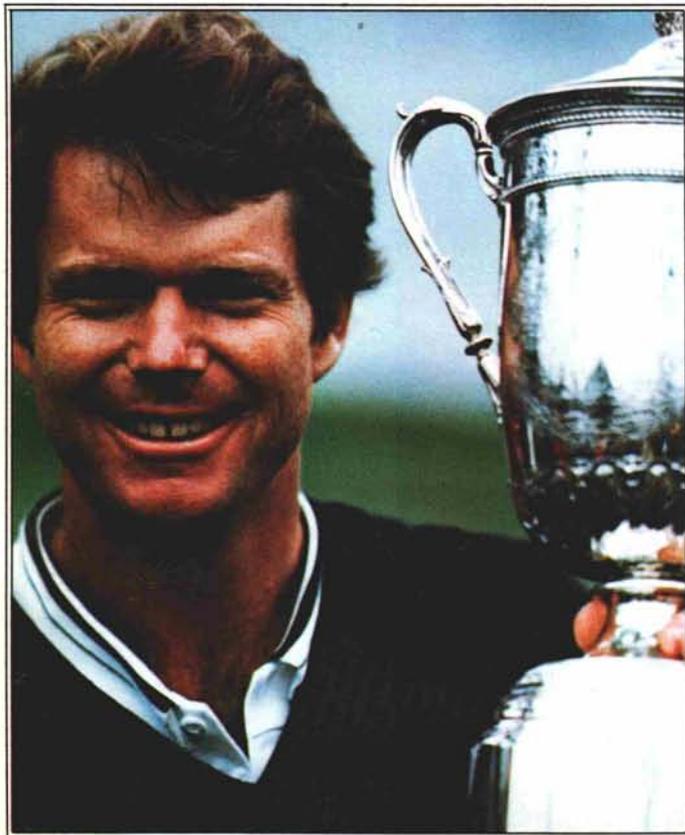


One Who Said Thanks



"I would like to thank the golf course superintendent. The course was in just about the best shape I've ever seen."

Those were the words offered by Tom Watson only seconds after accepting the United States Open trophy for his dramatic victory at Pebble Beach in 1982. After being handed the trophy by President Ford and Bill Campbell, president of the U.S.G.A., Watson held the trophy high in the air, proclaimed that he felt like a million dollars, thanked his lovely wife Linda — and then immediately and graciously thanked the golf course superintendent (Mike Phillips) for the fine conditions of the Pebble Beach course. That was the total extent of Watson's acceptance speech. As uncomplicated and sincere as the man himself.

How often have golf course superintendents watched championship after championship while anxiously waiting for a simple "thanks" to ring forth from the lips of a champion. If the thought's been voiced once, it's been voiced thousands of times: "Just once, I'd like to hear someone thank the superintendent who managed and prepared that golf course for the tournament." Well, Tom Watson fulfilled that long-standing request at the moment he officially became National Champion. He made up for a thousand who hadn't, because he was thoughtful and considerate enough to think of others at a time

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when many would have been in euphoric self-exaltation. It speaks for his character.

"Uncomplicated" and "sincere" is how Bill Spence, the golf course superintendent at Watson's home course of Kansas City Country Club, describes our National Champion. "One of the most straightforward people I've ever had the pleasure to meet. Tom Watson could never be described as pretentious. He tells it like he sees it and he cares about people."

When asked why he placed such a high priority on thanking the superintendent on that now immortal day in June while the world of golf looked on, Watson replied, "They're (superintendents) the people most responsible for the players having fun. If the golf course is not in good shape, then it's no fun to play — if it's in good shape, then it's very enjoyable to play. This is especially important to competitors in National Open championships. Where you really have to be exact and when it really counts, the condition of the course is most important."

superintendent at Kansas City Country Club. It was through these contacts and those with superintendents elsewhere that he became aware of the GCSAA and the role of our profession in golf. It is obvious that those early experiences left the young Watson with an indelible impression of the image of our profession. He explains his impression: "Superintendents are a combination of different bodies. They work more than most people — frequently more than an eight-hour-day. For example, when the weather is bad, Bill will be out at two o'clock in the morning to see if there is flooding. They're often at the mercy of the elements.

"Superintendents have to work hard and, mostly, have to really enjoy what they're doing. In this day and age, a golf course superintendent has to be an educated scientist, agronomist, an economist and a good people manager. If you put all this together with a love for a piece of earth, then you've got a good golf course superintendent."

