



Caring for the

The World Tour Golf Links in Myrtle Beach, S.C., gives you the opportunity to play No. 17 from the TPC at Sawgrass without going to Florida.

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It's hard enough for most superintendents to take care of *one* signature hole. Imagine trying to take care of 18 of them at a replica course

By Frank H. Andorka Jr., Managing Editor

You'd think Joel Ratcliff would feel pressure. After all, as certified superintendent of the World Tour Golf Links in Myrtle Beach, S.C., Ratcliff isn't just taking care of any course. He's taking care of Cypress Point, Inverness, Oakmont and St. Andrews — all rolled into one. Each hole on the 27-hole facility is inspired by famous holes from 23 courses around the world, which golfers often see on TV. Visitors to World Tour dream of imitating the great saves and shots they see their golfing heroes make on these holes. Furthermore, they expect the holes to play the same as they've seen them play on TV, even if the original holes exist in blustery, old Scotland instead of sweltering Myrtle Beach.

Some superintendents might buckle under the pressure of having so many hallowed holes under their care, but Ratcliff shrugs off the idea that there's additional pressure on him. To his

Continued on page 60

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(Above) No. 3 on the International Course at World Tour Golf Links owes its inspiration to the fourth hole at Baltusrol, Lower Course, in Springfield, N.J., while players shoot for a small green which mirrors the 12th hole at Augusta (below).

Continued from page 58

way of thinking, it's the same throughout the industry.

"Pressure is not a word I ever worry about," says Ratcliff, who adds that caring for the course is a team effort with his maintenance crew. "Golfer expectations are sky-high everywhere. As long as I satisfy my owners' commitments to the patrons, there's no added pressure."

Ratcliff is not alone. Superintendents at several replica courses across the country feel the same way. Still, with green fees ranging up to \$275 at The Royal Links in Las Vegas, golfers expect near perfection on replica courses, right down to turf that lines the walls of the pot bunker on No. 17 at St. Andrews. The trick, the courses' superintendents say, is not to let the hype scare them. No matter how venerable the holes you're replicating, it's still as simple as maintaining the best quality playing conditions for the golfers as you can, they agree.

Overcoming intimidation

When golfers drive the long, narrow driveway while entering Tour 18 Houston, the anticipation is palpable. You can't see the holes from the driveway, hidden as they are by tall hedges. Golfers eyes flit around. Where's No. 11 from Augusta? Where's No. 17 from TPC at Sawgrass? By the time they reach the tee-time desk in the pro shop, they're anxious to start playing those holes with the hope of conquering them. Superintendent Todd Stephens watches them enter the clubhouse and smiles. He knows the feeling.

Stephens admits the idea of maintaining such famous holes worried him when he first took the job in 2000. But once he stopped focusing on the history of the replica holes and created a maintenance schedule that treated the course as his own instead of 18 individual courses, the pressure abated.

"It's no longer a collection of disparate holes from around the world," Stephens says. "It's a course with its own challenges, but nothing that can't be overcome. My goal every day is to deliver the best golf course experience to our guests."

Brian Schafer, superintendent at The Royal Links, a course that replicates European holes in Las Vegas, agrees it's important not to focus on the hype surrounding a replica course.

Continued on page 62



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JOEL RATCLIFF
SUPERINTENDENT
WORLD TOUR GOLF LINKS

Replica Courses Require Patience and Precision to Construct

Joel Ratcliff isn't only the certified superintendent of International World Tour Golf Links in Myrtle Beach, S.C. He also helped build the course along with a local construction company, which gives him an appreciation for what it takes to create a replica course.

“We recreated holes from 23 different courses when we built this facility,” Ratcliff says. “It wasn't easy to do because we only had seven feet of elevation change on the 236 acres of property. If you're going to recreate holes with severe undulations, you have to move some dirt.”

Move dirt they certainly did — 1.3 million cubic yards, to be exact.

“Everyone's talking these days about minimalist design,” Ratcliff says. “You can't adhere to that philosophy if you want to get a replica course right.”

Aside from the massive earth moving, the biggest challenge at World Tour was routing.

“You don't want to plop holes down simply because they fit,” Ratcliff says. “If you do that, then you ruin the overall flow of the course and leave your golfers feeling out of sorts.”

Once you've got the holes chosen and routed, the next challenge concerns what grasses to use. Obviously, the grass they grow at St. Andrews in the Scottish climate won't thrive in South Carolina's heat. To provide value to your golfers, however, you have to choose grasses that will most closely mimic the originals, Ratcliff says.

For International, Ratcliff chose L-93 for the greens and 419 bermudas elsewhere. While it's not authentic on some of the holes, it's close enough so the golfers get the experience they're looking for.

“You want to emulate the holes as closely as possible, but there are limits on what you can do,” Ratcliff says. “I believe most golfers walk off our course satisfied with their experiences. That's what keeps me and the owners happy.”

— Frank H. Andorka Jr., Managing Editor

Continued from page 60

“If you woke up every day thinking about the history that's been made on the holes you're caring for, you'd be paralyzed,” Schafer says. “You have to think of it as No. 10 is just No. 10, which happens to emulate whichever famous hole it's patterned after.”

Schafer says he occasionally feels added pressure because the price of a round of golf at his course makes it a special-occasion course.

“This course is no one's home course,” Schafer says. “This is a course you play as a treat. I only have one chance to make a first impression. In the end, you can only do the best you can.”

Ratcliff, who also helped build World Tour, says his biggest challenge involves keeping up with all the renovations on the original courses that have contributed holes to his course.

“You finally get your holes to play like the originals, and the home course redesigns the hole to compensate for modern equipment,” Ratcliff says. “We won't be able to keep up indefinitely. If we tried to, we'd be tearing up holes all the time. Then people wouldn't want to play your course.”

