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Passion play: Darren J. Davis, CGCS

Driven by a love of the profession and a desire to give back to an industry that has given him so much, it's full speed ahead for Darren J. Davis, CGCS, GCSAA's 82nd president.

March 2018 | Scott Hollister [GCM](#)

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Darren J. Davis, CGCS, the golf course superintendent at Olde Florida Golf Club in Naples, Fla., was elected GCSAA's 82nd president during the 2018 Golf Industry Show in San Antonio. Photo by Montana Pritchard

This might come as a shock to those who know him well, but once upon a time, Darren J. Davis had no idea what he wanted to be when he grew up.


Nowadays, the Certified Golf Course Superintendent at Olde Florida Golf Club in Naples, Fla., has a well-earned reputation as one of the most driven and focused turfgrass managers around, one who successfully balances the demands of his full-time responsibilities at Olde Florida with volunteer service in nearly every corner of the golf course management industry.

But when he graduated from Lincoln High School in his hometown of Tallahassee, Fla., some 30 years ago, Davis wasn't all that driven, wasn't quite that focused. "When I got done with high school, I kind of scratched my head and thought, 'Now what am I going to do?'" he says. "I really had no idea."

In his quest to answer that question, he went to a local community college and earned an associate degree. He moved on to Florida State University, thinking a career in civil engineering appealed to him. "I loved being outdoors and I wanted a job that was going to provide me with a good living, so I thought civil engineering was the answer," Davis says.

He thought wrong. "Within the first two weeks, it was pretty obvious that wasn't going to be for me," he says. "I was taking trigonometry, geometry and calculus, and for the most part, didn't understand the language they were speaking."


But engineering's loss turned out to be golf course management's gain. A friend who knew that Davis loved the game of golf and had actually carved a putting green into his family's backyard using a standard rotary mower suggested he look into work on the golf course. "He told me I had to find a job







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standard rotary mower suggested he look into work on the golf course. He told me I had to find a job on the golf course, learn how to build them, how to maintain them," Davis says. "He thought it would be perfect for me."

He was right, and that friendly nudge was all Davis needed to finally embrace his true passion. His first job in golf at Golden Eagle Golf and Country Club in Tallahassee led him to pursue his formal turfgrass education, which turned into stints at one of America's greatest golf courses, which resulted in jobs at two Sunshine State standouts and a tenure at Olde Florida that is now in its 26th year.

Now, that twist of fate some three decades ago is taking the 50-year-old Davis to what he considers the most important and impactful point of his career: his election last month in San Antonio as the 82nd president of GCSAA.

"I get goose bumps thinking about being president for an association that I joined 28 years ago as a kid whose main excitement was getting to flip through the magazine every month," Davis says. "It's hard to believe it's all gone so quickly, but it just gives me chills."

His predecessor in that role, Bill Maynard, CGCS, from the Country Club of St. Albans (Mo.), says of Davis: "You'd be hard-pressed to find anyone more dedicated to this industry and this association, and to making them both better for everyone. His passion is just infectious, and I know it's going to lead to great things during his year as GCSAA president."

Gridiron great

If you're looking for an informed opinion about a person's character, their leadership abilities, about what drives them each and every day, you could do far worse than to ask someone like Mike Ditka.

Yep, that Mike Ditka. The Hall-of-Fame tight end who won an NFL championship in 1963 with the Chicago Bears. The legendary head coach who led the famed "Monsters of the Midway" to a 15-1 record and a Super Bowl title in 1985. The broadcaster who has spent nearly two decades as part of ESPN's NFL coverage each week.

And, most important for the purposes of this story, the Ditka who is one of the founding members of Olde Florida, who, along with a handful of others, helped identify the tract of land that would become the 18-hole championship course, who helped select Rees Jones as the architect to design that course, and who helped pick many of the key employees who would manage that facility once it opened – including its superintendent, Davis.



Davis (center) has enjoyed long, fruitful working relationships with many involved in the Olde Florida project, including club president Tom Kukk (left) and director of golf Tom Wildenhaus, both of whom, like Davis, have held those positions since the club opened 25 years ago. Photo by Montana Pritchard

When you ask Ditka what stood out to him about Davis when he interviewed for that job 26 years ago – as a relative rookie in the game of golf course management who had never run his own facility – and what qualities he believes Davis will bring to GCSAA's presidency in 2018, Ditka references many of the same things he looked for when identifying good, young assistant coaches for his teams in Chicago.

