



Teamwork and crew unity: two key ingredients in the success of a major championship. The Country Club, Brookline, Massachusetts.

Playing Host to a Championship Can Benefit Your Course!

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“THE PUTT is on its way . . . it looks good . . . it's in! Curtis Strange has just made birdie on the 16th green to take the lead in the 1989 U.S. Open.”

The excitement of watching a major championship can start a golfer's adrenaline flowing. As people sit around the television at the 19th hole, they sometimes wonder what it would be like for their club to play host to a championship; what it would mean for them and what their club would receive for its efforts. They might also wonder if their

course layout is of championship caliber, and how they should go about securing one of the USGA's 12 national championships for their course.

Finding out is really not so difficult. A club official should contact the championship department of the USGA with a phone call or letter expressing interest in a particular event. A USGA representative then contacts the club and might visit the course to discuss the requirements and options with the club officials. If both parties agree, a formal letter of invitation is then sent from

the club to the USGA Championship Committee, which considers the invitation and accepts or declines it.

Whether a club hosts the U.S. Open or one of the other USGA events, its membership can expect to gain much from the championship for all its hard work and sacrifice. The benefits are usually both tangible and intangible, from a new esprit de corps to a fresh coat of paint for the clubhouse. The benefits to the golf course and the maintenance program, though, can be many, and they are the focus of this discussion.

The benefit to the club and course often begins with an increase in membership unity. The goal of working toward the success of an enormous undertaking can create new friendships and a spirit of cooperation. People who might never get to know others in their club are now working side by side on a common interest. Many of the members are also in a position to work with the maintenance staff and become familiar with their special concerns and problems. The relationships forged during the preparation for a championship can have a positive impact on the maintenance program for many years to come.

For the Green Committee and maintenance staff, hosting a USGA event offers the rewarding challenge of bringing each facet of the maintenance program into peak performance for a single week, during which time the nation's best golfers compete with the course and each other for that elusive national championship. After play is done and a champion determined, there is usually recognition that the changes and modifications to the course and the maintenance program will continue to benefit the golfers at that course long into the future.

A beneficial aspect of hosting a championship is the knowledge gained on how to manage the golf course through a limited period of stress. The stress comes in various forms, including minimal irrigation of greens and fairways, an increase in the number of cuttings of all turfed areas and, in some cases, an increase in wear and tear caused by player traffic. Most superintendents are surprised to discover just how much the turf can take when it is adequately prepared. The experience of managing turf "on the edge" for a week in mid-summer can prove invaluable when preparing for club events in the future.

THE USGA believes that a championship course should provide a challenging but fair test of golf, requiring the golfer to use all of his skills during a round. To produce a course that meets these specifications, certain changes usually have to be made in the maintenance program.

Beginning with the putting surfaces, the concept of firm, fast greens is a very important consideration. The firmness of the greens should be such that they hold a properly struck golf shot from the fairway, yet not be so receptive to a flier shot from the rough. Also, developing fast greens without risking

the loss of turf requires much advance work. Changes in certain cultural practices, such as aerification and topdressing, may be needed, and here is where a club can begin to benefit from the championship.

Achieving quality playing conditions to challenge some of the world's best golfers often requires additions to the equipment inventory. An important change for some courses is the switch to walk-behind greensmowers. These courses, which may have been reluctant to abandon their triplex mowers in the past, find that hosting a championship provides a good reason to change. When the switch is made, they often see a significant change in the trueness and consistency of the putting surfaces and an improvement in their appearance. Among the benefits to the turf are a closer, tighter cut, the elimination of hydraulic oil spills, a reduction in compaction to the collar area where triplex mowers previously turned, and the elimination of the triplex ring.

