

A Dramatic Comeback

PGA member Jimmy Terry and GCSAA's Dick Gray lead the rejuvenation of PGA Golf Club



By Michael R. Abramowitz

It's not a state secret that PGA Golf Club in Port St. Lucie, Florida, was not in good shape just 18 months ago. Course conditions were nowhere near what anyone would expect from a facility with the PGA's name on it. Staff morale hung in the balance, as rounds played suffered along with them.

Editor's note:

This is the second in a series of articles highlighting the important relationship between PGA Professionals and GCSAA Superintendents.

Some of the problems were relatively low-hanging fruit – obsolete maintenance equipment was in dire need of replacement. Voila! Enter new Toro and Jacobsen mowers, sprayers and tri-plexes to expertly tend to the grasses.

Others were far more deep-rooted, such as the deteriorating course conditions, which partly were driven by a couple of 100-year floods that struck St. Lucie County in previous years; as well as by some well-intended, yet ineffective, maintenance practices that snowballed beyond control.

Different Callings

In early 2013, Superintendent Dick Gray, GCSAA, received a phone call from PGA of America President Ted Bishop and a group of PGA Executive Staff and Officers. Gray and Bishop knew each other from their superintendent days in Indiana, while Gray also had a relationship with Pete Dye that began in the 1960s at Crooked Stick Golf Club (Dye and Tom Fazio are the course designers at PGA Golf Club, while Jim Fazio designed the nearby PGA Country Club). Bishop reached out to Gray, saying: "Dick, we need your help."

Gray (*above left*), who designed The Florida Club and was instrumental behind Loblolly Pines and improvements to Jupiter Hills Club, listened intently. He knew full well about the course conditions through word of mouth. Yet, he saw this situation as a unique opportunity to put an exclamation point on his career's legacy by bringing PGA Golf Club back to glory.



PGA General Manager Jimmy Terry (*above right*), a PGA member, eventually started three months later, but it took an epiphany.

Terry and his wife, Rose, were a little surprised by what they saw upon their first visit. Rose even said to Jimmy, who was general manager at TPC San Antonio and TPC Harding Park at the time, "Would you rather just go home?"

While contemplating the question, he saw a group of PGA apprentices walking across the street from the PGA Education Center, following a checkpoint. For Terry, it was a calling. He made the decision right there that if offered the job he would take it, as he saw it as a means to give back to the organization that has given him so much throughout his career.

"The big thing is that I want my Association's golf courses to be the best they can be," Terry explains.

Terry and Gray had never worked together prior to PGA Golf Club. The two are separate personalities but their chemistry is readily apparent. Terry is a tall Texan who makes you feel at home. Gray, with a straw cowboy hat always in tow, is an entertaining straight shooter.

Together, they have instilled a dramatic comeback. The changes over 18 months are stunning. Greens, which once suffered from ring around the collar – literally – are now manicured. Fairways and tee boxes, which once were thin and diseased, are now lush. Overgrown vegetation has become picturesque scenery.

"We kind of see things through the same set of eyes," Terry says with pride. "The things I see and think are important are also things he sees and thinks are important. And if we are on opposite sides, we figure things out."

Dick Gray (left) and Jimmy Terry (right) have combined to right the ship at PGA Golf Club.

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Dick Gray installed "No!" signs on the course to keep golfers from venturing into sensitive areas. And it's working.



Early Dividends

All of this is part of a three-year plan that Terry and Gray have installed. Gray is quick to admit that it will take a few growing seasons to get everything as pristine as he would like, but many in golf are taking notice.

"All the things he's done over the past couple of years that we've talked about needed to be done (to improve the Dye Course), there's no way to put it all down," states Pete Dye. "Dick's done a good job, and I'm tickled to death with him."

Fellow course designer Tom Fazio has similar feelings about what he describes as the "additions" to PGA Golf Club. "I'm excited about what has been done and the good programs that are being put in place for the future of the golf courses," says Fazio.

Golfers are seeing a difference, too.

Darren Church, a guest from Riverview, New Brunswick, Canada, with a 2.7 handicap, played PGA Golf Club in March and posted his review on TripAdvisor.com: *"Well, a year later, I returned to the Dye Course (and) conditions were night (and) day vs. my 2013 trip. This course was in AMAZING shape. The greens crew has done a great job with it. All three courses here were in great shape ... Job well done by the Superintendent and his crew!"*

Terry and Gray both praise their staffs for not only turning around the courses but for instilling a new culture of customer service.

"I look at things as an inverted pyramid," explains Terry. "The GM is there for support. The staff does all the heavy lifting and hard work, and my job is to help them."

On the horizon in 2015 are changes that include the doubling in size of the clubhouse, which is being redesigned by the legendary Tom Hoch.

In the meantime, Gray realizes that he's doing things based on priorities and that there are items that will have to wait their turn.

To illustrate, over at the formerly private PGA Country Club — which Terry creatively steered to formally open to *both* the public and members on Nov. 1 (see the *PGA Village Update* page in next month's

issue for details) — the transformation of the 16th and 17th holes is nothing short of miraculous.

The par-4 16th had out-of-control marshland that blocked the view of the green from the fairway, making approach shots a crapshoot. The vast, overgrown vegetation has since been cut down to waist-level height, showcasing the emergence of manicured hedges that are mirrored on the 17th tee, a par 3 (*pictured above*) that now features the first bridge on the course.

A Big No-No!

One of Gray's signatures is the "No!" signs that dot the landscape periodically on the courses. They are a less-than-subtle reminder for golfers to avoid driving their golf cars near the area, as the maintenance staff gives some tender loving care to the course or new grass takes root. He started this practice at Loblolly Pines, and it was the one thing he found that everyone clearly understood.

"Seldom do we have someone run through a 'No!' sign," says Gray. "Folks understand what we're trying to do."

At first, Terry was unsure about the signs but has grown to appreciate them.

"It's not typical," reasons Terry, who is now considering putting an action zone of Gray saying "No!" on the golf carts' GPS, for when someone crosses the line. "It was like the Wild West before with people driving the carts where they want ... Those kind of issues have lessened as the courses have gotten better. I think overall people are respecting it and respecting the golf course."

It is sometimes tough to review a Mona Lisa when she's still just Mona, but in this case, the changes afoot are dramatic, impactful and consummate with the standards of the PGA of America.

"Who else in the world gets to work on four courses designed either by a Fazio or Pete Dye?" rhetorically asks Gray. "We built a better mousetrap. This is the home of the PGA. This is their place. You are working for the highest order of the game." ■