

# THE RYDER CUP CHALLENGE

By Josh Webber



FEATURE



**As an English turfgrass student, moving to the United States was no small step. On arrival at Valhalla Golf Club in June 2007, as part of the Ohio State Internship Programme, I quickly realised that accomplishing Valhalla's goals in preparation for this tournament was no small feat. In fact, the overall goal appeared as somewhat of an insurmountable quest. "This is for me," I thought. The sleeves had to be rolled up!**

As I write, the countdown reads 59 days until the start of the 37th Ryder Cup. As the world's largest golf tournament draws closer, Valhalla starts to emerge in the spotlight as this year's host. Although this is no surprise, as the event is estimated to attract the attention of 600 million viewers in 177 countries and territories.

With 250 members, Valhalla is normally only accustomed to 18,000-20,000 rounds a year; however, this year it will become home to 45,000 people during tournament week alone. One million square feet (22 acres) of tents will be installed for merchandise, chalets and concession stands. Alongside this, 250 corporations will entertain guests with five star private tents.

The economic impact of the tournament for the city of Louisville is estimated to bring in \$115 million! As a result, the PGA of America this year will partner with a number of different individuals and organisations to contribute \$500,000 to local charities in the Kentucky and Southern Indiana area.

Jack Nicklaus set out with a signature design to create the first championship golf facility for the area. Home to 486 rolling acres, Valhalla is

20 miles east of downtown Louisville, Kentucky. Valhalla provides a links-style front nine with a more traditional, parkland-style back nine.

As far as growing grass in the transition zone, anything goes. For example, if you walk the fairways of eight local courses, you will find an equal use of the following grasses: Bentgrass, Ryegrass, Bermuda and Zoysia. Managing Bentgrass fairways here is basically a modified greens programme: applying 5lbs of nitrogen to greens and 2.5lbs of nitrogen to tees and fairways, applied as an autumn application annually. Spoon feeding is implemented as a liquid for the remainder of the year, as needed.

A-1/A-4 Bentgrass is used on greens and Pennway on fairways and tees. The use of Kentucky Bluegrass and Perennial Ryegrass in the semi-rough help provide a great contrast with the Zoysia produced around bunker faces, also a mix of Fine Fescues in the native long rough areas help maintain good overall definition.

Without a doubt, the weather that Valhalla is exposed to each year is the single most controlling factor, as every step of the management plan is governed by Mother Nature. So as not to be dictated by the weather, lightweight equipment is utilised in a variety of ways. Triplex greens mowers are used on fairways, both 36 inch and 61 inch rotary mowers are used for rough areas, while greens, approaches and tees are all hand cut.

When I stepped off the plane last June, it was smack bang in the middle of a drought. Temperatures were in the high 90s and a million gallons of water were being pushed out each night. You could say this had me shocked! However, after I had endured multiple sunburns and completed an

impressive rain dance, I faced devastation as total flood prevailed this spring. Great times! It was at this point I began to grasp a better understanding for the unpredictable weather here.

Desert versus jungle would be the best way to describe the harsh environment, as the temperature and humidity fluctuate so much. Pop up rainstorms and adverse winds can also prove challenging. This is where the problems really start. Combining so many different types of weather within a certain day can become very problematic, as each one has so many variables. This in turn requires a day-to-day management style, which is frustrating at times with goals to achieve. If we could control the weather, we would go through the tournament relatively worry-free.

In this climate, disease pressure is huge. For example, there can be multiple days where Pythium, Dollar spot and Brown patch could all be active on the same turf. Although many of the diseases found here are somewhat culturally controlled, a preventative fungicide programme is in place every year to ensure good plant health. Very few clubs can deal with the cost of managing Bentgrass in this climate simply because of this relentless disease pressure. The main tactic here, to help keep disease at bay, is ensuring that you have good control over your water and nutrient applications. Trying to be a bit shy on both as it is much easier to add than is to subtract.