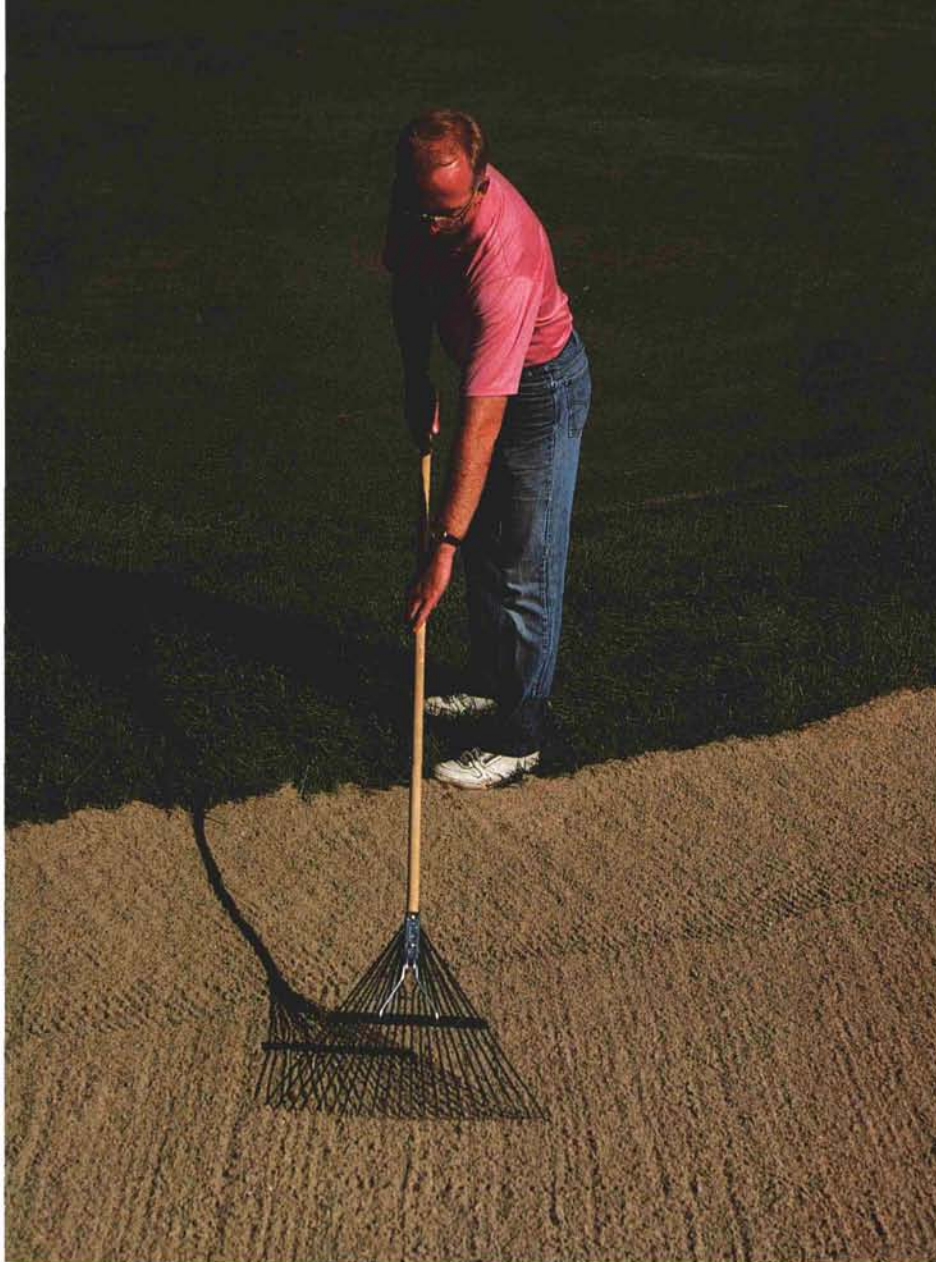
The Peachtree Golf Club, in Atlanta, Georgia, host of the 1989 Walker Cup competition, wanted to have the best possible putting surfaces for this event. This desire prompted a change from riding triplex mowers to walk-behind units. The golf course superintendent agreed to the change and felt it would be in the best interest of the greens. However, there needed to be an increase in labor and equipment for transport and maintenance. After reviewing this dilemma with the Green Committee, the extra labor and supplies were added to the budget. This change is one that produced better conditions for the championship itself and for the membership after the players had gone.

