



Tight common bermudagrass fairway at Pala Mesa Resort.

TEAMWORK

**Pays Off
For Pala Mesa**

Teamwork has always been important to Bob Dobek, golf course superintendent at Pala Mesa Resort in Fallbrook, CA. The greatest moments in his life and career have resulted from working with others to achieve a common goal.

From the U.S. Olympic Hockey Team in 1976 to the management team at Pala Mesa, winner of the 1988 John Deere Golf Team Championship, Dobek has always been a team player with spectacular success. *SportsTURF* thought you'd be interested in knowing how teamwork can affect the success and condition of a golf course.

Dobek has fond memories of the '76 Winter Olympics in Innsbruck, Austria. As starting center for the U.S., he remembers waiting nervously for the faceoff to begin the semi-finals against Poland. With two players injured, the rest of the team had to stretch their talents beyond their limit if they were to advance to the finals.

They were assured a bronze medal if they beat the Poles by seven goals. At the final buzzer, the Americans were on top, but only by five goals. Olympic rules eliminated them from medal play. Dobek returned home to Detroit, MI, with a sense of accomplishment and a great respect for teamwork.

His life as a team player didn't stop with the Olympics. He continued playing varsity hockey at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, where he received a degree in business. After college, he was drafted by the San Diego Mariners, a professional hockey franchise owned by McDonald's founder Ray Kroc. When Kroc decided to disband the team in 1977, Dobek had a choice: move to Birmingham, AL, and play professional hockey, or change careers.

Throughout his hockey career, Dobek had enjoyed playing golf. To prepare himself mentally for each Mariner home game, he would play 18 at Singing Hills Country Club in El Cajon. Golf seemed to improve his concentration in hockey.

In the fast-paced game of hockey, he had to make split-second decisions based upon set plays and pure instinct. In golf, his main opponent was the course. The contrast between a cold, flat rink and the rolling landscape of Singing Hills captivated him. It didn't take Dobek long to seek out Superintendent Dave Fleming for an insider's view of the course and how it was maintained.

Dobek and Fleming became golf partners. The more Dobek asked about course design and maintenance, the more Fleming thought he saw a budding superintendent. When the decision to disband the Mariners was announced, Fleming invited Dobek to join the staff at Singing Hills. To his surprise, Dobek accepted.

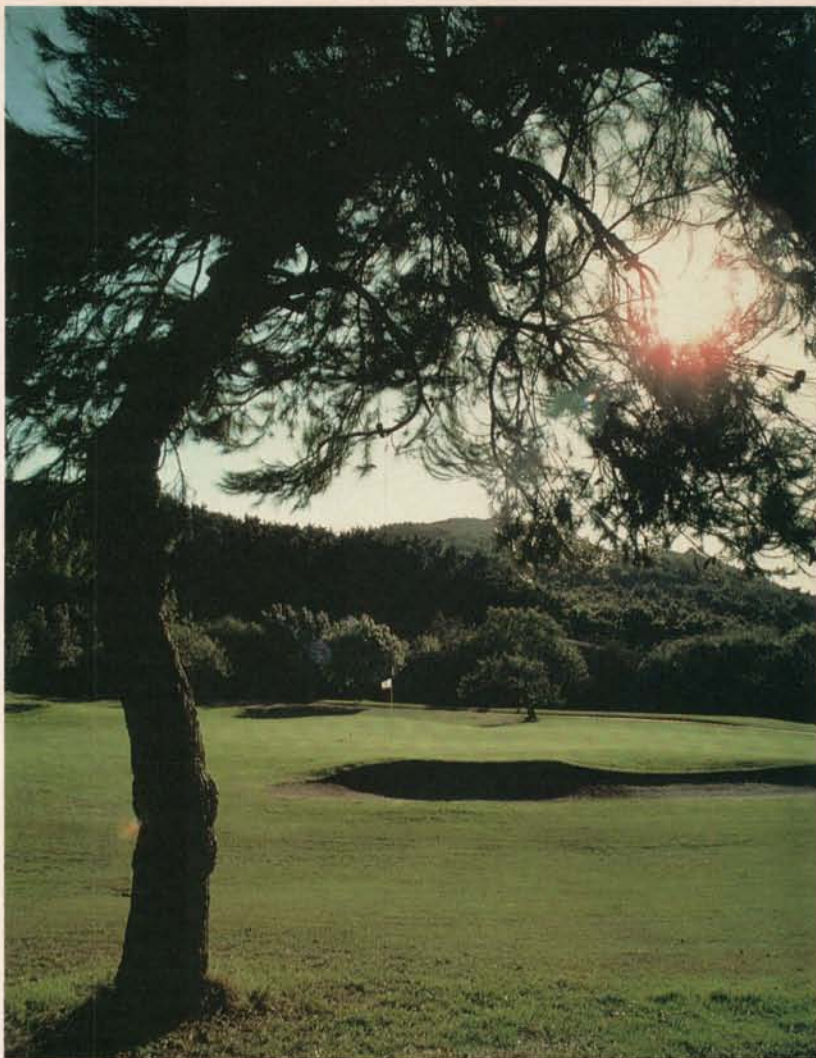
For seven years at Singing Hills, Fleming and Dobek worked side by side. When a fluke storm flooded the course and wiped out 42 of the 54 greens, Dobek was

