



Quail West Golf and Country Club, long regarded as one of the top facilities in golf-mad Naples, Fla., is prepping for a greens renovation with longtime superintendent Mark Black, CGCS, at the helm. Photos courtesy of Quail West

(renovation)

Don't call it a comeback

Mark Black, CGCS, and Quail West tackle a renovation project designed to modernize greens at the club and keep it among south Florida's elite.

It's a familiar feature at so many south Florida courses — the wooden retaining walls that form the hard edge separating putting surface from water hazard. The putting surface was typically designed to be flush with the top of that wall, but 25-30 years of sand and thatch accumulation have raised the greens up. In a region where topdressing is a year-round discipline, the putting surfaces can rise a half-inch every 12 months.

Mark Black, CGCS, director of golf course maintenance and grounds at the 36-hole Quail West Golf & Country Club in Fort Myers, Fla., estimates the ultradwarf putting surfaces on his Preserve Course today sit some 13 inches higher than the day the course opened for play in 1992. For golfers, the difference can be too gradual and subtle to notice — perhaps until the moment a ball rolls back off the green into the drink.

For Black and his crew? Well, they do notice the difference and have seen the agronomic and maintenance issues building for years. While the visuals are most stark beside retaining walls, it's a problem coursewide.

"As the green surfaces get to be that much higher, it makes some of the surrounding undulations disappear," says Black, who arrived from Bonita Bay 16 years ago, after construction and grow-in of both the Preserve and the neighboring Lakes Course (opened in two phases, in 1993 and '95).

"The interesting thing for ultradwarf growers is how topdressing programs affect the collars, not just the surrounds. The collars grow more aggressively — so fast that it affects surface drainage. And these ultradwarfs are so dense, when you start to lose surface drainage, when

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Black has mentored a host of superintendents who have gone on to manage some of southwest Florida's top golf facilities.

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it won’t sheet-flow off the putting surface, the moisture accumulates in those areas. In those parts of the green we’re battling pythium root rot and additional disease pressure.

“Obviously, I’m not the first one to manage aging greens with an above-average accumulation of mix, but I can tell you we maintain an aggressive aerification program in the summer months,” Black continues. “We continued incorporating and diluting organics with as much sand as we could. But there just comes a time when they won’t perform to the standards of member expectations — and our own expectations.”

Full-circle proposition

Push now comes to shove as Black and course architect Drew Rogers have embarked on a comprehensive plan for improvement of the Preserve, where all 18 greens and surrounds will be rebuilt, along with all 56 bunkers. It’s likely the Lakes Course will get a similar refurbishment when the Preserve project is complete.

Both 18s at Quail West are credited to architect Arthur Hills, whose firm Rogers joined the year the Preserve Course debuted. Rogers subsequently oversaw design and construction of the Lakes Course.

“You cringe a little bit when you consider how Florida courses were built at that time,” says Rogers, who formed his own architecture firm, JDR Design, in 2010. “Back in the ’90s, it was more typical to build the green separate from the surrounds. A cavity is built up with the layers of materials that compose a USGA green, of course. But there was one

big, looming problem that few in the industry paid enough attention to: You’ve got a cavity that is built up with layers of materials that are frankly different from everything around it.

“When we build today, we make darn sure the surrounds are identical and seamless — that, in terms of the soil profile, you can’t tell the green edge from the outside edge. Unfortunately, once greens in this part of the country get to be 25-30 years old (the typical life span of a USGA green in Florida), you can tell exactly where those edges, those transition areas are,” Rogers continues. “Little bumps and trenches develop around the edge of the green that are tough to maintain. And if your ball settles there? Well, it definitely affects playability ... and aesthetics.”

The work at Quail West is a full-circle proposition for Rogers, not merely for his revisitation of early designs, but also for the presence of Mark Black. The two met in the early 1990s, when Black was golf course superintendent at the Bonita Bay Club, perhaps Naples’ most prominent, multi-course development. Black would leave Bonita Bay for Quail West in 1998, but his time there was noteworthy. Not only did he oversee the development of some five separate 18-hole tracks, but Black also trained a veritable army of assistants who’ve gone on to take superintendent positions at some of the finest clubs in the Naples area.

“I just keep running into these guys, and they’re all recognizable because they clearly bring Mark’s expertise and dedication along with them,” Rogers says.

There is Matt Taylor, CGCS, a 22-year member of GCSAA who looked after the Fazio-designed East Course at Bonita Bay before taking the top job at 36-hole Royal Poinciana in Naples in 2000. Rogers is now renovating the Cypress course there.

There is Kenyon Kyle, CGCS, who left Black’s tutelage to build and grow in Shadow Wood Preserve in Estero. That was an Arthur Hills design where Rogers, by then a full partner in the firm, assumed lead architect duties. Kyle, a 19-year GCSAA member, then went off to Amelia Island before returning to Naples at Audubon Country Club, where he and Rogers are now collaborating on another refurbishment program.

Then there’s Hal Akin, CGCS, another 19-year member of the association who stayed put at Bonita Bay and today presides over the New Marsh, Creekside and Bay Island layouts.

