

San Antonio courses prepare for GCSAA championship event

By JOEL JOYNER

SAN ANTONIO, Texas — The Golf Course Superintendents Association of America will hold its 51st championship here when 720 superintendents from around the world compete at six area golf courses. The championship leads off the annual show, taking place in Dallas, Texas, Feb. 11-18.

Six superintendents and their courses in the San Antonio area have been chosen to host the tournament. They are:

- Rob Throne, Pecan Valley Golf Club;
- Bruce Burger, The Quarry Golf Club;
- Steven Dennis, Canyon Springs Golf Club;
- Ted McClure, Tapatio Springs Resort;
- Neil Thraikill, Silverhorn Golf Club;
- and Mitchell Kiser, Fair Oaks Ranch Golf & Country Club.

With a hot and dry summer here, and an autumn that produced near-record rainfall, the hosts will attempt to have their courses in top shape for the arrival of their peers. For the seventh consecutive year, the Toro Co. will be sponsoring the four-ball championship on Sunday, Feb. 11, followed by the tournament on Feb. 12 and 13.

Todd Barker, superintendent at the Fore Lakes Golf Course, of Murray, Utah, is the defending champion.

PECAN VALLEY: A TOUGH OLD/NEW COURSE

Having experienced a recent renovation, tornado strike and flooding at the Pecan Valley, superintendent Rob Throne is preparing his course for championship play after joking about "Texas weather at its finest."

Designed by Press Maxwell and built in 1963, the old-style course underwent a Robert Cupp-design renovation in 1999 that maintained most of the traditional flavor.

"The course was completely regrassed, and there's a new club house, maintenance facility, cart facilities, and irrigation system," said Throne. "The course was brought back to the standards it needs to be. Some greens, prone to flooding, were raised, a few bunkers were added, and a few greens were relocated to make them a little more accessible from the tee."

The recent tornado and flooding have taken a toll on the course, however. "Several bunkers need to be repaired, and several satellite units that went underwater had to be replaced. We also lost 12 trees in the tornado," said Throne. Fortunately, the course's famed oak tree, estimated to be some 800 years old, was untouched by the twister.

Even with the setbacks, Throne is excited to show the course and its challenges to his peers. "We're going to take the greens to a faster speed for the championship," said Throne. "The course plays fairly long, 7,000 yards from the tips, and the fairways are heavily tree-lined."

"The guys will want to keep their drivers in the bag," he advised. "Fairways are narrow, and even in February the roughs will be fairly thick. At that time of year the wind comes out of the north/northwest, so there's likely to be some forced carries hitting into the wind at this course. Also, the greens are not that big, only 115,000 square feet total, and all well bunkered."

THE QUARRY: TWO COURSES IN ONE

The Quarry, rated the top public golf course in Texas in four of the past five years, offers "really two courses in an 18-hole layout," said Bruce Burger, superintendent.

Built in 1993 and designed by Keith Foster, the front nine maintains a links-style layout with a lot of native grasses, mounding in the roughs, and no trees.

"The native grasses can be severe on the front nine, and we're definitely going to step it up a notch on the greens," said Burger. "But it's the back nine that intimidates players."

Packed entirely inside an old limestone quarry, the back nine occupies only 84 acres. "I've got some rock walls that rise over 100 feet above the floor of the quarry," said Burger. "It has dramatic views and some interesting holes. The 16th hole is a 242-yard, slightly uphill play that golfers say would make a really nice par-4, except that it's a par-3."

"The 17th is our signature hole," he said. "It's a 380-yard par-4. The tee shot is hit



"Escape from Alcatraz" is the 13th hole at The Quarry GC.

across this canyon to a landing area on another ledge. It's visually intimidating when you first step up to that tee. The 18th hole is a really tough finishing hole. You're in the rocks if you hit it right, and you're in the canyon if you hit it left. It's truly a three-shot par-5, even for the best golfers."

Roughly 6,800 yards from the back tees and with plenty of rock features and native grass areas, The Quarry will demand strategy and concentration to score well.

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Michigan turfgrass program earns President's Award

By JOEL JOYNER

EAST LANSING, Mich. — The Michigan Turfgrass Environmental Stewardship Program (MTESP), a public-private coalition geared specifically to issues involving golf course maintenance, will be awarded the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America's (GCSAA) 2001 President's Award for Environmental Leadership.

