

Hogan's heroes: Supers at

BY PETER BLAIS

Course conditions have run the gamut from "superb" to "needs improvement" over the first half of the Hogan Tour's freshman year, according to Professional Golf Association assistant agronomist Jeff Haley.

"Some have been superior and some we're going to take one step at a time over the next three to five years until we get them in excellent condition," said Haley. "One thing I can say this year is that all have had excellent putting surfaces."

The reason is that the Hogan Tour has emphasized greens in its rookie season.

"We're going to try to target one area of the courses every year," said Haley. "This year we were looking for great greens. Next year it might be the fairways."

"We want to help these courses on an annual basis, not just for the week of the tournament. We plan to come back to these courses year after year after year."

To help meet this year's goal, PGA agronomists have encouraged superintendents to concentrate almost exclusively on their greens for the two weeks prior to a Hogan tournament. That means cutting the grass every day in order to get them up to PGA tour speed and gain consistency from green to green, Haley said.

"We don't expect any less of the Hogan Tour courses than those on the regular PGA and Senior tours," said the PGA official. "We expect the same green speeds, fairways cut the same, roughs and bunkers to be in good shape."

Overall, Haley said he has been very impressed with the superintendents and their efforts, especially under occasionally trying conditions.

At Windance Golf & Country Club in Gulfport, Miss., it rained so hard that cart paths washed out and players had to be transported from tee to tee by truck, Haley said.

"They did yeoman's work. The pros wanted to quit. But the superintendent (Keith Smith) wouldn't let them," Haley said.

December's sub-zero temperatures sent some courses into dormancy, many for the first time.

"We caught some courses at the wrong time. It's difficult to maintain your course under those conditions, let alone hold a major tournament. But the superintendents did a great job," said the PGA official.

Because of the experience gained in this inaugural season, PGA agronomists are likely to visit individual courses less often next year, Haley said. This year's schedule has generally included visits one year, six weeks and one week (called Advance week) before the event.

"Inevitably people have saved major projects until Advance Week," said Haley. "We get people to the course that week and the last thing they want to see is bunkers

that need edging, drainage ditches that need filling, sod that needs replacing. It makes things so much easier if those things are done before we get there."

"The best advice I can offer is don't wait until the last minute to get your course in shape," agreed Lake City (Fla.) Country Club superintendent Carl Smith. "That's what I've heard from most of the other superintendents and what I've been telling those who have called asking me questions."

Smith began preparing his facil-

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Lake City CC**

ity last August for the March 30-April 1 Lake City Classic, the seventh stop on the developmental tour's 30-event schedule.

The major project was rebuild-

ing the course's 52 traps. All were dug out, some enlarged, others sodded around the edges and all filled with new sand.

Smith's crew also spent three months trimming hundreds of trees up to a height of eight feet to ensure golfers a clear swing at the ball.

Finally, two weeks before the tournament, Smith lowered the cut on his greens from their regular quarter-inch to 5/32-of-an-inch.

The result? Despite rains that suspended play midway through Friday's opening round, everything

went smoothly and the Hogan Tour is ready to return next year, Smith said.

"The Hogan people were very impressed with the improved condition of the course over the 11 months since they'd first visited," said Smith, who took over at Lake City last summer. "They were unsure, at first, whether they'd be able to stage the event here. The course was in pretty bad shape. That's one of the reasons they brought me in here. One of the nice things about having a contract al-

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1st-year tour's courses handle new obstacles

ready signed for next year is that I can start preparing now."

Smith said a few members grumbled about giving up their course for a week. "But by Monday's qualifying round, everyone was caught up in the excitement. They all seem happy it's coming back next year," he said.

Members of North Shore Country Club in Portland, Texas, were similarly supportive when their course hosted the South Texas Open on March 2-4, according to superintendent Tom Dechant.

"Our members really enjoyed

it," said Dechant. "We got good participation from many of them."

Dechant said he tries to keep his course tournament-ready all year. But with the south Texas coast still recovering from winter's chill, Dechant began a heavy fertilizing campaign to green up his bermudagrass in early January.

"We did a lot of top dressing to smooth out the greens and got the groomer rolls out twice a week beginning four or five weeks before the tournament," said Dechant.

Dechant said he went through

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The Woodlands**

large amounts of wire, stakes and paint once the Hogan and PGA officials arrived.

"They wanted all the par 3 tees

covered with chicken wire during the practice round so they wouldn't get chewed up," he remembered. "That seemed too much of an expense. So we used some wire we had left over from building the cart paths. But that was pretty hard to work with. We recommended that the tour officials begin carrying around their own wire. It's a pretty substantial expense for the club."

Dechant estimated he provided more than 200 stakes and "a lot of paint" to mark out the course.

The skies opened the day of the Pro-Am, dropping 3-1/2 inches of

rain on the course and canceling the Thursday event. But the regular tournament started as scheduled on Friday.

"We were here until 11 p.m. Thursday trying to pump the water out," Dechant said. "They were able to play the ball down the next day because of all the drainage work we've done the past four years. There's a lot of heavy clay soil here that just doesn't drain."

"The Hogan people seemed real happy. They understood the problems we had with the greens. They wrote us a nice note of thanks after they'd left."

The grass at The Country Club of Baton Rouge began emerging from dormancy just before the March 9-11 Baton Rouge Open. Superintendent Tolby Strahan mowed the fairways down to 7/16-of-an-inch three times before the tourney and the greens to 1/8-of-an-inch.

That's about the norm at the Jack Nicklaus course, which boasts a fairly young membership of talented players who demand the course be kept in tournament shape all year long, according to Strahan.

In fact, the only problem was cleaning up the 40 inches of rain that fell on the course from November through January. It rained again the first day of the tournament, holding up play for a brief time.

"But we have USGA (United States Golf Association) spec greens. They just soaked that up like a sponge," said Strahan.

The members didn't mind giving up the course, especially since heavy play doesn't begin until April, said Strahan. Many volunteered during the tournament, although Strahan said more would have been welcomed.

"You can always use more," he said.

The Tour began edging north in May and will reach its highest latitude July 13-15 at the New England Classic at The Woodlands Club in Falmouth, Maine.

"That's something for us to guide our season towards," said superintendent Ken Flisek. "Those guys will appreciate the little things we do to get the course in peak condition, things the members might not notice."

Flisek plans on cutting his Penn Links greens to 9/64-of-an-inch to get a 9 on the Stimp meter. The fairways will be at 1/2-inch and the roughs around three inches.

"We want the roughs long enough to keep the ball out of the woods," said Flisek, who enlarged his crew this spring to clear the trees and brush felled last winter along the 2-year-old course.

Members have found the relatively new facility very tough, so little needs to be done to increase the challenge for the pros, said Flisek.

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