



Covering the basics

Superintendent David Dickson's no-frills yet adaptable agronomic philosophies are helping 120-year-old Allegheny Country Club enhance its reputation.

By **Guy Cipriano**

David Dickson spent part of a recent Monday morning in his office speaking about the agronomic practices at Allegheny Country Club.

With his dog, Mosley, at his side, and the club's respected pro, John Aber, across the table, Dickson pulls a book from a shelf to show a visitor. The book documents the Western Pennsylvania

club's first 100 years. It was published in 1995.

Yes, Allegheny is *that* old. Dickson shifts the book and a visitor and Aber continue their discussion. Dickson lays the book on his desk. He positions it so pages run parallel with the edges of his desk. He then straightens a few other papers.

"I'm a very detailed guy," says Dickson, Allegheny's veteran superintendent. "Straight line, straight corner, straight everything. Rakes have to be placed right. My guys give me a lot of grief for that. I have a thing on the board: rakes have to be in the right place every morning. They always tease me that after the first group goes through the rakes are bad. But that first group sees it. I'm kind of crazy about stuff like that." Dickson pauses and looks at Aber and the visitor, knowing his point is bigger than something as mundane as rake placement. "But," he adds, "that's another thing that sets us apart are those details."

Putting equipment – and more importantly people – in the right spots matters because Allegheny rests in a region saturated with private clubs. Two clubs are less than two miles from Allegheny's entrance in the affluent Pittsburgh suburb of Sewickley. Famed Oakmont and highly acclaimed Fox Chapel are also nearby. Upstart clubs emerged during the boom. Once flourishing clubs shuttered during the downturn.

George Shannon has known Dickson for two decades and has worked closely with the superintendent the past four years as Allegheny's greens chairman. He says the condition of the golf course has become "much more important than ever before." This is where

a detailed-oriented superintendent such as Dickson fits into the club's goals.

"Everybody is competing for membership and our membership comes from a very small geographic area," Shannon says. "There are a couple of other golf courses in our immediate vicinity. We have a great golf course. But if it's not conditioned properly, it loses its luster. It's really important to our marketing plan right now to have the supreme golf course in our area. The new trend is fitness centers and swimming pools. We have that, but it's very important to our membership to have a really nice golf course."

Dickson, who arrived at Allegheny in 1993 as an assistant superintendent and assumed the top agronomic post in 2000, has ushered a Tom Bendelow-started, Donald Ross-enhanced and Gil Hanse-renovated course into a prosperous period amid industry peril. His secrets are neither subtle nor glitzy. "He just talks about the fundamentals," Aber says. "He says, 'If we do the right fundamentals day in and day out and have the right equipment, then it works out.'"

Aber, one of the best golfers in the Pittsburgh area, calls the golf course Dickson maintains Allegheny's "biggest asset." When the weather cooperates, the fairways are firm, the greens are as slick as the topography allows and the rough is lush. The course tests low-handicappers yet offers a forgiving venue for high-handicappers and beginners. "The biggest thing I have noticed is the conditioning," Aber says. "Many of the golf courses in the area the last five or six years have struggled and we have been put in the top of



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—David Dickson

the class because our golf course has been at the top of the class.”

Dickson sounds like a coach when describing his methods. His office, coincidentally, features multiple pictures of memorable Pittsburgh teams, athletes and sports facilities. Allegheny is like the city's sports franchise: a steely presence without the biggest budget on the block.

"My big philosophy is cover the basics," he says. "If you have a good, sound agronomic approach ... I know technology and science and things like that have really changed this industry. But there is a lot of snake oil out there. My thoughts as somebody without a whole lot of budget to work with to try those new and different things are that we have to concentrate on the basics. Good, sound chemical program. Good, sound fertility program. Aeration. Topdressing. All of those things. It's worked out fine for us."

Consistency and adaptability

are other pillars of Allegheny's agronomic program, which originated as a Syngenta program based on the records of Dickson's predecessor. Following the recommendations of Syngenta technical manager Dr. Mike Agnew, Dickson decided eight years ago to perform applications on two-week rotations. "We have been spotless ever since," Dickson says.

Agnew visits Allegheny each year, and the agronomic program is tweaked based on the results of the visits. Dickson treats regularly for dollar spot, which he traces to the presence of old bentgrass and *Poa annua* cultivars. Controlling summer patch represents another big part of the program. Allegheny has escaped recent problems caused by anthracnose and bacteria wilt in Western Pennsylvania, and Dickson says he hasn't recently observed annual bluegrass weevil damage "for years." "On the insect side, annual bluegrass weevil is a hot-button [issue] now," he



Allegheny Country Club, which moved to its current Sewickley, Pa., site in 1903, has been transformed from a wooded venue to one featuring numerous open vistas since David Dickson was promoted to superintendent in 2000. Dickson has played a critical role in communicating elements of architect Gil Hanse's master plan to the membership.

says. "I remember years ago we used to treat a horseshoe ring around the green and that was our only treatment that we did and that evolved into the spring. We started doing greens, tees and fairways. We had maybe only one year when we had some damage from it.

