

Interview with Mike Giuffre, Director of Agronomy at Congressional Country Club

Congressional Country Club is a country club and golf course in Bethesda, Maryland, USA.

Congressional opened in 1924 and has two 18 hole golf courses, the Blue and the Gold. The Blue Course has hosted three U.S. Opens and a PGA Championship. It is currently in its last year of an annual stop on the PGA Tour and will be an every other year stop over the next six years, with the Quicken Loans National hosted by Tiger Woods . Tournament winners at Congressional have included Rory McIlroy, Ken Venturi, Ernie Els, Justin Rose and Tiger Woods, among many others.

The man in charge of the Agronomics at this great facility is Mike Giuffre (Director of Agronomy).

During my time at Congressional in preparation for the latest Quicken Loans National Mike was kind enough to sit down with me for a short interview.

RD- So Mike, how did you get started in Turfgrass Management?

MG- Well my story is an interesting one. While I was in High School my buddies dad won a 9 hole golf course in a poker tournament. A real goat track called Acme Golf Club! Soon enough I spent most of my summer holiday working there and loving every second. I did it all mowing, fertilizing changing cups, whatever was needed.

Shortly before finishing high school my friends dad sold the 9 hole golf course to a developer who quickly added another 9 holes and then got hold of Jack Nicklaus to design another 18 holes. During this time a massive Hotel was also built which quickly transformed this little golf club into a great Resort course. Fortunately I got to see this process transpire before my eyes and I soaked it all up like a sponge. During my time there I saw three Superintendents come and go. With the appointment of the newest Superintendent I was soon promoted to 1st Assistant. The only condition of my appointment was that I have to educate myself in Turfgrass Management. At the time I was studying for a Business Degree at the local College and by my own admission was a C student. I then changed career paths and through some help from my Superintendent managed to enroll at Penn State University where Joe Duich was running the show. To my surprise I quickly went from being a C student to an A student, just because I was studying something that I was passionate about.

During my time at Penn State we had some great teachers but Joe was special. Let me tell you. You never wanted to miss a class by Joe as he taught from personal experience which included the cultivation of Penncross and his time at Augusta. So if you missed a class by Joe, you missed out on stuff that could not be found in any text book as you missed out on a chapter of his life. Further to

that Joe not only spoke about Turf, he also spoke about what we would face on a day to day basis and it wasn't about growing grass. It was about communicating and talking to members. He even made us take an etiquette class, so we could learn how to set a table and how to eat a fancy dinner at an interview or work function.

So I graduated Penn State in 1985 and went back to my golf course to fulfill my Assistant's role. After one summer I got offered a Superintendent's position at a small golf course in New York called Enjoie municipal golf course that hosted a small PGA Tour event. At the time I had 3 permanent workers and 10 seasonal workers and we hosted the PGA Tour event called the BC Open. It was an eye opening experience and one that I will never forget. During my time at Enjoie I learned how to make the most of a small budget. This was very valuable in my career development as it taught me how to get the most for my dollar and when I went to bigger budget courses I continued to do the same. I have always tried to do as much in-house as possible before contracting out and this has helped me a lot.

So I managed to do it all. A resort course in Michigan, municipal course in New York and then a private course in Virginia Beach where I completed the grow in and spent 2 years before being offered a position with the PGA Tour as part of the TPC group. As part of the group I was tasked with growing in a course in Detroit from scratch, which was a lot of fun. I was there for 8 years and was then moved to TPC at Avenel which is across the street from Congressional Country Club and spent 2 years there. I then got offered the position of Director of Agronomy at Congressional Country Club after Paul Latshaw (former Superintendent at Augusta) had moved on.

RD- It is a difficult thing moving to a new golf course. What advice do you have for Superintendents when they move to a new golf course? I have often noticed guys coming in and immediately start making changes. Which I don't necessarily agree with. What are your thoughts on this?

MG- I agree. When I started work at Congressional which was in the middle of July, the most difficult time to grow grass in the DC area, I didn't make any changes. I ran with the programme that Paul was on. I also leaned on the staff a lot for assistance during that first year. During my second year I hired Dave Hutchinson (South African from Sun City) and we then started our own programs from there.

RD- What advice do you have for youngsters getting into the industry?

MG- Be yourself, you have to be you. What drives me crazy is when kids come in here and immediately want to start shaking hands with everyone that walks through the door to get their name out there. You have to earn that. I tell kids that come here all the time. Keep your nose to the

grind stone and do the work you know you have to do. If your good enough, somebody is going to recognize you and they will come here and ask to interview you and I'm going to tell them please do. That's what I want to see happen. I want to see my guys going out and getting good jobs not because they are from Congressional but because they can do the work better than anyone else can.

RD- What brings you the most joy out of your career?

MG- It's the staff it's the family you create at work. I get more joy out of that than any tournament or great turf year we have. It's about seeing people become successful and move on in life that's what it's about.

RD- In your opinion what makes a great Golf Course Superintendent?

MG- To me it's keeping your nose to the grind stone. Learning from your mistakes and never making those mistakes again. It's also important to share that information with the people you work with so they can also learn from your experience. Our job is a job of humility, more so than any other I know. Mother Nature can at any time deal you a bad hand and you need to accept that and move on. Those guys that walk around beating their chests about how great they are, that's just bananas and they won't be successful.

RD- What are your views on the sustainability of the golf course industry. In essence will we continue to manipulate foreign grasses in order to meet the unrealistic expectations being demanded by golfers? Or are we going to take a step back and look at getting native grasses or grasses that are better suited to our climate back in play and at the same time reduce our inputs by using less water and chemicals to maintain them while still offering a great golfing experience?

MG- Let me tell you, the business has got to change. What we do is not sustainable and I struggle with it. Managing these grasses to the level that we manage them isn't really the right thing to be doing. I have been working with my committee's and we have been speaking about the way we manage our out of play areas. Ultimately I could still make the areas presentable by turning them into large mulch beds that don't require the same amounts of input as turf. I think the pendulum has swung too far to the side where everything needs to be maintained to an un-realistically high level and I don't think it should swing all the way back either. What we have to find is a happy medium.

RD- The last one is an easy one. What does the future have in store for Mike Giuffre?

MG- I don't know. It's one of those things where I could finish my career here or walk away tomorrow. I have had enough fulfillment in my career to last me a lifetime. But at the same time there is enough here to keep me busy for a long long time. It's probably going to come down to my

wife putting up with me for not being around. My wife met me while I was in the industry and she has had to put up with me not being around a lot. I call her Saint Emily because she's put up with me as long as she has. I owe her a lot and someday she's going to say enough is enough and I'm just going to have to walk away from it. It's going to be hard because I love it. It's my passion.

RD- Mike thanks so much for allowing me to sit down and pick your brain a little and thank you for sharing your story.

MG- It was my absolute pleasure.