Construction equipment was a common sight on the course during the renovation.

**Oakmont Regains Its Grueling Image**

**BY LARRY AYLWARD**

In preparing for this month's U.S. Open, John Zimmers Jr. helped oversee Oakmont Country Club's massive golf course restoration, which began before Zimmers arrived at the Pittsburgh-area course in 1999 and ended in late 2005.

Thanks to the restoration, which included the removal of more than 5,000 trees, Oakmont has regained its take-no-prisoners image. Of course, that's the image the late Henry C. Fownes sought when he designed his only golf course in 1903.

"He set out to make the hardest golf course in America, and I think he achieved what he wanted to do," Zimmers says.

Oakmont hired Fazio Golf Course Designers to engineer the restoration and builder McDonald & Sons to do the physical work. Zimmers and his staff assisted throughout.

The ambitious $2.5-million restoration, aided largely by the use of old photographs of Oakmont in its heyday, touched about every part of the course and included a new irrigation system.

"They wanted to put the course back to the original design that Mr. Fownes had," Zimmers says of Oakmont's 400 members. "They have the utmost respect for Mr. Fownes."

There were few, if any, trees on the course when Fownes designed it, but they accumulated over the next 90 years. Most of the trees were planted in the 1960s as part of a beautification program. But the course became so overgrown with trees that playability suffered and turf weakened because of poor air movement and shade.

Oakmont's grounds committee decided it was time to bring down the trees. Oakmont was designed as a links-style course, not a parkland course, they reasoned. Not surprisingly, the board's decision sparked controversy.

The tree-removal program began in 1995 under the direction of Mark Kuhns, who spent nine years at Oakmont and is now director of grounds at Baltusrol Golf Club. Zimmers inherited the project upon his arrival in 1999. Most of the work was done in-house and in the winter so tree-sentimental members wouldn't witness the severed lumber toppling to the ground.

Zimmers told Wallace he could smell dead roots, and that he would have to aerify the greens to rectify the problem.

"He knew it was the middle of the summer and that aerifying at that time would be controversial," Wallace says. "But he did it, and he saved the greens."

Under Zimmers' tenure, Oakmont has soared to another level, Wallace says.

"He has taken a very beautiful diamond and polished it even more," Wallace adds. "That's more difficult than taking a lump of coal and turning it into a diamond."

Zimmers believes he has earned the trust of Oakmont's members because he is honest and forthright with them.

"At no point has the support for John been any stronger than it is right now," Wallace says.

Zimmers doesn't duck the inquisitive members, either. He has learned that if you give those people face time, they are satisfied, even if they didn't get the answers they sought.

Zimmers also explains to members the nuances of certain agronomic procedures in terms they can understand.

"You know he knows more about grass than you ever will," Wallace says. "But he has a way that involves you. So the members don't walk away with their heads spinning."

Tim Moraghan, the United States Golf Association's director of championship agronomy, has known Zimmers since his days at Congressional. Moraghan has watched Zimmers grow into a superintendent who can handle the pressures that come with being superintendent at a top club. Zimmers doesn't get too high or too low, which is the best way to operate at a place like Oakmont.

"It is one of the all-time great courses in this country," Moraghan says. "And John survives it all very well."

Wallace is impressed that Zimmers sur-
Moraghan says. “They’ll be boasting, ‘We have
their course to the championship until a
day before the first practice round.
That tells you how passionate they are
about their golf,” Zimmers says. •

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Tim Moraghan, the United States Golf
Association’s director of championship
agronomy, describes the finished tree-re-
moval program as “mind blowing.”

“If you had seen the course before
1995 and seen it today, your jaw would hit
the ground,” Moraghan says.

Oakmont’s turf will benefit from the
tree removal, says Moraghan, who sup-
ported the endeavor.

“Are we there to play golf on quality turf-
grass, or are we there to take a walk in the
dark at the birds in the trees?” Moraghan asked. “It’s hard to convince peo-
ple in the environmental community that
taking down trees is beneficial. But were
not taking down trees in a national park.
Were taking down trees on a golf course.”

Fazio’s Tom Marzolf was the architec-
tural anchorman for the restoration. Mar-
zolf’s first order of business upon arriving in
1999 was lengthening Oakmont from the
trees. More than 200 yards was added to
the course, which now plays about 7,255
yards. A new par-3 tee on No. 8 will make
the hole 290 yards for the U.S. Open.

Oakmont’s existing bunkers were also
restored, and 10 bunkers were rebuilt.
Fownes designed Oakmont with 300
bunkers, but many were removed to cut
back on overall maintenance. There are
about 200 bunkers on the course now.

The project included the refurbishing of
the church pews bunker, one of the most
famous bunkers in golf. Over the years,
the church pews bunker floor had accumulated
so much sand that it had become raised.
The floor was lowered and the bunker’s
bottom was rebuilt. Two additional pews
were also added to each end of the bunker.

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Zimmers is the boss, but he doesn’t
dark instructions like a Paris Island drill
sergeant. He’s more like a coach with his
crew, taking time to explain the details of
a hole. Zimmers doesn’t run the show
from his comfortable office. He’s on the
golf course as much as he can be. He’s not
afraid to grab a shovel or a broom and get
down and dirty with the others.

Zimmers’ affinity to attract top tal-
ent for his staff is evident by the number
of assistants he has lost during his tenure.

Five of them have moved on to superin-
tendent jobs at prestigious clubs, includ-
ing Jason Hurwitz, who left Oakmont late
last year to become superintendent of
nearby Fox Chapel Golf Club.

“He is my only mentor,” says Hurwitz,
who worked under Zimmers for three
years at Sand Ridge and for seven years at
Oakmont. “I have always admired how
focused and motivated he is.”

It’s too early in Zimmers’ career to
begin talk of how he will be remembered
in the golf course maintenance profession.
But some people are already talking about
his legacy.

“John is a credit to his profession,”
Moraghan says. “He makes those around
him better.”

Oakmont member Bob Wagner, the
club’s former grounds chairman and pres-
ident, calls Zimmers the nation’s top
superintendent.

When asked how he would like to be
remembered, Zimmers talks more about
being a team player than a team’s star player.

“Somebody … that if you were putting
your team together, I hope I would get
your call,” he answers quietly.

Oakmont’s members are glad they called
on Zimmers to be the club’s superinten-
dent. Zimmers has lived up to their
demanding expectations.

And that is something he’ll be remem-
bered for.