



by Trent Bouts

Willing and able

Jeff Snyder sees the golf course from the player's perspective. That's why he was the perfect superintendent to get the course at The Water's Edge Country Club back in shape.

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That Jeff Snyder made a career out of golf is no surprise. His father John forged his own legend as a professional winning trophies, friends and universal respect over a Hall of Fame career in Virginia. Not surprisingly, the kid learned plenty from the dad and by his teens Snyder was competing in the U.S. Junior Amateur Championship. A brother Jack, six years older, would become a pro. It seemed logical, even a matter of destiny, that Snyder would do the same.

Instead, he became a golf course superintendent. "My dad had the art of politics down," says Snyder, who is in his 22nd year at The Water's Edge Country Club in Penhook, Va. "I just don't have that. That's just not me. If I don't like you, you're going to know it." Fortunately, Snyder must only encounter people he likes – or at least only those who like him – because today he commands the kind of standing among his own peers that his father enjoyed in professional ranks.

Snyder served as president of the Virginia Golf Course Superintendents Association from 2003 to 2005 and received that organization's Distinguished Service Award also in 2005. He was an integral part of the team that created the Virginia GCSA's landmark bible of environmental best management practices in 2012. And he's been a fixture on his state's team in the Virginia Cup, an annual challenge against the Carolinas GCSA presented in partnership with Syngenta.

Virginia GCSA executive director David Norman scoffs at Snyder's own suggestion that he might lack a little finesse when it comes to people skills. "Jeff's a great guy," Norman says. "At an association level, he's served his fellow superintendents with honor, dignity and determination. And he's always done it in a humble manner."

Snyder has come a long way since heading to James Madison University for a business degree he thought would launch him into a career in the bar industry. "My thinking then was that people drink when times are good and when times are bad they drink even more," he smiles.

It was on a break from JMU, while playing in the Kendridge Open at Farmington Country Club in his hometown of Charlottesville, Va., that it dawned on Snyder he might be happier nurturing turfgrass than tending bar. As well as competing,

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Snyder, then 20, was preparing the golf course as seasonal help for another Virginia industry legend, Dick Fisher.

“I was riding around the golf course with Dick this day and the final players were coming through and I was struck by all the accolades he was getting from the players,” Snyder says. “They were all saying how wonderful the golf course was. And, of course, I knew all the neat things that were going on behind the scenes to make it that way. That’s what really triggered it for me.”

Snyder transferred to the turfgrass program at North Carolina State University and with credits from JMU, graduated in 18 months. After nearly a decade working at various facilities, he arrived at The Water’s Edge in 1994. The golf

course, a Buddy Loving design that opened in 1988, was a showpiece amenity for a 700-acre high-end residential development on Smith Mountain Lake about an hour southeast of Roanoke.

With about 400 members, the club and the development have survived through an era when “a lot of others have come and gone,” Snyder says. His expertise has been a major reason why. “I think we would be very comfortable putting our golf course up against anybody in the area,” says Ron Willard II, whose father developed the property, which sees between 11,000 and 12,000 rounds each year, the vast majority of which are played between Memorial Day and Labor Day. “Jeff’s attention to detail is a major asset. That and his ability to

make sure the guys under him understand his expectations and follow suit. Jeff has always shared the same drive we have for The Water’s Edge.”

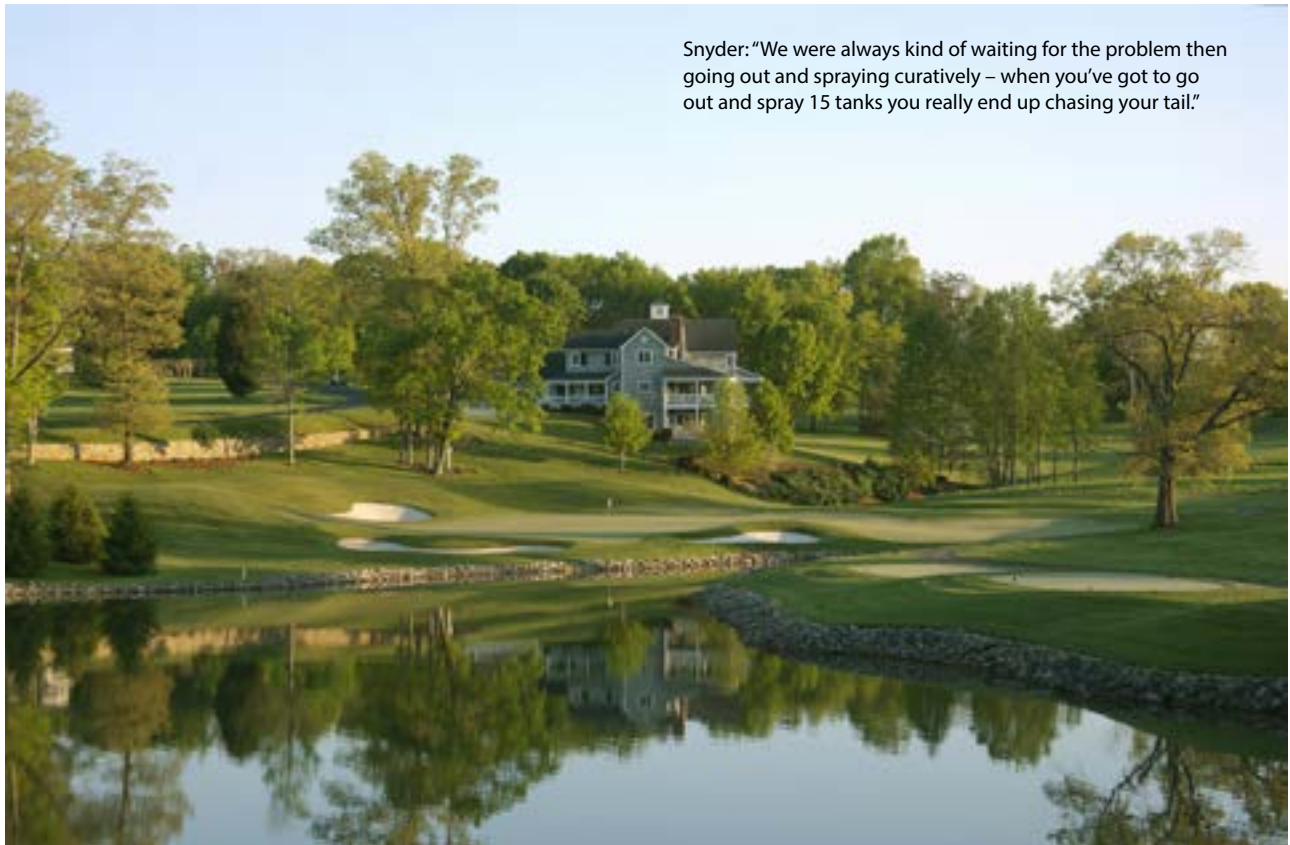
That shared commitment was evident in the passion Snyder brought to the table when the Willard family invested \$5 million in a major renovation under the architectural hand of Richard Mandell in 2008. “Jeff was a breeze to work with,” Mandell says. “He’s committed to excellence across the board. He has such a good perspective on things and he’s a great golfer so he sees the golf course from a player’s viewpoint.”

