Green Greens

by **Stephen Jermanok**

Martha's Vineyard course takes a swing at golf, without pesticides or an abundance of water.

In a scene reminiscent of the film *Caddyshack*, Walter Walodyka drives around the Vineyard Golf Club at night in his pickup truck, tracking the "enemy varmint." This time, the enemy's not gophers wreaking havoc on the greens but skunks and crows. Walodyka gets out of his truck wearing night-vision goggles and inspects the traps he laid the previous night, baited with barbecue sauce on white bread and cheese crackers. Fate for the unfortunate critter stuck in his cages is the inevitable, for Walodyka has the license to kill.

"Walter actually met the character Carl Spackler in person, when Bill Murray played here," says Vineyard superintendent Jeff Carlson.

The skunks and crows come to Vineyard Golf Club, seven miles off the coast of Massachusetts on the island of Martha's Vineyard, not to try their hands at the par-72 course but to dine on grubs. The insects, along with errant weeds and rough patches on the greens, are a few of the maladies Carlson faces in maintaining one of America's only organically managed golf courses.

Water quality and amount of use are important issues on Martha's Vineyard, especially since the island's sole source of water is supplied by one underground aquifer. When the Vineyard Golf Club applied for permits to build a 70-acre course in 1999, the governing body on the island, the Martha's Vineyard Commission, insisted on an all-organic turf-care regimen and limited water use to 150,000 gallons a day. Not exactly ideal conditions to create a verdant Augusta Golf Course look, considering that the typical 18-hole private course in the United States uses considerably more water during a course's growing season.

"I was a little nervous, to be honest with you," Carlson says. "No one had ever done this in the country without any pesticides." Yet, Carlson, a winner of the President's Award for Environmental Stewardship from the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, was the ideal candidate for the job. The bulk of his 40-year career was spent on Cape Cod at the Brewster Golf Course (now the Ocean Edge), where he had to deal with strict environmental regulations. Then, in 1998, he was chosen to help build the Widow's Walk course atop a sand-and-gravel pit in the coastal town of Scituate, Massachusetts. The former landfill, now replete with recycled materials like used carpeting for the bunkers, has reaped accolades for its sustainable design.

A year later, Carlson was on the Vineyard working with a British architect to create the links-style Vineyard Golf Course. Prevalent in the U.K., links golf takes advantage of the natural contours of the terrain to provide a bump-and-run style of play, where the fairways are wide and firm and the ball stays close to the ground. Involved in the initial planning stage of the project, Carlson knew full well to select turf that was resistant to disease, including good old fescue, a cool-season grass favored by British golfers long before pesticides

were an inkling of an idea. He was also fortunate that the weather on the Vineyard is a great ally in warding off malignant turf.

“The reason the Vineyard comes closest to the organic ideal is that it has one of the best growing conditions of any place in the country,” says Jim Snow, the National Director of the United States Golf Association’s Green Section. “It’s an island in the ocean and has a very moderate climate.”

Carlson eradicated much of the forest of spindly scrub oaks and pitch pines to provide a layout with wide-open air circulation and lots of sunshine, two of the most important components in combating turf damage. But that didn’t stop tan lesions from forming on the greens after the course opened in May 2002. So Carlson removed more trees and applied an organic pesticide to offset the so-called dollar-spot disease. Then came the grubs, skunks, crows, and, of course, weeds. Without the benefit of synthetic pesticides, Carlson resorts to nematodes, microscopic roundworms that attack and kill grubs, and he needs more workers than traditional golf courses do. He notes that the cost of extra employees is equivalent to the amount of money he would spend on pesticides.

So far, the 300 full-time members (who pay an introductory fee of $300,000 and yearly dues of $12,000) have been very forgiving. When you consider that some of those members are current and former CEOs of corporations such as Merrill Lynch, Comcast, and National City, demanding types who tend to renounce anything short of perfection, this seems remarkable.

Jay Swanson, a member since its inception, says, “I can’t tell any difference between this and another links course that uses pesticides. You don’t realize it’s organic.”

Which is good news, because as Snow notes, there are more than 70 courses in America doing their darnedest to use only organic fertilizers.

“They might use synthetic pesticides as a last resort, to spot treat, but they’re using the principals of organic golf and doing the best they can,” states Snow. “As time goes by, organic pesticides are going to be more and more in vogue.”

Carlson agrees. “An organic approach to golf management is definitely part of the future. You see it in Europe. You see it in Canada. A lot of countries are going that way.” The movement will grow significantly, he claims, as the golfing public becomes more tolerant toward blemishes.

“If golfers look more at courses for playability and less for visual perfection, we’ll be able to use a lot less pesticide.” That will certainly put the green back in the greens.