



Experimenting on familiar turf

Trying new things and trusting outside experts is helping John Nelson take a prestigious Chicagoland club to new heights.

By **Guy Cipriano**

The prairies, trees and, yes, the bentgrass. One of the many benefits of participating in the development of a new course is that moment when you are asked to reflect on the property's evolution. This is when it becomes apparent the connection between John Nelson and the Merit Club runs deeper than most superintendent-course relationships.

Needing a job after moving back to Chicago from Florida in 1990, Nelson visited a former boss whom he heard was involved in building a course on the North Shore. Oscar Miles was seeding the 11th hole at the Merit Club when Nelson, who worked under Miles as an intern at Butler National Golf Club, entered the property.

"I saw John walking down our service road. I recognized him,

The Merit Club hosted the 2000 U.S. Women's Open. The club was founded by Bert Getz Sr. and the Bob Lohmann/Ed Oldfield-designed golf course opened on July 4, 1992.

and I said, 'Hey, John, what are you doing out here?'" Miles says. "He said, 'Well, actually, I came back from Florida. I was an assistant in Florida and I'm looking for a job up here.'" Miles didn't have any open assistant jobs. But he needed bodies to help seed the course. "I told him, 'I would be glad to give you a job if you don't mind breathing the dust and getting your shoes muddy,'" Miles says. "He said, 'No, I would be glad to do it. I need a job.' I said, 'Come here tomorrow morning. Be here at 6 o'clock ready to go.'"

Nelson arrived early the following morning and started seeding the rough on the 15th hole. Growing – and then maintaining – the Merit Club's pristine turf has been the sole focus of Nelson's working life since he reunited with Miles.

When assistants above Nelson in the Merit Club turf hierarchy received head superintendent jobs, Miles promoted Nelson. When Miles, a member of the Illinois Golf Hall of Fame, retired in 2006, Nelson was the logical choice to continue what his legendary predecessor started.

The Merit Club, whose founder Bert Getz Sr. wanted a natural setting in a bustling slice of suburbia, opened in 1992 following a methodical and thoughtful grow-in process. Thoughtful also describes Nelson, a rare example of a superintendent who has seen nearly every stage of his course's history.



Nelson calls maintaining a property he helped build "very, very fulfilling." "It's the best thing for me, and I think most people would like to be in a situation like that," he adds. "You have a pretty good idea of everything that's below the surface and above the surface on the golf course."

The familiarity, though, has never yielded complacency. "John has done some creative things," Miles says. Creativity is needed to help the Merit Club stand out in a competitive market. Fifteen facilities, ranging from public courses with \$15 greens fees to private clubs with initiation fees approaching six figures, are within 10 miles of the club. Despite being a relative newbie among elite Chicago clubs, the Merit Club, which was designed by Bob Lohmann and Ed Oldfield, hosted the 2000 U.S. Women's Open and Getz's vision allowed the club to lure Miles from Butler National, which hosted

John Nelson replaced the legendary Oscar Miles as the superintendent at the Merit Club in 2006. Miles hired Nelson in 1990 to join a talented crew of turfgrass managers.

solve turf issues.

"I'm constantly changing as the companies evolve and put new products out," he says. "I have no problem being one of the first few to try new products. If it's something that I feel will fit on the golf course and eventually do a better job and cost cheaper or the same as I was paying before, I will definitely try new products. They are making new ones better, so it has to be better for us."

Chicago weather can fluster, frustrate and even depress those who make their living maintaining turf in the region. It gets frigid, windy, soggy, humid and dry. Plants get stressed during the summer. Some wilt.

Nelson has the ideal place to experiment with new products

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-- John Nelson, Merit Club



The sun rises over the Merit Club’s 15th hole. Maintaining healthy turf in Chicago can be challenging because of weather extremes. Superintendent John Nelson has successfully handled this season by using a greens spray program he constructed with the help of Syngenta technical manager Matt Giese. “The program got me to where I should be, rotating products more efficiently,” Nelson says.

and programs. The Merit Club features a three-hole practice course, with holes A, B and C ranging from 160 to 440 yards. The holes are maintained to the same playing standards as the 18 regulation holes, which include Pennlinks greens, Penncross tees and Penneagle II fairways. Four target greens, two practice putting greens and two chipping greens are also part of the practice facility. The presence of an expansive practice area helped Nelson handle a tricky situation last summer.

