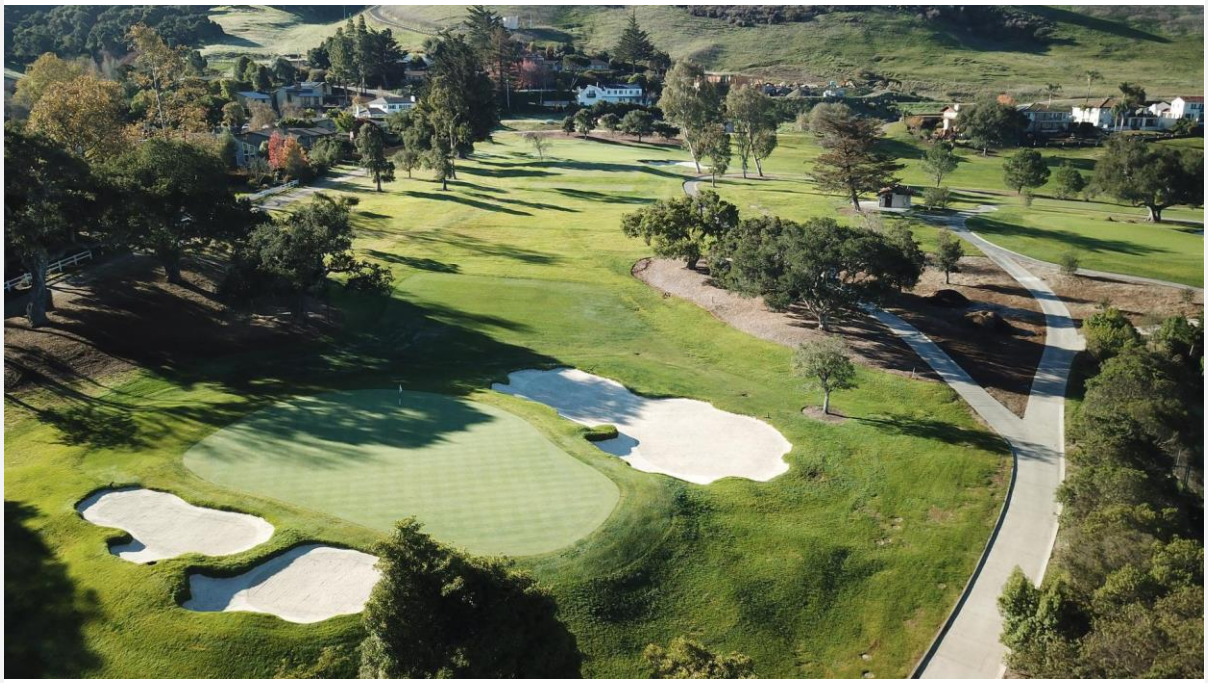
SAN LUIS OBISPO
COUNTRY CLUB

CLUB IN THE NEWS

# Playing It SLO at San Luis Obispo CC

**By Betsy Gilliland | May 8, 2022**



***A major golf course renovation at San Luis Obispo Country Club on California's central coast has the picturesque property set up for years to come.***

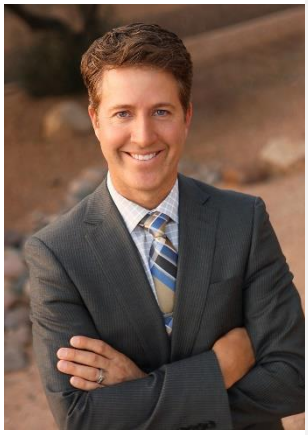
Working around a global pandemic for a major golf course redesign and renovation project. Keeping a portion of that 18-hole golf course operational for the membership throughout the project. Performing some of the renovations in-house with the same grounds crew that was maintaining the open holes on the course. Check, check, and check.

In other words, all in a day's work for the golf course maintenance staff at San Luis Obispo (Calif.) Country Club during the property's comprehensive, COVID-delayed, $9.3 million golf course renovation that was completed last fall.

