Pebble Beach: Keeping a course's well-being

BY FRANK POLLARD

Seventy years ago, Samuel F.B. Morse, amid much fanfare on Washington's birthday, 1919, opened the Pebble Beach Golf Links—a venue that many feel is still the finest seaside course in North America and perhaps the world. Morse's vision was to create a one-of-a-kind golf course with unsurpassed scenic beauty and an element of difficulty that would always be challenging but never conquered.

Commissioning amateur golfer and architect Jack Neville to achieve this dream was either a stroke of genius or happy chance, but the results were a magnificent creation. Neville and Douglas Grant (who assisted Neville in its design) devised it. The course has remained essentially without major alteration during that period of time and the changes that have been made are minor in the overall scheme of things.

It isn't by accident that Pebble Beach is relatively untouched by time. It's been a commitment by, first, Samuel Morse and, following him, those who have worked diligently to make the golfing experience of visitors as nearly perfect as possible.

Playing Pebble Beach today, the golfer negotiates those same unchanged verdant fairways and small contoured greens that became familiar to almost all the world's great golfers over the intervening years. The course remains as Neville and Douglas Grant (who assisted Neville in its design) devised it. The course has remained essentially without major alteration during that period of time and the changes that have been made are minor in the overall scheme of things.

The commitment of course officials is to be an innovative leader in providing their guests with a golfing experience on their four famous golf courses and preserving the Pebble Beach Golf Links in a manner that maintains its original character and appeal in the tradition of the game.

D.J. Pakalala, Pebble Beach's director of golf, puts it this way, "The Pebble Beach Co. has put forth a very strong effort to develop maintenance practices that will ensure keeping the continuity of the course so that whether the golfer comes back next week, next year, or in 20 years it will look and be precisely the same as it is today, and was in the distant past."}

"There have been tremendous improvements in both golf course equipment and maintenance practices over the past few years," says Larry Norman, Pebble Beach Golf Links superintendent. "Where we used to mow fairways every other day or every third day, now we are mowing daily. "New equipment has allowed more frequent aerification and sometimes weekly top dressing of greens where it doesn't have an impact on the golfer since it's done lightly. Advances in equipment are also allowing us to verticut greens quite often, and where we were doing it weekly, we can now do it very lightly on a daily basis. We are doing a great many tasks on a more frequent and intensive basis with a resultant higher consistency level throughout the golf course."

Norman says one of the keys to better maintenance practices is hiring well-qualified people who are career-oriented in turfgrass management. Continued on page 17
When we experienced high incidences of seismic activity, we found that we were losing chunks of earth into the sea.

"We identified the weakest areas and installed riprap sea walls along the 17th and 18th holes to successfully control those areas of erosion. The cliffs along the 4th and 6th holes presented a different problem when we discovered that there was an interface between the parent rock base and the topsoil varying in depth between 14 and 29 feet beneath those fairways. The course ground water was percolating down through the earth to the rock below and then moving toward the cliff and adjacent sea making the earth above it very unstable."

He says the problem was solved by cutting a trench down to bedrock the full length of each of those fairways and greens (320 yards along No. 4 and 510 yards along No. 6), then installing an intercept drain and drilling outlet exhaust drains from it into the ocean.

"It very nicely stabilized the earth and we've had no trouble with erosion since," he says.

"A tremendous amount of care is taken not to change a thing on the course. Whenever we plan to do anything to the golf course — whether it's a major project or just installing sprinkler heads, repairing cart paths, or trimming trees — we consult the archives that contain detailed records and photographs dating back to the very beginning," says Norman. "It is the philosophy and commitment of the Pebble Beach Co. to continue to maintain and improve the course, being very careful to preserve the integrity of the original design."

To safeguard this integrity, a series of yearbooks on the course is kept.

"Once a year we take pictures of the tees, fairways, greens and rough throughout the course and keep them in that year's book," Norman says. "In addition, anything we do to the course, no matter how minor, we also take 'before and after' photos as well as noting the reasons we did it and the costs. These also go into the yearbook where we are compiling a living history of the course."

Troublesome Kikuyugrass

One of Pebble Beach's major projects has been removal and control of Kikuyugrass.

"It was brought here at some point in the past and planted along the coastal bluffs for erosion abatement," Norman explains. "It is the kind of grass that adapts well but reproducing vegetatively and building upon itself, it spreads and becomes almost unplayable. It also becomes dormant in winter and is generally unsightly."

"Using the 1992 U.S. Open scheduled to be played at Pebble as a goal, we have developed a program to get it under control. We know we can't eradicate it completely but we can control it. We have therefore over the past year stripped 13 holes (with five yet to go) of Kikuyu and reseeded the fairways with a combination of colonial bentgrass, creeping bent and a small amount of fescue. The roughs were also stripped and reseeded with Kentucky bluegrass and perennial rye. And, interestingly enough, we managed to accomplish this prodigious task without disturbing daily play significantly."

He says players today wouldn't notice that the work had been done.

"We have instituted a vigilant and continuous program, one of a search-and-destroy type activity, which is keeping the Kikuyu well under control."

Coastal erosion

Another area of primary concern is the erosion, particularly along the coastal cliffs. Pebble Beach brought in a group of engineers and seismologists some time ago to see if they could devise solutions to stop some of these erosion problems. Photographs had shown that over a period of years, the coastline along the course had changed and become dramatically different.

"What was interesting," says Norman, "is that we determined that most of the erosion was not coming from tidal activity, rather from seismic activity. We also discovered, to our surprise, an earthquake fault running under the course (under hole 7 and across the course and under hole 13)."
Edward L. Hoffman, president of the Club Managers Association of America, recently announced his resignation as general manager of the Racine Country Club in Racine, Wis., from October 1981 until last July. Prior to this appointment, he was general manager of the Green Acres CC in Northbrook, Ill.

Hoffman joined the CMAA in 1961 and was first elected to the board in 1983. He has been actively involved on various committees including Budget and Finance, P.A.L.R., Research and Publication, Executive Career Service, Insurance and Executive.

Hoffman plans to remain involved in the association's activities and continue in the capacity of chairman for the 1990 annual conference, Jan. 29-Feb. 2, in Orlando, Fla.

The foreign superintendents also visited the University of Minnesota Department of Horticulture before flying to Florida. There they played the Doral Country Club's Gold Course and the New Course at Grand Cypress.

"The purpose of this trip is to educate them on what's being done here in the United States," said Neils-Erik Brems, a representative with ORAG, the European turf equipment sales organization that sponsored the trip. "They can go back and educate their boards of directors or green committees on what can be done to improve their courses."

Brems said the popularity of golf continues to grow throughout Scandinavia, with Sweden alone having an estimated 200,000 golfers. The number of courses in Denmark is expected to jump from its present 60 to 100 by the turn of the century.