



# Coming

*To a Brand New Place*

BY KATHY GEATCHES



In the spring of 1960-something a high school golfer named John Davis took a friend's little brother out for his first round of golf. Dave Ward — the little brother — can't remember if he was 10 or 12, but he does remember that he played his first holes at nearby Cherry Hills Golf Course in Flossmoor, one of Chicago's South Suburbs. Ward would go on to become one of the nation's top country club golf superintendents.

Early in 2004, after dealing with years of stress and demands on his time, Ward, then 52, made a career decision that surprised his family, shocked his peers and led him back to his very first tee.



## Building Courses — and a Reputation

Chicago’s South Suburbs are noted for their golf courses. In fact, one local village touts itself as the “golf capital of the world.” Homewood and Flossmoor are two adjoining villages that are often mistaken for one town. They have a combined population of 30,000 with a shared park district and public high school. Homewood-Flossmoor features five golf courses within its boundaries: four private country clubs and one public course.

Ward got his start at one of these country clubs. As a teen, he caddied and worked the driving range at Flossmoor’s Idlewild Country Club. There, he got to know the golf superintendent and asked to be switched to the grounds crew. “I remember doing grunt work in the summer of ’67,” says Ward. “It was the stormy, hot summer of the Oak Lawn tornado and I spent it hand-mowing greens, mowing around trees and shoveling sand up the side of bunkers every time it rained.” By the end of his Idlewild years, Ward became a trusted employee, who assisted the superintendent with almost every aspect of course maintenance.

Golf maintenance was Ward’s summer job during college. He began his studies at Illinois State University in Normal majoring in biology, thinking he



The architects perform an on-site review of the plans for Coyote Run.



**1920s**  
Cherry Hills Country Club established.



**1960-something**  
Dave Ward’s first round at Cherry Hills.

**1996**  
Homewood-Flossmoor enters negotiations to purchase Cherry Hills.



would end up in pre-med or education. But Idlewild changed his mind. “I guess I didn’t have a passion for biology. I had one for golf.” He transferred to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and switched his major to agricultural science.

After graduation, Ward began his professional career at Oak Park Country Club as an assistant superintendent, a position Ward likens to an apprenticeship or internship. “The pay wasn’t too great, but I transitioned from working on the grounds crew, and I could start thinking about management.” He stayed for two seasons and moved on to a better job as a superintendent at Wisconsin’s Kenosha Country Club where he stayed for five years.

His career eventually brought Ward and his family back to his hometown. He took the superintendent’s job at Ravisloe Country Club in Homewood. “I had the chance to develop a good reputation for that club, and I stayed there for 10 seasons.” Through the grapevine, Ward knew that nearby Olympia Fields Country Club was looking for a new superintendent. They previously offered him a job a couple times: he turned both opportunities down, but then the club came up with an offer he couldn’t refuse, and he stayed 14 years.

During his tenure, Olympia Fields Country Club hosted the 1997 U.S. Senior Open and the 2003 U.S. Open

Championship. Although the job and its associated events held a level of prestige and glamour, it wasn’t all easy sailing for Ward. “I was under tremendous pressure for the past 10 years, and the job had many layers of stress,” Ward says. Hosting two televised golf events, rebuilding the course twice for these events, and eventually putting things back for the members took its toll. “The year of the Open, my grounds crew and I worked sunrise to sunset as soon as we could get outside in the spring until mid-July, seven days a week.”

The nationally televised golf championships brought on stress. So did working with a country-club board. Ward told *Turf Net Monthly* (a publication for golf course superintendents): “There were things said and done that I wanted nothing to do with. That, along with the physical and emotional drain of the Open and downsizing of the budget, convinced me it was time to go.”

## Going Public

All the time Ward was preparing Olympia Fields for the U.S. Open, he was doing some casual consulting for the Homewood-Flossmoor Park District, which was in the not-so-easy process of acquiring the old Cherry Hills Country Club.