## Master Plan to Action Plan

Conversations about improving the golf course, which opened in 1957, initially began in January 2017. They were followed by presentations by San Luis Obispo staff members to the greens committee, the finance committee, and the board of directors before holding a town hall meeting to unveil the project to the membership in October 2019. Although the project was slated to get underway in March of 2020, COVID had other plans so the property “had to hit the pause button,” says General Manager David Stocke, CCM.

Instead, renovations on the front nine started in October 2020 and were completed in January 2021. Work on the back nine took place from mid-March 2021 until mid-August 2021, and San Luis Obispo held a grand opening in November 2021.



*David Stocke, CCM*

While the impetus for the project was a leaky, 32-year-old irrigation system, it wasn’t just the infrastructure that needed attention.

“The golf course was outdated,” says Golf Course Superintendent Paul Barr. “We made the golf course more current.”

Barr, who started at SLOCC as an intern in 2002 and became the superintendent in 2013, was working on a major renovation project for the first time. However, Stocke had been part of golf course renovations in two previous positions. He was hired July 1, 2017 after the property had signed an agreement in June with golf course architect Todd Eckenrode to develop a renovation plan.

“We had to turn a 10-year master plan into an action plan that would set up the property for years to come. We want the membership to have a better experience overall when they come to the club,” Stocke says. “We hired the professionals to be the professionals. We hired an architect to give us a vision.”

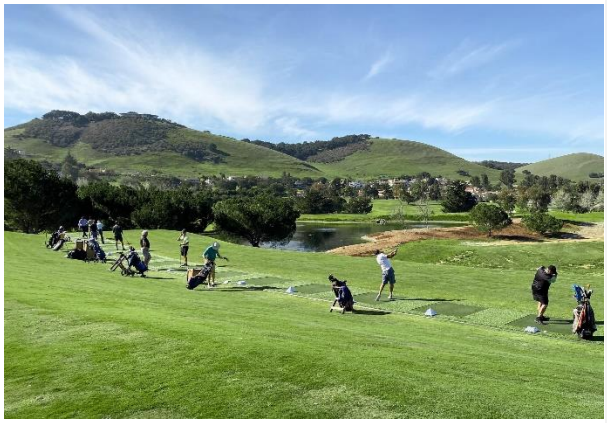
As the backbone of the project, the property installed a new state-of-the-art, HDPE, two-wire irrigation system that features a modern control system, maximized use of recycled water, improved control of the property’s wells, and single-head control with pinpoint accuracy for the highest distribution uniformity.

Other infrastructure improvements include the expansion of two freshwater lake reservoirs with new liners and deeper water-holding capacity on the ninth and 14th holes; updated pump stations; removal, re-routing, and repairs of cart paths; and improved drainage.

The lake on the ninth hole was enlarged slightly, while the lake on No. 14 was expanded dramatically to add visual interest and more freshwater storage.

“We took a water feature in front of the 14th hole and made it into a reservoir,” says Barr.

Additional lake improvements include naturalized shorelines and aquatic plantings. A new liner also was installed on the effluent water reservoir on No. 8. The property, where a wastewater treatment facility treats 58,000 gallons daily from the county of San Luis Obispo, uses effluent water to irrigate the fairways and rough.



As part of the project’s well telemetry system, two new wells were developed and a third well that never had been used was brought online. All seven of the property’s

wells feed into the reservoirs on Nos. 9 or 14.

*The tees on the driving range were regraded and elevated to provide additional visibility.*

While SLOCC is situated on 160 acres of picturesque land on the central California coast, Barr says the new design features of the golf course provide even greater interest to the layout. They include renovated bunkers with new liners, drainage, and white sand; select tree plantings and removals; select greens expansions; square, laser-leveled tee complexes; the widening of some fairways to make them more user friendly; and the addition of barrancas on Nos. 2 and 6 as well as a shared barranca between the 10th and 11th holes.

Originally, the golf course had 48 bunkers, but that number increased to 61 with the renovation. “Bunkers are the architect’s signature. They have a lot of varying edges,” notes Barr.

The greens and tees have a new look as well. To accommodate additional pin locations, 10 of 18 greens were expanded using grass from onsite nursery greens that were added to the facility.

