Whether playing host to thousands as a PGA Tour stop, or accommodating the local Kiwanis Club’s annual charity golf tournament, when your facility holds an event, things will go wrong and damage will occur. It’s part of the deal. You know that going in. But there are strategies for minimizing damage, and reducing your stress, when throngs descend upon your golf course.

Superintendents say that preparation, water management, turf selection, communication and planning are the key factors to hosting a successful tournament. Here, we take a look at some of the decisions superintendents have made around the country at various events, both professional and amateur, in order to come out of a tournament smiling.

Managing water
For the past 18 years, superintendent Rick Slattery has hosted the LPGA Tour at Locust Hill County Club in Rochester, N.Y. The club was a regular Tour stop for the first 15 years of Slattery’s tenure and became the home of the LPGA Championship, a Major, three years ago.

“Today, with these tournaments, their biggest priority is a firm surface,” Slattery says. To achieve a firm surface, Slattery begins the process of reducing irrigation in order to dry out the golf course some three months before the tournament.

“Dry it out as far as your turfgrass will allow, trying to lower that threshold of the turfgrass,” Slattery says. “If your golf course is healthy and you’ve allowed it to dry down, if you get heavy rain during the tournament, the playing surface will stay firm,” Slattery says.

He knows this from experience. Going into this year’s tournament, the course was enduring drought conditions. Then, during tournament week, the sky opened up, dumping 3.5 inches of rain. Despite the rain, the players and officials remarked how firm the greens were and how quickly it dried.

To help manage water on his course, Slattery utilizes Rain Bird’s Smart Pump central control software for his irrigation system. The software helps Slattery calculate rainfall and ET, so that he can manage how much irrigation is needed to achieve firm playing surfaces.

“One time a tent company put a stake through a 3-inch main. The system detected that and shut it down without me being there.”

Water management also has been an issue for superintendent Keith Wood, who hosts the PGA Tour’s Wyndham Championship at Sedgefield Country Club in Greensboro, N.C. Flooding of ponds and other waterways on the course is an issue every year.

“With the August date that we have in North Carolina, we’re subject to thunderstorms quite frequently and every year we’ve had a thunderstorm issue,” Wood says. “In 2009, we never finished a round until Sunday. This year had a Monday finish. We got inundated with rain Sunday afternoon, in the middle of Sun-
day’s round. We were so saturated that we couldn’t get back out there and play. We had eight inches of rain in August, including a three-inch bomb on the Sunday before the tournament week started.”

In 2008 and 2009, Wood says he and his staff spent the winter installing French drains “in just about every landing area that was flat that didn’t have very good surface drainage,” sandcapping the drains on the fifth, sixth and eighth fairways. Eleven holes on the course have a creek running through them, some parts of which are silted over. But getting a permit to alter the creeks may be difficult. Instead, Wood says he noticed a pond on the course could be enlarged and dredged to handle some of the excess water. Plans are underway to make that adjustment.

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North Carolina is getting more hot and humid, Wood says. Hosting the Wyndham Championship on bentgrass greens in August was not going to give players the best putting quality.

“We are a Donald Ross course and we’re supposed to play firm and fast. In August, bentgrass is not firm and fast,” he says.

To keep the course tournament-ready, Wood had to limit rounds before the tournament so that the bentgrass greens could survive through the end of the summer. It was a burden on the membership. And still, every year by the end of the event, Wood says the bentgrass “greens were devastated, were pretty much dead.”

To address this problem, the choice was made to re-grass the greens and switch from cool-season bentgrass to a warm-season bermudgrass. The course was fumigated on May 14th and sprigged with Champion bermudagrass on May 28th. It was shut down during the grow-in, but members were given three days to play before the tournament.

When they saw course conditions, Wood says, “they were thrilled.”

In an interview after the first day
of the tournament, 2012 U.S. Open champ Webb Simpson told the media, “The greens are perfect. It’s the way the golf course is meant to be played. Quite frankly, it’s more enjoyable to play it. I think everybody is really pleased.”

Immediately following the tournament, Wood says the new greens were able to support 140 rounds of golf per day with “no issues with agronomics. The ball is still rolling good. If we’d done 140 rounds on bent, around the pins would have been dead.”

With the change in turf variety came a change in mowers. When the new greens were ready to mow, Wood switched to a John Deere 180SL.

“The angle that the bed knife breaks the grass is very aggressive. We’re able to have the mowers at a higher height of cut, which is healthier for the grass,” Wood says. “More leaf blade showing means more photosynthesis. We’re able to achieve a tighter surface because of the geometry of the mower.”

