

# Mahaffey thrives as project manager

When Don Mahaffey was hired nearly three years ago to manage the turf at Wolf Point Club, a private golf course being built halfway between Corpus Christi, Texas, and Galveston, both owner and architect thought they were getting a greenkeeper only. Turns out both received more than they had anticipated.

For Wolf Point owner Al Stanger, Mahaffey, 47, is a superintendent who not only is a skilled greenkeeper, but also is a dogged and determined project manager who is not afraid to stand up to architects and construction crews for what he believes is best for the golf course and the checkbook of the man paying the bills.

For Wolf Point designer Mike Nuzzo, who ran point for Stanger in his search for a superintendent, Mahaffey has been a confident decision maker who is intent on seeing the architect's plans transformed into reality.

He has implemented common sense maintenance practices that will ease maintenance and upkeep on equipment without compromising playability of the golf course.

"He has been preaching a practical golf course maintenance program as if he were Jim Arthur," Nuzzo said. "The golf course is already healthy and vibrant and is going to play firm and fast."

His steadfast determination has shaved \$2 million-\$3 million from the project's original \$6.5 million anticipated price tag – enough that Stanger is able to change the plans accommodate construction of a multimillion-dollar home on the course.

"He's been real, I guess the word is cheap, good about saving money where needed," said Stanger, who is involved in the Texas oil industry. "I'm so impressed with what he's done so far. It's going to end up better than I had ever envisioned."

Wolf Point is no ordinary, private club. It will be Stanger's private playground. No members, no daily fee play; just Stanger and his guests.

Nuzzo, who had known Mahaffey since the two



COURTESY OF NUZZO COURSE DESIGN

*Wolf Point Club architect Mike Nuzzo (left) found an unexpected and capable project manager in Don Mahaffey (right).*

met five years ago during a function at Barona Creek Golf Club near San Diego, said he knew he had the right superintendent for his client after asking one question during the interview: "How would you take care of a golf course if you were the only one who played it?"

"Don fit the bill," Nuzzo said. "He's a talented superintendent with a strong architectural interest and very open minded and creative."

Construction of Wolf Point, which is scheduled for completion later this year, has been slow in coming, because the crew hired by Stanger to move dirt and shape the course accepted the project as a side job.

In the interim, Mahaffey manned bulldozers and other machinery to help keep the project on pace. It was soon after that Stanger had the confidence in Mahaffey to make him project manager.

Soon Mahaffey hired a work crew from a nearby farm to excavate an irrigation pond and began drafting plans for his maintenance facility and hiring a staff.

This year, he overcame one of the wettest sea-

sons on record in southeastern Texas and slow delivery of equipment and supplies. He has handled all obstacles with aplomb.

"Don's willingness to think differently has been invaluable, especially toward eliminating conventions in the modern game," Nuzzo said.

Mahaffey's approach was a pleasant surprise for the property's owner. During the interview process, Mahaffey said he would help out during the construction process in any way that he could.

"He never tried to sell himself for (project manager). I thought together with my designer, we'd be the driving influence," Stanger said. "But when (Mahaffey) got here and got involved, it became apparent that he was more adept at handling this than either of us were.

"He eventually ran the whole thing, and I gave him the latitude to do it because I could see he was so good at it. Let's put it this way: He's my superintendent of the year no matter what."

The job has been a dream come true for Mahaffey. He was working in Bend, Ore., when Nuzzo contacted him about the Wolf Point job. Mahaffey was immediately interested.

He always wanted to oversee construction and grow-in of a golf course, but because of the sometimes-nomadic life of a superintendent, Mahaffey feared that wife Dee would not be in favor of a return move to Texas.

"I was interested in the job for a couple of reasons," Mahaffey said.

"First: It was Mike's first job. I knew he'd need help, and I wanted to be part of it. Second: I knew it would be different."

Mahaffey bounced the idea off children Ryan (14), Elyse (12) and Anna (6), all of who were eager to return to Texas, where the family had lived from 2002-04. Daughter Sarah, who turned 2 in December, did not offer much of an opinion.

Surprisingly for Mahaffey, his wife also was receptive to the idea.

"She told me that if I didn't do this that I'd probably never get it out of my system," Mahaffey said.

It also might have been his final chance to live out that dream.

"At age 47, I didn't have a lot of options," Mahaffey said. "I don't feel old, but in this business people think I am."

"At first I was scared to death, but now I couldn't imagine going any other way."

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– Al Stanger, owner of Wolf Point Club in Port Lavaca, Texas