

FEATURE

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U.S. Loses Ryder Cup; Tyrrell, Crew, Medinah, Chicago, and Golf Win



Curtis Tyrrell addressed the staff and volunteers each morning before the operation began.

Certainly there are some that would like to erase the memory of the 2012 Ryder Cup, as Americans we know who those people are. But for the Europeans, and golf itself, the Ryder Cup was delightful. I encountered more than one person who explained to me how glued to their TVs they were on Sunday, claiming it was the most exciting sporting event they have ever seen. The most curious part of this is that they never watch golf. That makes the loss a little easier to bear, especially when I joked with European volunteers on Saturday night of the tournament week that the event was pretty much over for them. All both sides hoped for was a couple of early European wins on Sunday to keep the crowd and world somewhat interested in the event. When it was all said and done, I didn't feel bad the American team lost, because golf won bigger than anyone could have imagined, planned, or expected, and it happened in our front yard, conducted by one of our own Curtis Tyrrell, CGCS MG.

I'm an early bird and that was reinforced tournament week with my arising each morning around 3:30 a.m. to make the 5:00 a.m. starting time at the grounds department. I have to say I never had problems popping out of bed. Curtis had over a hundred volunteers, the majority of positions filled by Midwest members, a small contingent of Europeans, and a group of students from Penn State. We were all impressed

with our uniforms, three different colored shirts that rotated depending on the day of the week, (one of my larger stress issues each morning, what color shirt was I supposed to wear today?), a really nice rain suit and a black hat. All were instructed to wear khaki colored pants and show up on time for your slated slot(s).

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Each morning and afternoon the managers met and discussed the plan for the coming maintenance, tweaking it in the process. The whiteboard behind Curtis read "Congrats! We made it. HAVE FUN but focus."



Each morning the teams assembled together in the maintenance compound and learned their tasks for their coming shift.





Moving around the course sometimes proved difficult for the maintenance crew once the crowds were let into the gates.



The maintenance crew drove in together after morning set up to avoid the crowds and keep noise to a minimum once TV coverage began.

Curtis created a team and not only led it, but took charge by setting an example that all wanted to follow. His team consisted of his Superintendents, Jim Wallace, Jake Mendoza and Ross Laubscher and his Equipment Manager Paul Barousse. Other key employees, included his Assistants Dane Wilson, Ryan Cummings, Justin Gladhill, Chris Funke, and Admin Assistant Carrie Kirchway who all took direction and ran with it. Certainly his team was rounded out by his other 80 employees or so bringing the total of bodies to nearly 200. It reminded me of a head coach of an NFL team. Curtis started each morning with a prayer and then a pep talk to get the troops going. He followed these by introducing a well thought and calculated game plan leaving room to call audibles along the way to deal with the unknown. It could certainly be compared to a symphony of sorts, but I have no idea what a composer has to do to prepare for a symphony.

Every staff member and volunteer was put on one of fifteen teams. Each team was responsible for some type of process on several holes each morning, afternoon or evening. For example, Jim Wallace's hole set up team (one of three) started on 13 green each morning. They took care of the dew whipping, green mowing, hand raking of bunkers, blowing and rolling of the green, hole setting, watering (bluegrass and green if needed). On a side note, each green was probed with a TDI meter for moisture levels and hand watered if needed. Jim started on 13 because of the layout of the course and

the noise produced by the crews. It was all set, so when the players teed off on one, they'd be far away from the action.

There were six mowing teams that took care of tees, fairways, surrounds, and some areas in the rough. Other teams filled divots, dew whipped, raked fairway bunkers, and blew and raked leaves (yes, the leaves started to fall thanks to a couple of hard frosts the prior week.) Two of the other teams took care of the putting green and driving range. In the evening, bunkers were fly-mowed, surrounds hand mowed, the rough cut. I was there late on Friday, away from any fans and hubbub and the peace that each of you find on your course that time of day was even there as the sun set and chill fell.

All in all, the volunteers did the majority of what I would deem low-level tasks, not unimportant but let's just say we all knew we were there for any trouble that may come in the form of inclement weather. Curtis' staff had been running the drill weeks prior and had it dialed in by the time the event rolled around. Hole set up was documented to the minute and calculated by the proximity of play. Those volunteers that got in the groove made an impact with bunker raking, filling divots, dew whipping, blowing clippings picked up by the greens rollers, and in general a lot of standing around talking about the process that was going on and how tight the place looked. If you ask the leaders, we did make a little difference in the timing by speeding up the process. Curtis took the time to create an intricate schedule rotation for each of the volunteers. He set it up so each saw most of the golf course,

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A retrofitted walking greensmower with brush combed the collars to create a difference in color of turf so the players could discern when they were on the putting surface.



The evening shifts consisted of fly-mowing bunker surrounds, leaf clean up and touch up work.





Leaf clean up became an issue with the early hard frosts in September and crews were sent out to get them out of play.



Superintendents Ross Laubscher and Jim Wallace look over the set up on a putting green as fans pick their spots to wait for play.

working on a different set of holes with each shift, and even doing different tasks throughout the week. This attention to detail was appreciated by all the volunteers and kept each one of us fresh, motivated, and curious to see what we would be doing the following shift.

After set up on a hole was complete, the last step in the process was a walk through by either Curtis or Ross, or sometimes both of them. With their trained eyes, they would make sure everything was correct before turning the hole over to play. Once this occurred, the crew was cut loose to start on their next hole or head back in for rest. Each morning, the crew congregated by the 16th hole and headed in as a group down Medinah Road. The last hole set up was 15 as play had already begun. There was no way to get the crew through the course back to maintenance facility other than down the street. Standing, watching the crew come past, gave insight to the scale of the event. Over 80 vehicles caravanned down the Medinah Road past the pointing fans who were waiting to get through the main gate.

