Summer Battle Gains PGA Headquarters

By John Stevenson

In March 2005 I was approached by the new Irish company - Carnoustie Holdings Ltd - about the Superintendent position at Golf de Fontenailles, which is situated about 40 minutes southeast of Paris. The course is 15 years old and consists of 27 holes, 18 of which make up the Championship course.

The course was taken over from Japanese company - Taiyo, who also had Golf de Clement Ader and Golf des Aisses, which were sold off around the same time. Fontenailles had massive inputs for the first few years, which even included tarmaced roadways made through the forest areas and was recognised as a top golf course in France. From around 2001 there started to be big financial difficulties and eventually the last two years saw no finance at all, resulting in a big decline in the condition of the golf course. At this time I was positioned at Golf de Joyenval on the west side of Paris.

Each weekend in May the members appeared more and more angry and were more second thoughts as I thought that any kind of revival was impossible. I knew that 12 greens began to decline rapidly each time I visited. Handwatering was being done with a galvanised tank with no pressure at all, at a rate that was impossible to keep up with the 27 holes. The temperatures were around 25°C and some greens were only getting watered every three or four days, which wasn't enough. At the start of May I signed the contract for the Superintendents position, as it was an absolutely fabulous site. Having a month's notice to work in my existing job, I had to settle with the 27 holes.

As I made several visits early in the season, around April, before I had signed the contract, there started to be a worry about the irrigation system which needed major work doing in the pump station - to the value of around 25,000 euros. Due to the takeover process and the person responsible for the maintenance at the time, the greens began to decline rapidly each time I visited. Handwatering was being done with a galvanised tank with no pressure at all, at a rate that was impossible to keep up with the 27 holes. The temperatures were around 25°C and some greens were only getting watered every three or four days, which wasn't enough. At the start of May I signed the contract for the Superintendents position, as it was an absolutely fabulous site. Having a month's notice to work in my existing job, I had to settle with the 27 holes. The next month was a horror, as each time I visited the greens appeared worse, due to no irrigation system and temperatures rising. By the end of May I was distraught. I was going to start a job in 10 days and there were 15 greens that showed burnt areas like you've never seen before. At this stage I was starting to have second thoughts as I thought that any kind of revival was impossible. I knew that 12 of my 27 greens were fine but I didn't know what I was going to do with the other 15. Each weekend in May the members appeared more and more angry and were more and more doubtful of any revival. There were two major blocks for me that made me think it would be impossible. Firstly, after the lack of Japanese funds there had been three staff kept on to maintain the course, which resulted in no mechanical verticutting and one aeration in three years that resulted in a thatch layer of around three inches - this made a block on the surface. The other problem was that there was no aeration equipment on site or verticutters to control the thatch. (PHOTO 1).

On June 7 I got a call from Fontenailles to inform me that they'd hired an irrigation company to get the system up and running. I was satisfied and began to have a glimmer of hope but I knew the light at the end of the tunnel was a long way away and that this situation was the rise or fall of my career - as bad news travels fast. After exceptional experiences working at Oakland Hills for the 1996 US Open, and Valderamma for the 1997 Ryder Cup and World Championship, plus irreplaceable experiences at the Pinehurst resort, I started to think that even with the difficulties, pressure and levels demanded, I have never been faced with a situation as difficult as this.

June 13 and my first day at work, where do you start? The first thing I thought was there is a massive concern for the greens - that is a negative topic. I thought lets do something good and quick to get people talking positively while taking care of the negative. With the fairways starved I thought I'll put some ammonium sulfate at 15g m2 to give them a quick response. Not wanting to take the risk with the irrigation system until I had time to check it all, I waited for the first rain. The result was brilliant. I bought new flags and flagpoles and tidied up and pruned the trees at the front entrance and the hotel entrance, which gave a good first impression. The members started to talk a little more positively and I went to work with my major problem. (PHOTO 2).

My first concern was to check all the sprinklers on the greens that were lacking really bad. Going through the first three or four greens was no problem, and then all of a sudden there was a big drop in pressure, until eventually a cut off. I ran down to the pump station to find that the pumps would no longer run on automatic, but manual. The pump station is a type PEME with a jockey pump that gives 30m3 an hour and the two main pumps which each give 60m3 each. With still no dejointer installed I decided not to fiddle as the electrical wardrobe was like a time bomb and there is a massive concern for the greens - that is a negative topic. I thought lets do something good and quick to get people talking positively while taking care of the negative. With the fairways starved I thought I'll put some ammonium sulfate at 15g m2 to give them a quick response. Not wanting to take the risk with the irrigation system until I had time to check it all, I waited for the first rain. The result was brilliant. I bought new flags and flagpoles and tidied up and pruned the trees at the front entrance and the hotel entrance, which gave a good first impression. The members started to talk a little more positively and I went to work with my major problem. (PHOTO 2).

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journey, please let it be something I can solve as tomorrow is Sunday, no one works in fertilising with this heat but maybe they would suffer more if I didn't. Then there was the heavy thatch, I made the decision that when maximum temperatures went below 25°C, I would use a Scotts fertiliser with a high slow release at a low dose of 10g/m². I started to get yellowing. I figured there was a shortage of food and after speaking to my assistant the greens were last fed in March with a relatively soluble material, I applied it only to note two days later temperatures soared up to above 30°c and we could water from 8am-8pm and only the greens. Heavy fines are implemented if the rule was broken but I thought I needed four or five syringe cycles in the day to keep the seed moist. I decided to purchase some penmulch that really helped me retain the moisture during the day. The restrictions actually passed quite quickly and after a fortnight I managed to see big stands of pencox growing, at this stage I really felt the battle would be won. (PHOTO 4). I was granular fertilising the seeded areas once a week with predominantly slow release fertilisers but also a little soluble, the results were impressive and only two greens had to be put on temporary greens through all this.

Just after catching my breath we would run into more problems, which involved heavy damage to the course but this time it was by wild pigs. (PHOTO 5). Another detrimental problem was having over 100 Canadian geese that were leaving their deposits everywhere but the real concern for people was the problem of bird flu that scared people. To tackle the pig problem I took a five tonne excavator to make a path at the side of the neglected fence and started to push up 60cm of soil to the bottom so they couldn't push underneath, when the soil froze it made it like concrete which seemed to work as the pigs are only a seasonal problem. I also had to change to 500m, which had been abandoned for years and was in an impossible state to repair. An outside company carried out this work, the geese problem were very time consuming and we eventually stopped the problem with explosives.

Getting to where we are now we have managed to get a deal with the French PGA, which will become the home course of the PGA. Through hardwork from Camousie Holdings Ltd, Ireland and excellent work from my crew it all came together above our expectations. I am now recruiting staff to help out on a heavy workload and we are also in the process of buying all new equipment. We have a project of bunker renovation to do on the championship course, which will bring a lot of changes and more challenges; the bunker work is already underway. (PHOTO 6). There are also unforeseen problems like this one on the island green, which can hamper your current planning. (PHOTO 7). French Tour pro Jean-Françoise Remsey, will be involved on a consultancy basis on course upgrades and development which will be a great experience for myself and my crew.

If I got out of this summer the way I did, it's because I looked back on my previous experiences especially at the US Open where I lived with the Superintendent who is probably the person I respect most in the business (Steve Glossinger CGCS) many thanks to him, he was a good mentor. To conclude, if anyone is faced with a similar situation and you're self confident, go for it, things can only get better and I think it's easier to look good than take something on that is already good and make it better.