Perhaps the greatest dilemma that faces a golf course superintendent in preparation for a championship is to achieve the desired green speed without sacrificing turf quality. Fast greens inevitably have less grass on them than slower greens, making them more susceptible to a wide array of stress problems. A relatively new piece of equipment that has become something of a requisite for developing championship greens is the turf groomer available for today's putting green mowers. This unit allows the superintendent to achieve fast green speeds without having to lower mowers to an unreasonable height. The groomers remove the excess leaf tissue and reduce the grain that is a common problem in reaching the desired speed.

Championships and summer go hand in hand. With pleasant days come higher temperatures, though, and the inevitable concern about wilting and the effects of heat stress on greens. Irrigation is an important issue in any maintenance program, and when a championship is held it is put on the critical list. Given the importance of firm, fast greens for the event, it is essential to prepare well in advance. The weeks and months preceding the championship are ideal to learn how your greens respond under a minimal irrigation regime. By charting the putting surfaces you can get an idea of their individual growth characteristics. Locating the primary hot spots and noting the areas of the greens that hold moisture provide a good basis for establishing a customized irrigation program. With patience and perseverance you can learn to manage the putting surfaces through light hand watering, syringing, and proper use of the automatic irrigation system. During the championship, irrigation will be held to a minimum, just enough to keep the grass alive through the event. When it is over, you will have acquired a better appreciation of how to properly manage greens under stress conditions.

MANY of the clubs that host USGA championships are older, traditional courses built in an era when construction methods were based on instinct rather than scientific principles. Greens were often built with a clay base to ensure good moisture retention, an asset in the 1920s but not today. Other greens were built with extreme contours that cannot accommodate the green speeds achieved for championship play today. Where agronomic or playability problems are severe, some courses find that playing host to a USGA championship is a good excuse for resurfacing or rebuilding some or all of their greens or other course features. For example, Laurel Valley Golf Club, in Ligonier, Pennsylvania, host of the 1989 U.S. Senior Open, not only rebuilt all of its greens, but also many tees, fairways, and bunkers. In less drastic situations, where total reconstruction is not necessary, maintenance program changes such as deep-tine aerification, sand topdressing, or the installation of a supplemental perimeter irrigation system could upgrade the course for the championship and for the membership thereafter.

Greens usually receive the closest attention when preparing for a cham-



Attention to every detail is a must!

pionship, but tees are very important features and should be addressed as well. It is essential that surfaces be firm, level, and large enough to accommodate play. Producing a good-quality teeing surface involves many of the same cultural practices used on greens, such as deep-tine or traditional aerification to break up compacted soil, improve surface and internal drainage, and increase rooting potential. Top-dressing, overseeding, and a proper fertilization program are also important. A beneficial change at many courses is the switch from triplex mowing to the use of walk-behind units, a practice that often stays with the club after the event is over.

IN PREPARING for a USGA championship, some courses find that their tees are quite uneven. Their response usually involves removing the existing sod, bringing the base to an appropriate grade, and reestablishing turf by way of seed or sod.

If it also happens that the tees are too small or poorly drained, then total reconstruction and enlarging is sometimes undertaken. However, many tees are barely more than pushed-up mounds of poor soil that are small in size and don't function too well. To eliminate headaches during the event, reconstruction of certain problem tees or all tees to be used during the championship is a beneficial solution. Re-

construction typically involves the use of a modified soil/sand topmix, the installation of drainage, and increasing the usable teeing area to correspond to the annual number of rounds played at the course. A standard rule of thumb for tee enlargement requires 100 square feet of usable teeing area for every 1,000 rounds of golf on par-4 and par-5 holes, and 200 square feet of usable area per 1,000 rounds on par-3 holes.

