

# Communication is key to success

**M**ark Gorga was not the host superintendent of one of professional golf's major tournaments, nor did he resuscitate the greens for a high-profile PGA Tour event. But for the members at Briarwood Country Club in Sun City West, Ariz., Gorga's accomplishments were just as important as any that took place at other course nationwide.

Gorga, 54, has been superintendent at Briarwood since August 2006. Upon arriving at the course, Gorga recognized the need for upgrades throughout the property. Although Gorga still is in the process of putting together his long-term master plan for Briarwood, his brief tenure has been defined by educating members on golf course maintenance, why certain practices are necessary and the benefits of making upgrades to the golf course.

That might sound pretty elementary to some, but at a course marked by a mature, yet active membership (average age is 76, Gorga said) that does not take kindly to costly upgrades, educating members and administrators about turf management topics can be the difference between success and being out of a job.

In his nomination of Gorga for TurfNet's 2007 Superintendent of the Year Award, Dr. S. Randy Winston, Briarwood's green and grounds committee chairman, wrote: "Mark has educated me and my committee members to achieve a better understanding of maintenance cultures and guided us in the development of maintenance standards this year."

Gorga's plan at Briarwood includes reducing the amount of irrigated land – in accordance with state law – from 160 acres to 85-90 acres, allowing him to save water and concentrate maintenance efforts to in-play areas. That will be increasingly important in an area where water is at a premium – the club's grandfathered water rights will be cut in half within four years, Gorga said.

He already has begun converting some managed areas to native plantings, and he writes a monthly newsletter and weekly e-mail alerts to members that detail specific maintenance practices and informing them of potential problems.

Briarwood turns 50,000 rounds per year, and the membership is segregated into core golfers and the social set, who come for putting contests and camaraderie. Making sure both groups receive the same message on a consistent basis is critical, Gorga said.

"There is a lot of misinformation out there," he said. "We need to make sure everyone gets



COURTESY OF BRIARWOOD COUNTRY CLUB

*Mark Gorga gets what he needs at Briarwood Country Club by educating and communicating with the club's members.*

the whole story."

Regular communication with the members came in handy last year when the transformer in the pump house exploded, knocking out the irrigation system for two days. As luck would have it, the potential disaster was a blessing because it occurred at the end of the transition period. The heat coupled with lack of water helped usher out the last of the ryegrass.

"That's one of our most stressful times," Gorga said. "The Bermuda can stand a couple of days without water. The remainder of the ryegrass went out pretty quickly after that."

His master plan, which will cost the club about \$5 million if passed in its present form, also includes rebuilding the 25-year-old pushup greens to USGA specifications, replacing the 328 Bermuda putting surfaces with a more water-efficient Bermuda hybrid, such as Tifdwarf, and rebuilding the tees.

The past 16 months have been spent preparing members for that message. He also is putting together formalized maintenance standards to be approved by members. That gives members ownership of the process and Gorga hopes, will lead to realistic and sustainable standards and practices.

The golf course architecture firm of Trip Davis and Associates will be working with Gorga on the course-improvement project.

"(Gorga) has provided significant leadership and ideas as regards to planning for future course upgrading and renovation," Winston wrote.

"Mark's concept includes detailed plans for phasing in new course infrastructure; irrigation, landscaping and cart path renovation, while

decreasing the amount of irrigated acres. He has provided the membership with the direction necessary to maintain the excellence of the course in the face of the new, strict Arizona water paradigm."

Gorga's efforts to educate his membership began with taking Winston and others to a seminar by USGA Green Section agronomist Todd Lowe. Afterward, Lowe visited the course to help hammer home the message to Briarwood's golfers.

The talk went a long way in helping convince the Briarwood's administration about the need for a maintenance plan drafted with the help of the superintendent and approved by the membership.

"(Gorga) always takes the time to teach, or to call upon his large network of sources to augment his teaching," Winston wrote.

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In an effort to complete the maintenance plan, each member of the club's committee was given a topic to research. Gorga then spent several hours going over each topic with the committee. The entire proposal will be presented to the membership as part of the overall master plan at the club's next annual meeting.

"It details everything about why we do what we do," Gorga said. "It was important to try to get it all on paper."

Gorga, who knows former superintendent of the year winners Kip Tyler and Mark Burchfield, and admittedly would vote for fellow finalist Ralph Kepple as this year's winner, was humbled at being named a finalist.

"Quite frankly," he said, "I don't know if I'm in their category."

Briarwood's members would disagree.

Gorga doesn't ask workers to do jobs he wouldn't do himself. In fact, he rakes bunkers by hand every day along with members of his crew.

Wrote Winston: "He has demonstrated skill and team leadership in achieving championship course presentation through attention to detail and hard work. A man who leads by example and quietly educates a bilingual crew, he started the tradition of introducing his crew members to the club members via the club's monthly newsletter, thus giving a human face to guys in pith helmets on tractors."