



CHRIS & MIKE'S US OPEN ADVENTURE

Mike Gash and Chris Sealey have just returned from Pittsburg where they worked on the US Open as part of the huge volunteer squad. Mike gives an insight into life at the US Open

It all started back in 2005, Orlando, Florida, on the Bernhard trip, where we meet David Ward formally of Olympia Fields which held the US Open in 2003. We had a fascinating chat to David on the setting up of a US Open and afterwards Chris and I thought it would be a great idea to see if we could get on the volunteer support team at a US Open.

For me it was to see how different it was to an Open, as I have been on the BIGGA Support Team a few times there, so we set ourselves a date - the 2007 US Open at Oakmont (yeh right. As if that's going to work to plan). We sent letters together with recommendations and eventually we received an e-mail saying we would be considered and they would let us know before Christmas. True to form we got the e-mail we were looking for, saying we had been accepted and we would be part of the 2007 volunteer grounds crew.

We arrived on June 8th after 10 hours of travelling and two flights. Our initial meeting was not until the Sunday, two days later, at 4.30pm. We were staying in a Holiday Inn Express, along with nearly all the 150 grounds volunteers, about 2 ½ miles from the course.

On the Sunday we were picked up by mini bus and on arrival at the maintenance facility, we saw our marquee which housed all 200 plus greenkeepers, mainly Americans, but some from New Zealand, Australia, Japan, and the UK.

We picked up the credentials and shirts for the week and helped ourselves to free drinks ready for the meeting. The meeting went on for an hour and a half. We had a greeting and a motivational talk from

Superintendent, John Zimmers, known as JZ; the Greens Chairman of Oakmont, and couple of university professors who were friends/mentors to JZ, and a representative from USGA, who bought along the trophy for use to see and have a photo with.

JZ introduced us to all his assistants, past and present, who were going to be in charge of specific groups during the Championship. Then came the job allocations for the week. We did expect to be doing menial tasks but it was a nice surprise to see we were actually getting fully involved in every aspect.

Initially Chris was down for cutting greens on the front nine, and I was down for bunkers on the back nine.

We all, then, sat down for a meal, before JZ put us in our groups and we went straight out for a practice run.

The next morning we had to be ready for the mini bus at 3.15. JZ arrived and gave us our jobs for the morning, but at this stage people had already been swapped around. They were looking for the best man for each specific job, during the first couple of runs. By Monday evening Chris was swapped to the front nine bunkers, which he was happy with, as you get to see more of the course instead of just three greens! We were all out and ready for action for about 4.45am.

Some people could start earlier because they had floodlights to help then, and the guys cutting could see their first line because of the dew, but the bunker crews had to wait for sun up to see anything.

There was more fuss made over the bunkers than any other job. They had to be meticulously raked or basically you did it again. Everybody was finished for 7.30-8.00 with the whole course cut and raked ready for play and we were back at the marquee waiting for breakfast. Everyone was ushered back into the marquee at 9.30 ready for JZ to give us another talk on how we did and how progress was going, also to give us our afternoon job allocations. These were jobs like cutting the graded rough, flymo/stripping the bunkers, divoting and trimming sprinklers. Lunch was about 12.30pm then we would have a break until 4ish, just in time for our evening meal.

About 5pm JZ and his assistants would come in the marquee and give us another talk and our evening's job allocations. These were similar to the morning duties except the bunker crew would be divoting tees and fairways and the practice area. Everyone was finished for about 9.30pm ready for us to go back to the hotel and get some well-earned sleep or down the pub for one 'honest'.

Tuesday and Wednesday were much the same as Monday except on Wednesday we had a terrific thunderstorm, which destroyed all the bunkers, so that evening instead of divoting, we had to deep rake the bunkers. This was a big blow as we had only just got the bunkers back to perfect condition from the thunderstorm the Friday before, so we didn't finish until after 10pm.

Thursday and Friday morning duties started as normal, then one or two people from each bunker crew would walk with one of the assistants in charge from tee to green and check everything ie. if there were any clippings left etc. The bunkers were intensely scrutinised, if a small bird had walked through it would be raked again.

So having walked one half of the course again and raked about 20 more bunkers you didn't get back to the marquee until 9.30pm, which meant you just scraped in for breakfast. Then the day was yours until about 5pm when JZ would give everyone an update and job allocations for the evening.

Evenings brought one slight problem, no one could get out until the players had finished their game, which was not until around 7.30. So with all the equipment loaded up on trailers, plus all the ride-on mowers ready to go we all congregated for a convoy out of the maintenance facility. A police escort was waiting to lead us all down the road. What a sight that was, about 150 plus bits of equipment in one huge line going down main road with just over 200 green staff waving and smiling at all the traffic we had just held up. There were about 50 guys on the flymo team, 30-40 on the divoting team and the rest were cutting right up until about 10pm

Saturday and Sunday, this was a little easier, the morning duties were as normal, even though they didn't tee off till 10am. Because it was a one-tee start this meant we could get out earlier in the evening and get more jobs done.

Sunday morning, duties were as normal except I was in charge of the back nine bunker crew, quite an honour for me as the bunkers proved to be the focus of a lot of attention. We did receive throughout the week praise from JZ for their superb condition and we were even featured on CBS News focussing on the twilight raking. The organisation of the whole operation was fantastic, to get just over 200 greenkeepers working, as one without any mistakes was unreal. I think that is a testament to all, on how focused everyone was, from JZ right the way down.

We will say the USGA looked after us exceptionally well with four meals a day, free drinks and a freezer full of ice cream!

A fuller version of this article can be read on the Midland Section website: www.biggamidlandsection.com