**Watson compares a golf course to an artist's painting:
"In the end, it is the golf course superintendent
who has to finish the painting
and, in addition,
maintain it so the paint doesn't chip off."**

The Man And His Golf

To better understand why the reigning golf champion of both the United States and Great Britain places such a high priority on the role of the individual who manages the golf course, it is necessary to get to know Watson the man.

Bill Spence's description of Watson as unpretentious is most accurate. Watson is a reflection of the values championed by middle America. Spence's opinion was recently reinforced when the United States Jaycees named Watson as one of the Ten Outstanding Young Men in America — to say the least, a most deserving choice. And how much more middle American can one get than Watson's "Heart of America" hometown of Kansas City?

"What was it like growing up in the Midwest? Well, I got sunburned a lot, played 36 holes many times, ate bologna sandwiches and went round and round the golf course."

Round and round the golf course he certainly did travel. Watson began to play the game at the age of six. His father reportedly cut down the shaft of a three wood and had him solidly smacking the ball in a very short time. By the age of seven, he was noticed by the golf professional at Kansas City Country Club as already having developed a very balanced swing. The rest is now history. Where did Watson pick up his competitive instinct while growing up in the Midwest? "From my father and my older brother. I always wanted to beat my older brother. I couldn't beat him until I was about 11 years old and then finally did." Clearly, a demonstration of the positive motivation of sibling rivalry!

Perspective On The Profession

Young Watson also had frequent contact with the golf course

Perhaps this stands as a good lesson that many of today's golf course superintendents should recognize when dealing with all those young laddies and lassies running about their own links. The youngster you talk with and impress today, either positively or negatively, may very well be the winner of the National Championship of tomorrow. You may become his or her image of "the golf course superintendent." After all, the individual golf course manager setting an example, one-on-one, certainly is a decisive factor in determining professional image.

Not only does Watson have his impression of what a golf course superintendent is today — he also has a sound understanding of previous images and, perhaps, future as well.

"In the old days when superintendents were known as 'greenkeepers,' that was all that had to be done back then. They mowed the fairways and perhaps watered the greens. Then there came the 'green superintendent,' where they had more extensive irrigation systems and always watered the greens. Then came the title 'golf course superintendent' and much more sophisticated management."

Some have suggested that it's time for another name change. Watson has given some thought to the subject:

"The title 'manager' says it all. It may be better to say 'manager' rather than 'superintendent' simply because it's shorter and easier to say. I think 'golf course manager' is perfectly fine for a title, as it accurately describes the men and women who manage golf courses and that obviously means more than just the turf."

Today's Changing Golf World

Golf is more than just a game to Watson. As one sits and chats with the man, it becomes obvious that he recognizes there

Continued

is a business side to golf and he enjoys being part of the industry. Watson sees the change going on around the industry. He has an awareness that roles may be modifying in golf course management but prudently reserves judgment.

"I don't really have the expertise to say that I know how the role of the green committee is changing in course management. At Kansas City Country Club, I was in a position to say that I would become a permanent member of the green committee. The green committee is important to me because I just enjoy being around the golf course and I'm learning new ideas. Even though Bill deals with every member of the committee, I can still serve as a liaison between Bill and those members who may not know as much about the golf course.

"Bill and I share the same feelings toward the golf course — he simply knows the lady better than I do. I've played it a lot but he's out there every day."

The current National Champion definitely doesn't feel that his role on the green committee is one of criticizing the golf course, a trap that some members of green committees can fall into. He offers some sage observations on the subject of criticism: "When you're a kid, every golf course is perfect and there is never a thing to complain about. When you get older, and so-called 'wiser,' you understand the game much more and can criticize the course too much." Perhaps green committees should include a few junior members for balance!

Watson admits that he actually may have harbored latent desires to become a golf course superintendent. "Yes, I certainly have. I've had a desire to go to Kansas State and study turf-grass management and agronomy. In fact, I'm currently becoming involved in the design of a golf course along with Sandy Tatum and Rees Jones, and I know nothing about agronomy or turf management.

"But I do have my experience to count and I know that it takes skill to putt firm, fast greens, just as it takes skill to manage and maintain firm, fast greens. It is to the superintendent's advantage to maintain greens in that manner because they don't damage as easily."

Tomorrow's Golf

Just as superintendents are concerned about the future of golf, so also is Watson. He is optimistic about golf's future — with one exception:

"The only fear I have about golf is that we're not going to get enough young people involved in the game, and that is the first responsibility of the PGA. All the pros around this country must realize that the future of the game of golf is to get young kids interested in it. Now, it is more expensive than picking up a football or basketball, but it is not as expensive as standing around sticking quarters in video games.