In addition, all of the tee complexes were renovated. “Our tee boxes before were free-form shapes. Now, they have a square, precision look,” Stocke says.

While the barrancas, which were installed through low-lying waterways, add interest and natural features, the three-dimensional grassy areas with natural shelving also play as a true hazard and have drains to facilitate stormwater runoff.

“The architect didn’t like anything manmade in his line of sight. He wanted the golf course to look natural and pleasing to the eye,” reports Stocke. “The golf course has beautiful sight lines now of 180-degree and 360-degree vistas, hillsides, mountains, and vineyards all around the property.”

In addition to renovating the golf course, San Luis Obispo upgraded and expanded its practice facilities.

Driving range renovations include a regraded and elevated tee to provide more visibility, the addition of seven target greens that are built to simulate those on the golf course, elevation of the target tees to increase visibility, a 40% expansion of the putting green near the clubhouse, and construction of a new, on-deck putting green between the driving range and the first tee. The two-tiered range, which was regrassed with Santa Ana Bermudagrass, also features a synthetic strip of turf and 18 hitting bays on the lower tier.

“The previous driving range was like an afterthought,” Barr says. “It had poor drainage; it was hard to grow grass; and there were no target greens.”

The new short game practice facility features a tee area to hit to three target greens and bunkers. A fourth green, which is framed by two bunkers, gives golfers the opportunity to practice putting, chipping, and bunker shots. The greens are USGA-quality as well.

To put the finishing touches on the project, SLOCC also renovated the golf course restrooms to resemble mini replicas of the clubhouse. This effort, along with drilling the two wells and additional electrical work, pushed the total cost to $10.1 million.

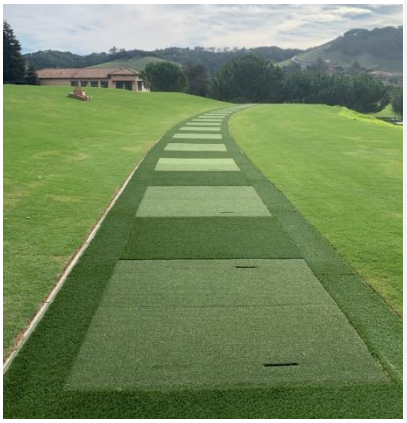
## Decisions and Responsibilities

The project unfolded during the tenure of four different club presidents and two greens committee chairmen, and Stocke says, “We had to be forward-thinking and do our homework to get this thing teed up.”

For instance, Barr and one of those greens committee chairmen, Robin Ventura, who also was on the board of directors when the project began and is the brother of Head Golf Professional Rick Ventura, PGA, visited other golf courses that were under construction before the SLOCC project began.

“We toured up and down the state to see a lot of ongoing projects or finished projects,” Barr says. “We took a little bit from every one and brought it back to make it fit our course. It was about managing our own expectations.”

Barr also talked to other superintendents, conducted research, collected questions, and gave PowerPoint presentations during 18 months of meetings.



*The two-tiered range also includes a synthetic strip of turf and 18 hitting bays on the lower tier.*

Stocke handled funding aspects of the project, served as the point person with the county to secure permits, and oversaw communications with the membership and the project team including Eckenrode, irrigation consultant Brent Harvey, and the SLOCC staff.

Once the project got underway, Stocke kept the membership informed by sending out e-blasts with photos, drone footage, and summaries of the progress. San Luis Obispo CC also updated members by text and created a YouTube channel that featured photos and video of the renovations.

“The membership loved it,” says Stocke. “There was a tremendous amount of work being done with the construction and demolition. You could see how things were transforming.”

He called Barr, who also did writeups about the project for the digital newsletter, “the boots on the ground with the construction crew every day.”

Sometimes calling audibles, the team made 15 to 20 decisions daily. For instance, Barr says, they decided in the middle of the project to establish mulch and landscape areas on the property to add texture. And instead of renovating 46% of the cart paths as originally intended, they revamped 60% of the cart paths.

“My job was to lead our crew, which was very active in the project itself, and work with the contractor and golf course architect,” says Barr.

