Paul Barratt — keeping perfect conditions for test facility

By DAVE BUCHANAN

Paul Barratt usually takes some good-natured kidding when he gets together with fellow golf course superintendents. That's because while they are tending 36, 18 or nine greens on their courses, Barratt has just a single putting surface to maintain.

"Some of them take a little pleasure in saying: 'A certified superintendent taking care of one-hole course?" Barratt said, with obvious good humor. "But I think I get the last laugh because I have not heard a member complain in three years."

Barratt is superintendent at Titleist and FootJoy Worldwide's Manchester Lane Test Facility in Acushnet, Mass. Here Titleist tests putting surface to maintain.

"What the research department at Titleist is concerned about is a ball's carry and roll," Barratt said. "So they are looking for a flat surface, comparable to championship conditions, something they're going to get accurate data on."

Barratt says Manchester Lane allows Titleist to do much of its testing under ideal conditions. Included in this 20-acre facility is a 10,000-square-foot green with both flat and sloped putting surfaces. A second, 50-by 150-foot green is under construction.

Manchester Lane's seven acres of bentgrass fairways are divided into two parallel 365-yard landing areas, leading up to the green. A third freeway intersects them, with a 2,500-square-foot bentgrass tee box fronting each.

Barratt said this configuration lets researchers conduct tests regardless of wind direction.

"We have two tees facing each other for those times when we want to test into a head wind. The intersecting freeway is used if there's a swirling wind. We have a free background."

The fairways are a power golfer's dream. All are straight with no hazards. But the clown course, right border, one of two protecting the green, gives the golfer a different experience each time his ball hits the beach.

One lobe is mason sand, the other two are silica sand," Barratt said. "We want to test balls and clubs using the different sands common to the United States."

NORMAL PROCEDURES

Despite Manchester Lane's smallness, Barratt uses the same maintenance procedures and equipment as at top clubs.

The green was built to USGA specs. We do everything comparable to a normal green," he said. The major difference between this green and most others is its usage, or lack of it.

"We don't get the traffic that normal greens would get, so we have to compensate for that by rolling. We use this green for putter testing, so obviously we want it comparable to a green you'd find on a golf course," he said.

For testing, a quality cut and consistent surface are vital.

"We're using a walk-behind greens mower with a turf conditioner," Barratt said. "We cut five days a week. We start at 5/32nds of an inch and lower it to 1/8 inch. We top dress it, roll it, and maintain it as a championship course."

On the fairways, as on the greens, standard golf course maintenance practices are used.

"It's PennEagle on the fairways, cut at 1/16ths. We're cutting three times a week with a triplex mower, and we're picking up all clipings," Barratt said.

Tees are maintained at 3/8ths of an inch, with the same mower used on the greens. Although the tees don't get the wear they would at a regular course, ball and club driving tests can force Barratt to deal with some monster divots.

"There's one test where a sensor is placed next to a tee box. Then a player hits the ball and keeps moving his tee up. I might get a divot four inches wide by four feet, six feet, eight feet, depending on how long the person is hitting."

Other turf management techniques at Manchester Lane are also similar to those of larger courses. A program to reduce water consumption is in place. Weeds are spot-treated. A crabgrass herbicide is used. Slow-release fertilizer is applied every month. And pesticide use is watched closely.

"We're very involved with integrated pest management. We're concerned about the environment, so we maintain close control over spraying pesticides," he said.

FREQUENT VISITORS

Given the frequency of the testing done here by both professional and amateur course managers, Manchester Lane is often on display. Golfers use every part of the course for testing, so every part has to play well in addition to looking good.

"Most of them hit off the tee, either for prototype ball or club testing. But we've had pros here, hitting wedges, hitting irons, putter testing. It depends on what we are developing at the time," Barratt said. "I think every pro who's been in here has been impressed with the looks and the conditions."

STAYING CURRENT

Barratt's departure from the everyday grind of golf course management doesn't mean he's dropped out of superintendent society. He still attends golf shows to stay up-to-date on equipment and turf maintenance techniques. He also serves on the board of the Cape Cod Turf Managers Association.

"Except during growing season, Barratt maintains the facility by himself,..." But Barratt is happy he doesn't have to face the Monday morning quarterbacks fellow superiors see.

"I don't have to worry about the guy who watched TV Sunday coming in and saying: 'How come our course doesn't look like that?' or 'My brother-in-law is doing this on his lawn.' My job isn't easy but it's certainly not as difficult as the people out there fighting the directors and members." So Barratt takes a little good-natured ribbing about being superintendent at a one-hole golf course. But he added, he probably say he doesn't mind the joking.

Int'l symposium to encompass water progress

CINCINNATI — The North American Lake Management Society's (NALS) 12th annual International Symposium, geared to protecting and enhancing surface water quality, will be held here Nov. 2-7.

While many of the workshop topics will be highly technical, there will be many presentations for volunteers who monitor water quality.

The symposium comes during the 20-year Clean Water Act, which is under review and renewal by Congress.

A host of Ohio researchers, educators and consultants will deliver presentations, as will experts from around the world.

Conference co-chair Elizabeth Buchanan said the conference "will provide an excellent opportunity to look at the progress we have made in protecting, managing and restoring our surface waters during the last decade."

More information is available from NALS, One Progress Blvd., Box 27, Alachua, Fla. 32615; 904-462-2554.