

# Old Town's Young Gun

Former Southern Hills superintendent takes Old Town Club to next level

By Brad King



Safe to say, the cities of Winston-Salem and Tulsa aren't often discussed in the same conversation. In this case, however, the dialogue that took place in mid-2018 was in regard to a pair of historic golf clubs: Old Town Club in the Triad area and Southern Hills Country Club in Oklahoma.

Old Town was interviewing Bryant Evans, then the head assistant superintendent at Southern Hills, to become only the eighth leader of Old Town's maintenance operations in the club's 80-year history.

That was when the similarities between the clubs — and the cities — began to emerge.

Southern Hills and Old Town are considered the two finest solo designs by legendary Golden Age golf course architect Perry Maxwell. A genius at incorporating natural landscapes in the sculpting of his layouts, moving as little land as possible in the process, Maxwell oversaw the construction of Southern Hills (1936) and Old Town (1939) prior to the start of World War II. Both were products of the Great Depression and funded by family money.

A Midwest masterpiece, Maxwell's Championship Course at Southern Hills (the club has 27 holes) has played host to seven major championships, including the 2007 PGA Championship won by Tiger Woods. At Old Town, Maxwell was entrusted with a canvas of more than 1,000 acres of hilly, sweeping farmland to plot his 140-acre layout. He modeled the holes after some of the best in the world, including those at St. Andrews and Augusta National.

At Southern Hills, Evans was in the process of working closely with architect Gil Hanse on a renovation in preparation for the 2021 KitchenAid Senior PGA Championship — the most historic and prestigious major championship in senior golf — as well as the return of the PGA Championship to Southern Hills by 2030.

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Hanse recommended Evans to Dunlop White, Old Town's longtime golf chairman, who is known widely in course architecture circles.

During his research, White noted that, despite being 1,000 miles apart, Winston-Salem and Tulsa were both situated in the country's "transition zone," where each experiences cool and warm golf seasons. "When you're talking about a combination of cool season and warm season grasses in the transition zone, it's a recipe for heartache and heartburn," White said.

"Superintendents in the transition zone stay up all night worrying about whether or not their bent grass greens are going to survive in the summertime and they stay up all night worrying about whether their Bermuda fairways are going to survive in the wintertime. It's very challenging.

"Weather wise, it was amazing how much Winston-Salem and Tulsa are exactly alike," White said. "Our high temperatures match up pretty well with their high temperatures. Our low temperatures in the wintertime pretty much match up. Average rainfall matches up as well.

"I said, 'Wind and humidity? That's got to be different because it's windy (in Oklahoma),' he said. "Little did I know that Oklahoma City on one side of Oklahoma is really windy, but Tulsa is much like Winston-Salem. Tulsa averages about 9 miles per hour of wind, Winston-Salem averages about 7 miles an hour of wind. The humidity factors were pretty much the same."

On top of that, White studied the type of turf on which Evans was working at Southern Hills and found it was exactly the same as Old Town. "Southern Hills had bent grass greens; we had bent grass greens. Southern Hills had Bermuda fairways. We had Bermuda fairways," he said.

Finally, Evans had been hired and trained at Southern Hills by superintendent extraordinaire Russ Myers, a big-time name in the industry. Myers and Evans form part of a maintenance fraternity that includes some of the nation's best, such as Matt Shaffer, formerly at Merion Golf Club, and Paul Latshaw, currently at Merion, along with Brad Owen and Marsh Benson at Augusta National.

"Everything was picture perfect as far as Bryant was concerned," White said. "It was pretty much a layup to hire him.

"Not only did we hire him because he came from Russ Myers, which is a grand experience in and of itself, but we hired him because he had 10 years of experience on a Perry Maxwell golf course," he said.



Photo provided by Old Town Club

"It's just a dream come true."

The 33-year-old Evans started as Old Town's director of agronomy in October 2018.