introduced to the fine details of reconstruction.

"Basically, we had to rebuild the whole golf course," he recalls. "Talk about a team effort! We really had to pull together that year." Dobek was hooked. After that experience, he enrolled in the two-year Nursery Landscape Technology program at Mesa College in San Diego, graduating in 1982.

In 1981, North American Resorts purchased the aging Pala Mesa Resort in nearby Fallbrook. Competition had grown tremendously in the San Diego resort industry since Pala Mesa was built in 1961. The stakes were higher. A major key to the success of these resorts was the condition and quality of their golf courses.

The Slavik family, which owns the company, decided in 1984 to make their move: to build a convention center and improve the course and grounds. They started looking for a superintendent with experience in golf course renovation. The timing was perfect for Dobek, since he now had the experience and education to take on a challenge on his own. With Fleming's support, he got the job.



Pines majestically frame this bunkered green at dusk.

That same year, Pala Mesa hired golf professional Chris Starkjohann to develop instructional and merchandising programs for the course. John Slavik, the company president, made it clear he wanted Dobek, Starkjohann, and Club Manager Danna Campbell to work together as a team to bring new life to Pala Mesa. To develop an esprit de corps, he encouraged them to play golf together. For Campbell, the financial expert, that meant she had to learn how to play, which she did enthusiastically with Starkjohann's help.

By playing the course, its flaws became obvious to the team. All the greens on the back nine were virtually dead. A previous experiment of plugging hybrid bermudagrass into the existing mixture of *Poa annua* and old bentgrass had failed. Temporary greens had been cut out of the common bermuda fairways and an automatic two-putt rule was established.

Dobek's first move was to build a 15,000 square foot nursery with Penncross bentgrass. Yet, he needed a temporary solution to the dead greens until the sod from the nursery was ready and he could start

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Three greens have been rebuilt with Penncross sod from the resort's nursery.

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rebuilding. His only choice was chemical renovation, killing the remaining bermuda, bent and Poa with glyphosate. In September, he aerified the dead greens heavily and seeded with Seaside, a salt-tolerant creeping bentgrass. His final step was to topdress

with mason sand, irrigate, and hope for the best.

The most important season for the resort business in Southern California begins in October. The greens had to be ready for the peak season . . . and they were. By October 20, the nine problem greens were back open and the temporary greens were gone.

By then, Dobek had also overseeded the tees and fairways with perennial ryegrass. This was done by scalping and verticutting the common bermuda with a Toro 450D five-reel, hydraulic fairway mower. After removing the debris with an Olathe vacuum, he broadcast the seed and dragged it in.

