



Musings from the US Open

Dr. Ed Nangle, CDGA

I encountered a week of dust, heat, and dry conditions while volunteering at the US Open at Pinehurst Country Club in North Carolina. The tournament is one of the four majors in men’s professional golf and was hotly anticipated for two reasons.

Restoration architects Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore put the course back as close to its original layout and condition as designed by Donald Ross in 1907. They accomplished this using archival images from neighboring Fort Bragg taken in 1930s onward. They were able to peel back the layers of changes and to return the course to its original style. The style encompassed very little rough and bunkering, simple, like nature. The other intriguing aspect was visible intent of the USGA to dry the course down and really firm the conditions up. Now that the tournament is over, the unintended impact has become the discussion about the how brown the course looked. Its playability was unaffected by these changes as Martin Kaymer proved and overall scoring was similar to other



It was tough to tell from the front of the house what the backyard looked like: the USGA liked to think brown is better and at least tougher.



Changing the mindset of golf, one brown blade at a time.

Opens. Was the USGA trying to change the mindset of their audience about the color of golf? Perhaps. One fact remains, Pinehurst conserved 40 million gallons of water, only irrigating via a single row system.

The water reduction happened because of two factors; the lack of fear of brown turf and not irrigating any rough. We must remember that it’s a lot easier to cut water with bermudagrass than with our cool season grasses. There is little fear losing a bermudagrass fairway in extreme heat. The bentgrass greens will be converted to an ultra dwarf cultivar of bermudagrass after both Opens (Men’s and Women’s) so expect to hear of even greater water savings at Pinehurst. One can hope the benefits that may land on our lap will include greater tolerance of brown fairways and some reductions in mowing all rough areas. From an environmental and budget management standpoint, these changes are welcome. From a playability standpoint I don’t remember any complaints of plugged balls in wet fairways. I’ve recapped my experience by days:

Day One (Sunday)

After meetings and introductions, credentials were handed out and directions to the parking lots were explained. The "Barn" was an impressive site. It had ping-pong and pool tables and hammocks were strung throughout. Knowing that the first three days were a test run, people were excited but somewhat relaxed about what lie ahead. The course was in excellent condition; most felt we would just be cleaning it up to prepare it for the following days to come.

Day Two (Monday)

Temperatures were a balmy 67°F at our 4:30 a.m. start and it didn't get much cooler all week. Those mowing greens were assigned partners to move turning boards and whip areas that needed it. Greens were mowed twice that morning followed by a roll to really firm them up and add speed. Every area on the course received some form of attention; bunkers were checked and cleaned, crews blew fairways and surrounds to clear pine needles and other debris that happened to be out of place. Moisture and green speeds were measured to ensure the turtle back greens were not too fast. The evening shift consisted of a single mow and only some greens were rolled to bring them all to consistent speeds. The one issue that no one could escape was the amount of dust in the air. They drying down of the course and the fact there was very little rainfall in the previous six weeks made the dust conspicuous.

Day Three (Tuesday)

The issue that arose had to do with the delineation of the bunkers from the now famous 'rough'. Rules officials were cognizant of what had occurred with Dustin Johnson at Whistling Straights during the PGA Championship and didn't want the same problems to arise. To remediate this problem, a crew went out to re-edge the back part of the bunkers (in particular where the native areas blended into the bunkers). A little finesse with a shovel and rake created a cleaner border between the two areas. Irrigation by hand watering occurred and a discussion about overhead irrigation was started. Temperatures rose into the mid 90s and those entrusted with turf health became more wary. Greens were single mowed and rolled both morning and evening. Final touches were put on some of the external fences and stands. As players made their way through practice rounds many of them were happy about the course and indicated that the greens were the best/truest they had played on all year. The dust was really starting to rise as patrons began to gather and move around the course.

Day Four (Wednesday)

A concerted effort to sharpen any loose edges that were required went on and final preparations of stadia were completed. A forecast of 350,000 spectators for both events necessitated a lot extra work and planning for safety and flexibility on and off the course. Shuttles were running from 10 miles away so traffic close to the course was light. There was heavy security presence at all times. The dust was really rising but a rain forecast for the night created hope that a light shower would knock it down. As the storm came through, the famous Pinehurst dome put up its shield and avoided any rainfall.