"The Old Town name and its architecture and golf culture just drew me in," Evans said. "One of my goals in my superintendent search was to find a course from the Golden Age of golf era that's got history and prestige, plus the club visionaries willing to preserve it. Old Town checked all those boxes.

"The stars kind of aligned," he said. "Everybody here, from the interview process to being hired and up to now, the membership has been excellent. They give us in the maintenance department everything we need to succeed. This is such a special place — they don't make golf courses like Old Town anymore."

Old Town has been the home of the neighboring Wake Forest University golf team for nearly a half century. Golf course architect Bill Coore first grew enamored with Old Town in the late 1960s, when he was a student at Wake Forest.

Following Coore and Ben Crenshaw's 2013 renovation — and Evans taking the helm — Old Town has catapulted up the national and world rankings. *GOLF Magazine* ranks Old Town No. 59 in the United States, and among their Top 150 golf courses on the planet. The "Top 100 Golf Courses" publication ranks Old Town No. 29 in the U.S., and No. 65 in the world, while *Golfweek* lists Old Town at No. 23 in its rankings of America's greatest "Classic Courses" constructed before 1960. *Golf Digest* now ranks Old Town No. 98 in the U.S., with a renewed listing expected later this year.

White said Evans has accepted full ownership of the look and playability of

Old Town's unique bunkers in a way that appears natural, which is the goal. "We had these bunkers that Coore and Crenshaw added that are really natural looking and artistic," he said. "They require a lot of hand work versus automated machinery to do the edges. We hand rake all our bunkers. We did the eroded edges by hand. You want things to look natural, like Mother Nature created it, but people don't realize that takes a lot of work. So that's a talent that he has brought here."

In addition, White said Evans "preaches all the time about turf density."

"He really delves into turf science," White said. "All his spraying programs are used to promote turf health, and turf density and quality. His cultural practices have improved our turf dramatically."

"Plant health is always going to be at the forefront of whatever we're doing on the course," added Evans. "We use a lot of different tools. We want to make educated decisions to get the desired result on the course that will give the members what they expect every day, and keep Old Town at the forefront of North Carolina golf."

A native of Iowa, Evans grew up in a small farm town of about 1,000 people. The family's backyard was a cornfield, but there was a little 9-hole course just a block away, where Evans said his family paid \$500 for a membership. "My buddies and I wore that place clean out," he said. "There wasn't much else to do other than play sports, and play golf and hit balls into the cornfield across the street. But it was really good. I wouldn't change it for much."

He attended college in Cedar Rapids to study golf course and turf grass management. "I knew what I wanted to do," Evans said. He interned for three years at a local

public course, where he eventually became second assistant. "After about three seasons, I knew I needed to spread my wings a little bit, and got the opportunity for an assistant in training job at Southern Hills."

Nine months after being hired by Myers at Southern Hills, Evans was made an assistant, the position he held for nearly a decade. "It's an intense place that expects a lot," he said. "It's a large part of where I am today. I've had the opportunity to have really good mentors and (Myers) is right at the top of that list. He's a big part of the little success I've had in this industry so far."

Evans generally works at least one major event every year, including a PGA Championship and a U.S. Open. The postponed 2020 Masters would have been his sixth time working at Augusta National. "I get there Sunday night the week before and it's about a 100-hour week," Evans said. "I've developed relationships with superintendents all over the country. It's a priceless opportunity to get a network and see how it's done at the highest level."

White says that Evans has brought to Old Town a keen attention to detail, and a thoughtful and varied course set-up, along with championship turf conditioning on a daily basis — adding that he expects the Old Town accolades to only increase in stature as the years pass.

"When you come to Old Town, we want it to feel like it's the 1940s or '50s, where you kind of go back in time," Evans said. "It's this incredible place where there's not a flat spot on the property and it's natural. We want that experience to be something people really remember."

"Bryant Evans has taken this golf course to an entirely different level," White said. "It's been remarkable."