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**1998**

Taxpayers pass Homewood-Flossmoor’s “Keep it Green” referendum, providing the district with \$14 million to fund land acquisition, including the Cherry Hills Country Club. That same year, Homewood-Flossmoor and the Cherry Hills owners begin a protracted legal battle about the purchase of the course.

**2000**

Cherry Hills Golf Course abandoned.



**February 2003**

A Cook County court rules that Homewood-Flossmoor may purchase the club for \$8.5 million.



# HOMWOOD-FLOSSMOOR PARK DISTRICT V. CHERRY HILLS COUNTRY CLUB CORPORATION COOK COUNTY CIRCUIT COURT CASE FEBRUARY 18-24, 2003

**The Facts in Brief:** In 1998 voters in the Homewood-Flossmoor Park District passed a referendum authorizing the park's board of commissioners to raise an additional \$14 million in tax money to fund the district's plan to purchase and develop three properties that would add 157.5 acres of natural areas to the district.

One parcel was the Cherry Hills Country Club, which had been slated for development. The property owners insisted that the golf course was worth \$15 million. For many years, the park district attempted to work with Cherry Hills on a fair purchase price for the vacant golf course. The district had hoped to resolve the matter by settlement, but never received a settlement proposal below \$9.6 million.

The park district exercised its right of immanent domain and had the property condemned in order to submit the Cherry Hills case to the court system in March 1999 to determine a fair cash market value for the property. During the trial, Cherry Hills Golf Course's experts testified that the property was worth \$12 million. Homewood -Flossmoor Park District's appraisers testified that the property's value was as high as \$4.5 million.

**At Issue:** Whether the Cherry Hills owners' asking price of \$15 million constituted a fair price for the property.

**The Holding:** On February 24, 2003, a Cook County jury determined that the just compensation for Homewood-Flossmoor Park District to purchase the Cherry Hills Golf Course was \$8.25 million.

**The Outcome:** The park district had the choice of accepting the jury's determination of just compensation or abandoning efforts to acquire the property. The property owners retained the right to appeal the verdict if they believed that the \$8.5 million selling price was insufficient. The district acquired the property in March 2003 for \$8.5 million, ending the 5-year price negotiation process.

### See More On the Web

For a more detailed look at the massive extent of the gutting and renovation project, go to the course's web site at [www.coyoterungolf.com](http://www.coyoterungolf.com) to find a photographic journal of the course's construction.

### March 2003

Homewood-Flossmoor takes possession of the club.



### June 2003

The district holds a groundbreaking ceremony for the Coyote Run Golf Course. Park district commissioners Melissa Barrett, Kenneth Goff, Sue Bertram, Pat Nevins and Mike Nussbaum preside over a bond fire that disposes of the old Cherry Hill course markers.



district's plan to purchase and develop three properties that would add 157.5 acres of natural areas to the district.

The district bought a vacant Hines Lumber yard in 1998 and developed it into the district's Millennium Park. In 2000, the U.S. government sold a nearby army reserve base, which was then developed into Patriot's Park.

The snag in the plan came with the purchase of the country club, which was slated for housing development.

Negotiations on a fair selling price between the park district and Cherry Hills' owners took place on and off for nearly a decade, before a court case finally set the selling price at \$8.5 million.

Homewood-Flossmoor Park District got the deed in March 2003 and promptly renamed the club the Coyote Run Golf Course. But there was a lot of work ahead. The course would be practically gutted and built anew.

That's where Dave Ward came in. "I've known of Dave for a long time," says Greg Meyer, Homewood-Flossmoor Park District's director of parks and recreation. "In November of '02 I called and asked him to look at our plans and give me some ideas."

