Surviving and prospering in the dead of winter

BY VERN PUTNEY

Except for two weeks early in February, when Alaska's Arctic grip returned America's northern states to harsh reality, golf course owners and superintendents gained pleasant reprieve last winter. Not that all equipment and course care was a breeze.

Cheyenne (Wyo.) Country Club course superintendent Frederick J. David would welcome moisture. "We're real dry, and we could use the snow in our ski-golf seasons setup. This unusual winter has meant little skiing," David said. When temperatures go above 42 degrees, he and two aides water the greens and tees.

Equipment repair accounts for 90 percent of David's winter maintenance. Topsy-turvy weather conditions also sometimes trick gophers into earlier spring appearances.

Elkhorn Country Club in Sun Valley, Idaho, had ample snow cover — more than three feet to accommodate cross-country ski trails. Ken Hearing of course superintendent Larry Bauman's staff noted a little problem with moles, but added that they head for waste areas when summer approaches.

Before the Alaskan cold wave sent a mass shudder across the country's northern tier, the novel winter experience was enjoyable. Peter Freidel of Coronado Golf Course in Hot Springs Village, Ark., recalled days in the high 60s before the "Big Blast" sent the thermometer plummeting near zero.

Freeze-thaw-freeze

"Ordinarily, December through February is our cold period, but this winter largely has been mild and quick thaw," Freidel said. "Our course often is playable, but not always comfortable. We'd gladly accept the weather bonus, even if it means more mowing to combat bee nests in the summer."

International Falls, Minn., grabs media attention as the nation's harshest icebox, but at least two owners of golf courses slightly north and west would argue that dubious distinction.

"It's as cold or colder at Warroad Estates," declared Lee Leach through teeth chattering from a minus 45-degree day. "Especially if one dared venture out to one of our wind-whipped holes. Not all of our 18 holes are tree-protected."

Dan Fabian of Oakcrest Country Club in Roseau shares Leach's frigid view. "The wind-chill factor is numbing, and there seems to be little letup in snow."

Both Warroad and Roseau are about five miles from the Canadian border. Fifty percent of Warroad's daily play comes from Canadians.

Leach wears many hats (in the winter, fur-lined) as owner, manager, superintendent and professional. His is a family operation, and he's able to farm out course chores to wife Jan, sons Guy, 22, and Rick, 17, and daughters Connie, 19, and Janna, 13, as play gets heavy in April when winter-weary enthusiasts shed skis and parkas.

Entering his fourth season at Warroad after pro posts at Abbey Springs in Fontana, Wis., Bristol Oaks in Bristol, Wis., and Hunter Valley Country Club in Richmond, Ill., Leach must do things differently because playing time is a month less in both the spring and fall.

Somewhat offsetting the short season is summer playing opportunity. It doesn't get dark until nearly 10:30 p.m.

Tarpaulins an answer

Leach has eyed with keen interest the new tarpaulin-like snow covers for greens. Snow fences help control snow mold. Equipment maintenance, course improvement, and preparing and mailing of club promotional material helps the family partnership pass the long winter.

Like Leach, job description of Little Falls Golf Club superintendent Douglas F. Veillette runs the full gamut. There is no club pro at the 18-hole municipal course located in the center of the state.

Veillette stocks the pro shop sets clubhouse policy for the 10-12 summer employees and meets with the advisory board to define strategy.

When winter comes, Veillette concentrates on greens safeguarding and he's able to farm out course chores to wife Jan, sons Guy, 22, and Rick, 17, and daughters Connie, 19, and Janna, 13, as play gets heavy in April when winter-weary enthusiasts shed skis and parkas.

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Veillette said. The Little Falls season usually runs from the second week in April to the second week in November.

"If there is no snow cover, greens start to grow in the spring; but if there is a cold snap, greens can be hard hit. Plentiful snow can mean snow mold, but that can be dealt with through proper treatment."

— Douglas Veillette
Little Falls Golf Course, Minn.