

Mount St. Helens is no 'saint'

By Mark Higgs, Superintendent,
Moses Lake G&CC, Moses Lake, Washington

On May 18, just after 9:00pm, Mt. St. Helens erupted for the first time. Since then it has erupted numerous times and shows no immediate signs of ceasing. By mid-July, ash at least 8

inches deep covered over 62,000 acres. The first eruption had completely devastated an area of 6400 acres around the mountain. Assistant pro John Ostrader at Moses Lake Golf and

Country Club, located about 100 miles northeast of Mount St. Helens, estimated their clean-up at about \$100,000 dollars. He estimated that they would lose another \$100,000 in

Continues on page 14



No rest for the weary...In the photo below, the dust on the roads recreates the dust on the course problem every time a vehicle stirs it up (photo at left).



It was dragged in. . .



Above, Mark Higgs. Below, the ash was harrowed. . .





Even though the green appears to have been cleaned (below), the soil probe shows a layer of ash remains (left).

It started from this. . .



And then traps had to be shoveled, parking lots and swimming pools cleaned. . .



Helens from page 11

business and that by the time the course was able to open back up, total losses would approach a quarter of a million dollars.

No one knows moreso than Mark Higgs, Superintendent at Moses Lake, what it was like to have your course covered by four inches of volcanic ash and then have to clean it up. Ed.

On May 18th, the countryside in the Moses Lake area changed drastically. What was once sand and scrub brush, turned into volcanic ash nearly four inches deep. People that are supposed to know about these sort of things estimated the material at 121 tons per acre. It sounds bad, and it is.

My assistant, Ken Tracy, and I came out to the course on the 18th at about noon to see if we could help. It was just about totally dark and by 12:45, it was as dark as any night you have ever seen. The ash was falling from the sky like a winter snow storm and it was starting to blow something terrible on the roads from the traffic.

At 1:30, we decided to try and make it home and got only as far as Ken's place, which is about nine miles from the course. We decided to spend the night there. Roads were impassible. You couldn't see out of the windshield, much less attempt to drive. Dust was absolutely everywhere.

Monday, the 19th was a day most people here will never forget. It was like walking on the moon. The sky, grass, lake, trees, and everything else was the same gray dusty color. Color vision did not exist. All the roads were closed and a full state of emergency was declared.

We finally made it through the roadblocks on the 21st and got our first look at what was once a green, lush golf course. What we saw was enough to make a guy throw up. Try to imagine a golf course completely covered in four inches of flour and that is close to what it looked like. We knew it was going to be bad, but never imagined that it was going to turn into the awesome job that it has become. Every inch of the entire facility had to be cleaned off. The 21st was spent cleaning off the roofs of buildings to keep them from collapsing from the weight. That done, we turned our attention to the painfully slow task of cleaning 60 acres of formal cut turf and 82 acres of rough.

A short explanation is needed to explain our course. The roughs here are scrub-covered sand dunes left in their natural state. They line each fairway and are close to 30 yards wide in each area. This allowed us to have a place to scrape each fairway and haul it into the roughs. Without this, I have no

idea what we would have done with nearly 8,000 tons of volcanic ash.

Back to the course—Thursday, May 22nd, and Friday, May 23rd was spent cleaning the 19 greens with a tractor and back blade, along with five people manning the shovels behind, to clean up the excess left by the blade. The greens had been mowed at 5/32-inches on the 18th and a blade running across them was not a pretty sight. However, damage done to the greens was slight compared to the awesome damage done to the fringes. Blades were never made to run over humps and bumps without taking some big bites.

The next job at hand was cleaning the fairways, by far the biggest task ever undertaken at this golf course. We begged, borrowed and rented six tractors with blades and then got after it. We ran the people in two shifts of eight hours each. Sixteen hours a day and it took 10 and a half days to complete the job. It was a lot of time to spend in the most miserable of working conditions. Dust was so thick that the majority of the time you couldn't see the front of the tractor. All you could do was pray there were no

sprinkler heads in the way and keep on going.

After the fairways were completed, it was a job of trying to put the rest of the place back into operation. The traps had to be hand-shoveled clean, the parking lot scraped and washed off with a fire truck, the swimming pool cleaned out, and the buildings all washed down. The problems with the ash never seem to end. Get it clean, the wind blows, and you have to start over again.

The crew (six people) is working but depressed. A lot of their hard work went down the drain in just one afternoon. These type of events do not happen very often—Thank God for that! The course is doing much better in the last three weeks and we are opening on the 15th of July.

I should mention that the roughs were all disked and leveled with a drag harrow and have been seeded with red wheat, rye, and fawn fescue. We are watering them with hand-moved sprinkler lines and they are looking greener than they ever have. It's still not the best place to have to play from, however. **GB**

The following is a letter written to Jim Brooks, National Sales Manager for GOLF BUSINESS, by Richard Malpass, Superintendent at Riverside G & CC in Vancouver, Washington.

Dear Jim:

As you probably know, you were fortunate you left Portland at 8:40 last Thursday (June 17) night. At a few minutes after 9:00 that evening, Mount St. Helens erupted up to 55,000 feet and the ash fall came our way. The airport was closed shortly after 11:00 p.m. after you left. The ash fall reduced visibility to near zero. My daughter had awakened me at about ten o'clock to report that the volcano had erupted. At 12:30 I awoke and noted no traffic sounds, which intrigued me. So I arose and looked out of the window. I could hear a noise sounding like heavy rain but the pavement was dry. I went to the back of the house and turned on an outside spotlight and ash was coming down like frozen snow. Almost one-quarter of an inch had fallen already. We turned on TV and watched the news for an hour, then went back to bed.

I didn't sleep much, worrying about the golf course. We went over at about 5:30 a.m. to find the whole course looking like it had received a sand topdressing. It had just started

to rain, but we started the sprinklers and watered most of the day — greens, tees and fairways. Between over an inch of rain and the irrigation, we pretty well knocked the sand down. We mowed greens, tees and collars of greens on Saturday, the greens again on Sunday, and fairways Sunday afternoon. It had dried somewhat by then, but the tractors and mowers were working in a huge cloud of dust arising from the grass.

We have to lap greens mowers every third day. We now have one fairway unit down to regrind the reels and bedknives. As soon as we finish it, we will have to do our other one as the sand dulls the blades in a day or so.

The ash is extremely hard to move and blows badly on the streets when vehicles stir it up. Hundreds of thousands of dollars are being spent to water down the streets and to sweep up the residue. It is more of a nuisance than a disaster. Of course the media have blown it all out of proportion, enough so that they are scaring away tourists who seem to feel that we are buried in feet of the stuff and that lava is flowing down the streets of Portland.

However, I do hope we don't get anymore.

Dick Malpass