permit air to circulate among the roots of the grass, and they help to eliminate thatch, which is a spongy accumulation of dead material that blocks air flow and promotes disease. Many superintendents aerify their greens twice a year.

"I aerified five of the greens 13 years ago," Bob said through clenched teeth, "and I haven't done any of them since."

The agronomist looked horrified. Under further questioning, Bob explained that he didn't like to poke holes in turf unless doing so was absolutely necessary, because he believed that such holes merely provided entry points for diseases, weeds and undesirable varieties of grass. Looking doubtful, the agronomist picked up an implement that resembled a pogo stick with a metal scoop attached to one end. He walked over to the old part of the practice green, near which we had been sitting, and plunged the scoop into the putting surface. He pulled it back out, flipped open a metal gate on the side of the scoop and revealed a soil sample that was roughly the size and shape of a slice of wedding cake. The earth in the sample was as black as espresso grounds. Dangling from the bottom, like the tentacles of a jellyfish, was a mass of filamentous roots.

The agronomist was silent for a moment, then said, "That's just about the healthiest-looking sample I've ever seen."

In his written report, which he mailed to us later, the agronomist said that although regular aerification of greens is a universally recommended procedure, Bob's "other cultural practices" apparently "make this aerification unneces-

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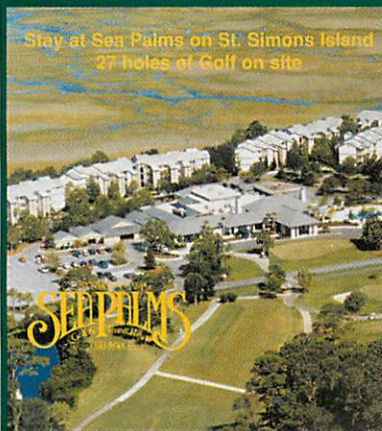
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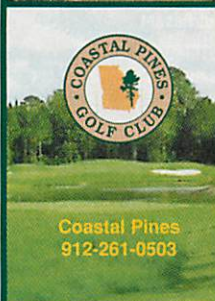
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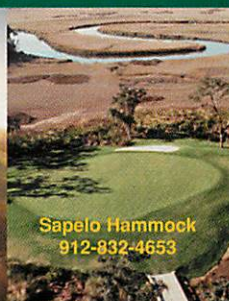
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sary." He also backed up Bob's restrictions on the use of our greens in the early spring and late fall. "The inconvenience caused by the delayed opening," he explained, "is minimal in comparison to the benefits that are obtained with the improved turf conditions and surface quality through the entire summer season." After that, we never mentioned experts to Bob again.

### The teacher

Half a dozen years ago, I watched the final match of our club championship from the passenger seat of a golf cart, which I was sharing with Zane. On the eighth tee, a kid named Galen—who had beaten me easily in the semifinal the day before, and would go on to win the title by a wide margin—hit a huge drive far down the center of the fairway. One

week before, Galen had shot 69 in the qualifying round, while the next-best score was something like 78. He was one of the longest hitters our club had ever had. His tee shot on eight that day sailed over a weed-covered mound that most of our members never worry about reaching. His ball ended up perhaps 50 yards short of the green, and I turned to Zane and asked, "How the hell does he hit the ball that far? His swing looks so easy."

"Don't you recognize that swing?" Zane said. "That's Bob's swing."

Galen has a loop at the top of his backswing that Bob doesn't approve of, but his power, simplicity and apparent ease are, indeed, highly Boblike. And for good reason: Bob taught Galen to play. Galen's father, Brendan, is a contemporary and a golf buddy of mine. He works as a lineman for the local power company, and he counts the days until he can retire. Brendan caddied at our club in the early '60s, when he was a young boy. In his era, veteran caddies hazed novices by forcing them to run from the clubhouse to the stop sign at the end of Golf Course Road and back in just their underpants. Caddieing got Brendan interested in golf, and Brendan's interest eventually captivated Galen, who started playing at the age of 11 or 12. Bob noticed him and took a proprietary interest in his swing.

Bob's conception of the golf swing is tantalizingly simple. "There's nothing complicated about it," he likes to say. "You just take the club straight back and then swing it straight through." This motion seems a lot simpler when Bob describes it or performs it than when you yourself try to replicate it, but something about Bob's ideas clicked with Galen. In those days, my club didn't have a real driving range (because Bob hadn't built one for us yet). Galen would go over to the course late in the afternoon and hit balls on the far side of the sixth fairway while Bob looked on. When Galen played, Bob would often observe him from a distance—while mowing an adjacent fairway, say. If Bob noticed something that needed atten-

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Dinner/Reception*†	1

\* Included in non-participant guest package  
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tion, he would call Galen over and tell him what he thought he ought to do.

Galen was the medalist in the first high school tournament he played in, as a freshman, and he continued to improve from there. He won match after match, played in college and won our club championship two years in a row.

## After that, we **never** mentioned experts to **Bob** again.

Half a dozen pretty good middle-aged players at my club were relieved when he finally graduated from college and got a job in San Francisco.

One day several years ago, when Galen was visiting from college, he and his father and my friend Ray and I played a round together. We ran into Bob on our club's fourth hole, a par 5. We were playing that hole from the far-

thest tee, which Bob built back in the early '80s for the touring pros Ken Green and Mark Calcavecchia, who, like George Burns, had family in our area and used to play at our club sometimes. (Green was a member briefly; Calcavecchia would sometimes jump on the gang mower and cut the rough

when Bob was short-handed, as he usually was. Bob says it was he who persuaded Calcavecchia to abandon his hook and adopt a fade—one of the keys to Calcavecchia's success as a pro, many people believe.) Bob was pruning some trees near the tee. He watched us all hit our drives, then talked with us for a while.

"Hit one," Galen said.

"Nah," Bob said. "I haven't swung a club all year."

"Come on. Just one."

Galen set a ball on a tee. I held out my driver. Bob looked at the club. Finally, he put down his loppers.

He didn't take a practice swing. He didn't make a waggle. He glanced once at the fairway.

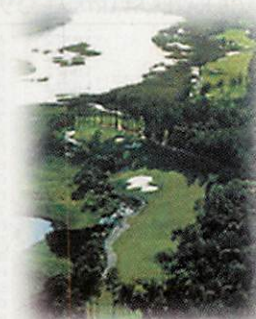
"This could go anywhere," he said. Then he drew the club straight back, until the ash at the end of his cigar just brushed the shoulder of his jacket, and he swung. His ball took off high and straight, toward the only part of the fairway from which you can reach the green with a middle iron. The ball stopped where it landed, on the center mowing stripe, 15 yards past Galen's ball.

"Missed it," Bob said, and he handed back my driver. It was a pretty long time before any of us could think of anything to say. 🏌️

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