

# Growing Grass WAY up North

PHOTO CREDITS: MARTY BAUMANN

Marty Baumann, *Anchorage Golf Course*

Do you use Eskimos for caddies? Is your clubhouse made of ice like an igloo? Do you use snowshoes instead of spikes on the course? The idea of managing a golf course in Alaska inevitably elicits these sorts of amusing queries from those who have never visited the state.



*Marty Baumann can trace some of his roots to the Midwest and he still supports the Cubs.*

The realities of managing the Anchorage Golf Course, however, are as unique and challenging as this great state.

Anchorage is a modern city of approximately 320,000 people that sits on the Cook Inlet. It is 100 miles north of the Pacific Ocean at about 60 degrees latitude (for reference, Chicago is around 42 degrees latitude).

The weather is similar to Northern Wisconsin or the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Alaska is two and a half times larger than Texas. It has state

parks larger than Rhode Island and Delaware. Alaska's national parks are even larger. Anchorage is home to four 18-hole facilities that serve the local community, the military, tourists, and Alaskans from bush communities. Between May and September 2012, an estimated 1,586,600 tourists came to Alaska, primarily to and through Anchorage. Additionally, many Alaskans who live outside of Anchorage come here for shopping, doctor's appointments, or for recreational and leisure activities. Anchorage residents who are employees of the oil and gas companies typically work in two-week, rotating shifts, leaving them lots of free time while 'off the slope.' The Anchorage Golf Course welcomes out-of-towners, slope workers, tourists, and locals.

Anchorage's golf season runs from the first week of May through the end of October. In order to open the course as early as possible, the covers are removed from the greens when soil temps rise high enough for the bent grass to actively grow. This allows for earlier play on temporary greens. Besides bent grass greens, we have a blend of Kentucky Bluegrass/Ryegrass fairways,

decks, collars and tees and primarily fescue roughs. The course was cut directly out of a boreal forest and is hilly and tight. We play at 6,005 yards at the white tees and 6,650 yards from the tips.

That's where the similarities to what I am used to end! We have very long days in the summer. In June and July, it never really gets completely dark at night. The sun rises in the north about 3:00 a.m. and sets in the north about 12:30 a.m. And yes, there are golfers at the gate before 4:00 a.m. every day wanting to play! Now, it's great to be able to have three full shotguns in a day in the summer, but it makes mowing and irrigating very difficult.

We budget for 10,000 rounds in June and July and another 9,000 in August to get us the bulk of our 35,000 rounds a season in just three months. Needless to say, I am here every day throughout that stretch.

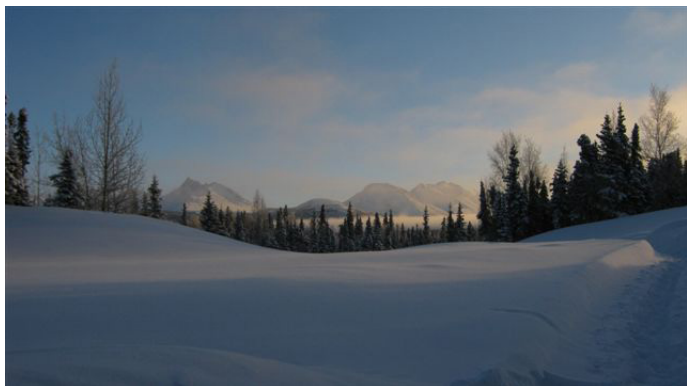
The stuff that's called soil here is a real challenge. There is no clay in our soil. Instead, we have glacial silt. It's composed of small, clay-like particles, but packs even tighter, and does not have the same properties as clay for percolation and exchange rates. The sand here is grey and black, and not available in mixes, as it is in the lower 48. Our bunkers get hard and packed down fast. We need to handle our soil nutrients and fertilization dif-



ferently to make them effective. The soil temps are lower. Below the 12-inch depth, the ground never really warms up, so organic material in the soil breaks down very slowly!

And then there is the wildlife! Moose are cool to see, but they poop everywhere,

they drag their feet across the greens and they are dangerous. How do you move an animal that stands 8 feet tall and tips the scales at 1,500 pounds if it does not want to move? I also have two black bears that live on the course. One is a sow that has cubs every year, and one is a two year old, who has made his home behind my 15th tee. Fun times!



*This is how most think of golf in Alaska*

Some things are very different in a good way. There are virtually no insects that affect grass. Sports turf grasses are not native, so there are no real insect pests. I deal with some anthracnose and dollar spot in the summer, but very little. The big issue is snow mold. Go figure that! It can wipe out the whole course every winter if I don't spray for it. And I do spray— everything but deep rough—spending over \$10,000 on fungicides just for snow mold protection!



*Nice backdrop for a driving range.*

The rest is mostly the same...we use JD walking mowers on our greens, and triplex our tees, decks, and collars. We use lightweight fairway mowers and rotary rough mowers. I have an irrigation specialist and a horticulturist as well as a full-time assistant.

Last, but not least, are my customers. We have a loyal following of Anchorage residents. A Monday, Thursday, and Friday night Men's league and a Tuesday and Thursday night Women's league are among the folks we call our regulars. We have up to 60 part and full shotguns a season. About half are for char-



*Marty begins his day 2:30 a.m., just as the sun sets.*

ity events and half are company events. The Alaska Korean Golf Association is also big here. But tourism is bigger! We get lots of visitors from the Far East—Japan, China, and Korea—who play LOTS of golf here. We have many cruise ships that come here, and lots of people want to play a round in Alaska when they drop anchor in Anchorage.

Then there are the people who want to play 100 holes in one day. With our number of rounds, it's hard to do in less than 16 hours. When you have 22 hours of sunlight in June and July, it isn't uncommon to have someone make a reservation and play through other groups to get their 100 holes in!

And everyone wants to play golf at midnight, or all night long. We don't have any days when it's light all night—you'd have to travel 430 miles north, to Fairbanks, for that. But, with a glow-in-the-dark golf ball and a fore caddy, you can play all night, because dark in late June is really only a couple of hours of dusk.

So, that's golf in Alaska. I try to bring standards from the industry in the lower 48 to a place where expectations can be different. As a result, I have seen our rounds and share of the local play grow.



*Don't veer too far off the fairways, it gets thick very quickly.*

Aside from the unique challenges of managing a golf course here, the number one reason I love it is that Alaska is BEAUTIFUL! If luck is on my side, I'm certain that this will be my last golf course, and my last home! If you're ever in the neighborhood, stop on by! ☺