A Few Minutes with Frank Hannigan

Senior Executive Director, USGA

FOR BETTER or worse, I find that I have been involved in the administration and management, in one way or the other, of the last 26 U.S. Opens. These have been the great years of Nicklaus, Trevino, of Arnold Palmer losing three playoffs in five years, and of Watson at the 17th at Pebble Beach. It has been a period when the game has gone international to the extent that no one will be surprised if this year's Open is won by an Australian, a German, a Japanese, or a Spaniard.

We spend a great deal of time thinking about television and what the Open will look like before an audience of 20 million people around the world. One reason the Open went to Shinnecock Hills last year was our clear understanding that Shinnecock would send a wonderful message on television. The Open has changed as a spectacle.

The one constant in the U.S. Open is the courses on which it is played and how they are prepared. You have seen these conditions: fairways an average of about 30 yards wide; two cuts of rough, the first five to six feet wide at two inches, which we call intermediate rough, and the second notorious U.S. Open rough, which goes to about four or five inches. The greens are dry, firm, and fast, and is a nice Stimpmeter speed for Open greens. They were about the same speed 25 years ago but we didn't know it because the Stimpmeter hadn't been widely used yet.

Providing these conditions is not easy, since most Open courses are open to members for regular play right up to Sunday night of Open week. It is a very hard job for the golf course superintendent. The hours are long, but he is used to long hours. Agronomically it is a little tricky, but he is accustomed to tricky agronomics. The real difficulty is in terms of emotional pressures.

The reputation of the USGA rides on the Open itself, and we watch it very, very carefully. Club members, who can age a superintendent inordinately in an ordinary year, get especially wrapped up when it comes to a U.S. Open. Their pride and their emotions can complicate things enormously. The players, the pros, very few of whom have ever done anything much at all except play golf, are now, all of a sudden, taken seriously as ultimate experts in the art of turfgrass management. Then the press is all over

Preparing for an Open. "Stop with the stakes!"

(Top) Brookline, Massachusetts, April, 1963. Nothing grew that spring. Nothing!

(Left) The roughs were the talk of the 1955 Open at The Olympic Club, California.

(Above) The 18th hole at The Olympic Club, 1955 U.S. Open.

the superintendent's golf course, and he is not a guy who has been trained to deal with reporters or television people. So out of this odd mix of circumstances you get some occasionally unforeseen consequences. I would like to share with you some of my memories of incidents involving golf courses and their management and superintendents that are quite apart from the play of golf shots.

First, at Oakland Hills, in Michigan, in 1961. I had just been hired by the USGA, and my experiences in golf had been primarily those of a player and someone who cut greens on the New York City public golf courses. I had never dreamed there was such a place as an Oakland Hills. I was given the job of supervising the installation of gallery stakes and ropes. We had had a late, late start and were in a sort of frenzy to finish, with me driving a tractor and Joe Dey driving in stakes with a sledge hammer. We were doing very well on a Sunday afternoon when a little man came running across the fairway yelling for us to get off the tractor and stop with the stakes! He was the shop steward of the crew at Oakland Hills. It never occurred to the USGA that there was such a thing as a union on a golf course, and that the union mattered more than the U.S. Open. This was Detroit in the early 1960s. I got off the tractor and Joe Dey stopped driving stakes.

The year 1963 was the one of the great winterkill at Brookline, Massachusetts. Nothing grew that spring. Nothing at all. Oh, we had some patchy rough, but by Memorial Day, three weeks before the event, we were commiserating with the superintendent at The Country Club. We said, "John, what a terrible thing to happen this particular year." He said, "Frank, enough of it. These tight Yankees are throwing money at you, and after you're gone the golf course will be better than it ever was before." He was absolutely right.

In 1965, in St. Louis, we had a golf course superintendent talk of resigning on Tuesday of the week of the Open. The pressure got to be too much. He was prevailed upon to stay through the Open, but it was very difficult for him as once again it was a late and cool spring, and this was a bermudagrass course. He was especially concerned because it was the first year of color television for the Open — and the course was going to be brown. We drove onto the course on Thursday morning, and he had dyed the 17th fairway. He did this on his own, and it didn't come out too well — it looked like a rancid Easter egg.

AT MERION in 1971 we had a tough spring, too. Greens were bumpy and not good at all. The central figure at Merion then was Richie Valentine. He would work with his friend Al Radko, National Director of the USGA Green Section in New Jersey. They concluded that the prescription for better greens was an application of sand topdressing. Richie and Al concluded that Richie's father, Joe Valentine, would have done the same. So an application of sand went on early in June. We came in and looked at it, and since Richie was not a man for moderate applications, we had 18 bunkers! There was much raking, and the end result was a marvelous golf course. Richie Valentine gave us a pure golf course.

At Atlanta in 1976 was perhaps the most celebrated incident concerning the golf course superintendent in the history of the U.S. Open. In those days I had an interesting job with the U.S. Open. I was the person who sat in the little tent near the 18th green where the players returned their score cards. You become accustomed to people vilifying the USGA, but there was something very unusual at Atlanta on that Thursday. Players were coming in and crying about the long fairways and that the grass hadn't been cut. This was intensified and intensified. All they talked about was flyers, flyers, flyers. It got so bad that I communicated with the USGA Championship Committee. I said look, we all know the paranoia of these guys, but there is so much of it, we had better check on it. So there was an investigation.

The superintendent, it seems, wanted to have everything just right, and so he had fixed up a lot of his equipment and had everything new for the Open. Among other things, he had ordered new sets of wheels for his fairway units. These were put on Wednesday night. It turned out that the new wheels were fractionally larger than the ones he replaced. So when the fairways were cut on Thursday morning, nothing was really cut.

And so both sides were right. The fairways were cut, but the grass was still very long. There was a little printed statement prepared apologizing to the players, telling them we would get it right the next day. Some did not believe the statement and felt it was a deliberate act on our part to humiliate them.

It was in 1977 at Southern Hills that Hubert Green went through the bizarre incident of a telephone death threat. He was accompanied around the course by State Troopers. But backstage at Southern Hills, for the golf course superintendent, it was the Great Gibberellic Acid Year. Again, it was a slow growth spring, and there was not enough rough, according to the USGA Committee. Monty Moncrief, our agronomist, told us there was a substance called gibberellic acid that could make a rain forest out of a desert. There was a frenzied search for it, a plane was dispatched, and it was brought to Southern Hills and applied on a Tuesday. Whether it grew any rough or not, I don't remember. But to this day, Jim McKay, of ABC Sports, asks us how goes our gibberellic acid?

In the last six or seven years, we have created a new role. We now have a specially assigned agronomist for USGA Championships. He is someone who makes not only Turf Advisory Service visits, but about half of his time overall is devoted to working with the golf course superintendents at our championships. His primary job, I think, is to shield the golf course superintendent; to keep us away from him and his green committee away from him. Let him do the job. For us, of course, the Open Championship is the most important thing in the world. We live off it in two critical ways. It is so prominent, it determines what the USGA reputation is, and it is a source of revenue that allows us to pay for many of our services, including the Green Section.

Whether or not the Open succeeds depends ultimately on the quality of the golf course. If the golf course isn't right, nothing else matters. So I would say, without hesitation, that it is the golf course superintendent at a U.S. Open who by miles matters more than anyone else. If he fails, we all fail. But he doesn't. It is his pride and his professionalism that invariably prevails.

This year we take the Open to San Francisco and the great Olympic Club. We expect that we will have a winner because John Fleming, superintendent at the Olympic Club won't let us down. So many of you have not let us down over the years!