Sometimes, the most important change concerning tees at older championship sites is the thinning and removal of nearby trees. These leafy sentinels that frame the tees can grow to enormous heights, blocking out much of the available sunlight, inhibiting air circulation, and producing roots that compete with the turf for moisture and nutrients. As their limbs gradually expand over the years, they also rob valuable teeing surface by interfering with shots on one or both sides of the tee. In preparation for the championship, overhanging limbs that interfere with play can be pruned off. To improve the turf on the tee surface below, a thorough pruning of the tree canopy is usually scheduled to increase sunlight penetration and air circulation. In many instances, the removal of certain overcrowded trees improves turf growth while allowing the remaining specimens to thrive and grow to a more natural form. To complete the process, tree root pruning is done to further enhance turf growth on the tee. This usually involves the use of a trencher or backhoe to sever the tree roots, followed by the installation of a barrier along the wall of the trench prior to backfilling.

GOOD championship fairway turf is tight and firm, enabling the contestants to place adequate backspin on the ball to hold their approach shots to firm, fast greens. A $\frac{1}{2}$ " cutting height is usually required, and thatch must be kept to an absolute minimum if firm conditions are to prevail.

Developing top-quality fairway turf is much easier than it used to be since the advent of lightweight mowing and clipping removal programs. Indeed, fairway conditions today can practically reach putting green conditions of 20 years ago. Today's triplex or five-gang fairway mowers have so improved playing quality that they are a must for cutting fairways for any major event. Once the club has invested in this program and has seen the results, there will be no turning back to alternative

*(Right top) Trees or turfgrass!
Few championships are played out
of trees. Air circulation and sunlight
are the choice for quality turfgrass.*

*(Right below) The final product . . .
to enjoy for the championship
and for years thereafter.*

means of mowing. The benefits of these lightweight mowers are many: less soil compaction, reduced disease incidence, and a decrease in irrigation requirements. Continued use of lightweight mowers almost invariably produces more bentgrass and a reduction in *Poa annua* in the fairways, much to the delight of most golf course superintendents.

Another fairway change that often accompanies the championship involves their contours and landing zone widths. Fairway landing area widths for some USGA events typically range between 27 and 35 yards, depending on hole length and difficulty. This change affords the opportunity to do some contouring of the fairways and to highlight their prominent features, enhancing both the appearance and playability of the fairways.

After The Country Club agreed to host the 1988 U.S. Open, many major changes were made on the course. Some were very visible, including the reconstruction of several greens. Others were not as noticeable, but were critical to the long-term maintenance of the course. An important change was the installation of a computerized irrigation system. Good water control is essential during Open week, and it is just as critical for daily maintenance throughout the season.

Always a subject for debate at the 19th hole or in conjunction with a championship is the condition of the sand bunkers. They can be too soft, resulting in fried-egg lies, or too hard, allowing the clubface to bounce off the hardpan and skull a shot across the green and into the rough. Sand replacement and bunker renovation can be a costly program, and one that is put off for too many years. Playing host to a championship, though, often provides the stimulus to follow through with this work.



For example, if bunker design has been compromised over the years by sand buildup, misuse of the mechanical sand rake, or indifferent edging techniques, the club may choose to restore their original size and shape with some advice from a golf course architect. Other important work might include the installation of drainage in all bunkers to insure quick removal of water during wet weather. Old sand is often removed and replaced with good-quality material, meeting depth requirements of 4 to 6 inches for the base and 2 to 3 inches on slopes and faces. Also, steep grass faces that have become worn down by player traffic or sand buildup are often refaced with new sod. Finally, many courses take this opportunity to eliminate or relocate bunkers that are out of play and have no aesthetic value.

ONE OF THE MORE controversial and misunderstood aspects of championship play is the rough. It can be too penal or not challenging enough, depending on your viewpoint. Sometimes the roughs play an insignificant role when they are cut too short, when the fairways are too wide, or when they go without rainfall or irrigation for too long a period. When preparing for a championship, the establishment of a challenging yet consistent rough turf is the goal. The USGA's view is that the rough turf should be at a height and density to cause significant concern to the player, but not so difficult that the player has to use a wedge to move the ball sideways back into play.