Looking back, this was another item that was different at the Ryder Cup from other events that I've worked. Because of the schedule of play and the limited number of viewing sites, it was very common for us to be doing course set up each morning in front of fans as they camped out, sometimes hours prior to play. I noticed many of them became excited to see the crew, often pointing at each process that took place. They were interested in seeing the crew mow the greens, and the skills demonstrated especially when changing direction on

the turning mats. The fans were intrigued by the rollers and could only guess what the staff was measuring with the TDI meters. I suppose if one was wearing really good set of noise cancelling headphones and listening to Bach or Beethoven, the work was like a symphony. Each task could be put to music as everything was measured and calculated (even the volunteers leaning on their rakes and shifting their weight to the other side) ending in a quiet exit underneath the ropes. The whole process allowed the fans, often the golfers that support our profession, the opportunity to see what gets done not only for a tournament, but everyday at their own places of play many hours before they arrive. It was an added benefit that lets the public see the expertise and talent of our profession.

One audible that was incorporated into the daily routine was to brush the collars each morning. After the first practice round, the players commented they were having trouble seeing the difference between green and collar. The mowing height between collar and green height is not that much different on Course 3. Because a golfer can mark and lift their ball on the green, not on the collar, something needed to be done to delineate between the two. I thought for sure they were just being overly sensitive, but after looking at a collar or two, it was tough to see the difference. Curtis and crew knew the solution and it implemented as one of the last items accomplished after green complex set up; each collar was brushed with retrofitted mower to create a contrast between collar and green. It worked perfectly.

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The putting surfaces got a quick shot of water if needed after everything was set. It was nice to have enough staff around so the hose didn't drag across the putting surface after it was mowed and rolled and ready for play.



When the Stimpmeter came out, everyone took notice like the group of volunteer marshals behind the green.



Medinah staff member Victor Garcia, prepares his cup cutter with care in the early morning.



The Stimpmeter drew a lot of attention. I often laughed every time the Stimpmeter was used; those in the crowd (usually the marshals and other volunteers) took immediate notice and wanted to know what they were rolling. Fast and true was the answer quickly given, and those that knew the meter is three feet long saw it flip comfortably 4.5 times could do the math, I think.

It is hard to describe the enormity of the event. Each day I traveled around the course and property, there was always something new that I saw that I didn't think about before that had to be planned, managed, set-up or maintained. There were 43.5 acres of temporary roof provided by the villas, tents and other structures (A new PGA record). The first course I managed was only slightly larger than that, and that includes the parking lot! There were over 23,000 stakes and other implements driven into the ground since June. Only 18 times did something get hit, kudos to Jake Mendoza for his coordinating this underground feat. There were grandstands on 11 holes, stakes, ropes, waste receptacles, first aid stations, portable toilets (players' are much nicer than the common folks), portable cell towers, generators, cables, cranes, cameras and more cameras. Sky TV (Euro TV's coverage) telecast the event in 3D and duplicated NBC's/ESPN's cameras, all in all there were over 60 TV towers. Those were the things I saw on the course, behind the scenes there was so much more. By far, this was the biggest build the PGA had ever done for one event.

Crowds were estimated at over 40,000 each day. Ryder Cup spectator golf is different than other golf tournaments; there is a lot of waiting to see golf. Those who had multiple day tickets learned the best place to camp out was as close to the ropes as they could find and in sight of one of the many large TV monitors and not too far from the beer vendors and portable toilets. For all, the payoff was worth it, when the players come through and the throng that followed. Some of the villas didn't look too bad for viewing either with their array of drinks, food and flat panel TVs.

Each morning started out as everyday for the main crew at Medinah CC with a manager's meeting in the conference room. As any great leader, Curtis used this time to listen to the guys on the ground and make tweaks to the battle plan as a team. From there it was off to the tent where the volunteers and crew assembled awaiting directions. On the first day of play, during the morning meeting, Curtis thanked

his leaders for working so hard up to this point and gave them all the credit for the course the world now say. He explained he had often thought over the past five years of what he would say to the larger group had just one word and that was an emotional and genuine "Thank you." He then got the group pumped up with all joining in a "USA, USA, USA" chant. It's been a long road for the staff and crew at Medinah, starting five years ago when Curtis landed the superintendent role. Not many will know the real extent of the event, but that's what happens when someone in the lead leads.

Curtis and crew finally caught a break. The weather that week was perfect for any outdoor activity, let alone a consecutive 3-day event in front of the world. The Americans lost all right; but golf won, and Chicago golf won even greater. This was my fourth go-round volunteering at a major golf event. It is a great place to be, inside the ropes being part of the team – that's how everyone felt, no matter what task he or she did each day. The golf community came together for golf's biggest show.

As David Feherty put it before the first ball was even struck, "The Ryder Cup is the greatest event in golf." He went on to explain, "Davis (Love) has not only set up the course for the players but set it up for the crowd, as much as the players." Feherty likes the crowd at the Ryder Cup because collectively it is a bit like him. He explained, "they (the fans) are not to be quiet, not to be partisan, we are going to see a lot of birdies, a lot of great shots, as well as a lot of awful shots, some of the most awful shots you've ever seen, because that's what the Ryder Cup does." I think he nailed it; there was some really great golf and some really bad golf, but just not what the USA expected.

When we experience something inside the ropes, our outlook changes. We are in the know to an extent and that is what makes life interesting. In the weeks following the Ryder Cup, I can't tell you how many conversations I had with golfers and non-golfers alike about the event. In fact, people still ask me about it and want me to share my experience with them. I am thankful for the experience that I had, and I know it didn't even put a nick in the surface of all that truly went on for the past two years leading up to the event. I'm grateful to have been a part of it. **-OC**

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