

# Chris Tilghman Sets His Own Course

By Matthew Trulio



Gator Hole Golf Course is situated on a wooded site in North Myrtle Beach, SC, just a few blocks from the ocean.

It's a warm evening at Gator Hole Golf Course and Chris Tilghman's dogs, a black labrador and an English setter, are running wild on the third fairway. The golfers are gone, the pro shop is closed, and Tilghman is walking the course, inspecting each green and fairway, looking for areas that need water.

The dogs are fairly out of control with excitement, as they are whenever Tilghman takes them on his inspection rounds of the 6,000-yard, 18-hole course in North Myrtle Beach, SC. It's a ritual that Tilghman performs a least once a week.

Such are the benefits of being a course superintendent, and co-owner.

"From the positive standpoint, I suppose I am my own boss," Tilghman admits. "My brother Phil and I discuss everything we may do to the course, but ultimately the decision is left to me. I don't have a lot of owners or a greens committee breathing down my neck,

but being an owner has its own set of responsibilities. In a sense, I'm looking after my own money, so I'm not going to go hog wild doing nutty stuff."

## Planting The Seed

Golf has been a part of 36-year-old Tilghman's life since he started playing it as a boy. He grew up playing the courses in North Myrtle Beach, and dreamed of golfing professionally. "But I realized at a very young age that I could never play competitively," he admits.

The Tilghman family owned several tracts of land in the area, and Chris' father, Charles, was a local developer and avid golfer. He opened Surf Golf Club, an 18-hole course, with a group of local businessmen in 1960, on a parcel of the family's land. Chris played the course as a boy. As a high school student, he worked there as a helper in the summers.

Tilghman became "hooked," on the work, he recalls. After high school he

enrolled at Clemson University in South Carolina to study turfgrass management.

"I did my share of fooling around," he laughs. "But when it came to getting serious, I got serious."

He returned to North Myrtle Beach after graduating from Clemson in 1977. The Tilghmans had sold or developed all but one of their parcels of land, and Charles wanted to keep the remaining parcel in the family. He gave the land to Chris and Phil, with the stipulation that they couldn't sell it. The brothers spent many hours talking about what to do with it, and how to best use their respective talents. A golf course was a natural choice.

Phil put together the financing. That secured, Chris and Phil selected Reese Jones to design the course. From the first day of construction, Chris was on the course, which includes a 14-acre natural lake and is lined with various hard-

woods such as holly, oak, maple, and pine. The course opened in 1980.

"I was lucky, because I had the opportunity for input into its construction," he says. "Most of the changes I suggested were minor, like not uprooting certain trees. I watched them put in the irrigation system, so I know where *everything* is."

### Money Matters

The land for Gator Hole, Tilghman concedes, was in his family—a family that is well-known in North Myrtle Beach. However, the course itself is the product of the brothers' hard work.

Their finances, especially during construction and the first few years of operation, were tight. To help keep down costs, Chris bought as much used equipment as he could.

"We almost never bought brand new equipment, but we always bought good equipment," he explains. "We cut our roughs today with a vintage, 1970 Toro Park Master.

"The last two greensmowers we bought cost about \$200 a piece, and we completely rebuilt both of them for about \$2,000," he adds.

Working within the budget, Tilghman notes, has been tricky, but dividing management responsibilities was never an issue. Phil is the general manager of the course. (He's also the Mayor of North Myrtle Beach.) Chris, of course, filled the superintendent position.

"Since Phil and I are owners, we put a lot of money back into the golf course," Tilghman says. We're not Hilton Head—blue collar people from the North come down here to play. We just try to make the *course* the best it can be, and it works. We hear about it from the golfers."

Adds Tilghman, "We're a relatively short course, so we need an edge. Ours is quality."

### Keeping The Edge

The golf course maintenance team at Gator Hole includes Tilghman, his assistant, four full-time equipment operators, a full-time mechanic, and two part-time mechanics. In the summers, two to three interns from nearby Horry Technical College's golf/turf management program work on the course, as well as other college students.

His philosophy of course maintenance is simple: If it works, consistent-

ly he'll do it. Tilghman is not one to do something simply because that's the way other courses in the area do it. He experiments, blending his hands-on experience and formal education, until he finds what is best for his course, such as overseeding earlier than other courses in the area.

While most courses in Myrtle Beach overseed in October, Tilghman overseeds in mid-September. "My reasoning is that October is a pretty big month for us," he explains. "By overseeding in September, the greens are already germinated and pretty hard by October, so we get a jump. People told me I was crazy to time it this way because of disease pressure, but after four years of doing it I notice some of them are following suit."

He overseeds the Tifgreen bermuda greens with a single ryegrass variety, blended with a single fescue variety, at 30 pounds per 1,000 square feet. Thirty days later, he overseeds again "to fill in the greens" with *poa trivialis* at three pounds per 1,000 square feet.

The Tifway fairways are overseeded with either a single or multiple vari-

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## Tilghman

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ety ryegrass at 400 pounds per acre. He uses the same seed on the Tifway tees at 20 pounds per 1,000 square feet.

"The fairway rate is a little heavy for around here, but that's the way I like it," he says. "Historically, February, March, April, and May are our heaviest golf season—this way, we have them playing on ryegrass predominantly, and I think that gives us an edge in appearance and playability."

Aeration, using a Toro machine, is another area where Tilghman goes against the local grain. He aerates the greens in February using 1/2-inch tines.

"Most people are afraid to aerate then because of the cold," he notes. "But one year, I had to do it early for some reason I can't remember, and the results were fantastic. We probably have 10,000 to 15,000 rounds of golf played here by the end of fall, so it's tough to get through spring without localized dry spots if you don't aerify. We always seem to get a mild winter break in February, and the week before we aerate, we fertilize. Then I punch holes and drag the plugs back in.



Chris Tilghman.

We do it again in early June, July, and August, but with 5/8 inch tines."

Although he used to aerify the fairways with the same unit, he's switched to a PTO-driven Howard Turf Quaker, which he says vibrates while cutting grooves in the sandy soil. The results he says, have been "tremendous" and the cleanup is minimal. The downside, says Tilghman is time: It takes him a week to 10 days to use the machine on all the course's fairways. The fairways are also verticut two to three times in the summer with a Jacobsen Fairway Verticutter.

If Tilghman seems particular about how his course is maintained, he is even more so about its irrigation. He uses a Toro Vari-Time 4000 hydraulic controller, and all the course's heads are fully automatic.

"During the summer, I usually water everything twice a week, but "I don't have anything set as far as an irrigation schedule goes—it's always done as needed," he asserts. "It's a matter of 'feel by eye.'"

### Rewards Of Staying The Course

An easy-going individual by nature, he still has high expectations for Gator Hole's playing conditions. However, he has relaxed somewhat in the 12 years since it opened.

"When I first got out of Clemson, I wanted to do *everything* on a golf course," he laughs. "But then comes the reality of 'Hey, this is a business and I've got to make it work.' So you cut your expectations a little, and that's okay because you don't have to do everything you ever dreamed of to have a quality course. I'll still have high expectations of how I want the course to look and play. I still want to have an edge." □

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