

COGS IN THE WHEEL

There are many people doing many jobs at all hours to ensure a day at a busy public golf course goes smoothly.



BY ADAM ELLIOTT SEGAL

PHOTOS BY MADISEN YOUNG/HONEY & OAK PHOTOGRAPHY

I love golf courses. I love the sound of lawn-mowers cutting fairways, the hushed early morning chatter on the first tee, whizzing down a fairway in a cart on a hot afternoon and walking a track for the first time. I love the way the first morning light or late evening dusk drifts over the green as you size up a sidewinder of a putt.

I've played 18 holes in North Carolina, Mexico and Hawaii, but these days I'm a bit of a Dorothy — there's no place like home. It's why some of my favourite rounds are here in Canada at places like Predator Ridge in Vernon, Vancouver's McCleery GC, or Toronto's west-end public gem, Scarlett Woods.

It's why, on the third day of spring, I trekked some 45 kilometres from the east side of Toronto's

downtown to Piper's Heath in Milton, Ont., a links-style, fescue-lined track carved from the landscape on the fringes of the Niagara Escarpment to capture the faces and feelings of a course rounding into full swing.

I chose Piper's because it's unusual, accessible and, most importantly, public. Public golf courses are the lifeblood of the game. It's where many of us learn to hack our way through weather and worry, where fathers and sons swing clubs together. Picture that course where you squeeze in nine before work — it's perfect, right? Striking distance from Toronto and Hamilton, smack in the middle of the Golden Horseshoe, Piper's Heath is windy, wild and a favourite of many.



First light. First drive. First putt.

When the sounds of morning song are pure, and more importantly, all yours. It's the time of day groundskeepers love. "When the birds are chirping and no one else is around," says Tim Muys, Piper's Heath's superintendent. It's why the stewards of the finest courses in the country wake up early every morning with a smile on their faces.

This isn't just a job. It's a way of life.

↓ Grounds crew member Matthew sets a morning pin on the front nine.



5:15 a.m.

Cast in fog, the moon hangs above Lake Ontario. I drive along the Gardiner Expressway, typically chock-a-block with commuters. This early, it's deserted.

5:45 a.m.

First light arrives with a smattering of sheet lightning in the north. Piper's is far enough from the lake that a micro-climate from the escarpment swerves above. I'm early — storm-watching it is.

6:15 a.m.

I'm first in the parking lot. Abby, one of the pro shop workers, greets me in a cart. This is a good sign.

6:30 a.m.

Soft blues. Spring pinks. Birdsong. The clatter of early morning attendants in the backshop as sunrise lifts above the clouds.

6:45 a.m.

Rows of golf carts stand at attention. Lorenzo, 18 and working here for five years already, is untangling charging cords hanging from the ceiling. There are 82 carts in total, he tells me, smiling ear to ear, and the course averages a 60/40 split of drivers and walkers.

6:50 a.m.

I poke my head into the equipment room. It smells like gas and hope and grass and soil. Alex, the assistant superintendent, shows me a task list that rivals a flight deck — green check, pins, who's mowing and rolling the greens, bunker duty, and a very Canadian thing, a morning dew drag. His favourite thing to do? "I love cutting fairways," he answers. "You have to be very precise, knowing when to lower and raise the blades." Alex points out the DIY PCP pipes he made to pick dew off the grass to prevent disease. "We're all handy around here," he says. Another groundskeeper, Fraser, one of the few new hires, is jettisoning off to the tee boxes to fill in divots and set the yardage blocks.



↑ Lorenzo stands in front of the golf carts.

7:00 a.m.

Red-winged blackbirds flit madly from hole to hole. Swans paddle along the pond near the first hole. Shadows of the friendly, 400-year-old oak trees in the distance. I head out by cart with my intrepid photographer, Maddie, to capture the morning crew.

7:23 a.m.