Other than that, it has been under control. I haven't seen any annual bluegrass weevil damage for years, but it's pretty devastating when you get it and it's very easy to misdiagnosis for drought stress. By the time you see it, you have a big problem." Dickson admits that when

he arrived at Allegheny his knowledge of chemicals lagged behind his expertise in other areas of managing a golf course. Experience and his interactions with Agnew increased his comfort level. "One size doesn't always fit all and you have to be careful in this business,"

Dickson says. "That comes with experience. You kind of understand where you should be and it's nice to have somebody like Dr. Agnew validate what you're doing and to hear him say, 'Yeah, you're on the right track.'" His philosophies – in his

own words – are “old school.” Budgetary considerations and the importance Allegheny places on course conditions are reasons Dickson gravitated toward proven solutions. “We didn’t have a lot of money to spend on extra stuff,” he says. “We wanted to make sure we got the most for our money.” Shannon lauds Dickson for maximizing the resources the club allots toward golf course maintenance. “We basically have 20 people through the summer and a lot of clubs have twice that,” Shannon says. “He’s efficient, he’s disciplined, he’s knowledgeable and he gives his people a lot of credit.”

Dickson’s handling of personnel complements his agronomic practices. Allegheny’s maintenance crew worked a Monday-Friday schedule when Dickson became superintendent. In order to maximize resources and provide consistent, high-quality conditions, employees work 40 hours per week over the course of six days. The schedule emphasizes peak golf days, with the entire crew working four hours on Saturdays and Sundays. At first glance, the schedule appears demanding, but Dickson says employees grow accustomed to it. The staff treats every day like it’s the final round of the men’s invitational.

“It’s very important to have this club looking good on a regular basis,” Dickson says. “Years ago, at the green committee level, we decided we don’t just want the golf course to be good for the invitational week, but we wanted it consistent every day. We changed our thought process. When we have the men’s invitational, we do nothing out of the norm as far as preparing the golf course.”

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Dickson and his crew are maintaining a golf course with an extensive history. Established in 1895 on Pittsburgh’s North Side, Allegheny moved to hilly and leafy Sewickley eight years later, a fact Dickson describes by modestly saying “we have only been here since 1903.” The club conducted its first men’s invitational the year it opened, and by 1898 the USGA grumbled because the event was staged on the same day as the U.S. Open, hurting the quality of the national field. Allegheny considers its men’s invitational the oldest event of its kind in the country and the tournament is still played on Father’s Day weekend, although exceptions are made when the USGA brings the U.S. Open to Oakmont. Dickson is the just the fifth superintendent in club history, a feat that suggests Allegheny empowers its superintendents more than other clubs.

A generational storm in 1999 destroyed 500 trees and damaged another 400. The ninth green was buried in fallen trees, a scene Dickson says resembled one found at a “lumberyard.” A year later, the club promoted Dickson to superintendent, and he quickly found a way to

meander the club politics associated with a tree situation. “At that point, we started cutting trees down out of necessity because of the damage,” he says. “It really opened up some vistas out there and members got excited about it. It went from a bad situation where they were upset that we lost all of those trees to a situation that turned out to be very good because they saw what the trees had been hiding all of those years.”

Dickson played a big part in changing the mentality. “It’s the way Dave handles everything,” Aber says. “He’s kind of calm and low-keyed and he gets that across to his chairman. That just helped our whole process. Once it was started and got done, I don’t know one person who now complains when trees are going down behind the old range or something like that.”

The tree removal rapidly altered the golf course, and the club’s mindset shifted from removal to renovation. After performing small-scale projects with Ron Forse, the club hired Hanse to perform a long-term master plan. Dickson represented a key cog between the membership and Hanse, one of four architects interviewed

by the club. “Gil said, ‘If I do my job, you won’t even notice that I was here,’” Dickson says. “That really carried a lot of the weight with the board. That’s exactly what we want to be at Allegheny. We’re not a flower golf course. We’re not a showy, picturesque golf course like some of the newer golf courses today. It’s just a good, solid golf course. Everybody that plays here gets off the golf course and says, ‘I never knew the place was like this.’ It’s kind of a hidden gem and it keeps getting better and better.”

Dickson uses an example from Pittsburgh sports to further illustrate the point about course conditions. His desk faces framed photographs of Forbes Field, the Pittsburgh Pirates’ home from 1909-70, and PNC Park, the franchise’s home since 2001. Faded green turf and numerous brown spots dot Forbes Field while the PNC Park outfield and infield are lush, green and mowed in a meticulous pattern. Allegheny has experienced a similar transition in playability and aesthetics.

“When I got here, we mowed fairways at ¾ of an inch and never aerified,” Dickson says. “Now we are aerifying twice a year and topdressing with 10 tons of sand per acre twice a year. The change is unbelievable. That’s just the evolution. It’s unbelievable the difference turf quality and what we can do today vs. what they could do years ago. The changes in this place are unbelievable.” The changes are helping an old club thrive in the modern era. “The results Dave has shown in the last 10 years are just spectacular,” Shannon says. **GCI**

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