Bay area courses recovering

Irrigation systems, greens major victims of quake

By Mark Leslie

In the aftermath of an earthquake that turned some San Francisco area communities upside down, Northern California golf course superintendents braced for the predicted next trembler and worked to get their courses back in shape.

While the nation’s eyes focused on the deadly tragedy at the Bay Bridge, nearer the epicenter 50 miles to the southeast, Santa Cruz’s downtown was leveled and some people’s lives permanently changed. Lost in the tumult of more important matters was the Oct. 17 earthquake’s effect on the region’s golf courses.

The major problems at the courses were damage to clubhouses and other structures, breaks in irrigation systems, cracks on putting surfaces and green complexes. And it was the greens that took the biggest hit.

“Green complexes are the most vulnerable part of the property,” said Steve Balogh of Kenova Construction in West Palm Beach, Fla., who coordinated construction of a championship course for the PGA Tour at the Tournament Players Club in Ponte Vedra Beach.

The Oct. 17 earthquake dropped Delaveaga Golf Course’s 18th green and collar eight inches along a 50-foot, four-inch crack.

“The PGA Tour has done an outstanding job in trying to put the finishing touches on the course,” Balogh said. “They’ve got a lot of good people working for them.”

Don Rossi, the San Francisco-based executive director of the Golf Course Builders of America, said the PGA Tour got the best business it could expect after the earthquake.

“People would slip while working along a four-inch crack,” Rossi said. “If you’ve got an 18-foot green that you’ve got to hit a 15-foot putt, and if the pin is 50 feet away and you’ve got to put from the back of the green, you’ve got to get it here. And you’ve got to get the spreaders, the seed, the fertilizer and the irrigation system all working — it’s a tremendous amount of work.”

Rossi said the PGA Tour will not be held accountable for any problems that developed in the green complexes because of the earthquake.

“People will not hold us accountable if there’s a tremor and the green cracks,” he said. “They’re not going to blame us for it.”

In the meantime, the PGA Tour is working to keep people off the greens until they can be properly repaired.

“The PGA Tour is doing a great job of trying to get people off the greens,” Rossi said. “They’re not trying to warehouse a hamburger.”

Flymo makes triumphant return to U.S.

By Peter Blais

Largely banished from U.S. golf courses in the mid-1980s, the Flymo mower is making a triumphant return heading into the 1990s, thanks to a safety device developed by a Florida distributor.

The Flymo, a walk-behind mower that rides on a cushion of air, has long been one of the most popular means of grooming around bunkers. But injuries have often occurred because of severe conditions and operator carelessness, according to Precision Small Engine Co. owner Andy Masciarelli, one of Flymo’s major U.S. distributors.

"People would slip while working along a four-inch crack," Balogh said. "If you’ve got an 18-foot green that you’ve got to hit a 15-foot putt, and if the pin is 50 feet away and you’ve got to put from the back of the green, you’ve got to get it here. And you’ve got to get the spreaders, the seed, the fertilizer and the irrigation system all working — it’s a tremendous amount of work."
Flymo

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With a new product line or develop a way of making the Flymo safe. We had so much experience with Flymo that we decided to develop the "Safety System," said Masciarella.

Flymo, which is now manufactured in England and still enjoys wide distribution throughout Europe (where the machine is rarely put through the rigorous use it is in this country) had little reason to develop such a system, said Masciarella.

So he decided to do it himself. Working with Precision Small Engine sales manager George Whistler and cousin Steve Brandt, the Florida businessman spent the next 1 1/2 years and over $50,000 trying to come up with a safety device that would be acceptable to golf course superintendents.

"We worked a lot of nights and weekends. We put together plastic models. I even kept what I called a Flymo Bible that I used to write down anything that occurred to me," said Masciarella.

What they came up with was an aluminum disc with a triangular monofilament line that snaps in and replaces Flymo's metal blade, effectively turning the mower into a large weed trimmer.

"If the monofilament line hits someone it may sting, but it isn't going to permanently disable the operator," said Masciarella.

Masciarella patented the "Safety System" in September 1988. He then approached the English manufacturer of Flymo, which conducted its own tests.

The British company accepted the design and will be incorporating it into its new mowers.

In exchange for the patent rights, Precision Small Engine was named the exclusive U.S. distributor of the safety kit and the new mowers.

Convincing superintendents and club managers (who often faced their own personal injury lawsuits) that Flymo could be made safe was our biggest accomplishment, said Masciarella.

His company has demonstrated the "Safety System" at various trade shows. Apparently the superintendents liked what they saw, ordering 3,500 of the $49.95 kits already this year.

"We're not making much at that price," he said. "It's really a promotion. They stopped selling new machines here in 1985. That means most of the Flymos are at least five years old. We're hoping that the superintendents will be buying new units (which cost about $700 apiece) down the road."

The manufacturer has redesigned a commercial Flymo unit and dubbed it a golf course trimmer. In addition to the "Safety System," it has been beeded up with a commercial engine better suited to the needs of a golf course.

An 18-hole course will usually have between one and five of the Flymo units. With a market of 15,000 courses, and another 4,000 expected to come on line in the next 10 years, Masciarella is optimistic about Flymo's future. He expects to sell between 2,000 and 3,000 new mowers next year and projects sales at 15,000 within three years.

"We're gearing up for the February International Golf Course Conference and Show in Orlando right now," said Masciarella.

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