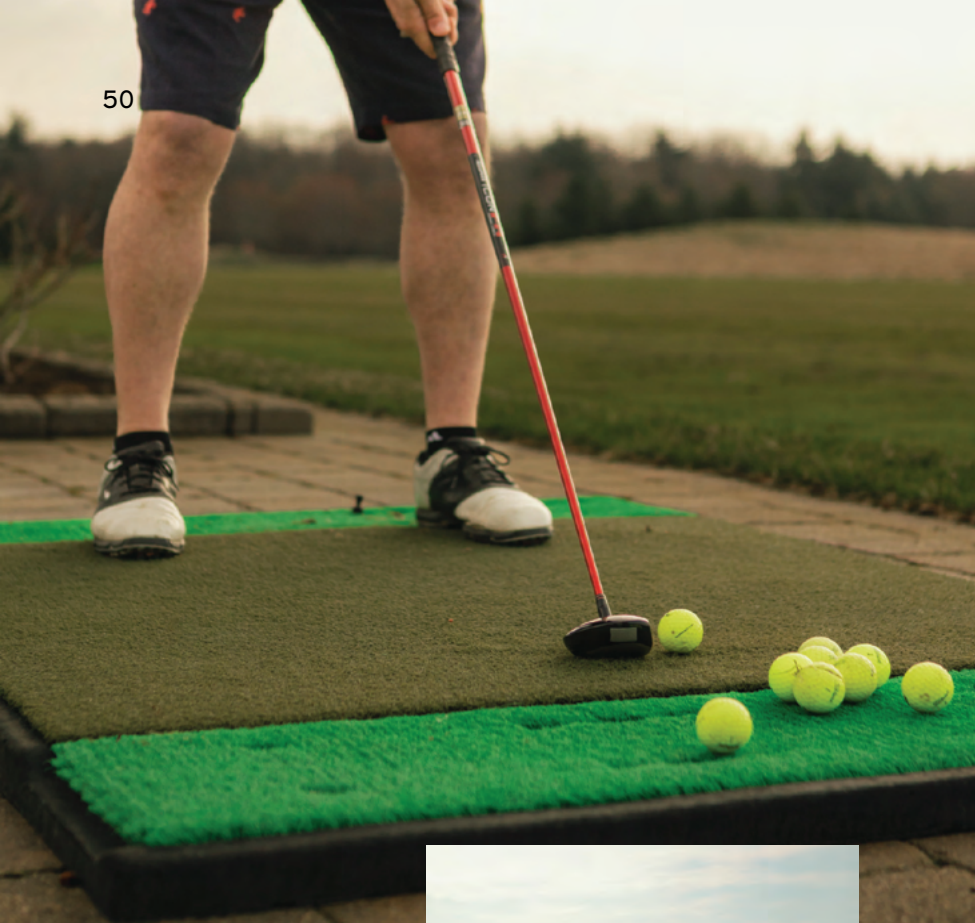
Matthew, back from university, is setting the pins. The greens are cut into grids, one through five, he tells me. Another crew member methodically rakes the deep bunkers, moving from trap to trap along the front nine wearing headphones. From below the cloud cover, the sun peeks out like a curious toddler.

8:00 a.m.

Emma is in the clubhouse prepping coffee and snacks — her sister also works here, driving the beverage cart, and both have returned for another season at Piper's. The clubhouse vibe is cozy man cave, complete with scratch kitchen and TVs showing last night's hockey game. The first golfers grab Gatorades and water. ►

↓ Early morning bunker work before golfers come through.



**8:15 a.m.**

We see our first face on the range, a massive, double-sided, 20-acre signature piece of the property. Eric, wearing a Blue Jays hat, long-sleeved Bay Hill shirt and shorts, hasn't teed it up in two years, he says, but he's downplaying his skill set — he's piping shots straight and long. He's driven all the way from Whitby, in the east end of the GTA, to play with his brother-in-law, who has a shorter commute from Burlington.

8:45 a.m.