On and off for 18 months, Meyer and Ward would meet for lunch and discuss golf. "I asked him for budgeting input, what to look for in a golf-course designer, sprinkler systems – all different

aspects of operation," Meyer says. At the time, Ward even offered to help Meyer find a superintendent to hire, not even considering himself for the job. But soon, job stress – coupled with a lack of free time – made Ward interested in joining the Homewood-Flossmoor team himself.

In March 2003, Ward turned the tables on Meyer and asked him to lunch. He wanted to know how far along Homewood-Flossmoor was in hiring a golf superintendent and that he was toying with the idea of working at Coyote Run. "It floored me to know that Dave

was interested in our job," says Meyer. "He likes living in the area and what we're doing with Coyote Run. He was looking for more security and was tired of the craziness of dealing with country club board egos."

Ward's decision to leave Olympia Fields was a conscious one. Ward's twin daughters were finished with college and soon there would be less financial demands on the family. He, his wife and youngest daughter enjoyed living in Homewood. He was looking to cut back.

Ward joined the Homewood-Flossmoor staff in April 2004. "Starting a



## August 2003

Demolition and construction begins.



## April 2004

Dave Ward takes the job as Coyote Run Superintendent.

## August 2004

Seeding begins.





Phil Knight is the assistant superintendent of golf.

**Summer 2004**

A coyote visits the course to check on construction. District officials decide not to charge the animal a fee for naming rights.



**September 2004**

Dave Ward is able to mow the number 5 green – the first time Coyote Run is mowed. Seeding the course is finished in October.

golf course from scratch and doing a grow-in is a lot of fun and appealing,” says Ward. Although he knew it would be a lot of work, Ward knew it would be substantially less stress on him and a better working environment.

Many of Ward’s peers thought he was crazy for leaving his high-paying, high-profile country club job. “In my peer group, you could sense that some people thought I was absolutely nuts,” says Ward. “But others congratulated me sincerely for getting out of the rat race that they’re in.” Ward also knows he is a rare bird in the field of golf superintendents. He’s been around for 32 years: a long time, since there are not many superintendents older than 50. “The job wears on you,” he says. “Many leave the field for sales, consulting or even switch careers.”

## Finding the Park District Advantage

“Homewood-Flossmoor Park District offered me a new start, and that’s exactly what I wanted,” says Ward.

Ward has moved to a smaller operation than he’s used to, but there are some obvious similarities between the public- and private-sector organizations. “We have the same routines – only my crew has gone from 55 to 12 workers. The rhythms of life are the same. The agronomic problems are

the same. Expectations are pretty high, especially since we do things here at Coyote Run with less money.”

Another notable difference is that Ward primarily works for one person. “There’s one head person – the director – and although there’s always the possibility that person may change, I know that I don’t have to report to a country club board and have one person from that board who serves as my boss. Greg knows what I’m doing because he’s curious about what I’m doing.”

In this case, Meyer sees a benefit to adding an “outsider” to the Homewood-Flossmoor staff. “Having staff members from outside the parks and recreation arena is a tremendous value to the district,” says Meyer. “In certain positions, the plusses outweigh the minuses. These employees bring different ideas and business perspectives to the district.”

Coyote Run brings Ward a new start and opportunities he has always wanted. He is intimately involved in the grow-in of a new course. He’s pleased with Coyote Run’s new design and is looking forward to keeping it in superb condition for the golfers.

Ward sees himself with Homewood-Flossmoor Park District five years down the road: “I took this job thinking this

would be a nice way to end a career.”

And, it is also a chance for him to come home: back to the links he learned to play on: albeit with a new name, different owner and completely reconfigured layout. But, it is Ward’s opportunity to leave a long-term impact on his hometown park district course for years to come. ■

*Kathy Geatches is the marketing and public relations manager for the Homewood-Flossmoor Park District.*



## December 2004

Brian Smith joins Coyote Run as its manager and head golf professional. He was the assistant golf professional at Channahon Park District’s Heritage Bluffs Golf Course for six years.



## June 2005

Projected Opening of Coyote Run Golf Course.

