Nighttime is the right time for a few maintenance operations, but working after dusk isn’t viable for most staffs

BY SHANE SHARP
The scene resembles something out of *Star Wars*. The sun has set on the finely manicured grounds at the Coeur d'Alene Resort GC in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, but the dark course abounds with flashing lights that dance on fairways and greens. No, there's not a covert operation going on, and what's happening at Coeur d'Alene is hardly top secret. It's just business as usual.

The golf course is lit up like a night game at Yankee Stadium because Coeur d'Alene's golf course maintenance staff, headed by superintendent John Anderson, is in high gear. Mowers with beaming headlights traverse fairways like tractor-trailers rumbling down the interstate at night. Such a full-scale nightly maintenance program is a sight to behold — and uncommon among U.S. golf courses.

"We've been doing the majority of our heavy maintenance at night since 1992," Anderson says.

Anderson's reason for working late has to do with Coeur d'Alene's "great guest moment" policy. "We want to provide the best golfing experience possible for our guests, and part of that is not to have equipment running while they play," Anderson explains.

The last tee time at Coeur d'Alene is about 3:30 p.m., followed by employee tee times. The maintenance program begins soon after.

Pioneers in the nighttime maintenance concept, the Coeur d'Alene staff has had tremendous success in keeping its course conditioned under the watchful eyes of the creatures of the night, Anderson says. In the summer, the course's nightshift begins at 4 p.m. and continues until around midnight. But running equipment well into the night raises a number of challenges that have limited night work to only a handful of course maintenance operations.

Pros and cons
Players may walk away from Coeur d'Alene amazed at the peace and quiet they experienced while playing the course. But Coeur d'Alene is one of the few courses where players won't see or hear maintenance workers before noon because implementation of full-scale maintenance operations at night is having trouble catching on.

The benefits to maintaining courses at night are lack of player interference, grass cuts better because it's not wet, and cooler temperatures are easier on workers and machinery. However, there are factors that limit courses from getting anything done at night, and most golf facilities target only specified maintenance activities for after-hours.

"We do all of our chemical applications at night, so we don't interfere with play," says Mark Skee, superintendent at Heatherwood GC in Springboro, Ohio.

Skee says there are drawbacks to mowing at night. For instance, a hydraulic leak on a mower could go unnoticed in the dark. Even if it was spotted, there wouldn't be a mechanic around to fix it.

In Myrtle Beach, most courses aerify greens at night or perform spot maintenance — tasks that don't require mechanics to be on duty or won't disturb tourists and residents who stay in nearby homes and villas.

Matt Sapochak, general manager at the Winyah Bay GC in Georgetown, S.C., formerly mowed fairways until 10:30 p.m. at Myrtle Beach's Deerfield Plantation when he worked there from 1994 to 1998. But pressure from residents to reduce evening noise led Sapochak and other Grand Strand superintendents to pack it in early.

Try keeping your mowers out at night in the sunshine state, and you may run into the same objections. John Foy, director of the USGA's Florida Region Greens Section, notes that most Florida courses are surrounded with houses, and maintenance crews aren't permitted to work past 10 p.m. most of the time because of local ordinances.

Homes and mechanical issues are not the only obstacles to running full-scale night maintenance operations. In the Southwest, mowing at night takes a backseat to irrigation.

It makes more sense for superintendents to water their golf courses in the cool of the evening in the water-scarce region.

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— Warren Mitchell, John Deere

The nocturnal future

While few facilities roll out the nighttime equipment that Coeur d’Alene does, numerous courses undertake some form of maintenance before and after daylight. Equipment manufacturers have responded accordingly by offering mowers and other machinery with lights. High beams can be outfitted on most equipment by request.

In light of the advantages and disadvantages of working at night, will the practice be the next titanium driver of golf course maintenance? Or will its popularity amount to the long putter?

Warren Mitchell, administrative manager of Worldwide Marketing Development, a marketer of John Deere equipment, is not convinced that working at night is the wave of the future.

"Nighttime mowing is something we’ll see more of, but it is not revolutionizing the business as we know it," he says. "Many of the greens mowers and fairway units can have lights on them because most courses are cutting before the break of dawn, not necessarily at night."

But all signs point to more courses undertaking periodic, routine maintenance activities such as aerification, overseeding and spraying at night while leaving the mowing to the Coeur d’Alenes and other courses with distinctive goals.

"You would have to have the budget for it and have a mechanic on board," Skeen says. "We’ll think about doing anything we can do if we’re not interfering with the players, but part of the fun of this job is seeing the sun come up."

Ken Happ, regional superintendent for American Golf and superintendent at Fowlers Mill GC in Chesterland, Ohio, often has his crew mow tee boxes and fairways at night, but greens are cut at night only if the course has a special event the next day.

"Bottom line is we need to get the job done, and it’s easier to do some things at night, like spraying," Happ says.

Some say that electric mowers could bolster the amount of nighttime maintenance undertaken at courses around the country because they don’t roar like gas mowers. But electric mowers probably can’t change maintenance budgets, desert heat or the powerful inertia of the status quo. So don’t pawn those sunglasses just yet.