“There are lots of other Mark Black protégés I don’t even know, but clearly here’s a fellow who produces talent,” Rogers says. “Guys

like Mark and Matt Schaffer (superintendent at Merion GC) and a few others, the Latshaws — they really demand a lot of their assistants and managers. It becomes sort of a way of life. You live and breathe the golf course. It's intense. It's demanding. But at the end of the day, the dynamic is fatherly. These assistants work hard because they're treated well, and that's a super motivator. They go on to do good things because they've been trained to succeed.

"I've always wanted to work directly with Mark because I've worked directly with so many of these guys who come from his farm, so to speak. Now I find myself with the chance to work directly with Mark, and I couldn't be more delighted," Rogers says.

'Just one of the offspring'

Black may embody the business in his corner of the world (he has been a GCSAA and Everglades GCSA member for 34 years), but he wasn't born to the profession. Black was "fortunate enough" to work for someone who was born to the job: Dan Hall, the longtime superintendent at Imperial Golf Club in Naples and himself the son of a superintendent. Black, a native of Lake Wales, Fla., got his first taste of golf course work at Arnold Palmer's



Quail West is a 36-hole facility featuring a pair of Arthur Hills-designed layouts — the Preserve (pictured here) and the Lakes courses. Drew Rogers, a former Hills protégé, will lead the upcoming renovation work.

Bay Hill Club and Lodge in Orlando. He qualified for and completed the golf course operations program at Lake City Community College (now called Florida Gateway College), then went to work for Hall.

"Yeah, there are a lot of young fellas who have worked with me, done a lot of great things, but I'm not sure it was because of me," Black says. "What they may not fully appreci-

ate is how much they got from Dan Hall. He's the godfather. I'm just one of the offspring."

Naturally, this family tree of superintendents all clustered in the Naples area invites some key comparisons. Such as, who's the snappiest dresser?

"That'd be me," Black deadpans.

And the best player?

"Me! Of course, that doesn't make me

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Returning Quail West's putting surfaces to their original design features and characteristics is job one of the club's upcoming renovation project.

business that I hope never dies.”

Final decisions

When we checked in with Black this past summer, final decisions had yet to be reached about just what turf he and Rogers would install on the Preserve Course. This is the other key component of the renovation, and Black is still researching the matter with his colleagues in Naples and the USGA.

“We’re awaiting the USGA report as we speak,” Black says. “There are off-types of bermuda that have contaminated our existing (ultradwarf) surfaces. Basically, it’s not unlike *Poa* does with bent greens. It’s a bermuda-grass type, but it behaves differently than the intended type. The growth habit, the susceptibility to drought, pests and disease is slightly different. That makes it tough because you have to treat one green different than you treat another. Something might be more effective on one green than another, and that creates inconsistent playing conditions for the golfers.”

“All this became very apparent to me over the past four to five years,” Black continues. “The last few we’ve had drought in summer and hot humid weather in the fall, which is perfect for disease. And if you don’t have greens that drain adequately or properly, you

any good.”

“The other thing you have to understand,” says Black, getting serious again, “is that Naples, Florida, has some of the finest superintendents in the country. There are a lot of really sharp guys, and the sharing of failures is what has always intrigued me in this business. What we get right is almost taken for granted. When things are bad, there are so many guys who are willing to stop and help and tell you what worked for them. That’s a part of the

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— Rogers

get a perfect storm of disease pressure. That’s hard to manage.”

Rogers says that, according to the USGA, once the contamination level gets to about 40 percent, courses should think seriously about removing that grass and establishing a new stand. Most of the greens at Quail West have gone beyond 60 percent contamination.

“It more or less forced the hand of the club to react,” Rogers says, noting that the non-original ultradwarf surfaces at Quail West are 16 years old and provide nothing close to the pure strain sought by all supers in this part of the country.

“At the same time we’re dealing with the contamination, the green complexes are 22 years old,” Black says. “We now have a greens mix that is 25 inches deep; a good average is 0.5 inch a year through topdressing. We’re on an average schedule. But they just don’t perform the way a USGA green is supposed to. They don’t drain and percolate like they did, and could, and should. In a region with 56-58 inches of annual rainfall, this has made it more difficult than we’d like.”

Rogers is marrying these agronomic efforts to a range of other course improvements befitting a 22-year-old course in a demanding climate — one that enables play 52 weeks a year.

“In large part, we are just piecing these golf courses back together,” Rogers explains. “They are 20-plus years old and showing their age. We see it in the bunkers, tees, around the greens. The greens we’ve talked about, but today we also understand how to move golf carts through holes better and more safely. Trees have grown and are adversely impacting play. Some bunkers are now out of position. The tees are small and perched up — tough to climb and tough for equipment to negotiate.”

“We’re also dealing with a slightly different demographic of member today, and we’re paying very close attention to their needs. Our plan involves details that will promote a more playable and enjoyable golf experience, but without negating the original design intent or the challenge from the back tees.”

“The membership,” Black adds, “is very happy with both golf courses. They’re not looking to have new golf courses when we’re done. They’d like the old ones returned to them, but just better versions.”

Hal Phillips is the managing director of golf and resorts for Mandarin Media, a public relations firm with offices in Portland, Maine; Park City, Utah; and Saigon, Vietnam, and the former editor of *Golf Course News*.



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