It's only the third day of golf season and morning tee times are just arriving — earlier in the week, frost still settled on the ground, Muys tells me, and his team needed extra time to prep the grounds after a cold start to spring. Ever the hardy superintendent, Muys is wearing short sleeves despite a strong breeze that has most everyone else on the property bundled up.

8:50 a.m.

The first two groups arrive at the starter's hut, long-lost, sun-starved faces released from winter's clutches. Handing over their starter slips, golfers here are greeted by the affable and inimitable Jason, one of the few "day-oners" at Piper's. He knows most regulars by name, bantering back and forth like cousins at a wedding after a long offseason without the ties that bind. It's a master-class in small talk. I could sit with him for hours, greeting every group, but Maddie and I make our way to the first tee to watch a foursome — Phil, Jeremy, Eric and Toban — tee off.

9:00 a.m.

Phil and Jeremy are a standing Saturday morning group. It shows — each rifle a drive middle of the fairway. Piper's Heath can play both short and long, with five tee blocks allowing a range of players to succeed. Still, a certain skill level helps. There's no sugarcoating the fact that the course is challenging. Vibes are high — they're all in the fairway so no breakfast balls with this seasoned group. We wave goodbye. Their day is off and running. ►



How best to describe this place? It feels elevated yet rustic, exclusive yet public — the closest you'll get to a private club without paying a membership fee.

It's not cheap — few courses near Toronto are — as a walking round tops out at \$120 plus tax. The pro shop staff — Abby, Evan, Marcus, all wearing Piper's hoodies — tell me the Graham Cooke-designed, owned by the Gruehl family and built in 2007, is often booked solid and customers love the entire property, which serves as a wedding venue for 40 to 50 celebrations a year.

The small touches help. Muys points out the rustic-looking receptacles at each tee box made from reclaimed wood, adding to the barnyard aesthetic littered throughout the property. Couples often trek out to the par-3 13th to snap wedding photos under the canopy of the ancient giant oak tree towering greenside. I understand why — tucked below a rising hill, the image is spectacular even as dark spring clouds spit rain on this spring morning.

◀ **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Phil Hobden, a Piper's regular; Tim Muys, superintendent; Colin Carroll, director of golf operations; Nick Vlattas, another Piper's regular.



↑ Jason Burch (left), the course starter, greets golfers on the first tee.

10:00 a.m.

Big Nick arrives. Nick Vlattas plays Piper's "70 to 80 times a year." Why does he love it so much? "It's private conditions, but a public course. Tim is probably the best superintendent in the GTA," Vlattas says. He loves the challenge of thigh-high fescue and cites 14 as a perfect example. "It's the hardest hole on the course, but one of my favourites. The green is ridiculous — you have to know where to miss."

Muys adds: "Graham (Cooke) did a spectacular job shaping a flat property. It doesn't feel like that when you play it." It's predominantly still a bentgrass golf course, he explains, with heavy soil. He doesn't use a lot of pesticides, spraying mostly fertilizer on the grass, taking a minimalist approach to course management. The firm fairways — he even underwaters them in the summer — are forgiving, with a little bit of roll; the green complexes, with their runoffs, are the course's defence, along with a stiff wind that blows throughout the day.

I reached Cooke over email. "My last tour with Tim brought back fond memories of being in the dirt and ducking big machines. A major challenge I faced was finding enough soil to create small and powerful features across the course. Fortunately, the Gruel family were excited about this venture and received countless loads of soil trucked in from other developments in the area. This allowed us to separate the golf holes and create expressive landforms that transformed the site into a memorable amble. Oh yes, I did dig out some ponds and a reservoir which enriched the look of the course and added special vistas. This character is not so Scottish, but architects are supposed to use their poetic licence when it adds long-term rewards to golfers.

"Pete Dye (the famous golf course designer), a man I could call friend, once told me, 'You know Graham, we are really just dirt pushers.'"

I asked Cooke if I could use that moniker, and he enthusiastically agreed. ▶



↑ Abby reads the day in the pro shop. ↓ Emma preps morning coffee in the clubhouse.



11:00 a.m.