When fairway landing zones are narrowed for a championship, a corresponding change is made in the roughs. If the fairways are primarily bentgrass and *Poa annua*, then the new rough areas will develop into thick, matted bent/*Poa* turf. These areas typically become scalped, diseased, and clumpy, producing an unsightly and unsatisfactory rough.

When bent/*Poa* turf problems or other inconsistencies exist, a renovation program is usually recommended. If the championship is just a year or two away and there is no time for more intensive renovation work, the bent/*Poa* turf is treated with Roundup, dead leaf and thatch tissue is scalped down, and the areas are then cultivated heavily and overseeded with a mixture of Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, and fine fescue. Areas that are not too large are

sometimes stripped and sodded to bluegrass. This work highlights the lighter color of green on the fairways while creating improved playing conditions for the golfers.

After grasses have been introduced into the roughs, the next step is to properly maintain this turf. Change often begins with good equipment. Reel mowers may have served their purpose for shorter-cut rough turf, but they usually don't produce a good-quality cut at the higher height required for the championship. The change to rotary mowers produces a more upright, uniform cut and a better playing surface. These units are lighter and have better traction and maneuverability than pull-gang reel mowers, reducing the amount of damage done to tree trunks and sharply sloped banks. Some courses choose to upgrade their irrigation systems to ensure coverage of in-play rough areas for the championship. The installation of double- or triple-row fairway systems continues to benefit the course far into the future.

“WHAT'S WRONG with that tree? It's never been a problem before!” is a comment that is heard too often today. Trees, like children, grow up too fast, and what once seemed an ideal planting can eventually grow to outrageous proportions. Trees can serve many useful functions on golf courses, but they can also become a real detriment to the health of nearby turf and the playability of the course. Such trees need to be addressed, and a championship is a good excuse to do something about them.

As trees grow near tees, greens, and fairways, they often block the penetration of sunlight to the turf surface. Selective limb pruning may be all that's necessary to improve turf growth, but occasionally a few trees must be removed. Tree work of this type can also benefit the turf by increasing air circulation through the area.

Trees can affect turf from beneath the surface, too, with their roots competing with the turf for moisture and nutrients. Greens, tees, fairways, and roughs can all be affected, especially during periods of dry weather. When it appears that tree root competition is contributing to the decline of nearby turf, a root-pruning program is recommended. A vibratory plow is often used along fairways

and roughs, where trenching would be too time consuming.

Finally, tree limb interference was mentioned earlier as a common problem around tees. It is also common on approach shots to greens or on exit shots from sand bunkers, and pruning work is usually recommended.

Good drainage is important to any golf course, whether or not there is a championship to be played. The ability to remove excess water from the course during periods of heavy rains is essential for maintaining firm, consistently good-quality turf for the championship or for regular play. When drainage is a question mark, one of the first priorities should be drainage installation. Sand bunkers and fairway landing areas usually receive the first attention, but the program could encompass many other areas if time and resources are available. Indeed, drainage installation could be one of the greatest benefits to the club through its involvement with a championship.

THE WORK required to transform your course into the site of a championship increases the work load of both crew and equipment. The saying “I thought it ran forever!” cannot be applied to either the staff or the machines. In anticipation of this work, many clubs need to take a serious look at upgrading their equipment inventory and increasing the size of the crew. For events where financial gains will be realized, the renovation or rebuilding of an unsuitable maintenance facility is a feasible possibility.

When golfers witness the improvements made on the course in conjunction with the championship preparations, they are often willing to sustain many of the programs long after the event. In addition to these positive effects, many golf course superintendents report that they come out of the championship with a better crew, who pick up some good training and discipline in the process.

If it sounds as though your course could benefit from these changes, or if your club just wants to give something back to the game of golf, consider playing host to a USGA championship. The short-term benefits are gratifying, but the resulting changes can benefit the course and the membership for many years to come.