

# Part 2



LIFESTYLES  
**HOME**  
& GARDENS

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Reading Bones to Tell Their Stories, B3



Newsday Photo / Ken Spencer

# PROTECTING THEIR TURF

A crew of more than 100 will be on hand to maintain the finely groomed grass at the U.S. Open

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# THE GREENS TEAM

These experts have been working for months — some for years — to make sure Bethpage Black's grass is in prime condition for next week's U.S. Open



**Craig Currier**  
Golf Course  
Superintendent

"You know, most people think of golf course guys as Weed Whacker guys," says Craig, who seems to have found his dream job at Bethpage. "But we're not. A lot goes into what we do."

**T**hey tell me it's a perfect day for golf. Warm but not hot, a short-sleeve-shirt kind of day with just the hint of a breeze ruffling the blue-stem grass along the outer fingers of the bunkers. I'm no judge of the conditions that affect driving a little white ball off a tee and cajoling it into a small metal cup sunk in the ground. But even a non-golfer can appreciate the colors of sky and earth here on the Black Course at Bethpage State Park. The white sand of the bunkers, the shades of green running from the tee box to the fairway to the greens. The tall, leafy trees beyond the rough that reach for wispy clouds in a bluer-than-blue sky.

I'm not a golfer, and even if I were, I'd be a million putts away from the professionals who will tee off at this fabled public golf course next Thursday for the 102nd U.S. Open. To me, an ace is something that's higher than a king and a birdie is what little kids call a robin. I threw out my iron years ago and the only bogie I'm familiar with ran a gin joint in Casablanca.

I'm here as a garden writer to see how the grass grows, to get an idea of what goes into preparing more than 7,000 yards of pampered turf for one of golf's most prestigious tournaments. And, along the way, to learn about some of the environmental practices that have made the course a certified Audubon sanctuary.

I'm also checking out some of the players. And I'm not talking about Tiger Woods and Veejay Singh and David Duval and Sergio Garcia and Ernie Els. They're just megabuck golf stars.

I'm talking about pros like Craig Currier, the park's 31-year-old golf course superintendent, who grew up on a dairy farm near Utica and has been teeing off since he was 10 and is living out a childhood dream at Bethpage. Or Dave Catalano,

the park director, who hired Craig five years ago when he started planning for the Open and the renovation of the once-down-trodden course known as Bethpage Black, on which duffers and pros play 250 rounds a day.

Or Garret Bodington, the supervisor of the Black Course, whose office, once a seed house, is among the oldest buildings in the 70-year-old park that was the vision of master planner Robert Moses and has grown to include a complex of five hilly, wooded, 18-hole courses.

I'm also talking about supporting players like Kathie Wegman of Patchogue, the Integrated Pest Management expert who ferrets out cutworms and dollar spot and brown patch. IPM is based on frequent monitoring to catch diseases and pest problems early, then using the least toxic methods to get them under control. It gets a little more complicated, but I shorthand it as a pesticides-as-last-resort approach.

Or Victor Azzaretto of Valley Stream, a horticulturist who grows roses behind the 13th green and nurtures lady slipper orchids on a hillside near the 16th tee and transformed an abandoned valley into a wildlife and native plant habitat. Or crew members like Robert "Surf" Miller, who rakes the bunkers. Surf has a degree in earth science and he's had lots of

sands-on experience — he's been a lifeguard at Jones Beach and Robert Moses and Hither Hills State Parks. "Dirt, rocks and sand are my thing," he says. "I'm definitely in the right place — the bunkers."

This was just two weeks before the U.S. Open, when an estimated 42,500 spectators are expected to descend upon the park each day. After five years of conditioning, the fine-tuning is under way.

"Things are going well," says Craig Currier, the head tuner. He is at the course going over details with Garret, who worked with him at the Masters Tournament at Augusta National in 1997. Craig mentions that a landscaper is delivering plants to dress up the corporate tents and then he's on his way to check on a hundred other details. I last see him turning on an irrigation system. More than four miles of underground pipes have been installed to supply 750 new sprinkler heads that each spew 30 gallons a minute.