"It comes down to leadership," he says. "A football coach has got to be a leader. He's got to be out front. He's got to be the guy in control. He's got to be the boss. And that's exactly what Darren is. He's the guy out front. He doesn't have a problem taking the heat when needed, and when there isn't any heat, he's the first to defer the praise to others. That's the way it should be, and you could see almost immediately back then that was the kind of leader he was going to be."

As the course architect for the Olde Florida project, Jones also had a voice in Davis' hiring. Since then, he's remained closely tied to both the property and to Davis. The pair have forged a strong relationship over the years as they've worked on projects at Olde Florida to continually tweak and improve the layout. Like Ditka, Jones believes Davis is the right man for the job with GCSAA, just as he was the right man for the job at Olde Florida back in 1992.

"Darren really has the confidence of just about everybody I've seen around him, which is extremely important at a golf course or for an association such as GCSAA," Jones says. "He's a people person who has done a good job of integrating into the entire golf community through his travels, and just through his personality. He's been at the right place at the right time, and I think he's going to be a true leader as president of GCSAA."

president of GCSAA.

Those who work with Davis on a day-to-day basis share similar opinions about his focus, his dedication and his determination to serve.

"Darren is as highly motivated a person as I've ever met in my life," says Tom Wildenhaus, Olde Florida's director of golf. "And I think throughout his service to GCSAA, he's found another level of engagement and another level of focus that have allowed him to balance his service and his responsibilities here. If you told some of our members that he's been away X number of days a year for seven years, they wouldn't believe it. The golf course is as good today as it was when he started his GCSAA service, and that's a credit to Darren."

First love

Davis credits his parents, Bill and Anita, for much in his life. The work ethic, focus, drive and determination that Ditka, Jones and many others regularly cite when talking about the 28-year GCSAA member can all be traced back, Davis says, to habits he learned from his parents.

What they probably can't take much credit for, however, is that love of golf. "I have this cool memory of my dad getting a set of clubs for Christmas one year," Davis says. "I remember that golf bag sitting under one of those old, all-silver Christmas trees. But he really only played once or twice a year. The game just wasn't a very prominent part of our household."

That didn't stifle Davis' natural curiosity about golf, though. He often dusted off his father's clubs to play a round at the nearby Seminole Golf Course, a public tract owned and operated by Florida State. He was interested enough in the game to dabble in backyard architecture, and also didn't dismiss out of hand those suggestions that he explore work on the golf course when little else in the professional world was holding his interest.

And that first time he pulled on his boots to go to work at Golden Eagle G&CC, everything just seemed to fall into place. "I just fell in love with the work, and never looked back," he says.

After just a few months on the job at Golden Eagle G&CC working for then-superintendent Jeff Vietmeier (a 32-year GCSAA member who is now the superintendent and owner of Sweet Water Golf Course in Pennsburg, Pa.), it became clear to Davis that his best next step was to earn a college degree in turfgrass management. He looked into the two-year program at nearby Lake City Community College (now Florida Gateway College), but at the gentle urging of Vietmeier and former Golden Eagle superintendent Dave Gardner – both Penn State grads – Davis turned his attention to the storied turf program in State College, Pa. He was accepted into the program on his first try.

Unburdened from the self-doubt and uncertainty that had troubled him after high school, Davis dove headfirst into his studies at Penn State, fully embracing the opportunity to learn at the feet of the program's longtime patriarch, Joe Duich, Ph.D., GCSAA's Old Tom Morris Award winner in 2006. "I was on a mission, no doubt," Davis says. "I wanted to get an A in every single class, take advantage of every opportunity that the program offered."



Davis (right) and Rees Jones have developed a close relationship over the years as they've worked together to tweak and improve the layout at Olde Florida. Photo courtesy of Darren Davis

Those opportunities included a six-month internship at Augusta National, return engagements at Golden Eagle during school breaks, and, ultimately, his graduation from Penn State near the top of his class in 1991.

