

Summer Battle Gains PGA Headquarters

By John Stevenson

In March 2005 I was approached by the new Irish company - Carnoustie Holdings Ltd - about the Superintendent position at Golf de Fontenailles, which is situated about 40 minutes southeast of Paris. The course is 15 years old and consists of 27 holes. 18 of which make up the Championship course.

The course was taken over from Japanese company - Taiyo, who also had Golf de Clement Ader and Golf des Aisses, which were sold off around the same time. Fontenailles had massive inputs for the first few years, which even included tarmaced roadways made through the forest areas and was recognised as a top golf course in France. From around 2001 there started to be big financial difficulties and eventually the last two years saw no finance at all, resulting in a big decline in the condition of the golf course. At this time I was positioned at Golf de Joyenval on the west side of Paris.



As I made several visits early in the season, around April, before I had signed the contract, there started to be a worry about the irrigation system which needed major work doing in the pump station - to the value of around 25.000 euros. Due to the takeover process and the person responsible for the maintenance at the time, the greens began to decline rapidly each time I visited. Handwatering was being done with a galvanised tank with no pressure at all, at a rate that was impossible to keep up with the 27 holes. The temperatures were around 25°C and some greens were only getting watered every three or four days, which wasn't enough. At the start of May I signed the contract for the Superintendents position, as it was an absolutely fabulous site. Having a month's notice to work in my existing job, I had to settle for weekend visits. The next month was a horror, as each time I visited the greens appeared worse, due to no irrigation system and temperatures rising. By the end of May I was distraught. I was going to start a job in 10 days and there were 15 greens that showed burnt areas like you've never seen before. At this stage I was starting to have second thoughts as I thought that any kind of revival was impossible. I knew that 12 of my 27 greens were fine but I didn't know what I was going to do with the other 15. Each weekend in May the members appeared more and more angry and were more and more doubtful of any revival. There were two major blocks for me that made me think it would be impossible. Firstly, after the lack of Japanese funds there had been three staff kept on to maintain the course, which resulted in no mechanical verticutting and one aeration in three years that resulted in a thatch layer of around three inches - this made a block on the surface. The other problem was that there was no aeration equipment on site or verticutters to control the thatch. (PHOTO 1).

On June 7 I got a call from Fontenailles to inform me that they'd hired an irrigation



company to get the system up and running. I was satisfied and began to have a glimmer of hope but I knew the light at the end of the tunnel was a long way away and that this situation was the rise or fall of my career - as bad news travels fast. After exceptional experiences working at Oakland Hills for the 1996 US Open, and Valderamma for the 1997 Ryder Cup and World Championship, plus irreplaceable experiences at the Pinehurst resort, I started to think that even with the difficulties, pressure and levels demanded, I have never been faced with a situation as difficult as this.



June 13 and my first day at work, where do you start? The first thing I thought was there is a massive concern for the greens - that is a negative topic. I thought lets do something good and quick to get people talking positively while taking care of the negative. With the fairways starved I thought I'll put some ammonium sulfate at 15g m2 to give them a quick response. Not wanting to take the risk with the irrigation system until I had time to check it all, I waited for the first rain. The result was brilliant. I bought new flags and flagpoles and tidied up and pruned the trees at the front entrance and the hotel entrance, which gave a good first impression. The members started to talk a little more positively and I went to work with my major problem. (PHOTO 2).

My first concern was to check all the sprinklers on the greens that were looking really bad. Going through the first three or four greens was no problem, and then all of a sudden there was a big drop in pressure, until eventually a cut off. I ran down to the pump station to find that the pumps would no longer run on automatic, but manual. The pump station is a type PEME with a jockey pump that gives 30m3 an hour and the two main pumps which each give 60m each. With still no dejoiner installed I decided not to fiddle as the electrical wardrobe was like a time bomb and there were wires dangling everywhere. I decided to call the company back to fix the problem and continued my tests with the jockey pump on manual. The company came back and fixed the problem with another two wires added to the time bomb. After my testing of all the irrigation system there were 25 sprinklers either to be replaced or installed, as they were non-existent. The next step was to get the pump station in security. We had had a quote for 7,000 euros to be installed by a company. After



asking for prices I could purchase one for 3.000 euros so I decided we'd install it ourselves, which we did. I set the cycles for the evening watering as usual. I came back the next morning and the first green I saw was drier than the previous day - the temperature had been around 32°C but if watered, the green should have been OK. I went to the satellite to test it. There was nothing, I verified a second one to make sure it was not an isolated problem but there was nothing. I went to the pump station to find it had dejointed. You think to yourself, I've done the right thing by making it secure but it's backfired. I started to go through all the normal tests to find out what the problem was. All the pressures on the outside of the tank were fine. All the pumps on manual worked fine and when put to the off position would stop. Then testing the pump on automatic there was a main pump that would not shut off once started which would eventually cause the whole system to dejoint. An electrician was brought to find the problem. After his diagnosis a wire had moved position. The next month would become a nightmare as we were getting our cabling sabotaged by an outside party. There must have been six or seven situations in the pump station where wires had been pulled out of place or moved, or disconnected. With tiredness playing a big part - at first I thought it was the vibrations that were causing the wiring to dislodge but as time went on this became inevitably impossible. I decided to make plans of



