Competition in Columbus brings out the best in supers

By MARK LESLIE

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Truth be told, you need only turn around and you can play another great golf course in this city. Five of the country's top 100 courses, according to one poll, operate here. So how do the superintendents — and their clubs — respond in the face of such stiff competition? Thrive or die?

"I don't want to sound boastful, but I don't think you can go anywhere in the country and find golf courses as well conditioned as we have right here," said Mark Yoder, superintendent at private Scioto Country Club in the near west end of Columbus. "Frequently, guests come in and say, 'They're playing' The Golf Club yesterday, Scioto today, Muirfield tomorrow, then Double Eagle.'"

Indeed, Golf Magazine's latest top 100 poll, released in October, ranks Muirfield Village Golf Club in nearby Dublin 19th in the United States, The Golf Club in neighboring New Albany 20th, Scioto 29th, Double Eagle in the suburb of Galena 41st and the public-access Ohio State University Scarlet Course a few blocks from Scioto 81st. The five superintendents are comrades-yet-competitors-in-arms.

"We're all proud to be on those ['best-of'] lists," said Terry Buchen, superintendent at the ultra-exclusive, ultra-condi...
Columbus composite: competition & camaraderie

Continued from previous page

tioned Double Eagle, whose tees would put faster than many greens around the country. But there is a competition like in any kind of business. Deep down inside, we want to be number one in town, like we're helping each other out. I've another course right down the road."

"With members who want to be number one in town, we realize we can't do everything."

Indeed, Rasor's Scarlet and Grey courses at OSU host 100,000 rounds a year, compared to around 20,000 at Scioto and Muirfield, under 10,000 at The Golf Club and 5,000 at Double Eagle.

"What's put before me is to give people the best round of golf for their money," Rasor said. "With the other guys, money may not be the issue because they want the best regardless of what it costs. We try do some of the things that they do, but we realize we can't do everything."

"There are certain corners Rasor can cut. For instance, he uses triplex mowers on his greens. When he rolls greens, he does so with a roller-mounted triplex. He allows the grass to grow a little higher and was one of the first to use a growth-retardant program. And, right, money is not a problem at the other courses.

"Budgets," said Yoder, "are whatever you need."

"We don't spray as much as we used to because we're better educated today and we have better fungicides that last longer. But, at the courses we're talking about, if there is a product we need, we'll get it."

"I have a few more people working," said McBride, "and there are a few things that take a higher priority here than elsewhere — whether it's how much man-hours you put into bunkers throughout the week, or some of the more detail-oriented jobs we do on a weekly basis that maybe some golf courses only do once a year."

"It's very difficult," Rasor admitted. "For example, with fungicides you start out in June and you can afford X number of sprays. Come August you hope the weather will give you a break. Primarily, you plan to spray every two weeks. Whereas if I had an unlimited budget and got into a crisis situation — say, with five days of 95 degrees and 60-percent humidity — instead of waiting 14 days I could get out there in eight. I don't have that choice."

Manpower is another factor. Rasor employs five full-timers and four seasonal workers for his entire 36 holes, plus five putting greens. And he cringes when those "seasonals" are taking their final exams and can't work. At the other end of the spectrum, Double Eagle enjoys 11 full-timers and 14 seasonal employees and Scioto has six full-timers and 25 to 30 seasonals.

Even though OSU was hosting the NCAA championships last fall, "the rough area and some of the trimming work was let go," Rasor said.

Scioto in September announced plans for a $1.5 million renovation of the course, including dredging a lake, a new irrigation system, creek walls and rebuilt walls on an island green.

When Muirfield had problems with poa annua, McBride stripped the greens and laid down new bentgrass sod. He is now regrassing with Pennlinks. It's worked out real well. A lot of new clubs have good new pure bentgrass greens, so we felt we had to do something.

"Mike [McBride] doesn't have the luxury of being able to close the course in the fall to reseed. If he could reseed he'd be better off (than sodding!)."

Memorial Tournament host Muirfield, by its reputation, poses other challenges. "Normal for us is Memorial Tournament conditions," McBride said. "When people come through the gates here, theirexpectations are high and they want to see what they want to see. It's my job to create this almost fantasy land. They want to see what they see on television during the tournament."

"Since we have the Memorial in late May or early June, we bring the course up to the conditions of the tournament and maintain it at that level the rest of the year. The only thing we do differently is to maintain green speeds of 13 on the Stimpeter.

Meanwhile, comparisons add pressure, Buchen acknowledged. "It's interesting to me. Members sometimes say they are not totally accurate about some of the things they find. They might say the greens are real slow at one of the other clubs when, in fact, they are not; they just feel slow or were not mowed on the Monday that member played. We hear many exaggerations, especially negative ones. Maybe they are trying to make us feel good (in comparison). You have to consider the source a lot of times."

Yet, the friendship factor overrides the competition.

"We all talk a lot on the phone about what each other is doing — especially Mike and I," Yoder said. "No one can appreciate what you're going through except another superintendent. We call each other and cry on each other's shoulders."

"We do help each other out with advice," Buchen agreed, "sometimes to see if a problem is widespread or not. Also, we all have to stick together — let each other know if we hear something about their course, or to form a common opinion about a controversial matter."

"Without question, we rely on each other far more than what we've had before," said McBride, "I think so. The biggest thing besides the individual competition in trying to be the best superintendent you can be, is that it helps your budget a lot of times. We call and compare budgets."

"Mike has helped me with my wages and benefits, especially in the first couple years I was here. We can take advantage of the competition being so keen and the golfers playing each course. When they're talking amongst themselves, we can inform them that the other courses have this budget or that equipment... It can help you get that other mower you need."

In spite of — and perhaps because of — their deep pockets, the four private clubs have worries that don't plague Rasor. They don't worry about keeping up with the Joneses. They are the Joneses. But there are other concerns — mainly, the comparisons.

"We're a highly manicured golf course. Everything inside the wall basically is manicured," Yoder said. "In 1991 we regrassed with Pennlinks. It's worked out real well. A lot of new clubs have good new pure bentgrass greens, so we felt we had to do something.

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