

Rounding up rattlesnakes: a desert within a desert

By BOB SPIWAK

In late autumn when snow covers the ground, many golfers from north-central Washington State travel to the desert to play golf. But they don't go south, they head north into the Canadian desert. Canadian desert?

Following highway 97, the Sonoran desert ends its northward journey from Mexico in the Okanagon Valley of south-central British Columbia, and in this valley lays a string of courses which are open for play most of the year. Along with golf, the moderate climate yields rich fruit harvest, a plethora of wineries and a burgeoning retirement industry, luring both Canadians and Americans.

It is just over the international border, at 27-hole Osoyoos Golf and Country Club, where golf course superintendent Mike Harrison plies his trade, conquering such odd chores as rattlesnake roundups.

Head pro Terry Graham's wife Gail is a regular on the LPGA Tour.

At Osoyoos for over a decade, Harrison oversees a crew of 13 in-season.

Each nine holes has a name: Park (built in 1972,) Meadow (1982) and Desert (1994) — and each layout reflects its name. The nines are rotated almost daily, with one reserved for nine-hole players.

Harrison, 41, received a two-year turfgrass degree at Kwantlen College in Vancouver and belongs to the British Columbia, Canadian and American superintendents' associations.

The course used to be open all year, shutting down the temporary winter greens only for the occasional snowfall (the region gets less than 9 inches of precipitation a year). But with increased play, Harrison and the management of the member-owned course decided to close from Dec. 15 to the end of January.

"Too many people not waiting for the frost to leave had some bad results,"



Osoyoos Golf and Country Club in British Columbia, with Lake Osoyoos in the background.

Harrison said, speaking of the all-year play.

The town of Osoyoos owns the 220-acre parcel containing the course and leases it to the club for a dollar a year. As part of the agreement the course irrigates with effluent water from the town's settling ponds in the middle of the course. While the water is plentiful, said Harrison, it does create problems. It comes from the purification process high in chlorination and sodiums. Over the years, these have wiped out most of the pine trees and thinned the turf on the greens. For the latter, Harrison has begun to use fresh water while hand-watering the putting surfaces.

Maintaining a heavily played desert course has its own problems. More than 55,000 rounds a year are played, but by law the effluent cannot be applied during the day when people are playing the course. And in summer these days can exceed 100 degrees.



Superintendent Mike Harrison in the desert — the Canadian desert — at Osoyoos G&CC.

The automatic sprinklers kick on after play, and Harrison's day begins at 5 a.m. during the summer months, usually, except when somebody discovers a broken line, or a plugged sprinkler, or the myriad other events that can crop up and require immediate attention.

"With a little luck," Harrison smiled, "I can be out of here by 2 in the afternoon — with a little luck."

He portrays the course as "a desert within a desert." By edict, the desert areas on the Meadow and Desert nines must be preserved.

"This makes things a lot easier in that there is less wall-to-wall maintenance," Harrison said. "On the other hand, players will hit balls into the sagebrush and antelope bush (the only vegetation off the course) and crash through them, breaking them."

He points to a sage plant, maybe 3 inches across its trunk: "This thing is over 200 years old. That's why we isolated it and offer the free lift (from a large circle around the plant) for the golfers. Even with that, a lot still thrash around."

RATTLESNAKE ROUNDUP

Another unique aspect of Harrison's work is rounding up rattlesnakes. "We're not allowed to kill them by law," he said, "so when we get a complaint we have to go out, capture them and release them elsewhere. Two years ago we had a major infestation, but usually not too many are around ... at least not seen."

The popularity of the region is determined by its moderate climate which has its origins in the Coast Mountains of British Columbia. These effectively block incoming weather from the Pacific and with the aid of lesser ranges west of Osoyoos hoist the incoming moisture over

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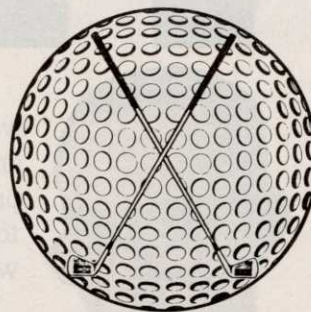
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Mike Harrison: Desert superintendent

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the valley, across the moderating influence of Lake Osoyoos and into the territory to the east. Lacking this topography, it can be relatively balmy at the course while in Omak, Wash., a mere 50 miles south, a major snowstorm might be in progress.