The emergency work performed by Dobek and his crew paid off. The confidence of the Pala Mesa team grew, and their success opened the doors for Dobek to purchase more equipment and to create a five-year plan to rebuild tees and greens.

The new convention center would make the resort busy year-round and increase the importance of the summer condition of the course. That meant doing all they could to improve the health of the Poa in the summer with better drainage, more precise irrigation, and a close watch on diseases. The greens are 85 to 90 percent Poa.

"I'll never forget the first time we aerified the greens," says Dobek. "The stench from anaerobiosis was so bad we had to wear masks!" It turned out the greens had not been aerified in two years. They were compacted and had no subsurface drainage. The silty soil tested at a pH of 7.5 to 7.7 and was high in both chlorides and salts.

To restore drainage and improve root depth, Dobek developed a plan to incorporate sand into the root zone by coring and sand topdressing. He started the following summer, aerifying and topdressing the

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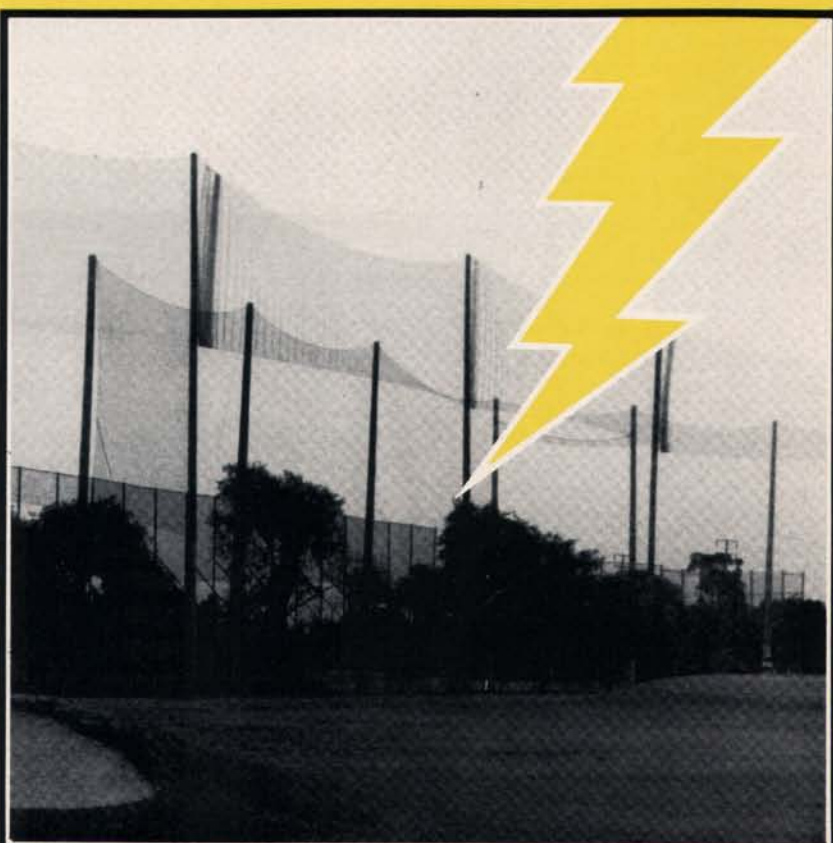
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Santa Ana Country Club, Costa Mesa, Calif.

greens five times. He then injected wetting agents into the Rain Bird irrigation system and flooded them to leach out the salts and chlorides.

"In this valley you live with Poa," Dobek points out. "Bentgrass just isn't aggressive enough during the winter. That's when the Poa shines. The test comes during the summer, especially in July and again in September, when the Santa Ana winds kick up. For three months you have to babysit it, being real careful with fertilizers, irrigation, and now disease."

