

Superintendent and pro boost bottom line by working in concert

By LYNN TILTON

CASA GRANDE, Ariz. — While the challenge for Northern and Eastern courses is staying open for play the maximum number of days, the powers-that-be at Francisco Grande Resort & Golf Club here will tell you that competition is the main challenge.

"There are 108 golf courses in the Phoenix metro area, which begins less than 50 miles north," pro Kent Chase explained.

Still, this course — Arizona's

longest — books 40,000 rounds a year. Chase is quick to credit head superintendent Juan Rascon and his crew. "Golfers can play a round in about four hours," Chase said. "A round in the Phoenix metro area can take as long as six and a half hours."

The key to their success is keeping it green and providing for transition. And the real secret is cooperative vigilance.

"Each Friday, Kent and I tour the grounds together," Rascon explained.

Condition of play gets a strong look, and the two jointly work out strategy to prevent and cure condition problems.

"We have about 140 acres to mow," said Rascon, adding that greens are kept at 11/64 of an inch, with fairways and tees at 5/8.

With daily temperature variations of 35 degrees, the work is to keep it green. Bermudagrass fairways dominate in the summer, and are overseeded to ryegrass for the winter. Greens

and tees are bentgrass. Fairways are overseeded the first week in October, then stressed the first two weeks in April to promote a natural return to Bermuda.

"We use three wells, each 750 feet deep," Rascon said. "In July and August, our heaviest watering months, we'll pump 88 acre feet per month. Winter months take just 15 to 20 acre feet per month."

With temperatures soaring into the low 120s, shade can make a 15-degree difference in

summer play — and this attracts Phoenix golfers to this course where 70 percent of annual play comes from walk-ons.

"We have many trees," Rascon said. "We don't water them any differently than we do our grass, and they seem to do well."

They do so well that Bill Buffman, golf writer for The Arizona Republic, commented: "This course looks mature. It has a lot of nice trees. I like the way they handle transitions."

Grass is fed twice a year at the recommended rates. Trees get no extra fertilizer. "We do give new trees extra water until they're well established," Rascon added.

Dry spots can prove another challenge. Rascon and crew use a roller hose to handle those. "A little extra shot of water monthly usually takes care of those dry spots," he said.

Daily watering averages 15 minutes, half just after sundown and another seven and a half minutes before sunrise. This minimized runoff and evaporation maximizes uptake and ensures the root zone is kept at optimum moisture levels, he said. Rascon and Chase both note that heavy play in Phoenix also helps.

"Some times up there are booked a year in advance," Chase reported. "We try to make sure that our times are open until the week before." Availability helps encourage Phoenix golfers, many of them retired, to travel the extra hour to play Francisco Grande.

Another challenge to ensure return play is keeping the grounds crew out of the way.

"In the summer we start at 5:30," Rascon explained, "and the course opens at 6:30. Winter, we start work when the course opens at 7 a.m. We train everybody to work fast, to stay ahead of the golfers."

That works well except for shotgun starts in tournaments, and tournament play gets a major emphasis at this course. On those days the crew, and the watering system, must start two to three hours earlier to ensure tournament success.

Another touch the superintendent and pro perform jointly is golf. Chase explained, "This helps Juan, and any of his crew who want to play, to see the course the way golfers see it."

In the quarter-century it's been open, the course — designed by Ralph Plummer — has developed a large following. With summer play at \$15 to \$20 and winter play at \$50 to \$55, golfing at Francisco Grande is not only a quality experience, but it's affordable.

As with any other enterprise, quality and price are two grand keys to success, no matter how many competitors try to woo the customer.

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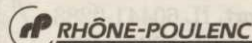
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