The only thing he didn't have immediately upon graduation was a job, but that quickly changed when he received a phone call from his former boss, Marsh Benson, Augusta National's veteran director of golf course and grounds.

"Marsh asked me if I had a job yet. I said, 'No sir, but I've applied here and there,'" Davis says. "He said, 'Well, Augusta National is a great place to do a job search, and I'd love to have you back.' And that's not something a 23-year-old kid turns down."

So he returned to Georgia as a spray tech at Augusta, actually living behind the first hole on the par-3 course in a cabin that he shared with Brad Owen, who would go on to a job as Augusta's superintendent before eventually taking over the club's top agronomic position when Benson retired in

2015.

Davis' time at Augusta wasn't quite as lengthy as Owen's, but it was no less of a springboard for his career and what would become a lengthy stint of his own back in his home state of Florida.

Back home again

Technically, Davis is not a native Floridian. He was actually born in Huntsville, Ala., but when he was just 22 days old, his family traded Roll Tide for the Sunshine State after his father took an administrative position with NASA at Cape Canaveral. They lived for a short time in Titusville before settling in Tallahassee, which Davis still considers his hometown.

That's why the search for his first assistant job focused on the state of Florida. "I interviewed with Matt Shaffer, who was then at Hershey (Pa.) Country Club, and we quickly realized it wasn't going to be a good fit for this Southern boy," Davis explains.

There was plenty of interest in a Penn State grad with two stints at Augusta National, too, but not always job openings to go with that interest. Eventually, though, Davis connected with Phil Shoemaker at The Loxahatchee Club in Jupiter, Fla., who offered Davis an assistant position before the first interview had even concluded. (A 35-year GCSAA member, Shoemaker is now the superintendent at Desert Highlands Golf Club in Scottsdale, Ariz.)

"I worked for a year and three months at Loxahatchee and absolutely loved it," Davis says. "Phil let me do a lot of things. He saw my passion and energy, so he let me experiment and try different things. I can't imagine learning more in 15 months than I learned during my time there."

So, why did his stint there last only 15 months? Well, to hear Davis and others at Olde Florida tell it, he got an offer he just couldn't refuse.



Olde Florida Golf Club was one of the first courses in the state of Florida to earn Audubon International Cooperative Sanctuary status when it achieved the designation in 1995. Shown here is the par-4 first hole. Photo courtesy of Darren Davis

Lynn Josephson, who at the time was the head golf professional at Wyndemere Country Club in Naples and was running point on the project for Olde Florida's founding members, recalls the hiring process for the club's key management positions, including superintendent. He says Davis stood out for that post almost immediately.

"You look at the résumé, and you see the two stints at Augusta, you see Loxahatchee – which a lot of us knew very well – and the Penn State turf program ... well, there was just a lot to like there," Josephson says.

The only thing that gave the folks at Olde Florida any pause was the relative lack of experience that Davis – just 25 years old at the time – would bring to the table. Those concerns were quickly put to rest by strong recommendations from references such as Duich.

"I'll never forget what Dr. Duich told me when I called to ask him about Darren," Josephson says. "He said, 'Lynn, don't let this young man's age scare you. He's one of the best I've ever seen come through our program, and even though he might not have all the answers, he knows where to go to ask the right questions.' That definitely stuck with me."

Tom Kukk, Olde Florida's president and one of the club's founding members, was equally impressed with Davis back then and marvels at what he's become, both as the club's superintendent and as a dedicated industry volunteer.

"It's been wonderful to watch him grow and learn about what it takes to run a club, to manage a golf course, to interact with membership and become financially responsible for his end of the operation," Kukk says. "We're just tickled with what he's done for us here at Olde Florida, and for the role that he's grown into in the golf industry and with GCSAA. We're very proud of the way he's represented the club and the membership in those ways."

One-of-a-kind opportunity

One of the reasons Davis has been able to so successfully balance his responsibilities at the club with his volunteer service to the industry – which will be highlighted this year as GCSAA president – is Olde Florida's relatively unique management structure.