Major renovations have been underway for the last three years in preparation for the tournament this year. The crew had the mentality of training for marathon rather than a sprint. Along the way, there have been some interesting developments. 7,560 yards will be the outcome if the course is



Course Renovation

played to its full potential. Not hard enough? An additional 35 bunkers have also been added taking the course total to 62. The removal of 8,000 trees was critical in providing spectators a clear view of multiple holes, also allowing for tent pads to be extended and easily accessible. One of the biggest challenges during this renovation period was trying to maintain a Grade A golf course while under construction since there were so many other projects going on.

#### Five of the holes have been totally redesigned...

The 6th has been lengthened 80 yards, now measuring a whopping 500 yards and is the hardest hole on the course. Without doubt will become a key-hole this month.

The 7th is a definite risk and reward approach. Featuring a split fairway separated by a new water feature, this par-5, measuring 601 yards, is expected to become a focal point on the course.

Two par-3s have also been redesigned. The 8th has been extended 25 yards and has adopted an extremely challenging six tier green that allows for some interesting pin positions. Additionally, the 11th has been completely rebuilt during the renovation. The green has moved back approximately 30 yards and now sits on the edge of a hillside- left of the previous green.

A new waterfall has also been added to the signature 13th hole - a short par-4. This island green may be in reach as the PGA is now considering allowing the players to use the closer tees. This really could create an interesting strategy: grip it, rip it, and hope it stops!

The 16th hole is the longest of the par-4s coming in at an impressive 511 yards. This tree lined, dogleg right is guarded by two recently added central bunkers.

Following the Captains' visit last September, an interesting situation arose. Since input from them carries such great weight, we were eagerly awaiting their comments. However, much to our dismay, they thought that the newly-designed greens that were recently built were now too severe! And you can guess what that meant... Yes, we had to start over! Tough to swallow is not

the words, but it was a turning point.

Constant changes were made throughout. The 11th green was rebuilt five times causing a new spin on the word persistence, which was followed by the "No Problems. Only Solutions" approach. Perhaps the tweaking got a bit out of control, one might say.

As a result the greens were turfed last November, meaning that we came through the winter and into the growing season with a lot of young grass, which in this climate has been a real challenge. Now aiming to get them to tournament specifications we still have a great deal to achieve.

The Ryder Cup is indeed bigger than big, so how do you prepare yourself for the biggest? Henry Ford once said, "Nothing is particularly hard if you divide it into small jobs." This is the mindset that Superintendent, Mark Wilson, has adopted and implemented at Valhalla..

The golf course is split into six zones, each with three holes. A zone leader is appointed for each and is responsible for ensuring that every last detail is taken care of on every hole, including the other workers that help tend to that zone.

I was fortunate enough to become a zone leader this year. Although, this management style was new to me, I can now see the benefits of its use first hand. It allows individuals to develop their own skills and their own way of thinking. Essentially giving you your own small golf course where you manage projects, prioritise, and delegate day-to-day goals and tasks. I am enjoying this position as I have been able to accomplish a number of goals I set myself and improve the skills I wanted to. Now assessing and approaching my work differently I can feel a development within myself.

Here's the secret plan! The golf course will be set up to reward the bigger hitters (apparently that's the Americans). Azinger and Wilson have worked closely together insuring the most is made of the home course advantage. Intermediate cuts have been made wider in the landing areas so that the Americans can hit bigger and not get penalised for it. Potentially this means they would have shorter shots into the greens making it a birdie-fest. With long rough surrounding the greens, they are hoping to ruin the Europeans well rounded short game. Don't worry guys this is all getting reported back to this year's captain, Nick Faldo.

During the tournament the crew will temporarily employ 80 additional staff members to take the total to 120. A large percentage of them are former employees, although we do have a few guys coming over to help me out with some European support.

The demands of a tournament of this scale are a huge challenge for everyone involved and the pressure will be on this month. It will be a huge effort on everyone's part. For me this has been as much a career challenge as a personal challenge. Dealing with the language barrier alone has been interesting. Nonetheless, I have found that the more I remove myself from my comfort zone the better I become. Being a part of this whole experience has really shown me how a passion for turf and a love for the game can bring people and nations together. Enjoy your Ryder Cup, I will.



Josh Webber with Superintendent Mark Wilson