In preparation for an industry event called Turf Science Live conducted at the Merit Club last August, Nelson used a chipping green for a trial. Knowing part of the regulation course was suffering from anthracnose and *bipolaris* leaf spot, Nelson split a chipping green in half. He treated one half of the green with his existing spray program and used a program constructed by Syngenta, one of the event’s sponsors, on the other half. The results piqued Nelson’s curiosity.

“Their half was clean,” he says.

The image of the clean half sparked multiple conversations involving Nelson and Syngenta’s Matt Giese and Brian Winkel. Nelson and Giese, a technical manager, had never met until Turf Science Live. With help from Giese last fall, Nelson altered his spray program for greens. Nelson added some different products to his rotations, including Briskway, Daconil Action and Medallion. A cold spring, damp early summer and a dry period

that stretched from mid-July into August made Chicago a ripe spot for anthracnose. As of mid-August, Nelson saw no signs of the disease on the greens, and he says he’s “confident” the new program will allow the surfaces to remain anthracnose-free throughout the season.

“The program got me back to where I should be, rotating products more efficiently,” he says. “It didn’t lessen the number of apps or products. It didn’t increase them compared

to what I was doing. It got me back into a better rotation and a more timely application of certain products to head off disease pressure before it came. Instead of chasing it, I was preventing it more.”

Nelson arguably knows the Merit Club turf better than anybody, but his willingness to develop professional relationships with outside experts such as Syngenta’s Giese are helping him achieve lofty conditioning goals. “That’s what it takes sometimes, especially when you’re dealing with somebody whose job and passion is to help us as superintendents find cures and help us prevent these things,” Nelson says. “When they see them, they want to find a way to fix it right away. That just helps us as golf course managers.”

Giese, who covers 15 Midwest states for Syngenta, says Nelson sets a solid example for other superintendents trying to enhance their courses. “It’s extremely refreshing to see somebody who has that seasoned experience yet is willing to look and say, ‘Maybe there is a way that I can better myself,’” Giese says. “I took a lot from that and really tried to utilize



The Merit Club provides a natural setting in a heavily populated part of Chicago and excellent playing conditions allowed it to quickly establish itself as one of the elite courses in a competitive golf market. “I feel if you walk onto the course today, we are as near perfect as we can be. That’s my target, and that’s what I like to maintain,” superintendent John Nelson says.

that moving forward whether it’s a program approach with what Syngenta offers or in a personal setting. I thought it was a great example for others to follow when you think about what you accomplished in your life, but there are always things

you can learn from. It’s a great example of being able to utilize some new technology to do your job a little better.”

The tweaking never stops at the Merit Club. Constant communication with general manager/director of golf Don Pieper allows Nelson to try new products, such as Velista, a fungicide Syngenta released this year, on the practice holes. Nelson considers himself a planner, meaning he’s already focusing on 2016. The early start allows him to take advantage of early order programs. “I’m open for change,” he says. “I’m not one to repeat year after year. I feel you get kind of stagnant that way and the golf course shows it over time.”

Over the years, Nelson has seen native trees mature and dirt become major-champi-

onship turf. He ushered the Merit Club into a firmer era when he implemented a heavy fairway topdressing program in 2009. The membership accepts the aesthetic and playability changes associated with dry fairways. Greens are always managed for perfection.

Even when he was seeding for Miles, Nelson envisioned big things. And his expectations have only heightened since the Merit Club opened on July 4, 1992. “Everything we try to do is to give our golfing members the best conditions possible,” Nelson says. “I feel if you walk onto the course today, we are as near perfect as we can be. That’s my target, and that’s what I like to maintain.” **GCI**

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