Snyder was as ready as anybody for the revamp. “The golf course needed to be brought up to the 21st century,” he says. “But if we saw what was coming, I don’t think we would

have spent \$5 million on a renovation.”

Of course, the economy crashed and within a year the real estate market followed. Housing starts and re-sales at The Water’s Edge hit a wall like they did all across the nation. Naturally, Snyder’s budget contracted along with everything else. “I was in the \$1.3 million range back in the day but now it’s more like \$1.1 million and a dollar doesn’t get you the same thing today so it’s less money with less buying power,” he says. “Pre-renovation, I’d run 10 full-time people even in winter and now I carry five. But at the same time, we’ve gotten our people raises and improved the quality of the golf course. At the end of the day, I think that’s pretty good.”

Snyder points to a new spray



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program as a significant factor in improved course conditioning. “We were kind of getting by with our spraying program on greens tees and fairways but our (fescue) roughs were our biggest problem,” he says, citing brown patch as his “biggest nemesis.” “We were always kind of waiting for the problem then going out and spraying curatively – when you’ve got to go out and spray 15 tanks you really end up chasing your tail.”

With help from Syngenta’s Steve Dorer, CGCS, and Dr. Lane Tredway, Snyder revised his approach. What they came up with was a program with Headway as the primary product that Snyder says allows him to “spray preventatively for basically the same dollars I was chasing my tail with curatively.” Now Snyder is down to nine tanks when he sprays in the rough. “The dollars are



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mows primary rough at 2½ inches. “We also incorporated Primo in the roughs, so we had tighter turf and slowed the grass down so that the fungicide stayed in the plant a little bit longer,” he says. “That meant we could get three-plus weeks out of it. They helped me

rake bunkers. “It’s all about making us shine,” he says.

Another key element to that polishing is a long-term conversion of what were bluegrass and ryegrass fairways to Memorial bentgrass. Instead of laying sod, which would have resulted in the closure of the course, Snyder used Primo on fairways and interseeded with the Memorial.

“We got a good stand the first year,” he says. “At that point, we started managing the bentgrass fairways, even though we had a lot of competition. We knew it would be a 5-6 year process and this is going into our fifth year.” The conversion also means Snyder must manage *Poa* in fairways. “I’m pretty heavy with Trimmit now for *Poa* control,” he says. “It helps with the consistency of the turf.”

To accommodate the change in irrigation needs between fairways and rough, he is also in the midst of a program converting select heads to in and out sprinklers. Doing that work gradually and in-house allows him to absorb the expense over time rather than taking the cost in a single big hit.

Since the recession, Snyder has made a concerted effort to align maintenance expenditures with club revenue flow. “I guess that’s probably the biggest thing I’ve contributed is to add that level of flexibility by matching personnel levels with the income stream,” he says.

Snyder’s key allies – he refers to them as his “lifeline” – in all that he does are long-time assistant superintendent Donald Huston and equipment technician Joey Woody, who is six years into his second stint at The Water’s Edge. As special as he regards his working relationship with those two men, nothing will resemble the bond he enjoyed with his first head professional at The Water’s Edge. Snyder got to collaborate with his dad who came to the facility when it opened and stayed for a decade until his retirement in 1997.

“It was the best experience of my life to work that closely with my father,” he says. “He was one of the best golf professionals in the state and a fantastic ambassador for the game. Our communication obviously was easy and we just clicked. The property was better for it.” **GCI**

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— Ron Willard II, *The Water’s Edge*

about the same,” he says. “We might have saved about 10 percent, but improvement in the quality of the fairways and the rough went up 100 percent by using better products.”

Snyder has raised his mowing heights to five inches in what are largely out-of-play areas, about 35 acres in all. He

tweak some product combinations to put together a really good spray program on fairways where we stretched that out from spraying every two weeks to spraying every three weeks.”

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