



Emirates Golf Club is located next to the Arabian Gulf and stands out in its surrounds.

THE GRASS DOESN'T CARE

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WHEN August 2, 1990, rolled around, everything was going along smoothly at the Emirates Golf Club, in Dubai. Most of the summer projects were well underway, the annual renovation and cultivation program was right on schedule, and the persistent 120° F midday temperature was the focus of our greatest concern. With the news of the invasion of Kuwait, reactions and appraisals ranged from one extreme to the other, from those who prognosticated like Doomsday prophets, to those people who simply shook their heads and said not to worry.

In the midst of all this uncertainty, a very special golf course reality occurred,

best described by a saying often used in our work — “The grass doesn’t care.” This phrase was used many times, virtually like waving a magic wand in the faces of the club’s management and members, when justifying course needs in the light of Mother Nature’s unrelenting demands. The course had to remain operating in an area shadowed by war, with no idea what kind of adaptation would be necessary. The grass was going to keep right on growing, and answers for whatever problems might come would be required.

Fortunately, a sense of confidence was felt because of the support from the club. From the board of directors, the

club management, and members, the attitude had always remained to do everything first class. The Emirates Golf Club was considered to be the focal point of Dubai, and every effort would be made to keep its reputation intact. Everybody felt that the club should be a sign of stability in a difficult time. While there was imminent danger in Dubai, there was no way to predict what ramifications might occur by such close proximity to the hostilities.

The first signals of change came from the shipping companies in Dubai. Not only did they indicate that the flow of goods might be reduced due to the presence of warships in the Arabian Gulf, but their insurance underwriters



In spite of the war and 120° heat, "the grass didn't care" and still needed to be mowed daily.

began an immediate escalation of fees. Indications were that these surcharges could run as high as 150%. The first dilemma was whether to go ahead and order large quantities of goods at an already modestly inflated rate, or play a "wait and see" game, gambling that any war risks would be short-lived. As the only grass golf course in the Middle East, it would not be possible to simply step next door to the neighboring superintendent's course and borrow a bit of what was needed.

The timing of the situation couldn't have been worse because we were just entering the peak growth period for the year. The months of September through November represent the main recovery period from cultivations and the annual wear and tear on the turf. The course is grassed with 328 Tifgreen bermudagrass on the greens and 419 Tifway everywhere else, and the temperature and humidity at this time make for a turf that is hungry and aggressive. There was just enough fertilizer in stock for three months of hard growing.

Fertilizer availability was complicated by the Desert Classic, a European Tour stop played at the Emirates Golf

Club. This year's tournament was slated for February 12-17, and the maintenance program for prepping the course was well underway. If the budgeted allowance of fertilizer was not purchased, the quality of the course might drop appreciably from what had been produced the past two years. Then again, if the war was abruptly over in four or five months and the Desert Classic went full steam ahead, problems were inevitable. Lead times for shipping to Dubai from the UK and the United States are usually six to eight weeks at best, so only a one-month grace period existed before minimum reorder time. When shipping costs soared 150% in the next few weeks, it was time to start hedging all bets.

During the months of September and October, a 100% fertigation program was started, choosing to save the granular products for November and December. In the past, a granular ammonium nitrate was used as the fertigation base. Unfortunately, this product was made in Kuwait and was no longer available. After some searching, another source from Bahrain was found that looked almost as good,

and enough was ordered to apply one pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet per month for the next six months. This quantity was supplemented with phosphoric acid and potassium nitrate products that a local chemical company was able to produce on demand. One of the Dubai vendors also had stocked minor fertilizers, in anticipation of the Desert Classic, so fertigating iron, magnesium, and manganese was possible.

FORTUNATELY, a good stock of pesticides was available. A severe outbreak of grubs and worms had occurred during the previous fall, and the major shipment for the year had already been received. Survival for three or four months on the existing inventory was expected, providing protection into the cooler, less troublesome months.

The next critical problem was dealing with crew morale. It was only natural for everyone to feel a degree of uncertainty during the crisis. To see warships passing within sight of the shore, and to watch the daily overhead flights of F-15s and F-16s were not



(Above) The postponement of the Desert Classic was uncertain for a while. This put more challenge into long-term management decisions.

(Left) The crew party helped keep morale up during the Gulf Crisis.

things that could be ignored. Although it gave us a sense of security to know it was our guys out there, the best way to reduce tension was to keep everyone well informed and updated as much as possible. A 10-band radio was played continuously throughout the day, and all of the pertinent newspapers were purchased each morning. Frequently held crew meetings kept everybody advised of the club's emergency plans.

