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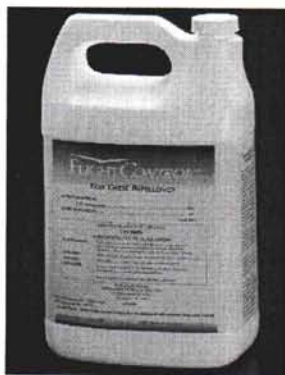
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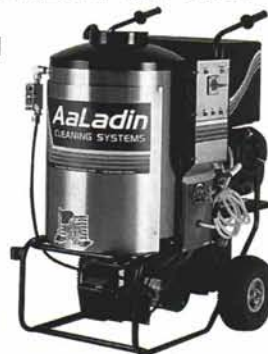
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“Course conditions in 1992 were quite different from today,” says Oscar. “Our putting green heights of cut were higher and less stressful. In the last eight years, for instance, with the emphasis from players on green speed, we have gone from a 108” 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

(continued on page 26)

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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.

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A micrograph shows the intricate anatomy of mycorrhizae within the plant root.

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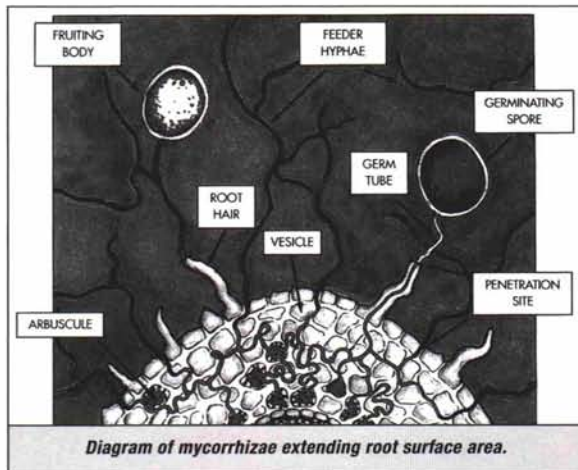


Diagram of mycorrhizae extending root surface area.



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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.

The Few, the Proud . . .

The analogy to the U.S. Marine Corps is an apt one. The Merit Club's special Open assistant, Chris Blake, and four interns—Steven Craig, Brian Stellwagen, Ben Grimme and Jeff Friedle—are experiencing all the rigors of turfgrass boot camp. Which is fine by them—all five young men are at The Merit Club this summer by choice.

“Preparing for a major Championship and the chance to work for Oscar Miles were my deciding factors in interning here,” notes Chris Blake, an Arizona native and recent graduate of Penn State. “That probably holds true for everybody.”

Adds Chris, “I’ve worked for a lot of young superintendents, and the longevity and established reputation Oscar has were a big draw.”

“Oscar explains the ‘what, why, where and when’ of championship golf course management from his vast previous experience,” says Jeff, who has one semester left at Joliet Junior College.

Beyond routine golf course maintenance practices, these interns are gaining exposure to the entire spectrum of activities that goes into readying for a major Championship.

“Preparation for the Open is so much over and above the usual,” explains Steve, who has one year still to complete in Penn State’s turfgrass management program. “The detail work is so important for the Open—we want the course to look good for the competitors, spectators, NBC-TV viewers and The Merit Club membership. I am really understanding the process of planning so that during the Open everything comes together.”

Brian, another PSU student, emphasizes that “participating throughout the whole planning and organizing” phase has been invaluable. Concurrs Steven, “The communication process here is excellent. Everyone’s working toward the same goal.”

All reflected on the unusual variety of tasks they’ve carried out, such as “preparing office trailer sites, spectator wood chip paths, landscaping a new practice tee, 90” tree spade transplanting,” says Jeff. And all praised The Merit Club’s membership as being most understanding and accommodating to tourney preparations.

the Interns!



The Merit Club's interns are (back, L to R) Chris Blake, Jeff Friedle, (front, L to R) Ben Grimme, Steven Craig and Brian Stellwagen, pictured here with Oscar Miles, CGCS (far right). Penn State intern Steve has made an unusual personal sacrifice to be in Gurnee this summer. His wife, back home in Pennsylvania, is expecting their first child July 4.


This multitasking group has been putting in 70- to 80-hour workweeks and will continue that arduous schedule until Championship week when, notes Jeff, “We’ll literally be living here.”

Agrees Chris, “We’ll be on call 24 hours a day that week.”

“During the tournament we have to be ready for anything, like heavy rainfall, which may damage sand bunkers, for example,” says Ben, who just completed his degree at Kishwaukee College.

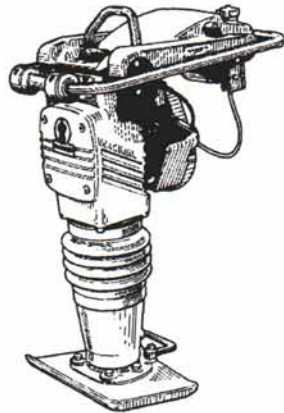
When July 24 rolls around and the Open is golf history, ample work will remain. “The course is the members’ course, and we want to make sure when the Open is over, they still have a pleasurable course to use and be proud of,” Steve notes.

Given the tight job market for superintendents, all five interns believe that paying their dues this summer will give their resumes a substantial boost.

“The combination of Oscar Miles and the U.S. Women’s Open puts us so far ahead of the game,” Chris says—and the group agreed enthusiastically. 

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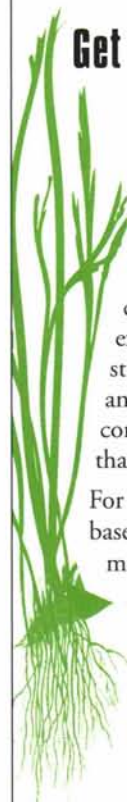
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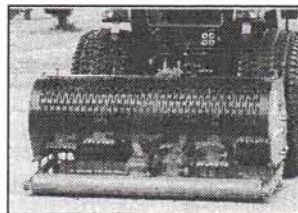
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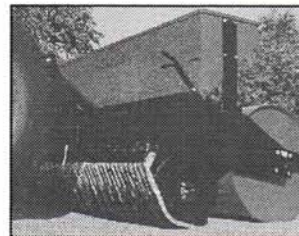
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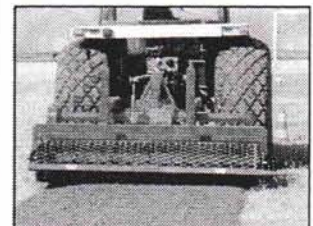
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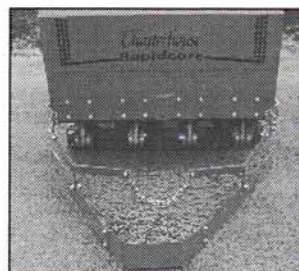
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