

Latshaw conquers tourney travails

BY PETER BLAIS

It's 1978, the PGA Championship at Oakmont Country Club.

"It was very dry before the tournament. Here it was my first major and I kept thinking it was never going to rain," remembered Paul Latshaw, the only superintendent to host three of golf's major championships.

"At that time we were trying to convert the fairways from annual bluegrass to bent and we were about a 50-50 count at that time. I kept thinking 'God, how are we going to get through each day without syringing the fairways during the tournament,' which was an absolute no-no at that time.

"Didn't have to, though. We finally had a massive rainstorm. On Thursday it was bone dry and we had those greens so hard and fast they couldn't putt on them. There wasn't a red score on the board. It started to rain Friday afternoon and that's when you finally started seeing some birdies."

Now flash ahead to the 1983 U.S. Open, also at Oakmont.

"It rained on Sunday, it rained on Saturday. It seems to me it rained on Thursday... The Open went an extra day."

Finally, hop forward to the 1987-89 Masters at Augusta National GC.

"The Masters is a very, very organized event, not to say that the PGA and Open aren't. But the fact that they have it at the same course every year, they take great pride in striving for perfection. It's almost like clockwork. At a PGA or Open event they have to worry about where the towers, camera and bleachers are all going. While at Augusta everything is pretty much in place. It gets down to almost where you have the same pin positions.

"But you still have to have perfect turf conditions. When you deal with nature, I don't care how organized you are. We used to worry about getting rained out. You can have the place looking perfect one day and it can look pretty bad the next. Rain is the biggest, biggest, biggest hardship of tournaments. Fortunately, I don't think it ever



Paul Latshaw

happened (at Augusta), but it was always a concern."

Rain and how to deal with it. It's a headache, definitely. But it's also a challenge, even for a superintendent considered among the elite in his field. And it's the challenges that have kept Paul Latshaw in the golf business for the past 27 years.

"I ask myself that a lot," replied Latshaw, who is currently the superintendent at Wilmington Country Club, when asked what keeps him showing up at the course at dawn each morning.

"I love my work, I really do. It's a great challenge," he said. "I love working with nature. And I've never let myself get trapped into being an office superintendent. I like to get out on the course where I see everything going on."

He also likes to see what is going on in his profession, traveling around the country and constantly trying to discover what's changed in his chosen occupation over the past quarter-century.

"There's been a tremendous difference in greens during that time," said Latshaw. "They are cut closer and provide better putting. Every playing surface has improved dramatically. In fact, I just wonder where the next step is going to be.

"There's always room for improvement. But our greens are being as close-cut as I can

imagine, unless we come up with some new kinds of mowing. Guys are cutting fairways right down to the nitty-gritty now. And people are really striving to get the roughs better.

"Those three — greens, tees and fairways — there's just no comparison. I get a kick when people say how fast greens used to be back when. Well, I don't buy that. They weren't that fast."

As for the future, Latshaw sees superintendents becoming increasingly involved with environmental issues as the 1990s unfold.

"We need to get lobbyists or someone to tell our side of the story. Pesticide issues are making us look like a bunch of bad guys, when really we're not. Different research has shown that golf course turf is very beneficial for the things environmentalists are concerned about.

"The regulation of water will be a big issue. And simple things like clippings removal. Everyone is going toward removing clippings from fairways. Getting rid of some of these things will be a real problem. We've just been burying them up until now. But I think I'm going to pursue a composting program."

The opportunity to work outside first attracted Latshaw to Pennsylvania State University's two-year turfgrass management program. After graduating in 1963, he accepted the assistant superintendent's post at Sewickley Heights Country Club in Pennsylvania.

His first head superintendent job was at the Country Club of Jackson in Michigan. After a five-year stint there, he moved on to Shaker Heights Country Club in Ohio for another seven.

Oakmont welcomed him in 1975. He stayed at the Pittsburgh course for a dozen years before relocating to Augusta in 1987.

"Augusta was a good job. But I just sort of like the Northern climate," explained the Pennsylvania native of his decision to move to Wilmington. "This is two hours from my home. So I guess it was the longing to return back to my breeding grounds, kind of like a

fish back to where it spawned."

Wilmington is a 36-hole complex, consisting of two Robert Trent Jones Sr. courses. The South course is rated in the Golf Digest Top 100.

"It has tremendous potential. We're getting an architect to draw up a master plan. They don't build them this way anymore. We have a beautiful piece of land here. It has a nice topography, ideal for golf. It has a good climate, good trees that just need a little work to get them looking right. I think we can have a real masterpiece here," he said.

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