In essence, the club has no standing membership committees. There is a board of directors, but its only true non-employee leadership position is president, and that's a job Kukuk has held since the club first opened its doors. The concept is based on the successful model of The Sharon Golf Club in Sharon Center, Ohio – where many of Olde Florida's members also belong – and it has proved to be just as successful in southwest Florida as in north-central Ohio.

Frank Dobie has a unique perspective on that structure. For more than 50 years, he has been the superintendent and general manager at The Sharon GC. He and Kukuk are old friends, and he's grown to know Davis well over the years as the two have served together on various boards throughout the industry, including the Musser International Turfgrass Foundation.

"The environment he has at Olde Florida is very conducive for him to serve as GCSAA president and spend the time necessary on those commitments," says Dobie, a 59-year GCSAA member. "Not a lot of clubs have that, but Olde Florida does. They will support him unconditionally. I have no doubt about that."

"I know that I'm blessed to have one of the best jobs in the industry," Davis says. "I have a tremendous amount of freedom, no meetings to speak of, a really supportive membership and a great team of people that I work with. When I first started, I wasn't sure how I was going to stay even five years, but then I look up and, all of a sudden, it's 25 years, and I hope I'm here another 20 years."



Pro Football Hall of Famer Mike Ditka is a founding member at Olde Florida and was involved in the hiring process for the club's superintendent when Davis got the job in 1992. "You could see almost immediately back then what kind of leader he was going to be," Ditka says. Photo by Montana Pritchard

The club's support of and belief in industry service doesn't extend only to Davis' work with GCSAA. It also has been unwaveringly supportive of Wildenhaus in his volunteer service to the PGA of America, both at the section level and nationally through his work on that association's board of control.

"Both Darren and Tom know what the board wants and expects, and we trust them enough to know that they're going to deliver," Kukuk says. "We're very proud of both of them, not just for what they've accomplished for us as a club, but also for how successful they've been in serving their profession."

And as Davis' year as GCSAA president commences, he hopes he can give the members at Olde Florida and the nearly 18,000 members of the association worldwide much more to be proud of.

"Being on the national board of directors and serving as president was never really a goal of mine. What I really aspired to do was simply give back to an industry that had given me so much in any way that I could," Davis says. "Everything I've been able to do because of that aspiration and my service to GCSAA has been such a blessing. It really means the world to me, and I'm excited to be in this position and to see what this year will hold for myself, for GCSAA and the profession."

Plugged in at Olde Florida Golf Club

Olde Florida Golf Club is a place that cherishes its anonymity, its perch just a little off the radar.

The club has no website. You won't find signs for it anywhere along busy I-75 located just a few miles away. And the entrance to the club is as nondescript as they come – just a pair of small stone columns affixed with Olde Florida plaques – palling in comparison to the grand entrances you'll find at some of the club's golf neighbors scattered throughout the Naples, Fla., area.

Considering all that, it's a little ironic that Olde Florida's superintendent for all 25 years of its existence, Darren J. Davis, CGCS, is among golf course management's most visible and prolific communicators, a man as comfortable in front of the camera as he is behind the wheel of a greens mower.

For many years, Davis hosted one of the industry's first widely embraced video products, EPIC Creative's "Superintendent's Video Magazine," and he played a key role in the related instructional video series, "Superintendent's Video Workshop." He's also an accomplished writer, having twice won the Leo Feser Award from GCSAA for the best superintendent-written story published in the pages of *GCM*, in addition to regular appearances in *Florida Green*, the chapter publication of the Florida GCSA, and other industry outlets. In 2007, he even went so far as to earn a bachelor's degree in communications from Florida Gulf Coast University.

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More recently, Davis has extended his passion for communications into the social media realm, connecting regularly about what's taking place on the golf course and his travels on behalf of GCSAA through [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and Facebook.

"I've been blessed to find a career where I've been able to write, take photos and share stories," Davis says. "Those are all things that I've enjoyed doing since I was a kid – things that my dad enjoyed, too, so they've always meant a lot to me."

"In our business, being able to communicate effectively – whether through an article, a video or on social media – is a really powerful tool. I've found that it can create a great connection with everyone from members at your club to your peers in the industry. It's something that I fully intend to keep doing throughout my year as president, because it's something I believe in and something I want to encourage others to embrace more."

Scott Hollister is GCM's editor-in-chief.

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