Photo 5

every electrical wire as to where it was connected and also change the lock on the pump station. Everything at this stage settled down until a very hot weekend of around 35°C-37°C. In the morning my assistant called me to say the irrigation cycle had shut off about an hour into its cycle and also the well pump had stopped feeding the lake which had caused shutdown. He had looked in the electric box to find wires had been disconnected and he couldn't find the solution. I set off and prayed on the journey, please let it be something I can solve as tomorrow is Sunday, no one works in France and it's scorching. I went to the office to get my plan and the work I'd done with the plans saved my bacon. The well pump functioned so I let it run for a few hours and came back early morning to get some water on the greens and bought another lock for the well pump house.

Towards the end of July some of the greens that had stayed in decent condition started to get yellowing. I figured there was a shortage of food and after speaking to my assistant the greens were last fed in March with a relatively soluble material, which I figured was finished and the greens were now stressed. I was worried about fertilising with this heat but maybe they would suffer more if I didn't. Then there was the heavy thatch, I made the decision that when maximum temperatures went below 25°C, I would use a Scotts fertiliser with a high slow release at a low dose of 10gmn2. I applied it only to note two days later temperatures soared up to above 30°C and we had to water heavily for the dry areas which resulted in a pythium outbreak which was surely due to excessive watering and thatch. Not every choice or decision we make will work but always know the consequences and have the solution ready. I saw it very early and sprayed with fosetyl-al, which cleared it up.



Photo 6

Now was the time to purchase aeration equipment that was essential, as the greens had taken a knock back with all the electrical difficulties, this was a critical stage. I purchased the new Toro procore 648 aerateur, which I used on its closest spacing to alleviate as much thatch as possible as I had only tried one verticut as I thought the stress would be too much. When I arrived here they were mowing all the greens at 3.7mm that I moved up to 5mm from the first day to allow for better photosynthesis and recovery. The aeration went great and then I verticut only the major worn areas I thought may not recover. On some greens there were spotty areas that needed reseeding. These areas were raked with a leaf rake seeded with penncross and toppedressed. (PHOTO 3). These works all went really well. All I needed now was the irrigation to stay working. After the seed had been out for three days, I got a call from the hotel to say I had a visitor. I drove over and entered the hotel to find a gentleman dressed in a military style uniform who turned out to be from the water police, he had come to place his heavy restrictions on water use. Just as I felt I'd got my head above the surface of the water, someone's come and stood on it and pushed me under. At this stage I really thought I was not destined to get out of this situation. I could water from 8am-8pm and only the greens. Heavy fines are implemented if the rule was broken but I thought I needed four or five syringe cycles in the day to keep the seed moist. I decided to purchase some penmulch that really helped me retain the moisture during the day. The restrictions actually passed quite quickly and after a fortnight I managed to see big stands of penncross growing, at this stage I really felt the battle would be won. (PHOTO 4). I was granular fertilising the seeded areas once a week with predominantly slow release fertilisers but also a little soluble, the results were impressive and only two greens had to be put on temporary greens through all this.

Just after catching my breath we would run into more problems, which involved heavy damage to the course but this time it was by wild pigs. (PHOTO 5). Another detrimental problem was having over 100 Canadian geese that were leaving their deposits everywhere but the real concern for people was the problem of bird flu that scared people. To tackle the pig problem I took a five tonne excavator to make a path at the side of the neglected fence and started to push up 60cm of soil to the bottom so they couldn't push underneath, when the soil froze it made it like concrete which seemed to work as the pigs are only a seasonal problem. I also had to change to 500m, which had been abandoned for years and was in an impossible state to repair. An outside company carried out this work, the geese problem were very time consuming and we eventually stopped the problem with explosives.

Getting to where we are now we have managed to get a deal with the French PGA, which will become the home course of the PGA. Through hardwork from Carnoustie Holdings Ltd, Ireland and excellent work from my crew it all came together above our expectations. I am now recruiting staff to help out on a heavy workload and we are also in the process of buying all new equipment. We have a project of bunker renovation to do on the championship course, which will bring a lot of changes and more challenges; the bunker work is already underway. (PHOTO 6). There are also unforeseen problems like this one on the island green, which can hamper your current planning. (PHOTO 7). French Tour pro Jean-Françoise Remsey, will be involved on a consultancy basis on course upgrades and development which will be a great experience for myself and my crew.

If I got out of this summer the way I did, it's because I looked back on my previous experiences especially at the US Open where I lived with the Superintendent who is probably the person I respect most in the business (Steve Glossinger CGCS) many thanks to him, he was a good mentor. To conclude, if anyone is faced with a similar situation and you're self confident, go for it, things can only get better and I think it's easier to look good than take something on that is already good and make it better.



Photo 7