His assistants also helped him manage the significant amount of in-house work that the grounds crew performed for the project.

The maintenance staff built a putting green with nursery sod on each nine – between the fourth green and the eighth tee on the front nine and left of No. 10 on the back nine. Taking aerification plugs from the golf course greens for the nursery greens, they planted the nursery turf with a matching *poa annua*/creeping bentgrass hybrid.

“We wanted to grow it instead of buy it to match the greens as quickly as possible,” notes Barr.

The grounds crew also lined the bunkers and filled them with new white sand.

However, one the maintenance staff’s most important contributions was the installation of more than 35 miles of perforated drain pipe, which was cut on a diagonal every 15 feet, in the fairways.

The architect and superintendent were aware of the trouble spots on the golf course, notes Stocke, so they knew where to put in the perforated pipes to improve drainage. The work

would have cost about $4 million if it had been performed by an outside contractor, he added, but the price tag was about $500,000 by doing it in-house.

Although the maintenance staff members completed the pipe installation in November 2021, they performed some of the in-house work well in advance. For instance, they removed trees that are not indigenous to the central California coast as well as sickly, vulnerable trees from the golf course a year before construction got underway. They also planted four native varietals of trees – pepper, cypress, oak, and sycamore. The property has 25 different tree varietals on the golf course, Barr says.

In addition, maintenance staff members installed a liner on one of the old bunkers to try it out for a year and see how they liked it. In the short game area, they built a trial tee with two or three different grasses to see which type they preferred.

“The things we chose to do in-house gave us better control so we would have a better project,” says Barr.

Crew members also provided additional sets of eyes to help the contractors – all while meeting the added challenge of maintaining the holes that remained open during construction.

The superintendent, who had about 24 crew members, usually would send out five people to work on the open holes – just enough staff to set up the golf course in the morning.

“When we maintained the open holes, we were going for the health of the turf, not so much greens speeds and conditions,” says Barr. “It was stressful, but we needed to provide something for the members to play on.”

The members wanted access to their amenities, he added, particularly during the pandemic when they wanted to play golf.

Barr believes that doing so much work in-house has given the grounds crew more ownership of the project and maintenance practices. He has found that his staff pays greater attention to detail now.

“It was valuable to have them see why a bunker couldn’t be too steep or why and how drains were installed,” Barr says. “They value the bunkers instead of seeing them as a nuisance.”

## Immediate Effects

While the course is still healing, Barr has seen immediate effects of the renovation on golf course maintenance inputs.

Staff members have reduced spot watering on greens and fairways, and improved drainage in the bunkers has reduced post-storm maintenance.

Because the perforated pipes have improved drainage so that water leaves the fairways faster, golfers also can get back on the course right after a storm. Since the renovation, notes Barr, the golf course “drained beautifully” after 8 inches of rain fell on it in a seven-day period.

Previously, he adds, golfers had to stay on cart paths or the course would be closed for several days after heavy rains. In addition, he says, the irrigation reservoir also used to contain one or two feet of sludge that reduced storage capacity.

Stocke also notes that the maintenance staff no longer will have to contend with the effects of smaller projects, such as redoing bunkers and planting trees, that the property had done through the years.

“When you start making changes to the golf course design, it messes up the distribution uniformity. Little tweaks and changes have an effect,” Stocke says. “Every change after the fact has an impact on how the golf course plays and holds up.”

Prior to the completion of the project, Barr says, the grounds crew “spent a lot of time putting Band-Aids on the irrigation system.”

“We had constant irrigation issues and repair costs before the renovation,” he adds.

Barr says he is still learning the new irrigation system, but all of the heads are level and it provides better distribution uniformity.

“Going forward, it will be like the 12th man,” he says of the irrigation system.

The staff already has used sod from the nursery greens for recovery purposes as well. In addition, the maintenance staff has implemented a fairway sand topdressing program at 80 tons per acre to improve soil conditions over time.

Post-renovation, the fairways and groomed turf around the greens have increased by about 30%. As a result, the grounds crew will have to perform additional maintenance inputs.

