

The World Amateur Team Championships

A marathon event unlike any other!

BY JOHN H. FOY



Just like the Olympic Games, each country participating in the WATC is introduced during the opening ceremonies. This is just one of the special features enjoyed by participants in this unique event. Photo by John Mummert, USGA.

After a brief appearance more than 100 years ago, golf will again be in the Olympic Games in 2016. However, many are unaware that since 1958 there has been a biennial international competition for gold, silver, and bronze medals with the mission of “Fostering Friendship and Sportsmanship” through golf. The World Amateur Team Championship (WATC) shares many similarities with the Olympic Games, including its values of excellence, friendship, and fair play. From the standpoint of championship course preparations and

management, the WATC has some unique challenges and is a marathon event unlike any other.

A BRIEF HISTORY

During a meeting hosted by the USGA and The Royal and Ancient of St. Andrews, Scotland, (The R&A) in Washington, D.C., and attended by representatives from 35 countries, The World Amateur Golf Council (WAGC) was established in May 1958 to conduct the WATC. The first Championship was hosted by The R&A at the Old Course in St. Andrews, Scotland, in

October of that same year. With permission from then U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who received the original WAGC representatives in the White House Rose Garden, the winning team was awarded the Eisenhower Trophy. In 1964, the French Golf Federation hosted the first Women’s WATC and awarded the Espirito Santo Trophy to the winning team. Since then the WAGC has conducted both the women’s and men’s championships, and in 1991 it became affiliated with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to promote

golf as an Olympic sport and to act as the Federation for Golf in the Olympic Games. The WAGC was renamed the International Golf Federation in 2003.

With both the women's and men's championships, there are opening ceremonies, during which all teams

Buenos Aires, Argentina, there were 52 women's teams and 69 men's teams. The vast majority of teams have three players, and thus 155 women and 207 men played in the two championships. The women's and men's championships are played in

before sunrise, and then in the late afternoon as the last groups are completing their rounds the crews are coming back and working until sunset or later. While this routine is not uncommon with any big golf event, 16 consecutive days does take its toll. An



Hosting over 300 competitors for 16 rounds of golf is a lot of traffic on any golf course, and wear and damage are especially concentrated on practice facilities.

are introduced with their national flags. At the end of each competition, along with the championship trophies, medals are awarded to the first-, second-, and third-place teams and their captains. These ceremonies and the opportunity to represent one's country evoke the same emotions that are felt by the athletes that participate in the Olympic Games. While the Championships are a team stroke-play competition, there is a long list of very notable past players from around the world. For this and more information on the International Golf Federation, visit <http://www.internationalgolfederation.org/>.

MAINTENANCE MARATHON

Compared to hosting any other championship or tournament, the WATC is a marathon event for the host courses and maintenance staff because of the number of competitors and length of time that championship conditions must be provided. For the 2010 championships, played at Buenos Aires and Olivos Golf Clubs on the outskirts of

back-to-back weeks, and each has four practice rounds followed by four rounds of stroke-play competition. This means that championship course conditions must be provided for 16 consecutive days! The fields are split in half and alternately play each course each day. The women's championship is conducted first, and this does help as far as limiting course damage and being able to progressively toughen up the courses for the men with faster putting speeds and higher roughs. Due to the very large men's field, holes Nos. 1 and 10 tee starting times with morning and afternoon waves must be used each and every day.

As would be expected, the courses that have hosted the WATC do not typically have the extra staff, equipment, or resources needed for conducting all of the daily championship maintenance tasks prior to the very early morning starting times. There has been great support from neighboring clubs in regard to volunteers and equipment. Yet, course work still must start well

additional challenge for the maintenance staff has been that the courses continued to host regular member play right up until two days prior to the first practice round of the women's championship. In spite of these challenges, the dedicated golf course superintendents, their staffs and volunteers have provided first-class course conditions and a great experience for the top amateur golfers from around the world.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Similar to the Olympic Games, the member golf federations or associations submit bids to the IGF to host the biennial WATC, which is generally held as early as mid-September or as late as mid-November. To encourage international development of the game, the championships are rotated among the Asia-Pacific, American, and European-African Zones of the world. The past three championships (2006 South Africa, 2008 Australia, and 2010 Argentina) have been played in the southern hemisphere, and this has

presented a bit of an agronomic challenge because the warm-season turfgrasses on tees, fairways, and roughs were just emerging from winter dormancy and starting to grow. On the other hand, the mild springtime weather is ideal for creeping bentgrass, a cool-season turfgrass, used on the putting greens, because it reduces the potential for problems that could result from heavy play and maintaining championship conditions for 16 consecutive days.

In some regions and countries around the world, the availability of golf course maintenance equipment and specialty products is rather limited compared to what we are accustomed to in the U.S. Also, importation duties and taxes can significantly increase the cost to acquire equipment and products. However, this does not mean that consistent and good quality course conditions are not being provided. With the employment of sound agronomic programs and the ingenuity of the golf course superintendents, these challenges are being successfully met. At a recent championship it was realized during the first practice round that one of the hole cutters was out of round, or not perfectly circular. Also, as a result of daily hand raking of the bunkers, excessively soft sand conditions were developing. Making a call to a local distributor to get a new hole cutter and bunker rakes was simply not an option. Instead, the superintendant and mechanic fabricated both a replacement blade for the hole cutter and a set of bunker rakes that helped maintain a firmer surface condition. Within a couple of days, similar bunker rakes were also being used at the other golf course.

TURKEY 2012

The 2012 Championships rotate to the European-African Zone and will be hosted by the Turkish Golf Federation. The women's championship will be played at the Gloria Golf Club on the Old and New Courses. The men's championship will be played at Antalya Golf Club (PGA Sultan course) and Cornelia Golf Club (Tiberius and Gaius nines). For the first time, four courses will be used, and this obviously results

in the need to provide championship course conditions for only eight consecutive days instead of 16. However, hosting the WATC does present a different challenge for these facilities and their staffs. The golf courses are located in the Belek-Antalya region on the southeastern Mediterranean coast of Turkey, and all of the courses have bermudagrass, a warm-season turfgrass, on putting greens, tees, fairways, and roughs. This is a very popular European resort area destination, and the primary golf season is the cooler weather months in fall, winter, and spring. Along with the challenges of disrupting the timing of routine preparations and overseeding, course closure time will also be reduced at the golf facilities hosting the WATC. As is the case for some facilities in the U.S., dormant and off-color bermudagrass is not well received, and overseeding of all of the courses in the region is a necessary practice to meet the expectations of the resort guests who arrive for winter play. Thus, as soon as the championships are over, establishment of wall-to-wall winter overseeding on the courses must immediately be undertaken.

CONCLUSION

With national membership now including 125 countries, the International Golf Federation has witnessed significant growth in the game as more and more countries foster national golf programs. This effort is assisted by the funds available through many sports ministries, which is further supported now that golf has resumed a place in the Olympics. In particular, new teams from Eastern Europe, Oceania, and Africa are now participating in the WATC. The biggest growth is seen in the number of women's teams competing. The WATC welcomes all countries, even emerging programs, regardless of golfer skill level. As such, even though there is fierce competition at the top, President Eisenhower's hope that nations would come together in sport and peace — to promote a better understanding — is realized through the WATC.

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Immediately following the 2012 Championships in Turkey, the maintenance staffs at host courses will switch gears and undertake establishment of a winter overseeding program to provide an actively growing turf cover for resort guests during the primary golfing season.