

# It's Tourney Time!

## The Merit Club prepares to host Chicagoland's first women's Major in nearly 20 years.

*Less than one year ago, Medinah Country Club and superintendent Dan Quast hosted the "Last Major of the Millennium," the 1999 PGA Championship, which concluded with an exciting battle between Tiger Woods and young Spaniard Sergio Garcia. This month, Chicago-area golf fans will relish the thrills of another Major as The Merit Club and Oscar Miles, CGCS, welcome the 2000 U.S. Women's Open.*



*On May 18, The Merit Club tallied 3.5" of rain in two hours. Oscar reports run-off was excellent, but major problems reconditioning washed-out sand bunkers. Says Oscar, "We used this problem to train grounds care crew what could happen and what we would do!"*

"On the men's circuit, the question has long been which Major is the Major? But there is no question that the U.S. Women's Open is the premier tournament in women's golf," says Ed Oldfield, president of The Merit Club.

The international field competing for the \$2.75 million purse—the largest in the ladies game—will include defending champion Juli Inkster (now seen frequently in Subaru commercials); luminaries like Nancy Lopez and Pat Bradley; and top players such as Se Ri Pak, Karrie Webb, Annika Sorenstam, Laura Davies, Betsy King, Patty Sheehan, Meg Mallon and Beth Daniel.

Nearly 20 years have passed since a women's championship event graced Chicagoland (think back to 1981's Open at LaGrange C.C.). During the intervening decades, women's sports have surged in popularity, and ladies golf is no exception. Tournament officials for the 2000 U.S. Women's Open Championship expect more than 125,000 enthusiastic golf fans to watch the world's best women compete at the breathtaking Merit Club the week of July 17-23; ESPN (Thursday/Friday) and NBC (Saturday/Sunday) will broadcast the event to millions of armchair fans worldwide.

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## Setting the stage

Preparing for the Open has been a lengthy, painstaking and arduous process. The story begins in 1992, when The Merit Club's full 18 holes opened for play. That year and the following year, USGA officials visited, expressing interest in hosting a Major Cham-

"The course will bring out the best in the world's best," notes Mary Capouch, chair of the USGA Women's Committee.

Yet as Oscar tells it, today's Merit Club has evolved since its premiere in 1992, when the USGA first expressed interest.



*In anticipation of the Open, staff installed a road for the catering company and expanded the west practice tee. Following a March 10 seeding, Oscar and crew covered the tee with plastic to create a greenhouse effect. They mowed the grass April 10 and opened the tee for member practice June 17.*

pionship at the acclaimed new course. Subsequently, owner and founder Bert Getz extended a formal invitation, and in 1994, the USGA and The Merit Club entered into an agreement that the venue would host the 2000 U.S. Women's Open.

Seldom does the USGA award a tournament of such magnitude to such a young golf course, but The Merit Club itself and its desirable location—accessible to both the Chicago and Milwaukee markets—were an irresistible combination. In fact, when the USGA visited in fall of 1998 to initialize course set-up, officials recommended zero changes to the course prior to the tournament, another rarity, says Oscar. In other words, the USGA felt the course was challenging and fair as is—Oscar and staff faced no mandates to add or subtract bunkers, length or add trees, as is often the case.

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“Course conditions in 1992 were quite different from today,” says Oscar. “Our putting green heights of cut were higher and less stressful. In the last eight years, for instance, with the emphasis from players on green speed, we have gone from a 108” ball-roll distance for members’ tournament play up to 120”. USGA Championship agronomist, Tim Moraghan, has requested that we maintain Stimp ball-roll speeds of 120-132” during the week of the Championship. We have fairly aggressive PennLinks greens. We control the nitrogen percentage in the plant at 4.75 to 4% and use plant growth regulators to control the daily leaf extension so the greens putt the same from morning till evening. The bentgrass tends to grow sideways rather than vertically. However, this promotes more grain development and thatch problems. We’ve had to do more core aeration, sand topdressing, brushing and grooming to keep the putting surfaces free of ‘grain’ and the surface thatch open for exchange of air, gases, water and nutrients.”

During the past three years, the grounds staff has also begun walker mowing of the Penncross tees, in place of triplex cutting, for a more attractive, smoother finish.