As the crisis dragged into the second and third months, it was apparent that the continuing tension was dragging everyone down. In response, a combination crew party, ping-pong tournament, and talent show was arranged. It was amazing how much good this one-day break from the routine did for the crew. They seemed to stay geared up throughout the rest of the turmoil.

IT SHOULD come as no surprise that the Gulf crisis caused the club to go through some significant — albeit temporary — changes. The club had been built primarily to attract tourists to Dubai, so tourism had always been high on the list of priorities. During the war, however, tourism slowed dramatically. Despite expectations that play would drop off, we found to our surprise that it actually picked up! Since most of the members are businessmen, and since business was slow due to the uncertainty in the region, there was now much more free time to play golf. It seemed that every tee time from sunup to sundown was taken.

As the crisis dragged into November, another problem surfaced. The Desert Classic was still scheduled, but equipment overhaul was required. Summer programs and the non-stop maintenance of the course had taken a big toll on the fleet. Lead times for securing replacement parts were being extended every day and, in fact, it became clear that air freight, at exorbitant prices, was becoming more and more a necessity. To help offset the time and money restraints, the shop was reorganized and a fabrication unit was installed. One of our crew was very gifted at metalwork and was able to turn out the materials we needed. The sounds of drilling, grinding, sheet metal cutting, welding, and the like were incessant for three months. Both the quantity and quality of parts turned out were exceptional, from topdresser beds to greensmower handles to a complete new set of course benches.

A few other tricks were tried to reduce the need for machinery upkeep.



The Chairman of our Board, H. H. Sheikh Butti al Maktoum, presenting a competition trophy. Sheikh Butti is also Major General of the Central Military Command of the Emirates, which gave us an added sense of security.

Fertilization with more iron and magnesium, and less nitrogen, maintained course color while reducing the growth of the turf. Fairway and rough cutting heights were raised to reduce cutting frequency. It was interesting that the members actually noticed these changes and supported them, making the job a lot easier.

One of the exotic aspects of the Emirates is the wildlife on the course. In the freshwater lakes, several thousand Japanese koi fish create quite a stir when they cause the water to "boil" at their morning feedings. There is also a large group of flamingos that stroll around the course. Both the koi and the flamingos take regular monitoring and feeding to ensure their well-being. This care had been difficult even in the best of times, but when shipments from the U.S. became intermittent, improvisation with various kinds of bread, rice, and even pet-shop substitutes was necessary.

It was the beginning of January when the decision to postpone the Desert Classic arrived. At first it was a bit of a letdown for the crew, but when January 16th came, the decision looked good in hindsight. Instead of backing off on the course maintenance, however,

it was full steam ahead. The club management wanted to keep the course in top tournament condition, proof that life in Dubai was proceeding in a normal manner. Granular fertilizers were applied, with special emphasis on the color and definition of the course. It was important for our members, the servicemen, and the media who were playing and visiting the course to enjoy a feeling of life as usual.

THIS ENVIRONMENT didn't mean we were oblivious to the situation "up the road." Two crew members patrolled the golf course every night with a special watch on the clubhouse and crew accommodations, and the greens staff had designated uniforms to wear on the property so they could be easily recognized. Special care was taken to look for anything that seemed unusual.

The last major concern to face was the irrigation system. Our irrigation water comes from a local desalinization plant. A potential disaster appeared with the oil slick moving in the Gulf. If the slick reached the course, a cutoff of water was likely, or at least severe rationing would occur. Fortunately, several well points had been placed in the ninth fairway during construction, with the hope that over a period of time a fresh water "lens" would develop to augment the normal irrigation water supply. After two weeks of overhauling, a vacuum pump dedicated for tapping the fresh water lens was ready for testing. For about 30 minutes we watched horrible red, rusty water pour out of the test pipe, but then a clear, fresh stream emerged. When a sample was run through the salinity testing unit, the water contained only 1,200 ppm soluble salts. A contingency plan was developed for what could have been a great disaster for the turf.

It wasn't long before the war came to a close, and it was apparent that neither the oil slick nor the war clouds over Kuwait were going to affect the course. As life returned to normal, several things became apparent. A healthy rapport had developed at all levels of the club, between the members, the management, and the crew. A feeling of having surmounted the crisis together was present, even if unspoken. A first-class lesson also had been learned in how to improvise. This fact will not be forgotten.

Even now, manufacturing fertilizers and fabricating spare parts continues, and our next crew party promises to be a humdinger!