Overseed order
Turf selection, in the form of sod and overseed, is a consideration for Jeff Plotts, CGCS, Director of Golf Course Operations at TPC Scottsdale. The 36-hole facility’s Stadium Course is home to the Waste Management Phoenix Open, the PGA Tour’s most highly attended event. During the tournament week, an average of 500,000 spectators swarm the place.

The facility was built specifically to support such large galleries. Spectator mounds were built into the venue, just outside of the playing envelope. The course is also the site of the Tour’s only fully enclosed golf hole. Number 16 on the Stadium Course is often referred to as “The Coliseum.” The par-3 Coliseum is surrounded tee-to-green by skyboxes and grandstands that hold 20,000 spectators every day of the tournament. It is undoubtedly the loudest, rowdiest hole in golf. It also, by its very nature of being enclosed by large tents and scaffolding, has some major shade issues.

Although the tournament doesn’t start until the end of January, overseeding begins October 1st with an 80/20 mix of perennial rye to fine fescue. On the 16th hole, Plotts says, “we’ll overseed 80/20, and then come back with additional fine fescue to aid in more shade tolerance.”

The course is closed the second week of October to allow the seed to germinate. On October 28th, the scaffolding arrives at the course. The next day, construction on the grandstands that form The Coliseum begins, a full three months before the event. To cut down on the long shadows cast by the structures, Potts requests that the roof and skirting of the skyboxes aren’t installed until the very last moment. A mirror is erected to capture sunlight and reflect it back onto the seedlings.

Mowing is reduced to give the overseed a chance to grow in.

Even with so much prep, Plotts says he knows the 16th hole and other areas will suffer turf damage. To be proactive, he orders his overseed from Seed Research of Oregon a full year in advance. West Coast Turf grows two acres of overseeded 419 bermudagrass for Plotts every year “to put back into the overseed footprint that we have out here to repair all the damage.”

A quick recovery from the tournament is necessary, Plotts says, “because this is all going on in our high season when we have our highest dollar per round.”

Talk it through
Through the seven years that Plotts has worked the event, he says he’s learned that planning and communication are key to successfully hosting a tournament.

“It’s not a magic trick, good communication,” he says. “It’s important to understand that all of the parties have a big job and everybody’s job is important to them. Our job is to host the largest tournament in golf.”

Communication and planning for the next year’s tournament begins at 10 a.m. the Sunday morning of the final round. Representatives of all of the parties involved — vendors, volunteers and staff — sit down and take a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) approach to the week that just ended.

Each of these areas is addressed before the final putt falls so that they can review what went well and what can be improved. Later in the day, Plotts meets with his staff to do the same, and meetings continue throughout the year.

Communication with people is one thing, but how about communication with equipment? Cameron Craig, Golf Operations Manager at Predator Ridge Resort in Vernon, B. C., Canada, has 166 golf carts at his facility equipped with the DSG Tag System, a fleet management and tracking system that allows for electronic communication with players in the carts.

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This system is now available on EZ-Go golf carts and Cushman utility vehicles. The DSG TAG System can give a warning or shut down a cart if it ventures into restricted areas. The idea is to keep golfers out of lakes and ditches or to prevent them from driving the cart onto greens and approaches. The tracking system can also be installed on mowers and other equipment. “TAG may be installed on any vehicle on the course,” says Natasha Benes, product manager for DSG TAG Systems. “You can see its location at any time.” Benes adds that you can also set up virtual restricted zones, cart path zones and more — and shut vehicles down before they get to those areas.

Craig hosts mainly corporate and member events at Predator Ridge. He says he uses the system to keep play inbounds and moving on tournament days. “We have the function set that warns guests when they enter a restricted zone,” he says. “This helps to keep our guests safe and our course in great condition.” With the system enabled on the carts at Predator Ridge, when “a group drives into a restricted area the cart will not stop, it will give them an alarm to warn them they are in a restricted area.”

Tournament time
Preparation, water management, turf selection, communication, technology and planning. All of these will help a superintendent succeed when hosting a big event. But perhaps the most useful item in the toolbox is the one that’s entirely up to you: your attitude. “I think the biggest thing is enjoy it and have fun,” Plotts says. “Because if you enjoy it and have fun, then your staff will too.” Sedgefield’s Wood agrees. “I learned after a few years to go with the flow,” he says. “It’s part of the event. Don’t let it get you down when, actually, it’s job security. We’ve got another month of work lined up ahead of us.”

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