Maddie indulges my request to stop by the practice range. “In case we need some photos,” I suggest, but as the daughter of a golf writer and a player herself, she knows what I’m up to — sneaking in some much-needed reps after a long winter. After a few rusty swings, I make my way through my bag and after flushing several in a row, you could bottle and sell my smile in the pro shop.

12:00 p.m.

A steady stream of midday golfers dusting off the winter blahs are in the shop. Gentle ribbing, swing talk, new equipment being purchased, a basket of range balls, a starter slip, Round Three of the RBC Heritage on the television above. It’s Saturday morning, Easter weekend, a week on from Rory McIlroy’s thrilling win at the Masters and golf is as fresh on everyone’s minds as the morning dew.

The staff is tight thanks to the steady leadership of director of golf operations, Colin Carroll. Those in his employ gush about his easy-going nature. Except for one thing. Abby mentions at the all-staff meeting that Carroll 86’ed country music on the range, a favourite of hers. She doesn’t hold a grudge. It’s unique for a Canadian course to allow music on its practice facilities. Plus, it seems to be working. In 2024, 37,000 rounds were played here.

12:15 p.m.

The clubhouse is beginning to churn out for the lunch crowd. Pro tip: order food from the QR code on your cart after finishing eight so the kitchen can prep a to-go order when you hit the turn.

The back nine has teeth. The 10th plays 607 yards from the blues, while the 11th, a par 3, plays 205. We see the turf crew member Fraser on 13th green and drive by 14, Vlittas’ favourite. It’s a 448-yard par 4 with an approach shot into a plateaued green surrounded by bunkers and water on the right and a runoff, should you miss left, that’s treacherous. I must admit there’s something regal, rural, even a bit feral, about this wild gem of a property that’s eerily reminiscent of a Scottish course. An unplucked gem, hiding in suburbia. ►

1:30 p.m.

The sound of golf spikes clicking on concrete as the first groups gather in the parking lot. Bro hugs and high fives, a whole day ahead for the early birds, first round of the year in their back pockets.

2:00 p.m.

Back in the clubhouse, the wedding co-ordinator, Miriam, is flitting about. An 80-person, Harry-Potter-themed wedding in the chandeliered reception room is arriving later this evening. Alyssa, the food and beverage manager, is prepping for two Easter Sunday brunch seatings, which means the kitchen is closing early. Fret not, hungry golfers — the chef sets up a grill off the first tee for the afternoon crowd. I've decided I want to stay here forever, eat barbeque and talk golf.

2:01 p.m.

Lorenzo is finishing up his day. If he was working the late shift, he'd be on site until 9 driving wedding shuttles, deep-cleaning carts, refilling sand bottles and ensuring the range is picked clean. For Abby, end of day means wiping down computers, calling and confirming the next day's tee times, turning off the range music and helping the backshop crew wash carts as day descends to night. It's all hands on deck, a total team effort. Before I say goodbye to Abby, who is in her early 20s, I tell her about a country group she might try slipping past Colin, Blue Rodeo.

↓ Assistant superintendent Alex shows off a homemade dew picker.



From general manager to maintenance crew, from pro shop to clubhouse to beverage cart servers to marshals, keeping and maintaining a high-quality golf course is hard work. At the most popular public courses, places like Piper's Heath, the ebullient faces cleaning clubs, greeting guests or zipping by to roll the next green are a constant.

These are long days, in service of our four hours of freedom, and almost everyone who works at a golf course — as a summer employee or an executive — loves what they do. I think of all the banquets and birdies, burgers by the pond and biting one-liners Jason, Piper's starter, will fire off before I'm back again. I think of the dirt pushers and the bunker rakers, the dew pickers and bulldozer drivers who shaped this tract of land. By summer the fescue should be thigh-high, the friendly oaks all grown in. I think of what Tim Muys said to me about why he loves it here. "You want to ruin a golf course? Start changing things."

He's right. I wouldn't change a thing. ♡

↓ Lorenzo power washing carts.