Lights, camera, mowing.....in order to have the course ready for 6:45 a.m. tee times, lights were used to get mowers out and working on Thursday and Friday.

Day Five (Thursday)

Tournament day arrived and golf began at 6:45 a.m. All available lighting was used to get a jump on the mowing as greens, tees, fairways and surrounds were clipped. Bunkers were touched up. Crews were on hand for any "just in case moments" as all operations worked as planned. Players were delighted with the course conditions and certainly Martin Kaymer shocked everyone with his opening round. A majority of the staff even thought at that point Kaymer would be tough to catch. That evening work concentrated on clean up; pine needles had blown around throughout the day. We completed our work at 9:30 p.m. and most of us didn't know that 15 minutes after we left the grounds an inch of rain fell in the next 20 minutes.

Day Six (Friday)

Upon morning arrival at the Barn it became apparent that there was going to be some cleanup required from the rain. The crews all went out rapidly on their initial jobs; fairways and approaches did not get mowed. The pressure was on for clean up crews to stay ahead of play. The bunkers became a source of much attention. Some were contaminated from the chaff and debris from the rough; others held water that required pumping and some needed sand to be pushed back into place (Picture 4). However, the dust had abated.



One of the bunkers that needed some sand pushed back into place after the rainfall event on Thursday night.

The Pinehurst Resort has nine golf courses (they just bought another). The benefit of being able to summon crews from the other courses became quickly apparent as over 100 staff members made their way up the 17th and 18th holes to put things back together. It was an impressive

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sight, to say the least. The clean up was a huge success. Kaymer's second round of five under, proved the course not in an unfair state. It was apparent he was a very strong favorite to win the whole thing, which deflated the spectacle a bit. During the evening shift fairways and approaches were mowed. It was amazing how much the bermudagrass had grown, even despite its brown look. Clean up continued as a welcome drop in temperature ensued.

Day Seven (Saturday)

Friday's afternoon winds helped some of firmness in greens to recover. Speeds were at target so only a single mow and roll was needed on Saturday morning. Water and hoses were non-existent, but Superintendent Kevin Robinson, CGCS and Assistants John Jeffreys and Alan Owen were surely thinking about the Women's US Open the following week. Preserving the course for another week of championship golf was extremely important, a feat no course had ever accomplished. By Saturday's end an act of God was the only thing that would prevent Kaymer from winning. The course had returned to its consistent drier conditions by the end of the day and hoses were on show to syringe surfaces. Conditions had firmed up completely and greens were extremely smooth.

Day Eight (Sunday)

Like Saturday, Greens received a single mow and roll. Everything was tidied up and prepared for the big final day, although most knew the event was over due to the control that Kaymer had displayed the previous days. It would take an epic Greg Norman-esque collapse for anyone to catch Kaymer. It didn't happen and he took his second major. In truth, it was as dazzling for his domination of the golf course versus the inability of the field to catch him. The course displayed beautifully, though a dramatic contrast from its previous spotlights - this however is in the eye of the beholder



It wasn't that long ago the colors we saw at Pinehurst were the norm each weekend broadcast, this however was the first in high definition.

Overall, it was an incredible experience and on Friday morning when the massive clean up was going on I realized what it meant to Pinehurst to have the event run off without a hitch. To see over 100 people working as a small army was really impressive and reminded me why guys do the job – for the love of it. Looking forward to Chambers Bay and Erin Hills, it seems the USGA is on the path of using "low input" natural looking courses. It was accomplished at Pinehurst and we all know it is possible to manage turf when there is a consistent breeze that moderates both humidity and temperature. However, there has to be some cognizance that just like the British Isles, these courses make up a very small portion of the golfing world in the U.S. The USGA set the table and the debate will continue on the color of turf and the impact on playability, but more importantly the long-term impact on water savings. @






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Leibold Irrigation, Inc.
 18950 County Hwy 5W East Dubuque, IL 61025
 Ph (815) 747-6024



Construction Division
 Kevin Stieneke (563) 564-9333



Service Division
 Mike Skopik (563) 564-6908



Irrigation Division
 Jim Boyer (815) 747-6024