The area's popularity has resulted in acres of condominiums

and private homes south of the course, and a building boom in the area of the town.

In addition to the water-purification chemicals, the residents use water softeners, Harrison said. These use salt which add yet more sodium to the mix.

Ruefully Harrison noted: "There are better products out there [for water softening] but they're more

costly by four times."

Pointing to a browning pine, he added, "We had a dead pine analyzed and there were 67 parts per million sodium in its tissue. That's 15 times normal."

But Harrison is not discouraged.

"This is a great place to grow grass," he said. "Over the last two years we only had five or six days of snow, and it wasn't cold."

Beside growing grass, the

crew cuts cups and moves the tee markers daily. Bunkers are power-raked five times a week. Although the greens are cut daily, Harrison has the cleanup cut done only three times a week, explaining that the compression of the triplex mowers around the curves exacerbates the effects of the sodium in weakening the turf.

HORSE TRIALS

One day annually, in May, the South Okanagan Horse Trials

come to Osoyoos G&CC. There is a course of jumps (permanently placed) and other objects, very large objects, that are used on land equestrians share with the course. On this day, the configuration reverts to the original 18 holes, a process that takes six hours to set up and another six to reconfigure.

"Actually," Harrison grinned, "it isn't bad as it sounds. In fact, I enjoy it."

POSSIBLE 36 HOLES

Addition of another nine holes is being considered at Osoyoos G&CC.

"There are more people moving into the area, more people coming from The States to play here," Harrison said, perhaps lured by the fact the Canadian dollar in October was worth \$1.47 U.S. There are 200 privately owned and 50 rental golf cars at the course.

Will Harrison be up to the challenge of yet another nine holes?

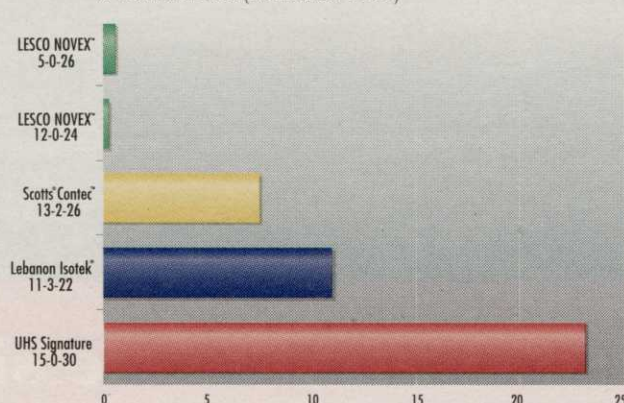
"Oh yes," he said enthusiastically. "Each problem is a challenge, and really, there aren't too many major problems that crop up. The membership is great. I get very little pressure. I love living here and so do my wife and children." ▶

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Future grasses

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• Non-thatch producers. This, Watschke said, is a problem.

"Some of our best grasses are thatch producers," he said. "In this part of the world you have a lot of fine fescues that are thatch producers. They have seasons in which they grow for 12 months, and yet for another period of growth there are such cold soil temperatures that you have very low background-level microbial activity. Even though you have a pH that is adjusted and a top-dressing program, you still get this accumulating thatch just because of their growing environment, coupled with lack of microbial decomposition.

Meanwhile, scientists are trying to breed cold tolerance into warm-season turfs and heat-tolerance into cool-season grasses.

"Under those circumstances the challenges will be far greater than a lot of the other things I've mentioned," Watschke said. "This gets tricky, when you take metabolic issues that have complexity of genetic control. To unravel all of that and make it work is difficult.

"However, the Japanese have had early success in transferring such traits from Zoysiagrass to cool-season germplasm."

Turfgrass management, he said, "will only get worse in terms of how complex the issues are that you are going to have to deal with. Genetic engineering is not going away." ▶