

The Graduate

Leewood head superintendent Trapper Van Dunk shows that the first GOLFWORKS interns have come of age

BY JEANNE MCCOOEY

Awave of pride came over me as I walked from the parking lot at Leewood Golf Club in Eastchester, New York, toward the maintenance facility to meet with the club's new head superintendent, Herman "Trapper" Van Dunk. As I got closer to the doorway where he was waiting, I realized that I had been looking forward to this interview for 13 years.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF WEINER

WHERE DO YOU STAND? On one side lies comfort and coddling. On the other, truth and expectation. Not everyone can cross over. Nor should they. But for those willing to make the leap, to leave their comfort zone, to lay bare their shortcomings and insecurities, the potential for reward is unlimited.



Ben Hogan
Master Your Game

Uncompromising quality. Unparalleled craftsmanship. Undeniably Hogan. Are you ready? www.benhogan.com

©2007 Callaway Golf Company. Apex, Apex Edge, Apex Plus, Ben Hogan and the Sunburst Design are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Callaway Golf Company.



Above: Trapper's hard-working crew at Leewood includes (clockwise from bottom left) Stephen Sciorra, Carlos Perez and Ailan Silva.

I first met Trapper in 1994, after he was accepted to the MGA Foundation's fledgling student intern program, GOLFWORKS. No longer a shy, high school student, he was now a mature young man of 29, looking every bit the head superintendent. Thankfully, the one thing that had not changed was the big smile that seemed perpetually planted on his face and which made him instantly likable, both then and now. He was part of the first GOLFWORKS graduating class, and was the first to pursue a career in the golf industry. Though it may have seemed natural, it wasn't his original plan.

Trapper's father, Burgess, a member of New York State's Ramapough-Lenape Indian tribe, was part of the grounds crew at The Tuxedo Club in Tuxedo Park, N.Y., from the time Trapper was 16. (It was Burgess who gave his son the nickname "Trapper" – not for the amount of time he spent raking sand traps at Tuxedo, but because his job on their frequent hunting and fishing trips was guarding the traps.) Trapper insists he always planned to become a lawyer, and used to work odd jobs at the club, "just so I could be with my dad." He goes on to add, "Tuxedo was like a family.

I never thought of it as a career."

That all changed when he was approached in 1994 by MGA Executive Director Jay Mottola, a Tuxedo member, about a job in the new GOLFWORKS program. "I knew Trapper's dad and I used to see him working around the golf course and caddying at the club. We were trying to identify good kids who would have some access to a golf course so I asked Trapper about working at the club," says Mottola.

After Trapper entered GOLFWORKS, his perspective changed. "Now I had a real job. I was working under superintendent Carney McGrady, and between him and my dad I really began to learn a lot. I began to understand the pressures that the superintendent faced. People expected more of me, and it made me want to do well," he recalls.

Trapper's work was well regarded and caught the attention of Al Radko, the former director of the USGA Green Section Committee, who at the time was consulting at Tuxedo. It was Radko who suggested to Trapper that he consider golf course maintenance as a career. "It was the first time I had thought about it seriously," he says. After graduating from high school in 1995, he entered the Turfgrass Management program at Penn State University.

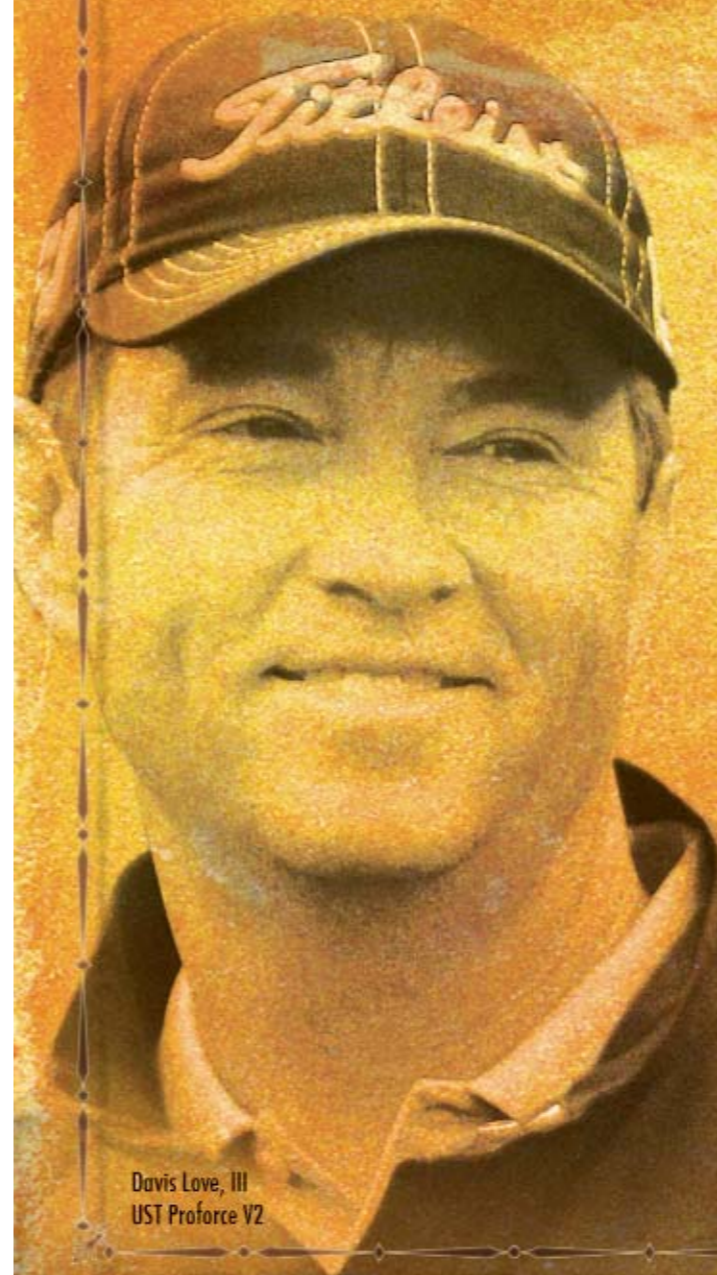
"Penn State was a big adjustment, but an even bigger surprise was how much science was taught as part of the curriculum," says Trapper. "I would have been lost if I hadn't had some hands-on experience already. Unlike many fellow students, I could relate some of the information I was being taught to situations around the golf course. In retrospect, I feel that this is one of the pitfalls of these kinds of curricula. I think they should include more business courses and maybe some basic law courses. Most of all, I would make Spanish a requirement. It is critical to communicating with the maintenance staff."

