

# Loyalty lifts hurricane-ravaged club

Within a week of returning to New Orleans Country Club after Hurricane Katrina two years ago, Neil Mayberry was transformed from a wet-behind-the-ears assistant to a learn-on-the-fly interim superintendent trying to save a golf course and his career. Despite the enormity of the task of getting the golf course up and running after it, and much of the rest of the New Orleans area, was decimated by floodwaters that came in Katrina's wake, Mayberry never once regretted his decision to return to the club where he had been working for three years as an assistant.

"I still go out and think about it," said Mayberry, 28. "Looking back, I'd still do it in a heartbeat. I learned stuff in a few months that I couldn't have learned in 10 years."

Within hours after Katrina made land-fall in Louisiana on Nov. 29, 2005, two major canals designed to help flood control in New Orleans breached their levees, leaving parts of the city under several feet of water. One of those compromised waterways was the 17th Street Canal that splits and Orleans and Jefferson parishes. On the Orleans side of the canal lies New Orleans Country, across the way is Metairie Country Club.

Much of New Orleans Country Club was under as much as 7 feet of water for two to three weeks. Parts of the course that weren't under water, namely some of its greens, were used as a staging ground from which to launch rescue operations for many of the New Orleans' stranded residents. Military helicopters used greens as landing pads, and multi-purpose vehicles such as Humvees were used to transport military personnel and refugees to and from the facility, often driving over greens and through bunkers to get in and out of the property. It was another three weeks – after the water had receded – before golf course personnel were allowed back onto the property.

Mayberry and his wife, Shannon, lost everything in Katrina, as did superintendent Chris McCranie and his family. McCranie and Mayberry, along with the course mechanic were the only members of the crew to return to the course. What they found when they returned was as heart wrenching as the personal losses they'd endured.

Equipment valued at more than \$1 million was a total loss. Likewise, the course had not seen water in the five weeks that had passed since Katrina came through, and the turf was at risk of being lost as well.

"Our golf course was in shambles," wrote club general manager Bobby Crifasi in his letter nomi-



COURTESY OF NEW ORLEANS COUNTRY CLUB

Neil Mayberry was searching for a new job when he was promoted to head superintendent in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans.

nating Mayberry for TurfNet's 2007 Superintendent of the Year. "We had downed trees, and the entire course had a thick, unknown residue on the surface once all the water finally receded."

The turf faced a dire situation. Mayberry said the grass on the TifEagle greens and TifSport tees and fairways was so dry that it crunched under his boots. The greens were dotted with ruts from Humvee and helicopter tires, and damage from exhaust and foot traffic of first responders was evident everywhere.

"The turf had gone into dormancy. It shut down," Mayberry said. "Honestly, I didn't expect it to come back."

Within days, McCranie, a Florida native, accepted a new position in his home state. With no superintendent at the course, matters threatened to get worse for the club. Before the storm, Mayberry had been searching for a superintendent's position and was reasonably certain he would be offered a position at a course in his native Mississippi. Given the post-Katrina mess at the club he said he felt like he'd be abandoning the course under such circumstances. So he stayed on as interim superintendent, not knowing whether he would have a job when the course reopened that December.

"I'd been looking for another job, and I was probably going to get this one I'd interviewed for," said Mayberry, a graduate of Mississippi State's turfgrass management program.

"I just couldn't leave. I called the club I'd interviewed with and backed out. I decided to give it my all. It was a great chance to prove myself."

He immediately began securing equipment, including a 4,000-gallon water truck to irrigate the greens, and making repairs to the irrigation system.

Mayberry learned a lot on the fly, including how to grow-in the golf course all over again. Some consultants and a golf course architect advised him to oversee that first year, a plan initially met with some approval by members. But Mayberry thought putting off reestablishment of the Bermuda for another year would only delay the long-term recovery of the course. His plan was to sod in the edges, covering the greens each night and letting the grass grow-in from the perimeter.

"Mold was everywhere, and we had no way to get fungicide out on the course," he said. "The battle was to get 10 board members to believe the opinion of the assistant over the architect who wanted to oversee."

Eventually, Mayberry was able to convince membership to follow his advice. A program of sodding in 4 acres and verticutting elsewhere worked – eventually.

"The roots were white and lush. Based on that, I knew I could grow grass from that," he said. "We treated the whole course like a grow-in. Eventually, we saw the light at the end of the tunnel, and sprigs began popping up everywhere."

By the Dec. 5 reopening, turf reestablishment ranged between 60 percent and 80 percent. By summer it was at 100 percent, he said.

Although Katrina whipped through the Gulf Coast more than two years ago, reminders remain, including the influence over the potential labor pool. Mayberry went more than a year without an assistant and still has yet to find a second assistant. He worked 80 to 100 hours per week in the first six months after the storm.

The first worker Mayberry hired in the post-Katrina era, Brandi Berdin, still is on the crew today. Since then, however, finding good help among those who have returned to New Orleans or never left has been a challenge. Soon after the storm, club employees, including the chef, were on the course helping to make repairs.

Several industries, including fast food and government, were starved for workers, and competition was fierce. The club offered laborers \$10 per hour to start and even paid to rent a home in nearby Kenner to house high school student/laborers from West Monroe in northern Louisiana.

"We went through 40 people to finally get a stable crew," Mayberry said.

"People knew with (assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency) that they didn't have to work, and they were getting away with murder. You learn to hire and fire real fast."