

Different strokes in the land of 24-hour light

BY PETER BLAIS

It's a few minutes past 8 o'clock on a mid-summer night, the time when the last few golfers in the Lower 48 are normally lumbering in the general direction of the 18th hole.

But while their Southern cousins are mulling over whether a Bud or a Miller will go down easier once they reach the clubhouse, the last foursome of the day is preparing to tee off on the first hole at Elmendorf Air Force Base's Eagle Glen Golf Course near Anchorage, Alaska.

"Tee times begin at 6:20 a.m. and run through until 8:12 p.m.," said Eagle Glen general manager/superintendent Al Fry. "We've got six or seven weeks when you can basically play all night long."

And people do. Eagle Glen, one of the few military courses open to the public, hosts more than 30,000 rounds during its brief, four-month season from mid-May to mid-September.

"That would work out to 90,000 rounds a year in some of the Southern states. It's not a long season. But the course is played hard," Fry said.

Extended daylight and heavy play present special maintenance problems for Fry and his 14-member grounds crew, a staff he estimates is about 50 percent larger than would be needed on a comparable-size course in the continental United States where play would be lighter and the hours of operation shorter.

The bentgrass greens grow as much as 1/4-inch a day in the 20-plus hours of Alaskan sunlight. Greens are mowed once and often twice a day in mid-summer. Fairways are groomed twice a week.

"We don't have any trouble growing grass," understated Fry. "In fact, we try to slow it down with growth retardants. And we're very careful with our nitrogen levels."

Irrigating a course subjected to round-the-clock daylight is a 16-hour-a-day job. Tees and greens must be watered every day, fairways every other day. Eagle Glen has two full-time watering people, one of whom works the 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. shift. The rest of the crew begins coming in at 3 a.m. and stays until 2 p.m.

One of their main jobs is caring for the 18 Robert Trent Jones Sr.-designed greens. Because of the heavy play, Fry maintains an ambitious aeration and top-dressing program to minimize compaction.

Greens are top-dressed every two weeks. They are aerated in early spring and fall and two to three times during the summer.

"If you let them get away, they'll turn as hard as rock," Fry said.

Eagle Glen, which opened in 1971, was carved out of the natural terrain, according to Fry. There are no adjoining fairways, helping it maintain its natural appearance and making it an ideal home for ducks, geese, beaver and moose.

"It's quite a zoo here," commented Fry. "We even had four or five black bear sightings last summer."

The animals people expect when they first come to Alaska. The first-rate turf conditions they don't, Fry said.

"Visitors think it's going to be all ice and igloos," he joked. "They're generally surprised at the quality of the turf."

Last winter saw a 4-1/2-foot snow cover blanketing the course. Temperatures frequently dropped well below zero. To ensure a quality playing surface the next spring, Fry has to prepare his facility for those harsh conditions.

He begins by covering his course with fungicide after it closes for play in the fall. "With the heavy snows, we're very susceptible to snow mold," he

said.

After aerating the greens for the final time, he completely covers them with a sand top dressing to protect and insulate the crowns.

When that's done, Fry catches his breath for a few weeks and begins preparing the nearby ice rink and cross-country trails he manages through the winter. Such versatility has served Fry well since the service transferred him from New Jersey to Alaska 23 years ago.

"My wife and I just fell in love with the place and we've been here ever

since," he said.

He was discharged in 1971 and eventually opened his own construction firm. He folded the business when the Alaskan economy went South in the early 1980s.

An avid golfer, he joined the Eagle Glen grounds crew in the fall of 1986. Four months later he was named general manager. His golf responsibilities include running the pro shop and snack bar as well as maintaining the course.

Fry has no formal agronomy training. He takes advantage of occasional

visits from United States Golf Association agronomists. But mainly he is, as he said, "a self-taught superintendent."

"The lack of a college degree isn't a handicap," he said. "Common sense and a practical mind are the main attributes in an operation like this."

Including the night watering person, Fry's maintenance crew works around-the-clock from May through September. Fry can be found on the course seven days a week during the peak season.

"It's a lot of fun," he said.

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