USGA thrilled with Pebble Beach

By Frank Pollard

While discussions continue between the California Coastal Commission and Pebble Beach Co. over private membership plans as they relate to public access to the course, restoration of Pebble Beach Golf Links and its preparation for the 1992 U.S. Open is on schedule.

The year-long, massive facelift of the course has been successful as Pebble Beach Co. has brought the course to its finest look and challenging qualities. At the same time, with the June 1992 U.S. Open looming close on the horizon, EPA and USGA course requirements of the United States Golf Association have nearly all been met.

More than 70 years of substantial public and tournament play had caused many subtle changes throughout the golf course. Greens, bunkers and tees, along with the locations had changed over the decades and an enormous infestation of Kikuyugrass in fairways, collars, aprons, tees and roughs was rampant.

Eradication of the Kikuyugrass, a noxious weed, was mandatory. It is very nearly unplayable since the golf ball doesn't roll well and tends to nestle deep in its tough stolons (above-ground stems/runners), presenting tricky lies that make it almost impossible to hit the ball out in many cases. The course, in fact, had generally suffered from neglect over a period of time.

Kikuyugrass has been eradicated and the 18 fairways resowed in perennial ryegrass, with the assistance of golf course architect Jack Nicklaus, and under Director of Golf Operations Ed Miller and Pebble Beach superintendent Brad Hines.

A thorough renovation of all greens including reclaiming putting surfaces lost over the years to encroachment (growth on their perimeters), collars, tees and bunkers has restored them to meet the original 1919 design of architects Jack Neville and Douglas Grant. The bunkers and tees have been entirely reconstructed to USGA specifications. A unique heating system was installed beneath the heavily shaded 5th green to maintain soil temperature and assure good grass growth during the cold winter months.

After a recent USGA inspection, the team of USGA President C. Grant Spahr; former USGA President Frank "Sandy" Tatum, who had assisted Neville in making minor course changes prior to the 1972 Open; Tom Meeks, USGA Director of rules and competitions; Tim Moraghan, USGA championship course agronomist; and Ron Reed, USGA manager of regional affairs, was enthusiastic about the progress.

Our recent walk-through (October) was to assess the current condition of the course and the progress that has been made, and to establish new benchmarks such as fairway widths; cutting heights of the fairways, primary roughs and intermediate roughs; condition and consistency of the greens; and other course preparation guidelines for the 1992 Open," said Spahr. "We are right on schedule and actually, the course looks to be in absolutely wonderful condition.

"The cooperation of the Pebble Beach people — company President Tom Oliver, Vice-President of Golf Paul Spenger (also U.S. Open general chairman), Ed Miller and Brad Hines and their staffs has been marvelous and they have done a superb job. All we really have to do from here on in is fine-tune it."

The USGA team, in complete agreement with Spahr, also commented on the course's superior condition and the confidence the USGA has in the Pebble Beach staff and its accomplishments in bringing the course back into such magnificent shape.

Miller has nothing but praise for the enormous amount of work as well as the caliber of the work accomplished by his Pebble Beach grounds-keeping staff and U.S. Open project crew in a relatively short time.

"We've made tremendous progress this past year and the credit belongs entirely to the dedication of our exceptionally fine crew of people working out on the course," Miller said. "Most people thought the eradication of the Kikuyugrass alone was an insurmountable task. That, coupled with our total course restoration program, plus meeting the requirements of U.S. Open course conditioning, made our work even more difficult. Yet, our crews managed to complete their demanding assignments and objectives very successfully, with minimal interruption or disturbance of daily play.

"Restoration is very nearly complete," said Miller, "with only minor tasks to be wrapped up. The fine-tuning of the course for the Open will, however, continue over the next few months and we have reason to expect that it will be in the best shape it's ever been by the time the Open rolls around."

The Pebble Beach National Pro-Am touring pros and 1992 U.S. Open field will now be seeing the course as the original classic design dictated and players of the past saw it and played it.

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Mantenance management practices on the course and the work of Carl Rygg is already drawing scrutiny by golf industry officials as he begins to find ways to maintain a course without pesticides, herbicides and fungicides.

The techniques he develops could pave the way for modern maintenance techniques for the next century. But Rygg keeps this futuristic view in perspective.

"I really look at the program that I am developing at Squaw Creek as a step forward into the past to a time when chemical use was not as prevalent as it is today," Rygg explained. "I think there is much to be learned from the old-fashioned methods to encourage healthy turf. And I know that sound cultural practices and good old-fashioned hard hand labor can make the difference."

January 1992

GOLF COURSE NEWS

Carl Rygg

Rygg won't have the advantage of hitting the course with soluble nitrogen to kick the grass into growth. Instead he will take a diligent close-down effort in the fall of cutting back irrigation and fertilizer to harden off the turf before the first light frosts.

Rygg foresees the possibility of having to resod areas on greens and landing areas of the fairways that may succumb to snow cold.

With such a short playing season here, I can't justify having patches of the greens unplayable as we wait for new turf to grow in," he said.

Through the summer months, the course will become a living laboratory as Rygg works on new ideas to use modern-day products that will work in a restrictive maintenance program.

He plans to use wetting agents to help with areas of hydrophobic soils. He will use biostimulants to help develop good balance in the soils. And he will use one of the most labor-intensive programs imaginable.

The course is restricted to only 80 acres of fertilized and cultivated turf, but Rygg will begin with a staff of 25 workers. Many of them will begin work in March and be busy through November, even though the course itself won't open for players until mid-May.

The course went through its first winter last year and the double whammy of warm weather through January and February, followed by more than nine feet of snow in March, produced perfect conditions for severe damage from molds.

Rygg was happy with how the young grass pulled through this first shock and learned much about the fickle Sierra weather. After a brief warm-up in April, the golf course was still receiving snowstorms and cold temperatures in May.

"We had some spot damage out of that first thaw and we got a better feeling of how the snowpack works," Rygg said. "This is going to help in the future in knowing what areas we need our attention first."

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