



Year In Review

What Happened?

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

A look back
on the notable
occurrences
of 2007

The golf course industry had its share of headlines in 2007 when it came to the state of the game.

For the second straight year, golf course construction was hardly hot as the overbuilt industry continued to correct itself with more course closings than openings. Mid-level clubs across the country also experienced expanded waiting lists for people wanting to sell their memberships. And play remained stagnant in the public golf sector.

Yet while the professional game produced plenty of interesting storylines, it clearly did not motivate people to play more golf. Then again, why would anyone want to take up the game after seeing Zach Johnson put away a star-studded field at the Masters by making plenty of cautious pars?

At least 2007 continued the trend of golf-world dignitaries lashing out at Augusta National's design changes and the potential impact of rough, tree planting and extreme conditions on the rest of the golf world. Starting with, of all sources, the hometown Augusta Chronicle's Scott Michaux.

"It's the trees and the rough, however, that seem to fly in the face of the original design and strategic intent that the club, players and

patrons so passionately embrace," he wrote, surely to the dismay of his publisher, a club member. "The constriction of options and the mandated conformity of play on certain holes defies everything that (Bobby) Jones and (Alister) MacKenzie strived to achieve with Augusta National."

Professional golfer Joe Ogilvie offered his opinion in *Golfweek* magazine after seeing the course. "It's like if you have a beautiful woman, but after her 20th or 30th plastic surgery, she doesn't look as good," he said.

The PGA Tour's other Ogilvy, Geoff, shared this ideal club bulletin board fodder.

"Augusta has a lot to answer for, getting the whole world obsessed with really fast greens," he told writer John Huggan. "They have lost a lot of pin positions with that policy. I bet they used to have a lot more variety. I would like to see Augusta's greens — even if only for one year — maybe 2 feet slower. Then they could use some of the front pins that have basically been eliminated. And you wouldn't need the rough. I think everyone would be comfortable with getting rid of it. It's just not necessary. The course is all about the greens. You don't even need the trees. If you put the pin in the right place, there is only one good spot on the fairway."

Don't you wish he was on your green committee?



Angel Cabrera took home the U.S. Open trophy at beautifully conditioned and rejuvenated Oakmont Country Club near Pittsburgh. However, as many long-time observers have warned, the club's incredibly dense rough backfired when several players were injured hitting shots, including world No. 2 and pre-tournament favorite Phil Mickelson.

"It's disappointing to dream as a kid about winning the U.S. Open and spend all this time getting ready for it and have the course setup [cause an] injury, you know?" Mickelson said after missing the 36-hole cut.

The media lashed out at Mickelson. Even United States Golf Association officials took offense at his suggestion.

Then this fall, the USGA's sensible course setup man, Mike Davis, authored a memo to upcoming U.S. Open site superintendents on the need to ensure that roughs offer recovery shots. He warned that the USGA does not want excessively fertilized "pitch-out" rough that is both boring for spectators to watch and in the case of Oakmont, dangerous to golfers.

Meanwhile, officials for 2008 U.S. Open site Torrey Pines Golf Course brought in kikuyu grass sod from neighboring courses to convert fairways and roughs at the USGA's suggestion. But officials decided to oversee the roughs this fall with perennial ryegrass, and



even some fairways now might get the same treatment. So much for the first kikuyu grass U.S. Open since Riviera in 1948.

In other USGA news, the organization nominated Jim Vernon of Pasadena, Calif., to take over as president in 2008. He will have his hands full with several messy issues left behind by former president Walter Driver. Most notable is talk of an unprecedented equipment rules change that would ban all U grooves and eventually return the V groove to the game.

Whether the rule change occurs depends on cooperation from the Royal and Ancient Golf Club, which pulled off the year's best Major where Pádraig Harrington's thrilling Open Championship victory at a beautifully

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Above, superintendent John Zimmers Jr. peels back Oakmont's vicious rough a day after the final round of the U.S. Open. Below, golf's influentials continued to criticize Augusta National for its design changes.

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set up Carnoustie Golf Links in Scotland erased memories of the 1999 debacle there.

For the year's final Major, superintendent Russ Myers and crew somehow got Southern

Hills Country Club in Tulsa, Okla., through a wet summer and withering August heat during the PGA Championship won by Tiger Woods. Though the course was not as fast and firm as Myers would have liked, Keith Foster's recent revitalization of Perry Maxwell's design came off beautifully, with the increase in short grass around the greens once again proving that if you give the game's best players options, they usually pick the wrong one.

Off the course, Woods entered the design business in full force by announcing his first American course design for The Cliffs in rural North Carolina. He has partnered with former Tom Fazio associate Beau Welling, and talk of his design philosophy became an integral part of almost every Woods press conference.

"I will not be hiring some guy to design a golf course," he told a gathering of writers. "I'll be hands-on and involved in it. My tastes are toward the old and traditional. I'm a big fan of the Aussie-built courses in Melbourne.

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Mike Davis, the USGA's senior director of rules and competitions, told future U.S. Open host superintendents that their respective roughs should offer recovery shots.

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I'm also a tremendous fan of some of the courses in our Northeast."

It was a toss up for best celebrity break-up in 2007. While Phil Mickelson denied he was firing long-time teacher Rick Smith to work with former Tiger Woods instructor Butch Harmon, he made the change after not winning the Masters. Then he won The Players

Championship at The Players Stadium Course in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.

Far more entertaining was a dispute between former friends Golf Digest magazine and developer Donald Trump, who was embroiled in various battles, but none more comical than his claims that the Golf Digest Top 100 course ranking is fixed. "Golf Digest is a disgrace to their profession," Trump told The New York Post's "Page Six" column.

It seems Trump was upset when Golf Digest dropped his Trump International from its Top 100. Trump claimed it was the result of a tense Nov. 28 meeting he had at Trump Tower with the magazine's publisher, who Trump claimed "came to my office and told me the only way I'll get the ratings I deserve was if I advertised. I said, 'No thanks' and sent him on his way." Trump added: "Can you believe it? The magazine had already told me that I have built the best new courses in this country in years, but then they say I have to advertise to make it in? It's unbelievable."

Trump's reasoning for Golf Digest's purported black mailing? Because he featured the editors of rival Golf Magazine in episodes of "The Apprentice."

Little did he know that the folks at Golf Digest probably considered that a blessing.

Meanwhile, restored and remodeled courses were rewarded in the latest lists. As Golf Digest's Ron Whitten noted, a number of former 100 Greatest Courses have undergone major remodeling programs in just the past two years, including Atlanta Athletic Club, Bel-Air, Bellerive, Jupiter Hills, Oak Tree and Stanwich (Golf Digest's Best New Remodel of 2006). All that these courses need now are the minimum 40 panelist evaluations to qualify for reconsideration on the 100 Greatest.

As much as folks want to blame the rankings for golf's business struggles, the most eye-opening news of the year came not from Tacoma, where much-anticipated new municipal course Chambers Bay opened to rave reviews and future U.S. Open site buzz, but from south of there where the 18-hole municipal known as The Crossings at Carlsbad opened at a cost to taxpayers of \$73.8 million.

As the kids like to say these days, "Good luck with that." ■



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