“We have more greens to maintain now and more detailed turf that will be more demanding of our attention,” says Barr. “Keeping a square tee will be a challenging task. With a freeform tee, the shape can change. We’ll need to keep the lines straight to prevent encroachment from kikuyu. It’s an aggressive turf around the tees.”

With more bunkers on the golf course, maintenance of these hazards has increased as well.

## Proving Its Worth

The renovations not only have provided benefits to the maintenance staff, however. Golfers will have a more consistent, uniform playing surface, Barr says, and firm fairways result in better ball roll. With the new bunkers, however, he also believes the golf course will be more challenging for the membership. Because the bunkers are no longer contaminated, Stocke adds, their playability is more consistent.

In addition, the tree plantings and removal have given golfers better sight lines and views from the tee boxes.

“The look and feel of the golf course is more upscale. When you stand on the tee, you feel like you’re somewhere special,” Stocke says. “The cypress and oak trees have their moment to shine. It’s been a treat to see a golf course that was already good become great.”

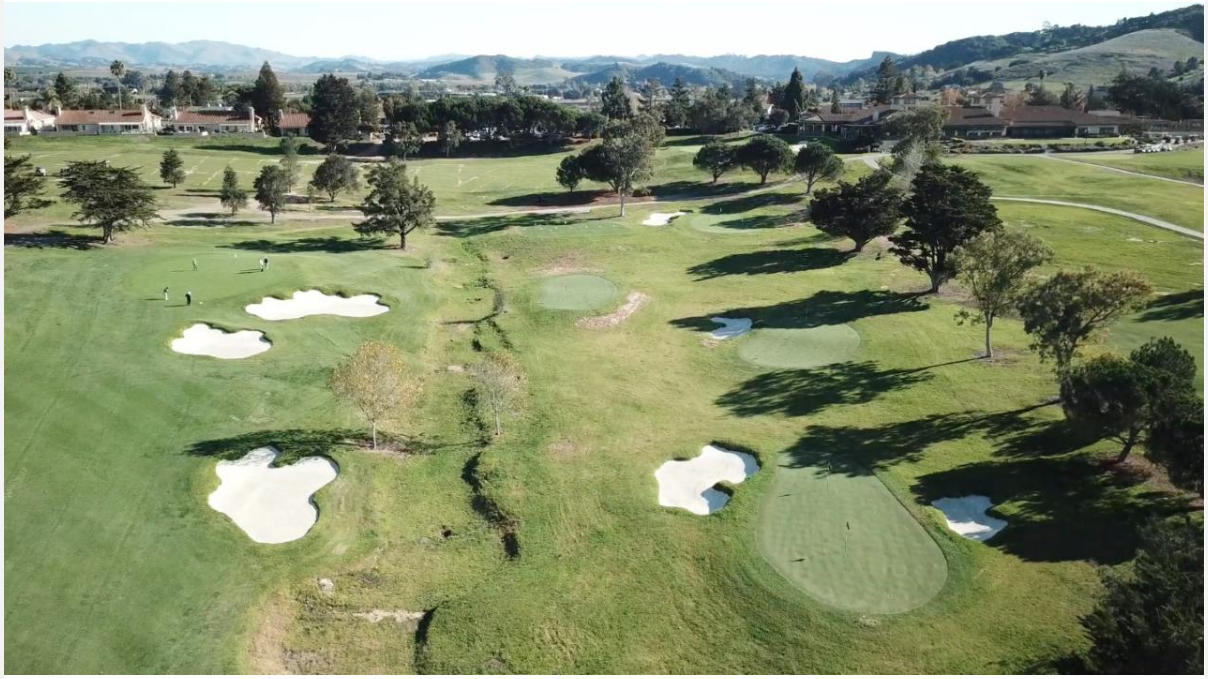
Along with improved irrigation, drainage, visual appeal, and playability to the golf course, another goal of the project is to bring prestigious tournaments to the property. San Luis Obispo has been the site of many collegiate tournaments such as the Big West Women’s Golf Championship in April. The golf course also is home to the annual Straight Down Fall Classic, a tournament that pairs top amateurs with some of the world’s best professional golfers in a low-key format that lets fans walk the fairways with the players. In July, the California Women’s Amateur Championship will be held at SLOCC as well.