Craig and Dave had brought me up to par on sprinkler heads and green speeds and tee boxes a few days before, when a wind-driven rain was roughing up the roughs and running down the fairways and soaking the greens and bunkers. We were in the renovated clubhouse that was originally built in the early 1930s as a Depression-era work project, and a wedding reception was taking place downstairs. The way Craig explained things, the rain was probably causing more problems for the arriving guests than it would for the Open.

"If it rains, we'll squeegee the course and it'll be just fine," he said. "The squeegees are like a roller on a broom handle. Besides, the Black drains as well as any course I've seen."

Craig is a lot more than a 10-handicap golfer. He's a turf man. "Ever since my first job on a golf course cleaning clubs when I was 14, I always knew what I wanted to do," he said. "In high school, I'd tell people I was going to go to college for turf grass management. They'd say, 'What is *that*?' and look at me like I was crazy."

He ended up with an associate's degree in turf grass management and a bachelor's degree in plant science from SUNY Cobleskill. He interned at Piping Rock in Locust Valley and worked at the Garden City Golf Club and Augusta National be-



**Victor Azzaretto**  
Horticulturist

"It's really a July garden," says Victor of the wildlife and native plant habitat he has created out of a mugwort-ridden wasteland not far from the fourth-hole bunkers.







Newsday Photos / Ken Spencer

Beauty and assiduous grooming are par for the course at Bethpage, which is kept in top form for golf's top players.

fore coming to Bethpage in June of '97 — he was 26 years old and he was touching the top of his profession.

"I was coming to a 90-hole course that would host the U.S. Open. It was a dream come true."

In the past five years, Bethpage's 6-foot-6 turf czar has reached new heights — upgrading the crew as well as the course. "We probably have 20 full-time employees with four-year degrees in turf grass management. When I came here in 1997, there was zero. Hosting the Open is an easy way to attract good people. You know, most people think of golf course guys as Weed Whacker guys. But we're not. A lot goes into what we do."



For full coverage of the U.S. Open, including an interactive hole-by-hole tour of the course, log on to [www.newsday.com](http://www.newsday.com).

earth. Since public play on the Black Course ended on Memorial Day, patrols have been filling in all divots with a mixture of grass seed and light sandy soil.

The greens roll where few front lawns ever go — they're marvels of bent and bluegrass that are fertilized every two weeks with one-tenth to one-eighth of a pound of nitrogen and have been aerated at least 30 times in the past five years. I'm not into front lawns — I replaced much of mine with a flower-and-vegeta-

See GREENS on B24



Irene Virag

The redesign by noted golf course architect Rees Jones called for rebuilding tees, narrowing fairways, extending greens and reshaping bunkers — a job that required trucking in more than 9,000 tons of sand. In all, 400 yards were added to the Black, creating a 7,214-yard, par 71 course — it'll be 70 for the Open. The United States Golf Association-funded renovation took \$2.7 million and 10 months to complete. Since the course reopened in June 1998, Craig and crew — the complement will hit 110 by Open time — have put down more than a million square feet of sod.

They resodded the tees with Kentucky bluegrass and overseeded with rye and *Poa annua*, aka annual bluegrass, which germinates in a matter of days. Bunkers were resodded on the outside with fine fescues — blue stem and native sedges were clumped in. On the inside, everything is coming up bluegrass. The fairways were cleared of clover and weeds and overseeded twice a year with perennial rye, which heals from divots faster than many other grasses.

I confess that I didn't even know how to spell divot when I started this report, but I'm learning the language of a game that seems to fall somewhere between obsession and religion. A golfer takes a divot when his club rips a piece of turf out of the

**Kathie Wegman**  
*Integrated Pest Management Expert*

"If you catch problems early, you have a fighting chance," says Kathie, whose job is to keep the bugs out. "But on a golf course, aesthetics and playing quality are important and sometimes you have to spray."





