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THE PATH TO BROOKLINE

Dave Johnson's extraordinary career has prepared him well for the challenge of readying The Country Club for the 2022 U.S. Open

// by Pat Jones //

Photo credit: James Sylvia | MembersFirst

For Dave Johnson, the path to hosting a major championship at one of golf's most storied courses began in the quiet town of Dudley, Mass., where he grew up in a little house across from a local course. "I was that kid who was outside until the sun went down," he says. He picked up the game, started working at the course and was hooked.

Along the path, three Donald Ross courses shaped the '97 UMass turf grad's career. First, the family-owned gem, Wachusett CC, where a curious aspiring turfhead cut his teeth and learned about more than playing surfaces. "I worked

with the Marrone family for seven years and really learned the business of running a golf course," says Johnson. Next came two Ross restorations, Whitinsville GC, which is considered one of the best 9-hole facilities in the country, and Wianno Club, on Cape Cod. In both cases he collaborated with Gil Hanse to restore and revitalize. "I was having a ball," he recalls.

But the path to Brookline beckoned. When long-time superintendent Bill Spence announced his retirement five years ago, Johnson quickly rose to the top of the candidates list because many members of The Country Club were also

members at Whitinsville and Wianno and had seen Johnson's work firsthand. So, in 2018, he became director of grounds at one of America's oldest and most storied clubs. And he had just four years to prepare for a major.

We caught up with Johnson earlier this spring to find out about his approach to the preparing for the 2022 U.S. Open that will be played at The Country Club this June, how volunteers will be engaged, and how he's built a program that includes BASF turf products to produce elite conditions for his members and the world's best players.

QA

AND



Photo credit: USGA



DAVE JOHNSON
"THE SANDMAN"
Director of Grounds
The Country Club

WE HAVE A STRONG PROGRAM FOCUSED ON THE BASF PRODUCTS. ”

Why were you and The Country Club a good fit for each other?

The leadership here is the best in the industry. The culture is special. My experience prepared me but my communication skills and my passion for the business and for the golf course were critical. I think they appreciated that I was a team leader, and I was committed to being the best and giving them the best in the industry.

The history there is amazing. Tell us what's really special about that for you.

Francis Ouimet in 1913! This is where golf really started in America. People played golf before that but when that young amateur won the U.S. Open...that's what blew it up. He lived across the street and was a caddy here and walked this ground all the time. Then all of the championships that have been held here: more than a dozen national championships, including three U.S. Open championships, and the Ryder Cup in 1999.

When you arrived you had about a four-year timeline for the national championship. What has your team focused on?

We started with infrastructure. The greens needed some work to move water off of them. That led to working with Gil Hanse to repair the contours so water would shed off them. And, if we were doing that, it made sense to redo greenside bunkers. So we expanded 17 out of 18 greens and rebuilt all the bunkers on the championship course. About 90% of the work was done in-house.

What else have you focused on?

We've been very, very, very aggressive about cultural practices. Topdressing tee to green to try to get firm and fast as much as possible. My nickname here is The Sandman.

Tell me about the volunteer program for the event and your staffing this year?

We have a staff of 36 and we're bringing in 100 volunteers. We've asked all of them to work the full 7 days instead of trying to rotate people through with shorter schedules. We're a smaller footprint and it's a difficult property to get around and they're going to be working in the middle of the night. We must have work done and tees open on 1 and 10 before the first tee times at 6:45 a.m. That said, we're confident with 136 people, we'll be in a good spot.

How do you hope that will translate into a great experience for your staff and the volunteers?

I hope on that on Sunday when they're heading home after a week, they leave with a sense of satisfaction, happiness, and value. We're going to have a tent dedicated just to education, so we hope to provide some great opportunities, particularly leadership and networking. This should be a great networking opportunity. We're going to have some real leaders of the industry for them to meet and expand their networks to become better professionals.



WHAT ARE YOUR CORE PRODUCTS?

Lexicon® [Intrinsic® brand fungicide] and Navicon® [Intrinsic® brand fungicide] are core products for us. We use them for the heat of the battle. When Navicon [Intrinsic brand fungicide] is going out, I tell the staff we're putting out the good stuff! I also tell them why we're spraying it: we're in the heat of the battle, the worst weather we see all summer and the most stress on the plant. Those products are so strong and effective and that's why we rely on them in the heat of the season.



Photo credit: Elisha Lung

What are your disease challenges?

We have built a plant protectant program here that is focused on plant health and sustainability. That means we choose products that offer nice environmental profiles along with having longer residual protection, so we don't have to spray as often. Our biggest disease pressure – especially on fairways – is dollar spot. We have a strong program focused on the BASF products. You put them out and you don't have to worry for a solid three weeks in the summer months. We're on a strong preventative program we've built over four years.

How does it feel to be where you're at today?

I am so fortunate that I get to work at one of the best clubs in the country. The people who belong here and the people who run this club are amazing. That helps make me a better professional and I'm very fortunate for that. I don't take it for granted and I try to instill that into my staff. I want to educate them, elevate them, and prepare them for whatever is next for them. That is my goal: to prepare my staff for their future.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The land tells the story of this place. When you walk the property and look how it's laid out and you realize how they built this golf course back in the day and how it meanders through the valley and rock outcroppings. You don't see that in modern day construction. The people who really love golf and get it will appreciate it. It's a special piece of land and a truly special golf course. I can't wait to show it off.

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