The award will be presented Feb. 15 during the GCSAA's 72nd International Golf Course Conference and Show in Dallas, Texas. Established in 1991, the award acknowledges "an exceptional environmental contribution to the game of golf." MTESP was selected by the GCSAA for their work in improving golf courses and the environment.

Developed in 1997, MTESP coordinates the efforts of the turfgrass industry, Michigan State University, state agencies and environmental organizations. "The program was created by the willingness of the turfgrass industry to do something productive in the area of environmental protection," said program director Greg Lyman, extension specialist at MSU. The program is designed to promote and recognize the following practices:

- protecting water quality, wildlife habitat and native species;
- commitment to the protection of natural resources on the property;
- adopting pollution prevention practices (reduce waste, minimize inputs to the environment);
- complying with environmental laws and regulations;
- promoting and communicating best management practices to control potential sources of pollution.

Golf courses subscribing to the program attend a workshop that focuses on issues such as fuel storage, wellhead protection, fertilizer and pesticide storage, handling and application. The second stage of the program is a self-assessment that requires superintendents to apply the know-how from the workshop to their own courses. In the next phase, a stewardship team completes a site visit to determine how information from the workshop is being used.

MEMBERSHIP REQUIREMENTS

To maintain membership, golf courses must have a site visit at least once in a three-year period. Annual participant fees range from \$75 for a daily-fee, nine-hole course to \$150 for a golf resort property. Stewardship site evaluations cost \$200 for a half day.

More than 150 golf courses currently participate in the program, with a target of 50 more members for the winter workshops. Half of the members in the program have completed the site-visit phase, and 30 courses to date have been certified.

The MTESP also provides information for enhancing wildlife habitat and is developing criteria for the construction or renovation of golf courses to avoid any potential compromise to the environment.

"The workshop covers a lot of material and examines the practices we use in the

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The Golden Bear Club at Keene's Point

GCSAA championship

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CANYON SPRINGS: GREEN SPEED CHALLENGES

Steven Dennis at Canyon Springs is currently in the process of renovating bunkers and hopes to be finished, at least with the greenside bunkers, in time for the tournament.

Set in the "hill country," the 7,077-yard layout is laid out in two big loops, one for the front nine and one for the back nine. "The course is really spread out. Sometimes you can feel like you're the only one out there," said Dennis. "We sort of have a rustic look here with canyons and dry creek beds."

One of the most challenging aspects of the course will certainly be the greens. "Our greens probably have more ridges and undulations than most courses. Reading the greens will be one of the keys to playing Canyon Springs," he said, "and we'll probably maintain green speeds at nine feet to nine and a half. You don't want to get above the hole on certain greens, because you'd more than likely be looking at a three putt."

Designed by Tom Walker and opened in 1998, the course presents numerous challenges. "Be cautious of our tall native grasses," Dennis warned. "They can be treacherous. And on the eighth hole, don't try to bite off too much or you'll be in some serious trouble. It's our number one handicap hole with a two-part fairway. You may want to lay up with a two iron or three wood, and then go for a long shot in to the green."

With a couple of scenic waterfalls, one on the tenth hole and another off the 18th green, and some challenging greens, Canyon Springs will provide for attractive and competitive championship play.

TAPATIO SPRINGS: IN THE HIGH COUNTRY

At 1,900 feet, Ted McClure's Tapatio Springs Resort is the highest of the six courses in the championship. Designed by Bill Johnston, the Valley and Lakes nines opened in 1981. The Ridge Course, once an executive course, was renovated and reopened in 1999 to create a 27-hole championship layout.

Other than some bunker clean-up, McClure is currently taking care of some overdue tree trimming to keep the course well-groomed for his peers. "We're a fairly wide-open course, with quite a few trees," said McClure. "We also have a fair amount of water that comes into play here. Frederick Creek cuts across holes two, three, four, five and six on the Lakes nine,

and holes three and eight on the Valley nine.

"The Ridge Course," he added, "has water that comes into play on holes one, two, three, four, five and seven. You don't have to hit it long to score well, but you definitely need to keep it straight." Though it's uncertain which 18 holes will be played, McClure deems the Valley nine to be slightly tougher to play, since some of the par-4s play a little longer.

SILVERHORN: A TREE-LINED LAYOUT

Barring some sort of strike from Mother Nature, Neil Thraikill assures that Silverhorn Golf Club will be in top shape for championship play.

The 6,922-yard traditional course, designed by Randy Heckenkemper, was submerged for a week during the 1998 flood. "We had 24 inches of rain in 20 hours," said Thraikill. "Some greens were totally submerged for five or six days under about 10 feet of water. The silt settled and really left a mess."