# THE GREENS TEAM

GREENS from B8

ble garden that's totally organic, but nobody is lining up putts on it. Pesticides and synthetic fertilizers may never be passé on golf courses, but at least more environmentally friendly techniques are being tried at Bethpage and elsewhere.

In fact, the Green Course is part of a three-year study on pesticide usage funded by Cornell University and the USGA. Six greens remain on a pesticide program, six follow Integrated Pest Management practices and six are going organic. Dave said three of the pesticide-free greens succumbed to the fungal disease dollar spot and had to be resodded. "We're working to achieve a balance," he said. "We haven't achieved Nirvana."

Perfection and bliss aside, the greens are aerated regularly by pulling up plugs of grass with narrow, hollow tubes. The holes are filled with sand to improve drainage and air flow and in the fall, with organic fertilizer. The greens also are cored twice a year — a process that relieves compaction by punching holes in the turf with a solid, 8-inch-long tine to fracture the heavy soil. Since both techniques temporarily disrupt the surface, they were suspended this spring so as not to create bumps for the 156 professional and amateur golfers who will compete for \$5.5 million.

There are no bumps on the greens, at least none that I can see during my visit when the course was still open. The sound and occasional fury of everyday golfers play out against the cacophony of power mowers and the bustle of construction crews erecting a veritable village of hospitality tents with wooden floors and stone access roads on the first and 18th holes of the Red and Green courses.

Eric Stern of Garden City South and Adam Hunter, a summer intern from SUNY Cobleskill, are on their Toro Triplex mowers, cutting the fairways. Consider that your lawn should be mowed no lower than two inches. Now consider that the fairways at Bethpage are maintained at three-eighths of an inch, the tees are cut just above one-quarter of an inch and the greens — get ready for this — are mowed below one-tenth of an inch. The roughs run from 3½ to 4 inches high. The fescue areas beyond them are a junglelike 1½ feet tall or more.

Eric and Adam will be riding the course next Thursday, the first day of



**A tree swallow enjoys a bird's-eye view of the fourth fairway.**

play, when mowing starts at 5 a.m. There will be 10 mowers on the fairways, 12 on the greens, six on the tees, four on the collars and approaches, and two on the primary rough. The fairways will be shorn twice a day and the tees once. The greens get whatever it takes to keep them fast and fearsome.

At the moment, golfers are approaching. "If we don't keep moving, we'll get hit by a golf ball," Eric, a 23-year-old crew chief, shouts over the din of his cherry red machine that's bigger than a VW bug. He takes off to catch up with a group of green Ransome-250 mowers that swarm like beetles farther down the course.

It helps that I'm in a golf cart with a knowledgeable park ranger named John Harofil, who adds to my meager store of golf lore. "Tournaments are made on the green," he tells me. "There's an old saying: Drive for show, putt for dough."

Greens are big. There's a reason for all that coring and cutting. I remember my rainy day conversation with Dave Catalano and Craig.

"The knock is that the greens are flat and everyone will eat them up," Craig said. "I don't think so."

And Dave chimed in, "The faster the green speed, the harder the course is to play. The slower the greens, the straighter you can hit. There's no fear. We want fear. Craig would like to have the greens as fast as a piece of linoleum."

That was theory. I get an on-the-green demonstration from Garret. Speed equals distance, he explains, and it's measured with a stimp meter



— a 36-inch-long metal track just wide enough for a golf ball to roll down. Garret holds the stimp meter at a slight angle to the green. He places the ball at the top of the meter and tips the track up until the ball starts rolling. Then he measures the distance the ball travels along the green. The average of three measurements is the green speed.

"Right now, the speed is about 11, almost 12," Garret says, "and we haven't mowed this green yet today. If we mowed right now, we'd have an easy 12. I'm happy." He says the speed will be 12 on opening day and go up to 14 or 15 — they'll simply mow as often as necessary to get there. Everyday green speed ranges from 8½ to 9½.