"We have a very good program here at Kansas City CC, in conjunction with the PGA. It's called the 'Clubs For Kids Program.' The whole idea is to target kids who have never played the game before, such as inner-city kids. Many have no idea what golf is. Some even think that golf is played with a bat.

"We have the kids come out and we give them a golf club and a lesson. It's beautiful because you just might make a golfer out of 10 percent of them and they all get exposed to a game that they can turn to later in their lives."

Watson genuinely believes in the game — and how it can

benefit kids in ways other than providing recreation — and he continues: "Golf is still the best game there is. You learn to play by the rules and that builds character. The real challenge is individual. The person plays against the course, learning to deal with failure and success."

Of course, in his modesty he doesn't mention the one additional benefit the Clubs For Kids Program at Kansas City CC offers these kids — Tom Watson as an example of the discipline, character and individualism they need to emulate.



The Prospects For Amateurism

Watson's amateur record did not foreshadow his future successes as a pro, and he admits that his game in those days had not yet developed. He did compete in the NCAA as a member of the Stanford golf team and, in addition to his amateur experience at Stanford, also gained something that most certainly prepared him for the challenges of the professional tour — a degree in psychology.

With regard to the amateur golfers of today, Watson feels that they are the only *true* amateurs left.

"What's an amateur today? Basically, golf is the only place where true amateurs are left in sport. You can hardly call college football or basketball an amateur sport. The lack of true amateurism in other sports today is probably the main reason why amateurs fail to receive much recognition. It's a trend in the country that amateurs are simply not recognized nearly as much as they were when I was growing up."

When asked if he thought placing golf back in the Olympics would enhance the recognition of amateur golfers he explained, "There is no reason why golf should not be in the Olympics. I would certainly like to see golf back in the Olympics, because it would really make something significant of the amateur game of golf. It should be done."

Watson's Own Future

Just as Watson made the transition from amateur golfer to champion professional, he is now testing his talent as a golf course architect. He does not intend to jump into it hastily, but only to explore his abilities.

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"It's just like my getting involved in being a professional golfer. At first I had no idea as to what kind of a professional golfer I would be. I didn't have a great amateur record. I did know that I loved golf and had greater talent in golf than I had in psychology." Currently involved in the design and construction of a new course near Pebble Beach, Watson adds, "My role in the design of Spanish Bay will be a very muted one, one of consulting architect. It will be a learning experience for me in how to build a golf course. Of course, it may be my first and last attempt. I may find out that I don't like it.

"I know at this time it excites me no end to think of helping to build a golf course on the Monterey Peninsula — and in an area that lends itself so well to a links course. It's right on the ocean and it gives me a feeling of tradition as well as a sense of golf that exists in Scotland, Ireland and England.

"There will be a lot of play on this golf course, and that is where the scientific expertise and management of the golf course superintendent comes in. We have to have a good manager there and he or she has to develop a good program in cooperation with the architects."

Watson compares the design and construction of a golf course to an artist's painting: "In the end, it is the golf course superintendent who has to finish the painting and, in addition, maintain it so the paint doesn't chip off."

As for Watson's preferences of turfgrass varieties, he prefers zoysia in the Midwest and, to the chagrin of a few turfgrass managers, kikuyugrass as providing the best playing surfaces.

"Personally, a good zoysiagrass fairway is like a good kikuyugrass fairway. Kikuyugrass is the best playing surface anyone can play. It's indestructible and a perfect playing surface. In fact, Jack Nicklaus recently attempted to obtain seed in order to establish kikuyugrass at a new course he is building in California. He was unable to get the seed, as it is still considered a noxious weed in some areas."

Although kikuyugrass and zoysiagrass may have a definite place in the futures of many golf course superintendents, in Watson's immediate future he faces defending his American title at Oakmont. Then, a bit later, he'll travel on to the Royal Birkdale and the defense of his British title. Further into the future, his travels and destinations become less fixed. However, when it comes to where home will be, he leaves no doubts and has plans for some golf activities there.

"I love Kansas City and I don't plan on moving from here. Down the road, I'd like to see a tour championship established in the city. Starting this year, we're giving this area a Midwest junior golf tournament sponsored by the PGA. The PGA is going to run it and give the kids a chance to enjoy a little competition."

When asked what special message he would convey to superintendents if given the opportunity, Watson didn't have a complaint or a pet peeve. He gave it some careful thought and then explained the only advice he would offer to superintendents was that they should "just keep experimenting and improving the courses."

What more complimentary statement could one receive from the Champion of America and Britannia? This time, it's our turn to say — thanks. □

MIGHTY OAKMONT RUMBLES AGAIN



Photos by Brian Morgan