"We haven't been able to really get back to where we once were," he said. "but we'll be geared toward high-end maintenance and focused on frequencies as the tournament gets closer. We'll be mowing more often and very detail-oriented to present a great round of play."

Thraikill offered some strategic advice for those who must navigate this woodlands course carved out of 220 acres. "The front nine is fairly open, which is evident on the par-5 first hole. The back nine has a very tight tree-lined layout with creeks running through it. You really have to put a premium on accuracy off the tee."

"Placement can be critical," he added. "You can land in the fairway on a lot of holes and still have a lot of work to do to get the ball where it needs to be."

The greens are not severe at all, not very undulating, and are fair putting surfaces. We'll try to get the green speeds up between 10 and 11 feet for the championship.

FAIR OAKS RANCH: DORMANT FAIRWAYS

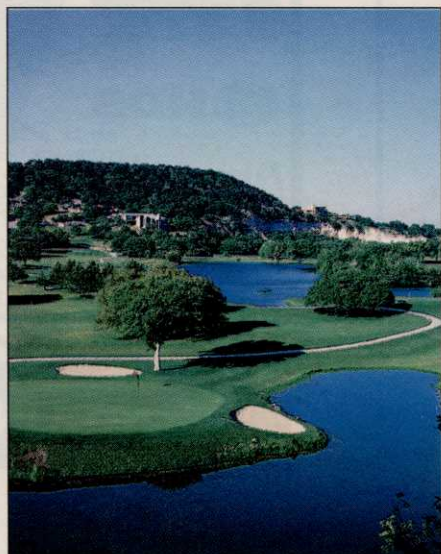
During 16 months of drought, superintendent Mitchell Kiser at the Fair Oaks Ranch Golf & Country Club decided not to overseed the 419 Bermuda grass fairways with ryegrass this season. "At the time, we believed there wouldn't be enough water to grow the seed in, so we made the decision to go for an early spring-up next year," he said. "For the tournament, we're looking at options to darken the fairways so that, at least from the tee boxes, the players will be able to pick out the fairways and a target line."

The private, high hill-country club offers 36-holes—the Blackjack Oak and Live Oak courses. Kiser anticipates that the Live Oak course will be the one chosen for his peers to play. "It's an old-style course with small undulating greens, some rolling terrain, lots of trees, and fairly tight," he said. "The course is only 6,700 yards, but it requires a smart round of play. Especially with the last four holes, players will need to finish strong to score well."

"Our number-one handicap 15th hole is a long par-4 that plays into the prevailing winds," he said. "There's also a creek that runs right in front of the green, so a long carry is challenging. The 16th hole is a little par-3 over a ravine, and it's uphill with a narrow shoot. The next hole is a par-5 with a double ravine. Because of the position of the first ravine, players typically will not use a driver off the tee."

"The 18th hole is a par-4. It's not very long, but it's very tight," he said. "Unless you hit a perfect drive, you could easily end up in a large bunker to the right or behind some trees. The last hole also plays into the wind that time of year."

Players won't need their drivers very often at this course, but strategic play will be imperative to have any hopes of winning. ■



The par-3 third hole at Tapatio Springs Resort

Golf Trust of America

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Barbara, Calif., might go to a company that recently built a hotel next door, he said.

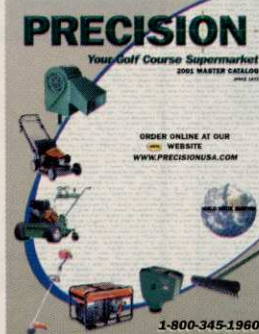
The other large, public golf course holding company, National Golf Properties (NGP), "can probably pick off a few courses, as well," said Penney, who tracks NGP for RS Investment Management. "They have looked at the whole deal, and there are six to eight courses that they would like, at the right price."

Penney added that NGP, although subject to some of the same financial pressures as GTA, appears to be in substantially better shape. "About 45 percent of their debt is variable-rate, so we've had to lower numbers a couple of times due to the fact that rates are going up," he said. "But they're so big, with 184 courses, that they'll be okay. They've also been more cautious. They grew nice and slow." ■

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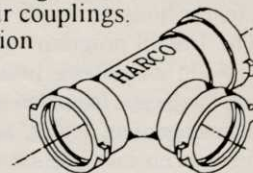
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