The disease he is referring to is summer patch, a root disease that hit most of the Poa courses in the area during the past two years. "We couldn't identify the problem at first," says Dobek. "Joe Vargas (turf pathologist at Michigan State University) happened to be out here last year and gave us the answer. Since then, we've been on a preventative fungicide program with benomyl." This is in addition to summer applications of Subdue and/or Koban for pythium control.

Pala Mesa has rebuilt one green each year for the past three years. The main reason is to improve drainage and root growth. The other is to take out some of the more severe undulations to allow a wider choice of pin placements. "John (Slavik) makes the final decision on grading and reshaping," adds Dobek.

The crew strips off the top 16 inches of soil and installs a network of four-inch per-



The Pala Mesa golf team savoring victory after the John Deere Team Championship, (L to R) Jim Davis, Bob Dobek, Danna Campbell, Chris Starkjohann, and John Slavik.

forated drainpipe. After lining the bottom with a four-inch layer of pea gravel, they bring in river sand, amending it with fir bark. The new root zone is fumigated before the Penncross sod from the nursery is laid.

"It takes about six weeks to rebuild a green and get it back in play," states Dobek.

"So far, we've rebuilt three greens and reseeded six others." To make certain each piece of sod cut from the nursery is level, the meticulous Dobek turns it upside down on plywood and shaves off some of the soil with the bedknife of an old mower.

The greens are toppedressed with sand

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Water and trees make the approach to this large undulating green challenging.

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every four to six weeks. They are aerified four times a year before topdressing. "After three years of repeated coring and topdressing, the soil is now a sandy loam texture," Dobek reveals. "We no longer detect an odor when we aerify." The cutting height of the Jacobsen Greens Kings is set at 1/8-inch in the fall, winter and spring and 5/32-inch during the summer.

Four tees have been converted from common bermuda to Tifgreen. All the tees are aerified four times a year and topdressed monthly. The tee mower is kept at 3/8-inch year-round.

Fairways are aerified three times a year and maintained at 1/2-inch with the 450D. The common bermuda has few problems with diseases, weeds or insects. Divots in the aggressive turf fill in rapidly. Thin or thatchy areas are verticut and seeded in late spring.

The cart paths have been rebuilt and golfers are required to keep their carts on them during certain times of the year.

"This is a classic golf course and we intend to keep it that way," says Dobek. "It reminds golfers of some of the great courses they played back East, lined with mature pines and oaks." If you look closely at the desert foothills you also see sagebrush, tall eucalyptus, and junipers. It's a challenging course at 6,500 yards, with tight fairways, undulating greens, and heavily bunkered greens. Nearly 40 large bunkers and three lakes challenge the golfer.

Today the resort and convention center are busy both summer and winter. Nevertheless, the management team of Slavik, Starkjohann, Campbell and Dobek still find time to play their course regularly. With all the original flaws corrected, the team now discusses small refinements as they play, like tucking the tees further back

into the trees to add yardage or reshaping greens to adjust for the shade from the trees as they grow taller.

"You need to make small improvements each year to keep classic courses in top condition," says Dobek. "It's condition that impresses golfers and makes them want to come back. After a few rounds on a Pete Dye course, they want to return to a course they feel comfortable playing."

With each improvement, the Pala Mesa team's game got a little better. They missed the first Deere Team Championship in 1987 at PGA National in Palm Beach Gardens, FL. They were determined not to miss the next one.

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The Deere Team Championship started out two years ago as a way of introducing all the decision makers at golf courses to the company's products and distributors. They recruited the PGA to set up and direct a series of sectional golf tournaments in which the superintendent, club manager, golf professional, and club president play together as a team. The winners of more than 40 regional events advance to a national championship.

PGA set up the tournaments in a modified scramble format, explains Clair Peterson, tournament director for Deere. In this format the professional plays his own ball while the rest of the team plays best ball, using at least two drives from each member of the team. The pro helps the others plot strategy. At the end of the tournament, the pro's score is added to the score of the other three.