“Golf is, without a doubt, number one at the club,” Stocke says. “We are a true family club, but golf reigns supreme.”

Barr believes the renovation was a necessary project that “will prove its worth.”

“When any country club goes through this, it’s a big deal for their membership to give up their golf course. It’s important for all involved to be aware that the membership has put their normal lives on hold,” says Stocke. “It’s an exciting process, but you can’t wait for it to be over. The board, committees, and management team are really put to the test to create a great final product that the membership can be proud of.”

## Golf Scorecard



**San Luis Obispo Country Club**
**Club Website:** *www.slocountryclub.com*
**No. of Holes:** 18
**Designer:** Bert Stamps, original design; Todd Eckenrode, 2020-21 renovations
**Type:** Private equity – member-owned
**No. of Members:** 760
**Year Opened:** 1957
**Golf Season:** Year-round (Mediterranean climate)
**Annual Rounds of Golf:** 26,500
**Fairways:** Kikuya
**Greens:** Bentgrass/*poa annua*

## Superintendent Profile

**Paul Barr, GCSAA**
**Education and Training:** California Polytechnic State University-San Luis Obispo, Bachelor's Degree in Environmental Horticulture Science, 2005
**Years at San Luis Obispo Country Club:** 20; Superintendent since 2013
**Years in the Golf Course Maintenance Business:** 20
**Previous Employment:** San Luis Obispo Country Club, Assistant Superintendent
**Certifications:** Class A Golf Course Superintendent; California pesticide licenses – Qualified Applicator Certificate (QAC) and PCA license
**Honors and Awards:** Distinguished Clubs of America by Forbes Travel Guide 2012- 2022; America's Healthiest Clubs since 2015. David Stocke, CCM – General Manager: Distinguished Club Executive-Exceptional Leadership 2021

## Golf Course Operations

**Annual Budget:** $2 mllion, plus $150,000 in annual sand deposits to create a sandtop over time and improve overall soil base and drainage.
**Staff:** 24 fulltime
**Key Staff Members:** Richard Navarro, Equipment Manager; David Vargas and Dustin Limon, Irrigators; José Ramirez, Assistant Superintendent currently and Second Assistant during the renovation project; Nick Niles, Assistant Superintendent during the renovation project; Jon Briggs, Assistant-in-Training during the renovation project
**Irrigation System:** New 2021 Rain Bird irrigation system with 3,000 heads
**Water Source and Usage:** Seven fresh -water wells, plus wastewater treatment center that provides the property with 58,000 gallons of effluent water each day
**Equipment:** Most major equipment is owned; mixed fleet of equipment (Toro, John Deere, Jacobsen)
**Technology:** Yamatrack GPS for all golf carts with geofencing to protect course, GPS full-course mapping for Rain Bird system
**Maintenance Facility:** Steel structure with lockers, conference room, storage facilities, equipment mechanics bay, washpad, sand/seed/fertilizer concrete bays, upper deck storage
**Aerating and Overseeding Schedules:** Aerate twice per year (spring/fall); no overseeding
**Upcoming Capital Projects:** Additonal cart path pours and repair/replacement in areas; pump station improvements; fiber lines for increased connectivity
**Duties and Responsibilities:** Paul Barr oversees the golf course maintenance crew and course agronomy

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Betsy Gilliland**

Contributing Editor

Betsy Gilliland, a contributing editor for Club & Resort Business since 2005, primarily covers golf course maintenance and management for the Course & Grounds section of the publication. She also serves as executive editor of Columbia County Magazine, a monthly

lifestyles publication in the Augusta, Ga., area. Betsy lives in Augusta with her husband, Gary, who is a golf course superintendent.

Betsy previously worked as a newspaper reporter for Main Line Life in Ardmore, Pa., the Daily Local News in West Chester, Pa., and the Augusta (Ga.) Chronicle. During her newspaper career, Betsy covered a variety of beats including government and politics, education and law enforcement. She has won awards for spot news, non-deadline, and series/special projects reporting.

She is a graduate of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.