Protecting the course where memories are made

Why a family-owned Connecticut facility explored an emerging solution to ensure ABW doesn't hinder charming experiences.

Near a river, in the middle of a pleasant section of Connecticut, surrounded by intertwined properties, sits Portland Golf Course.

The course is quaint in yardage and purpose. A par-71 layout measuring just 6,194 yards from the back tees, the owners, operators and greeters want patrons to post low scores.

"It's a golf course where you can go and shoot the best round of your life — and people really enjoy that," superintendent Jack Kelley says. "When you have the best round of your life, you remember where you did it."

Jack represents the third generation of Kelleys to play a major role in helping patrons play the best golf of their lives. His grandfather, John Joseph Kelley Sr., built and opened Portland Golf Course on a former cow farm less than 20 miles from Hartford in 1974. Jack's father, John Joseph Kelley Jr., now owns the course. Jack is John Joseph Kelley III. Family, friends and golfers call him Jack.

John Joseph Sr., who started his career in the landscape business after majoring in horticulture during the University of Connecticut's pre-turfgrass management era, also developed neighboring Portland West Golf Course and Quarry Ridge Golf Course. A par-60 layout, Portland West remains in the family. Jack's uncles, Shawn and Kevin Kelley, own Portland West, and his brother, James, is the superintendent.

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The Kelleys relish spreading the joy of golf to others by providing affordable and connective recreational experiences. Jack personifies the folksy and noble business approach.

"What I really want to do is deliver the best conditions for the best value," he says. "I want people to come play golf here and not feel uptight. I want it to feel very welcoming, and that people are getting their money's worth. We want people to come out, have fun and keep it growing."

Producing solid conditions despite a tricky growing environment tests Jack's vast golf maintenance acumen. A UConn turfgrass management graduate, Jack started his post-college career as an assistant superintendent at annual PGA Tour venue TPC River Highlands, less than 10 miles from Portland Golf Course. But his industry destiny always pointed toward Portland Golf Course, where he's held the superintendent title for a decade. Jack is still just 32.

Proximity to the Connecticut River means a reliable water source, maintaining turf atop sand, gravel and bedrock, confounding precipitation patterns, and warmer temperatures compared with layouts more distant from the river. Consider it a hyperlocal growing environment for a hyperlocal business. **And one pest threatens turf** — and thus pleasant, low-scoring playing experiences — **more than any other: annual bluegrass weevil (ABW)**.

"In this river valley, if it's not under control, it's our No. 1 pest," Jack says. "**It could just wipe areas out.**"

Reminders of ABW's wrath lurk in memories and mobile devices. "I was looking back at my phone of a video of our fifth fairway … and I was driving through the fairway, and every bit of *Poa* was eaten," Jack adds. "You could just see the patches of bluegrass and bentgrass, but it just absolutely wiped out the fairway."

Jack has fond memories of his childhood, because his friends worked and played at Portland Golf Course. Some childhood memories are more unique than others, like when he realized as a 16-year-old what ABW was and what it could do to the family playground.

"That's when I started to question my dad on stuff," says Jack, whose father preceded him as superintendent. "We had a little bit of damage on the 11th green, and he was looking at it, trying to figure it out. He did a little bit of digging and found larvae."

The early experiences ingrained in Jack the importance of scouting, adapting and studying every possible control tactic. **"Just to apply an insecticide without scouting and knowing what you have would just be wasteful,"** he says.

So, when a cutting-edge solution enters the market such as Atexzo® insecticide/miticide, Jack wields an open mind. Atexzo features the novel active ingredient PLINAZOLIN® technology with a mode of action that acts through **contact and ingestion** to control a myriad of pestering turfgrass insects, including ABW larvae and adults.

"I'm open to anything," Jack says. "**If a new product comes out, a lot of times it's formulations that are changed a little bit. But to have a totally new technology, I think it was crazy not to try it, especially given the fact that, all things considered, it's very affordable**."

Syngenta received registration for Atexzo late last year and it became available to superintendents earlier this year. Jack made his initial application this spring to target first-generation ABW larvae on Portland Golf Course's tees and collars, which comprise around five acres of short-cut turf. He left one tee untreated. "**We saw no damage whatsoever except for the one tee I left unsprayed**," he says.

Following the application, Jack and his assistant superintendent performed lemon soap washes on historically challenging spots along wood lines and pine straw and they didn't spot any

FINDING FLEXIBILITY

Portland Golf Course superintendent Jack Kelley lauds industry manufacturers for introducing several reliable new annual bluegrass weevil control solutions in recent years.

In the case of Atexzo® insecticide/miticide, he's enthused by its ability to control multiple stages of ABW.

"The application window with these newer products has really opened things up," he says. "We have a longer interval when we can apply a product and get some control. **Atexzo is impressive because you're getting control of both the adults and the larvae stages."**

A third-generation superintendent, Kelley realizes new tools must be used strategically to remain effective. Because it controls adults and larvae, Atexzo can further help Kelley and his peers avoid losing quality control options due to resistance.

"Going into early order, I'm 100 percent planning on using it next year for an entire application on greens, tees, collars and fairways, whether it be first or second generation. I know a lot of research has gone into it, and as a rotation product, it's really good for resistance purposes, which is great."

"If I went out and put it down for every generation all year for the next five years, it wouldn't be helping the case of resistance. To me, it's important to rotate it."

adults. He then called James and performed a soap rinse later in the day at Portland West. "And it was maybe 30 seconds later and we had about 15 ABW adults come up in like an 8-inch spot," Jack says. "That's when the light bulb went on, **'Wow, this stuff is really working if I can't find anything on my golf course.'"**

Jack made his second Atexzo application in early summer, targeting second-generation ABW on every green, fairway, tee and collar. The second Atexzo application wasn't part of Jack's initial 2026 plans, but the spring results observed on tees and collars convinced him a widespread application was worth the investment.

"This season my goal was to try to **keep unbelievable consistency throughout the year**," he says. **"This product has definitely helped me do that.** Typically, by this time of year, middle to early July, that second generation would be coming out.

"You think you have it under control, but there are all these different life cycles out there. And you go out one morning and your 12th fairway is starting to get eaten up. You can make it this far and then things just happen like that. **I can definitely say this product has helped make me look good.**"

Neither purchases nor reputations are taken lightly at Portland Golf Course. On a morning following a storm earlier this year, Jack's father ran over a rake as he scurried to repair a washed-out bunker, causing his son to joke, "Dad, you know, if you picked up that rake, that's less money coming out of your pocket. With this being a family-owned business, we put as much back into it as we can, but every piece of equipment, every bag of fertilizer, every product that we try, is money coming out of our pocket."

Owning and operating a golf course is consuming. But Jack doesn't envision the familial vibe leaving Portland Golf Course. In addition to providing affordable daily recreation, local charities, organizations and sports teams use the course for fundraising outings.

It's way too personal to let a pest ruin somebody's mood.

"I plan to stay here and keep it going," Jack says. "We're trying to make it better every day, every week, every month, every year. I want our golf course to be known as being family-owned and family-operated. When you come and play golf here, you're going to see us, and you're going to get a wave and a hello."

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Scan the QR code to watch Penn State University professor of turfgrass science Dr. Ben McGraw describe what he's discovered about controlling ABW using WeevilTrak℠ Plus and Atexzo® insecticide/miticide.