"To score well a team has to plan each stroke, utilizing the strengths of each player," explains Pete Wofford, PGA's information manager. "That requires a group decision on every shot. If you don't work well together, you won't win a scramble."

The pro lends his expertise on shotmaking, while the superintendent advises the team on the effects of the condition of the course, such as the speed, grain or softness of the greens. The club manager and president witness the skills of their staff in reading the course and reap a different kind of reward from working together as a team.

The Pala Mesa team had an advantage in the 1988 sectional since it was held there. But they were just as awestruck as the rest of the finalists by the tough Jack Nicklaus Resort course at PGA West. In the championship, the Deere distributor representative serving the club joins the team to play best ball with the amateurs. Jim Davis from Hydro-Scape in San Diego, a two-handicapper, was Pala Mesa's Deere representative.

"We had one day to practice and build our strategy," recalls Starkjohann, captain of the team. "The course had just been reopened after overseeding. The ryegrass was young and slick, so we expected some flyer lies. But we had been practicing at home in similar conditions."

"The fairways were just as narrow as ours. Instead of trees, the Nicklaus course had big, steep-walled bunkers, lakes, and mounds topped with lovegrass. Water is a bigger factor at PGA West."

"The bent greens had about the same undulation as ours, but more grain. Since ours are Poa, they were about as fast as the low-cut bent," noted Starkjohann.

For the next two days, everything seemed to click for the Pala Mesa team. At the end of the first round they were one stroke off the pace.

"Everybody got hot in the final," Dobek recalls. Starkjohann shot a 70 the first day. Campbell, playing from the ladies' tees, drove over 150 yards consistently. Instead of using just two of her drives, they used more. Dobek and Davis, both long hitters, provided strength on drives and fairway shots. Slavik proved invaluable with his chipping.

The final day was a shotgun start with the Pala Mesa team beginning on the tenth hole. "Danna (Campbell) sank a 35 footer right off the bat," Starkjohann remembers vividly. "Then John (Slavik) sunk two long birdie putts. We ended up birdieing the first five holes!"

With one hole left to play, Starkjohann was worried. "The ninth hole is a par 4 with water. In the first two rounds, my drive went into the lake. This time not only did my drive end up in the lake, so did everybody else's. We had to take drops. Bob hit an unbelievable eight iron 15 feet from the hole. With that inspiration, I hit mine five feet inside his.

"As we walked up to the ninth green, we knew we had to sink our puts to save par and have any chance to win the tournament. Dana, Bob, and John all missed the 15-footer. It now was up to Jim and me. The rest is like a dream. Jim rolled his right into the center of the hole for their par. We all went nuts! I stepped up to my ball, having read the break on Jim's. Like fate, I caught the right side and it dropped in the cup. What a great sound!

When Pala Mesa's score was posted, they realized they had the lead by two-tenths of a point. When the last team finished, nearly 30 minutes later, they remained on top of the leader board.

To the team, the victory meant more than a trophy. It was the climax of five years of consistent teamwork. Not only had they brought their resort back to life, they had developed a rapport that held up under competition.

This year the sectional was again held at Pala Mesa. But this time the team from Mission Trails in San Diego rallied on the final



An outbreak of summer patch forced Dobek to treat his Poa greens with benomyl.

hole to beat Pala Mesa by one stroke. "We'll be back next year," Dobek promised.

Sectional tournaments are being held across the country until October, says Deere's Peterson. This year the championship will be played on two courses in La Quinta November 16-19. The 40 finalists will play one round on the Nicklaus Resort Course at PGA West and the second on the Dunes Course at the La Quinta Hotel.

Two teams, Pala Mesa Resort and Ocean Pines Golf & Country Club in Ocean City, MD, winner of the first Deere Team Championship, have shown that teamwork pays off in more ways than one. The club president, club manager, golf professional and superintendent have a joint stake in their course. By working and playing together, they can accomplish more than they could as individuals. Just ask Bob Dobek. ●

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