

## FEATURE ARTICLE

Paul Vermeulen, PGA Tour

# Special Events Require Special Considerations



**The key components for making a special event special are proper scheduling, rigorous course preparations, and appropriate budgeting.**

*While a number of golfers would never admit it, somewhere deep down inside they want their course to be in peak tournament condition every time they have the opportunity to tee it up. After all, it seems perfectly logical that, if the superintendent can get the course in peak condition for the club championship in mid-June, he or she ought to be able to sustain the effort all year long. Suffice it to say, more than one green committee chairman has had to learn the hard way that the seduction of this logic is often the shortest path to an unhappy future.*

From a scheduling perspective, all turfgrasses must be in optimum health in order for the superintendent to produce peak tournament conditions. For cool-season species, such as Kentucky bluegrass, *Poa annua*, and creeping bentgrass, optimum health coincides with specific periods when daytime temperatures are in the upper 60s to mid-80s and nighttime temperatures are in the mid-40s to upper 50s. When temperatures are either too cold or too hot, the growth of cool-season turfgrasses is unavoidably subdued and so is the potential for sustaining fast putting green speeds.

It is important to recognize the relationship between temperature and the rate of turfgrass growth, since producing optimal playing conditions requires a variety of maintenance practices that cause some degree of turfgrass abrasion. These practices include frequent mowing at low cutting heights to

produce ideal ball roll, vertical mowing to eliminate grain, and topdressing to create a smooth surface. To tolerate abrasive maintenance practices and avoid irreparable thinning, the turf has to be growing vigorously so that damaged foliage is replaced. This being the case, the first key component for hosting a special event is to select a date when the odds are favorable for good weather and turf growth. In the Chicago area, the optimum time for scheduling special events tends to be late spring/early summer and late summer/early fall.

Having determined a proper date for a special event, preparing the course by implementing a rigorous maintenance plan requires a coordinated effort by all parties. Depending on the circumstances, these parties can include but may not be limited to club staff, the board of directors, corporate leadership, the golf committee, and the green committee.





Regardless of who is involved, the first step is to establish appropriate guidelines for course preparation.

While some people are convinced that the only guideline for tournament play is to turn off the irrigation system so that the greens become firm and fast; those who must actually shoulder the responsibility soon realize that naive slogans are no substitute for in-depth analysis and detailed planning. While it is true that firm greens with a high Stimpmeter reading can be ideal for some tournaments, exactly how firm and how fast are critical details.

For the very best players competing in the U. S. Open, greens that are firm enough to discourage lob shots at the base of the flagstick and fast enough to add enormous break to a long putt are highly appropriate. Can the same be said for the Club Championship at a typical Midwestern golf course? Probably not, since even the firmness and speed of the greens on the PGA Tour varies considerably tournament to tournament and is dependent on how the greens were constructed, turf species, prevailing weather conditions, availability of principle resources, and design of the course.

When developing guidelines for tournament preparation, each part of the course should be evaluated. Starting with the greens, most superintendents provide consistent Stimpmeter readings in the range of 9'6" to 10'0". Generally, this range allows the superintendent to sustain healthy turf conditions and utilize six or more hole locations per green for daily play. For special events, such as the Club Championship, increasing the Stimpmeter reading by as much as a foot is, in all probability, a realistic goal. It should also be noted that the Stimpmeter reading should be consistent from green to green and from the first day to the last day of competition.

Weather and soil type permitting, greens should be firm, but not overly hard. To achieve this goal over the span of several days usually requires intensive hand watering ahead of the first group and immediately after the last group of the day. This necessity can be costly, as the most experienced staff members are needed to recognize areas that will dry out and therefore require added attention. To prevent severe wilting and subsequent turf loss, watering with the

irrigation system and/or hand watering between groups should be done without hesitation.

To help maintain the greens at a prudent moisture level, several types of electronic probes can be useful given uniform, sand-based construction. Also, the use of wetting agents via spray or hose-end application will promote a more even water infiltration and reduce dew formation.

In regard to fertilizing, mowing, topdressing, brushing, vertical mowing, and the use of growth regulators, each superintendent must develop a schedule that produces the desired ball roll without too much physical damage. Sounds easy or does it? Not really, because the results of each practice have to produce a simultaneous and synergistic effect during tournament week, not the week before or the week after. By comparing notes with superintendents across the country who host events for one or more of the three Tours, one will quickly discover that there is no 'one size fits all' program that guarantees success.

In addition to scheduling practices that have a direct impact on putting conditions during the week of a special event, thought must also be given to disruptive practices that are essential to the long-term health of the turf. The best example of a disruptive practice is aeration when it is performed with large, hollow or solid tines. Ideally, the date for completing aeration should be set well in advance of a tournament so as to ensure that the turf will be fully recovered.

To help make certain that nothing is overlooked, it is always good to write down a list of final course preparations that will require attention in the days and weeks leading up to a special event. Details, such as preserving the best hole locations two weeks before the event, leveling greenside sprinkler heads to avoid unnecessary rulings, replacing high and low hole plugs, and training an employee to paint the rim of the hole, can make a significant difference in the overall perception of an event and how well it proceeds.

Once a sound strategy has been developed for preparing the greens, doing the same for the tees, approaches, fairways and rough should be fairly straightforward. As in the case of

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the greens, the underlying theme of consistency is important in producing equitable playing conditions. This theme should also carry over to the bunkers, where too much time is spent creating hazard-free playing conditions. Bunkers are simply hazards where a golfer should anticipate a challenging situation; one that is similar for anyone who hits a shot off line. If designed and built in a consistent manner, then a quick once over with a machine or leaf rake should allow the competition to move forward without delay.

Whether at the professional or amateur level, every special event requires proper golf course marking. Similarly, any plan for a special event absent course marking should be considered incomplete. Fortunately, there is a regional golf association in every part of the country that can provide assistance, albeit they require plenty of advance notice when an on-site visit is necessary.

Given the many special considerations that are required to host a major tournament on a club's calendar, it should hardly be surprising that appropriate funds are needed in the annual budget to get everything accomplished. Albeit, if it is hardly surprising, why is it so rare to find a line item in the annual budget for tournament preparations? The answer is probably related to the fact that most golfers believe that little is required to get a course tournament ready. That said, maybe putting together a detailed tournament plan and adding the cost to the annual budget is a good way to drive home the message that a special event requires special considerations. **-OC**

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