Pitfalls aside, Trapper graduated in 1999, and went to work for superintendent Ed Walsh at The Golf Club at Mansion Ridge in Monroe, N.Y. In 2001, he worked for David Pughe at Rockaway River Country Club in

Contribute Today

To learn more about GOLFWORKS or for information on how you can support this or other MGA Foundation Programs, contact the Foundation office at 914-347-4653 or www.mgagolf.org. The MGA Foundation is a 501(c)-3 charitable organization and all contributions are tax-deductible.

MY GAME.



Davis Love, III
UST Proforce V2

MY
SHAFT.

UST United Sports
Technologies

HIGH PERFORMANCE GOLF SHAFTS

www.ustgolfshaft.com

©2007 United Sports Technologies. All Rights Reserved.

Denville, New Jersey, and the following year for Joe Smythe and Gabe Cirillo at Manhattan Woods Country Club in West Nyack, N.Y. At each club, Trapper learned new skills, and also came to grips with the demanding workload and schedule that is required of superintendents.

“Not only is this job hard on you physically, but the hours don’t leave you much of a social life. I was young, and really needed to step back and re-evaluate if I wanted to do this the rest of my life. So I made the decision to take some time off.”

In Trapper's case, his involvement with GOLFWORKS has come full circle. The former intern will now be looking to hire several interns of his own.

During this time Trapper kept in close touch with his many friends in the industry, including Walsh and Tuxedo superintendent Tim Garceau, who provided guidance. “The maintenance community is small and close and we all help each other out. That kind of camaraderie is very valuable. I gained some perspective being away from the field for a while, enough that I knew I wanted to return. When I was ready it was nice to know I could count on my friends in the industry to help me get along.”

In 2003 Trapper was offered a job at Leewood under longtime superintendent Pete Dirollo, whose traditional approach to golf course maintenance suited him well. “Pete let me take on a lot of responsibility. When he left in 2006, I felt very confident about applying for the position.” One aspect of Leewood that drew him to the job was the

cooperation that exists between the membership and the department heads. “At some clubs you and the other staff administrators never interact. At Leewood, you are part of a team. The general manager, superintendent and golf professional meet almost daily. It makes us all better at our jobs, which is to serve the membership.”

It also makes it easier to introduce new ideas, and Trapper has plenty of those. Leewood is a course with a lot of history and tradition, but like any young person Trapper is eager to modernize certain things. His first step in that direction was to computerize as many of the maintenance functions as possible – a must, he says, in today’s operations.

Trapper admits that when he thinks about all the responsibility he has, it’s a bit daunting, but he is helped by his experience. “GOLFWORKS gave me the opportunity to view the golf course and the club in a way I may never have considered. It gave me confidence, and the access to people who could help me realize my dreams. It’s Networking 101. What you do with those opportunities is up to you.”

In Trapper’s case, his involvement with GOLFWORKS has come full circle. The former intern will now be looking to hire several interns of his own this season and Leewood, a longtime supporter of the program, will also have interns in the clubhouse and pro shop areas. “It’s a win-win situation for us,” Trapper says. The same can be said for the entire GOLFWORKS program. ■



Leewood general manager Mario DiPreta (center), head professional Dean Johnson (left), and Trapper have regular meetings at the club.

JEFF WEINER



Kiawah Island Golf Resort
www.kiawahgolf.com



The Class of 2007

The 2007 Great Golf Resorts of the World Directory features exceptional golf resorts, covered in detail with over 200 breathtaking photographs, and it’s free.



The Ritz-Carlton Golf and Spa Resort
www.ritzcarlton.com



Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate
www.OmniChampionsGateGolf.com



Mauna Kea Golf Course at Mauna Kea Resort
www.PrinceResortsHawaii.com



Lajitas - The Ultimate Hideout
www.lajitas.com

Complete the accompanying card or visit www.greatgolfresorts.com to request your free copy.