Location, location, location

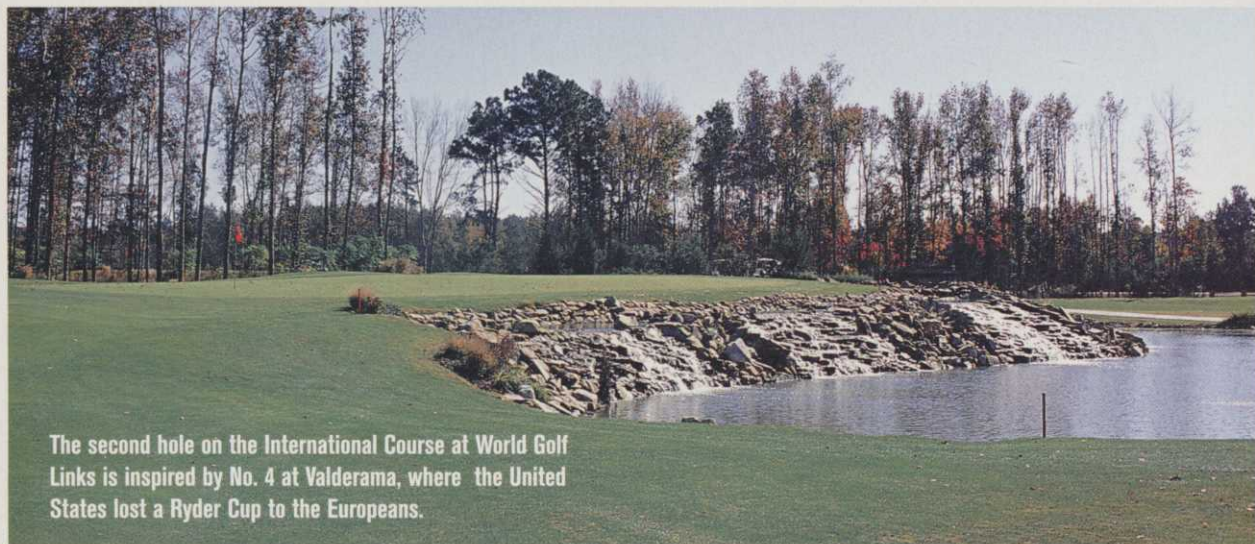
Often, a replica course's location differs radically in climate and topography from the areas where the original holes hail, Stephens says. While it may be easy to grow azaleas in April in Georgia, it's almost impossible to grow them in the middle of a scorching Houston summer.

“We want the holes to look as true to the originals as possible, but sometimes it's just not possible,” Stephens says. “You can't grow azaleas when it's 100 degrees outside and humid. That's when we have to explain to our golfers that it might not be a perfect replica.”

“We aim for Amen Corner to look perfect in April during Masters' week because that's when we'll get the most play on those holes,” he adds. “The rest of the year, we make it look as close as possible, but we have to make concessions to our climate.”

Schafer says his biggest challenge since joining The Royal Links 16 months ago was to change his mind about providing wall-to-wall green for his customers. After all, most European courses don't have triple-row irrigation systems.

Continued on page 66



The second hole on the International Course at World Golf Links is inspired by No. 4 at Valderama, where the United States lost a Ryder Cup to the Europeans.



“It’s been a lot of fun working on this project.”

TODD STEPHENS
SUPERINTENDENT
TOUR 18 HOUSTON

Continued from page 62

“On this course, it’s the exact opposite of what you experience on other courses in this country,” Schafer says. “When you’re trying to replicate holes from Europe, particularly Scotland, you don’t have completely green turf. Therefore, to remain true to the originals, you have to allow for a lot more brown.”

Brown turf isn’t hard to create in Las Vegas, where summer temperatures often reach 120 degrees F, Schafer says.

Schafer says most of the course’s golfers are people who will never travel to Scotland to play Carnoustie or St. Andrews. His job, as he sees it, is to help them have the experience without the expense of traveling overseas. The pressure builds, however, because of the price tag.

“You have to take care of them from start to finish and make sure they enjoy their round,” Schafer says. “Otherwise, they’ll never come back.”

Ratcliff says it takes a complete team effort, from the pro shop to the crew member raking bunkers, to make replica courses successful.

“We coordinate our efforts as much as possible because we want people to walk off our course pleased with what we’ve done,” Ratcliff says. “That starts in the bag drop-off area and follows them around the course. We need to be attentive to our golfers’ needs even more than your average course because of the price of admission.”

Stephens says the green complexes at his course present the largest maintenance headaches for him. Most of the holes repli-

cated at Tour 18 have smaller-than-normal greens because the original courses don’t handle a high volume of golfers. Unfortunately, when 50,000 rounds parade through, it’s hard to keep the traffic from ruining them.

“The small greens present some problems, but they’re not insurmountable,” Stephens says. “You have to aerify more aggressively and be more vigilant about traffic wear, but the problems are manageable.”

Worth the work

Schafer says his job at The Royal Links is fun despite its challenges.

“It’s a constant learning experience, and I’m becoming a better superintendent as I meet each new challenge,” Schafer says. “I enjoy hearing golfers talk positively about the course when they come off the 18th green.”

Stephens says the steady flow of customers that continue to come to Tour 18 proves to him he’s doing something right.

“We don’t get a lot of negative comments,” Stephens says. “Most of our golfers think we do a good job of replicating the holes within reason. It’s been a lot of fun working on this project.”

“It’s our job to keep the course in exceptional shape year-round, and that’s the biggest challenge,” he adds. “We can’t ever lose sight of the fact that we need to provide as healthy turf as possible so our customers keep coming back. Sure it’s added pressure, but I can’t complain.” ■

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