I catch up with Kathie Wegman on the fourth tee, where she's on pest patrol with a dimple doctor and a cup cutter. The former is a contraption that tamps down repaired divots and stamps out other depressions. The latter, which looks like an oversized bulb planter, is used to check for nasties that might be lurking below ground and terrorizing the turf.

"It's the only way to monitor for grubs," says Kathie, "and for annual bluegrass weevils." It also shows up black layer — a sign of drainage problems. She plunges the cup-cutter into the turf and pulls up a sample of grass and soil. "I don't see anything but a few pebbles," she says.

She keeps watch for fungal diseases like anthracnose and pithium and brown patch and dollar spot. "I'm always on the lookout," she says. "Turf this short and manicured is prone to disease. If the weather is cool and dry and there's a little wind, generally everything's fine. If it's humid, a fungus can take right off. With IPM, our goal is to maintain the turf in its healthiest state with as few pesticides as possible. If you catch problems early, you have a fighting chance. But on a golf course, aesthetics and playing quality are important, and sometimes you have to spray."

Kathie replaces the plug, waters it in and tamps it down with the dimple doctor. Then she spots a worm inching across the tee. "You're coming with me," she says, and puts the striped



High grasses line the bunkers' edges, giving the course a natural look.

Newsday Photos / Ken Spencer

inch-and-a-half intruder in a plastic container. "I'll have to check out every body part to make sure I know what you are." Later, she tells me it's a bronzed cutworm and doesn't constitute a problem.

I've been saving Vic Azzaretto for last. He and Kathie are among the mainstays of the Audubon sanctuary project on and around the Black, Red and Green courses. It includes the IPM program, construction of bluebird and bat houses, water conservation standards, a raptor survey — red-tailed hawks are raising a family near the Black's ninth green — and the planting of native marsh marigolds and cattails around the ponds at the eighth hole, where salamanders and



Garret Bodington takes a soil sample from one of the greens to determine its condition.



**Garret Bodington**  
*Black Course Supervisor*

"I'm happy," says Garret, testing the speed of a green. The faster the green, the harder it is to play, and, as park director Dave Catalano says, "Craig would like to have the greens as fast as a piece of linoleum."

painted turtles breed.

And there's Vic's Valley — a 100-by-400-foot garden that is just an errant golf ball's flight from the fescue-bordered bunkers of the fourth hole. Before the 25-year-old horticulturalist got his green thumbs on this place, it was a mugwort-ridden wasteland of wood chips and rubber tires and miscellaneous debris.

Now it's filled with cranberry viburnum and white clethra and yellow and red *Asclepias incarnata* — the swamp milkweed that monarch butterflies love. Trumpet vines scramble up his hand-crafted pillars and sunflower stems push through the rich soil and purple coneflower seedlings pop up everywhere. A wren perches on a nesting box Vic built. A mockingbird flies into a tall scarlet oak overlooking the bunker and picks up the wren's song. A few minutes later, the gold finches that nest in the old oak fly in. Swallowtail butterflies dance about and a neon-blue dragonfly joins the ballet.

Vic shows off his garden, complete with a seedling nursery, where he nurtures baby pawpaw trees and dogwoods and bayberries that eventually will find homes in other parts of the park. "It's really a July garden," he says, pulling out snapshots of his valley ablaze in summer with red monarda and pink phlox and purple liatris and golden goldenrods.

From the top of the fourth tee, Vic's Valley is a green spot in the distance, but you can locate it if you know what you're looking for. I'm not sure if Tiger Woods will see the garden for the greens.

I hope he does.

And I hope the sky is bluer than blue and just the hint of a breeze ruffles the rough and the greens are green and oh so fast.

And that Craig Currier and company feel like they've hit a hole in one. "Any time the whole world is looking at your course," Craig told me, "you want it to be just right." ■