The landscape surrounds, with their colorful palette of prairie grasses and wildflowers, have been a 10-year work in progress. “We were one of the first modern designed

golf courses to try to blend together wetlands, woods and prairie surrounds of each hole into a harmonious, natural-appearing setting,” Oscar notes. “Based on research, then trial-and-error, we took a basic list of planting materials, then learned what would work best for different holes, under varying topography, soil types and sun exposure and began adjustments. We’ve been redoing approximately two acres of prairies per year to more native prairie grasses and wildflowers. A good example of this is the prairie done over a three-year period behind the #12 green.”

### Coordinating every detail

A veteran of 12 Western Opens, 10 at Butler National in the ’80s and two at Olympia Fields in 1968 and 1971, Oscar relates that the upcoming Open has been several years in the planning. The in-house staff have completed special projects, such as striping and resodding the fairway and green bluegrass surrounds (eight acres total) and expanding the practice tee facility at the west end of the driving range.

“The pressure builds month by month, year by year,” Oscar says. “It really hits home the winter prior to the Championship. All the media attention and publicity starts to motivate you into a state of focused tension.”

Over the winter, explains Oscar, the tournament budget

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Prairieloak tree planting re-do on #2 necessitated preparing the rough.



Making room for skyboxes and bleachers around #18 green required moving 12 trees to new sites. Here, a 90” tree spade sets up to take a plug from the lawn for transplanting a ginkgo tree.



was finalized, creating one more pressure point. The winter maintenance staff implemented a schedule to have all equipment ready to go by March 1 (although, notes Oscar, this does not preclude the eventual need for replacements, rentals or loaners during the tourney). "Once the frost gets out of the ground in the spring you're off and running," Oscar says. At that point, rather than dictating an itinerary to his team, Oscar assembled the leadership staff and interns to plan out the next five months. By enlisting the group's involvement and taking the opportunity to educate them on the whys and wherefores, Oscar ensures that he receives important input and that employees "buy into the plan." He explains how the process unfolds. "First I go to the week of the Championship and block that out (hopefully this week will be strictly grooming and course conditioning for the Open). Working backwards with a club event calendar in hand, we then program our activities around preparing the course for the Championship while accounting for important membership dates."

"Only three or four times per year can you 'peak' your golf course," adds Oscar. "We need to try to hit the top of the curve in July and then arrange other peaks based on membership needs and related activities like Media Day back on May 15."

The result of this programming session is a large and elaborate, color-coded calendar of the months leading up to the Open. While weather conditions and external factors may prompt minor modifications to the plan, the blueprint is in place. During early spring, staff initiated normal course maintenance practices, conditioning the course for opening day (the first Saturday in

April) and regular play. As May approached, staff began readying for the Championship and completed special projects such as creating and beautifying concession areas on the golf course and preparing accommodations for NBC. (Not incidentally, NBC trailers will reside in close proximity to the maintenance buildings; "an excellent opportunity," says Oscar, "for the TV people to witness firsthand the importance of the golf course crew.")



Here, the grounds crew takes a highway pier crawler across #18 fairway to the site of the "Monster Board."

Also notable during May, USGA officials visited the week of May 22 to set up the course for the Championship and provided Oscar with a cup location map of each green. Just after Memorial Day, NBC sent a ShowCopter and film crew to shoot aerial footage of holes three through 18.


### Preparing the playing field

Ever the scientist, Oscar points to 30 years of soil temperature data he has collected and observes, "We can correlate soil temperatures and potential grass stress and disease problems this way. In the Chicago area, July 4-15 is the time when grass is most susceptible to root loss. We have to be really cautious of what we do during this timeframe just preceding the Open."

July, then, becomes a balancing act as staff refines the course for the tournament, managing the turf around its growth cycle and keeping in mind that hot, humid and/or wet conditions may stress the turf and its root system just prior to the event.

Oscar and his staff are up to the challenge. "There's no better superintendent in the business [than Oscar]," states the USGA's Kendra Graham. Moreover, Oscar

has surrounded himself with staff who share his passion for excellence. During the week of the Open, first assistant superintendent John Nelson will cover the back nine, while second assistant Chris Blake takes the front nine; foreman Enrique Valadez will supervise the crew on the entire 18.

Then there is another team member, Oscar's wife Mardelle, whom he credits for patience and moral support. "She puts up with me and the long hours," says Oscar. Long hours, of course, is probably understating the case. Come tournament week, however, the golf world's eyes will be on The Merit Club—Oscar and company of staff and volunteers will be ready. 

September: Tourney wrap-up.