Open superintendent happy morning after

Perhaps the second happiest man at the 1976 U.S. Open in Atlanta as Jerry Pate shot to within three feet of the 18th pin, clinching the victory from the fading grasp of John Mahaffey, was Bobby McGee, golf course superintendent for the Atlanta Athletic Club. Pate's approach shot won him the championship and assured McGee there would be no Monday playoff. The last-minute charge by the rookie professional ended a three-year marathon of planning and preparation for McGee and his regular staff of 25 men.

McGee and crew, plus 15 extras, had been working seven-day weeks preparing for the prestigious tournament. It was a grand success; over 145,000 fans (including the three practice days) watched the first Open ever held in the south. But because this was the first Open in the south, McGee had to contend with some special problems.

Bentgrass was one. It is difficult to maintain in hot climates. McGee had to be careful not to mow the grass too short on the greens, since they would burn out before the end of the tournament. To accomplish this, he carefully paced the length of the grass, cutting it successively shorter each day until the start of the tournament. By then, the greens were approaching the USGA desired lightning speed. Rain during the four playing days slowed them somewhat, but McGee's crew kept them playable with squeegees. USGA officials, who now measure the speed of Open greens twice daily with golf balls, launched from 20-degree-inclined planes, remarked about the consistency of the greens. To McGee's delight they announced "tremendous."

That bit of rare praise from golf's official association helped sweeten the stew caused after the first round of play when some of the more vocal pro's complained enthusiastically that the fairways were too high. The trouble was traced to the wheels on the mowers. The cutting-height settings were adjusted to compensate and the problem was corrected for the second round.

Another problem for McGee was the rough. The USGA specifies four to five inches deep. McGee's roughs are Bermudagrass, a late bloomer in North Georgia. Last year McGee experimented with a chemical, Gerbillic Acid, to boost the Bermuda growth early in the season. It worked. This year he applied four to five sprayings and a tow truck. They had to wait for the sun to make the grass on the greens can now grow a little longer. During the Open they were cut once in the evening and twice every morning before play.

Vehicles trying to leave the course over wet clay-surface access roads found the going a bit slippery. "Seemed like we were driving on ice," commented the driver of this Florida television truck. They had to wait for the sun and a tow truck.

Sitting amid the debris behind the lake at the 18th green, superintendent Bobby McGee is acutely aware that he is responsible for not only the golf course, but all of the grounds at the Atlanta Athletic Club.