The Real Arnie's Army: The Maintenance Staff

An extremely large maintenance staff is needed for daily maintenance of golf courses during televised golf events.

BY ADAM MOELLER

The U.S. Open Championship is one of the most watched televised golf events annually. Preparing the golf course for this championship requires a huge maintenance staff each day. Photo: USGA Photo Archive.

Televised golf events became increasingly popular during the days of Arnold Palmer in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Over the years, these events have greatly improved golf's popularity worldwide. Watching great players battle it out on some of the best golf courses makes for great drama. Part of the appeal to watching televised golf is seeing great players navigate the challenging conditions and difficult course setup each week. After all, who doesn't enjoy an extreme close-up of a golf ball rolling smoothly toward the hole? It takes a lot of time and effort to produce putting greens that are smooth, let alone to manicure an entire golf course to look perfect on TV. Arnie's Army, which referred to his legion of fans that marched around the golf course following him, perhaps is a more fitting name for the maintenance staff during televised golf events we watch each week. After all, a small army is required to prepare a golf course to such a high level for these events.

Golf course superintendents have said many times that viewers should be notified often throughout the telecast that the conditions observed on TV are not to be expected on a daily basis at their course — a viewer discretion notice of sorts that states:

1. It is extremely difficult for any golf course to maintain such high-quality conditions for more than a week or two without risking severe turf loss.

2. Preparing a golf course to this level requires very sound infrastructure, a huge equipment fleet, and years of agronomic planning.

3. Maintenance inputs and the golf calendar have been aligned to peak the golf course for this event.

4. The level of conditioning observed would not be possible without a healthy operating budget and a large maintenance staff with ample volunteers.

THE ARMY

Just as every golf course is unique, the maintenance staff for each televised golf event is equally unique. The size

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Mowing fairways can be completed in short order with extra staff and extra equipment.

and layout of the golf course, number of players in the event, the planned maintenance programs, daily starting times, and time of year (e.g., June versus September) for the event are some things to consider when determining the maintenance staff needs for the week. Ample maintenance staff and volunteers are also needed in the event of worst-case scenarios during morning and afternoon course preparations. Being prepared for course restorations after heavy rainfall is one of the biggest concerns. Furthermore, maintenance activities, like mowing around bunkers and putting green complexes, often require considerable hand work, which is also an important factor to consider.

Having a total maintenance staff of 60 people or more, of whom typically half are volunteers, is common for most televised golf events. Major championships are another story. It is not uncommon to have a maintenance staff of 125 people or more, of whom 75 or more are volunteers, for the entire week of the event. The staff size for these events is enormous compared to the average staff size, which is around 15 employees during the peak season, of most 18-hole facilities in the U.S. Large maintenance staffs are needed to prepare a golf course at a high level without interfering with play. The goal for most events is to have most, if not all maintenance personnel off the golf course before the first shot is struck. This would not be possible without an army of maintenance staff and an inflated equipment inventory.

Loaner equipment is often borrowed during the week of a televised tournament to expedite course preparations. For instance, having 10 to 15 five-plex fairway mowers on-site during the week of a televised event is common. Extra walk-mowers, rollers, back-pack blowers, etc. are also added to the equipment fleet. Hand-raking of bunkers is also common and often requires a dedicated staff larger than the average golf course maintenance staff just to prepare bunkers ahead of play each day.

LONG-RANGE PLANNING

Each golf course superintendent responsible for overseeing the preparation of a golf course hosting a televised golf event starts planning well in advance. Recruiting volunteers often starts one year before the event at superintendent meetings and education seminars. A volunteer form is distributed locally to golf courses and

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golf associations several months before the event. Most volunteers are experienced golf course maintenance staff from other facilities in the area. Golf course vendors are also contacted early and often to aid in volunteer recruitment. For major events, international volunteers are commonplace.

The long hours and labor intensity during these events is extremely taxing. Thankfully, most events provide three meals each day for the entire staff. The staff also typically receive clothing and hats to wear during the event and usually receive extra gear, often valued between $50 and $125, in appreciation of their hard work. Further incentives sometimes include golf privileges at some point after the event.

These perks are a huge help in volunteer recruitment. After all, many of the volunteers would make more money working normal hours at their course during the week. However, being part of the maintenance staff preparing a golf course for a televised golf event is special. It is a great opportunity to support a local golf course, learn new ideas, and network with other turf professionals.

BIG EVENTS AT YOUR COURSE

Of the over 15,000 golf courses in the U.S., most will never host a televised golf event. Nonetheless, important course tournaments such as the member-guest, club championship, or big outings warrant increased maintenance inputs outside of daily maintenance. Extra maintenance staff or volunteers are probably not necessary for these events, unless it is a large state or national amateur event. Instead, the existing staff works overtime to complete the extra maintenance. Golfers should keep this in mind not only when playing in these events at their facility, but also when they play in similar events at other courses. All too often players enjoy a fun round of golf during a special event and wonder, "Why can't we maintain the course like this all the time?" The answer is easy. Your maintenance staff is not the size of a small army and the budget cannot sustain it. The same can be said for the majority of golf courses you see on TV each week.

The amount of hand work required to maintain a golf course during televised golf events is very extensive to ensure precision and accuracy.

The next time you are watching golf on TV, consider the army of people it takes to prepare that golf course for play. Often in darkness, long before the TV cameras were rolling, an extremely large maintenance staff was busy preparing the golf course for the best players in the world. The maintenance staff and volunteers are the unsung heroes of televised golf and, in many respects, the most important part of a successful event.

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