Golf, the Census and a less-spacious America

California leads the nation in everything from pop culture to high technology. Now it may be showing us the way to a more crowded and energy-deprived America of the future.

Joe Joyner’s front-page story in this issue explores California’s energy debacle and its impact on the state’s golf courses. Superintendents are bracing for a summer of power blackouts and soaring electricity rates, topped off by less water than usual.

And that’s not the worst of it. According to U.S. Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham, the country as a whole faces a “major energy supply crisis” over the next 25 years. He warns that the shortage could swamp the economy and lead to radically reduced living standards.

But great damage may be done long before then. Our immigration policies place us at the mercy of post-2000 immigration.

By Ronald W. Fream

This year’s Masters Tournament at Augusta National Golf Club clearly demonstrated the unsurpassed excellence of Tiger Woods’ golf game. There is only one Tiger.

In fact, there is only one Augusta National, too. This singular existence is often overlooked and unappreciated by avid golfers, golf club committees and club members. During the past 10 years or so, satellite television access and expanding worldwide coverage of the Masters have circled the globe.

As I travel internationally, I often hear people wishfully say, “Why can’t our course look like Augusta?” The unmitigated perfection of Augusta opens new potential and new standards for other golf courses. Augusta continues to raise the benchmark and others often wish they could follow.

A TOUGH EXAMPLE TO EMULATE

The basic fact is that Augusta National is, worldwide TV sees it, for all of two weeks each year. An immense force is directed into achieving these two weeks of perfection.

Other courses attempt to duplicate the appearance of unrestrained, luxurious turf and flowering trees and shrubs. Augusta National inspires this effort. While Augusta must be as it is for only those two weeks leading to the tournament, other want-to-be lookalikes must face the fact that immaculate perfection is extremely expensive to realize and is not everlasting.

When viewed from a cost-effective, or cost-push action and reaction view, trying to emulate Augusta brings more harm to many courses and to many golfers than luxuriant turf.

$1.5-MILLION MAINTENANCE BUDGET

Augusta sets an unrealistic example. Consider its vast advantages: an excellent superintendent, seemingly unlimited maintenance funds (at least $1.5 million per year), a crew topped off by numerous volunteer superintendents, permanent maintenance labor staff of around 40 with another 40 brought in for the week preceding the Masters, fresh new state-of-the-art equipment annually, unlimited play, nearly ideal weather conditions in the spring and constant tinkering with the design and maintenance to yield exceptional results.

To achieve even near-similar results elsewhere drives up the maintenance budget severely. Higher costs for maintenance then must be reflected in higher green fees or membership dues.

HELPING MOTHER NATURE

The climate helps, too. The basic fairway turf of Bermuda grass can easily be more over sown with fine-leaf rye grass in September or October as the Bermuda enters dormancy. The rye grass flourishes in the cooler winter weather under intense maintenance. The creeping bentgrass
Augusta National

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greens are at their best in early spring before the onslaught of summer heat and humidity. Subsurface heating coils help bring early-season growth to some of the greens ahead of Mother Nature's schedule. It has been noted that cooling tubes beneath some of the greens help prolong the quality of the bentgrass when the heat and humidity arrive. To achieve Stimpeter speeds of 12 or even 13 requires bentgrass and special mowers with extremely thin bed knives. Even so, the height of cut for Masters week (approximately 1/8 inch) cannot be maintained throughout the golf season. The grass will die. Achieving these speeds requires intense attention to the greens with many actions beyond only mowing. With fewer than 10,000 rounds of golf a year and restricted play leading up to Masters week, traffic over the course is at its best modest. Limited annual play eliminates the cancerous effects of traffic-induced compaction that stresses many courses.

MAINTENANCE IN THE REAL WORLD

Courses that must withstand 40,000, 60,000 or even 100,000 rounds of play per year cannot compete. Tropical locations where bentgrass is unknown must deal with Bermudagrass cultivars or perhaps paspalum on the greens. Trying to achieve Augusta greens' speeds on Bermuda or paspalum cannot be done, even with the new Tif Eagle hybrid Bermuda variety. Bermudagrass cannot be cut as closely as creeping bent. Trying to shave down Bermudagrass can afford the price of intense micronutrient supplements and nitrogen-phosphorus-potassium fertilizer programs. Moving each year with brand new equipment that is carefully adjusted, perhaps with factory mechanic assistance, helps. Most golf courses cannot afford to replace all their primary and expensive mowing equipment every year.

AZALEAS BY FEDEX

The spectacular floral show around Augusta's greens seeking ever-faster Stimpeter readings leads to deterioration in the reliability of the turf and the quality of the putting. In any event, remember that Augusta's greens speeds are faster during Masters week than at any other time of the year. They are not maintained at that height throughout the year. They cannot be. The immaculate perfection of fairways, and now even a little semi-rough "second cut" along with tees and greens, is as much due to superb management of fertilizers and micronutrients as it is of mowing. Not every other course everywhere.

Golf and the Census

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State holds 15 million people today. Its population is projected to hit 20 million in 2020 and 30 to 40 million by 2050. Florida adds 760,000 new people every single day. At current rates, Florida needs 111,000 more gallons of fresh water today than it needed yesterday, and the same tomorrow. And so on. In this a state where water shortages, saltwater encroachment, and declining aquifers are already serious problems. Florida could build huge desalination plants and start tapping the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico, but that would be very expensive water indeed. Not many Floridians care about what's happening to their state. Some 72 percent of them say that growth, sprawl and overpopulation are Florida's worst problems.

MAILBAG

REFUTING THE 'THREE-YEAR RULE'

Dear editor:

I read your article about the "three-year rule" (May issue), and had to let you know about golf courses on the North Shore of Chicago. My course, Sunset Ridge Country Club, was built in 1923, and I'm only the fourth superintendent. Dominic Grotti was here from 1933 to 1978, and I've been here 36 years, including 22 as superintendent. I could come up with another 20 guys who have been at their clubs for 15 years or more. Ed Fischer has been at Old Elm Club for 30 years. Julius Albaugh has been at Westmoreland Country Club for more than 30 years. And Mike Bavier has been at Inverness Golf Club for some 30 years. There are many superintendents in this area who've been in their current jobs at least 20 years. Dennis Miller, Sunset Ridge CC, Northfield, Ill.

Ron Freeman of Freeman & Dale Golfplan, has been involved with planning, design, construction and maintenance of golf courses in about 60 countries.