

# There's no golf like 'snow golf' in great N'west

By Bob Spiwak

Once upon a time, superintendents were called greenskeepers. Were the term still valid, Chris Becker of Fairways Golf Course in Cheney, Wash., would be a "whiteskeeper" as well. Becker brought "snow golf" to the Spokane area.

For those in the North who some years do not see grass for several months, there are as many variations of the game as there are frigid flailers of golf sticks.

But for Becker, in his fourth year as superintendent at Fairways, preparation of the snow course is done with as much care as the summer greensward, where his putting surfaces have earned the reputation of being among the best in the Pacific Northwest.

Those greens are of bentgrass. His winter greens are of smashesnow.

Around October, before the ground freezes, Becker begins to prepare the six-acre driving range for the winter activities. He pounds five-foot stakes a foot into the ground to mark the tee boxes.

For the "cups," he sinks five-gallon buckets into the ground. Snow is packed inside the buckets and standard cups are installed into the packed snow. Players will putt into the bucket, but the cups must be placed to hold the flags. By the time the course is ready, the cups will be buried in concrete-hard ice and snow.

Becker is such a fuss-budget about his course that he will not attempt to pack the fairway snow until there is at least a foot on the ground.

"It gives me a cushion. I don't want to risk injuring the turf, even on the driving range," he said.

Once there is adequate snow, he rounds up some buddies with snowmobiles who, in about four hours, have the course packed. An extra pack goes onto the greens — er, whites — which are a circle with a 10-foot radius.

These are done the old-fashioned way — stomped. With feet alone, on boards — and one year with boards attached to feet.

The putting surfaces are then raked with metal lawn rakes and finally squeegeed to provide some degree of smoothness. You might say the speed is determined with a "stompmeter."

"Perfection is not what we are after," Becker said. "We try to keep part of the course on the rough side, causing the unknown bounce."

Sometimes, like major tournaments, he goes out with a backpack sprayer filled with warm water and green dye. The greens then look like greens, "... and you can make them any shape you want."

Similarly, brown dyes are applied to create authentic-looking bunkers.

Actually, the whole course is a big bunker, because once the initial pack is down, new snowfall is left up to a depth of three inches. This accommodates the special balls used in this version of snow golf. So special are the spheres that they can only be found in supermarkets or toy, hardware or convenience stores. Each member of a foursome is given a different colored pair of balls for identification. Or, for a dollar deposit, they can "rent" balls from the pro shop.

The balls are three inches in diameter, and made of sponge rubber. The hardest thing to learn in snow golf is to hit the ball first. If you try to take a divot, the club will slide through the snow under the ball. Each stroke, Becker said, must be played as though it were a fairway bunker shot.

The holes range from a 49-yard par 3 to a 250-yard par 6. Par for the nine holes is 35.

Becker and head pro John Durgan share the course record of 24.

"The first time out, a golfer will shoot in the 50s," Becker said. "By the end of that round, he's figured out how to hit the ball square for the long shots, and lower and lower for the finesse strokes."

As for putting, well, it's not at all like real putting. The cup is 14 inches wide, and the putter is frequently a mid-iron. Becker said that for those who want to pack a "full set" of clubs

for snow golf, it's usually a mid-iron and a putter. But it's a lot easier on cold hands just to bring the iron.

Cold hands? Becker said the coldest temperature in which a competition was played was 10 degrees above zero.

Constant winter rules are observed. The golfer has the option of moving the ball six inches, or onto packed snow if the ball has gone astray. "You should see some of the slices with those rubber balls," Becker laughed.

Becker estimates the cost of course preparation at about \$20 for gasoline. All the other materials are

at hand, and his friends like to exercise their snowmobiles.

As soon as there is a lot of snow, the club phone begins ringing with inquiries about the condition of the snow course.

The down side of all this comes from the ultimate course superintendent, Mother Nature. In the West there's something called a Chinook, a mighty warm wind out of the Northwest that can strip a snowcover faster than you can say "Metalaxyl prevents pythium blight."

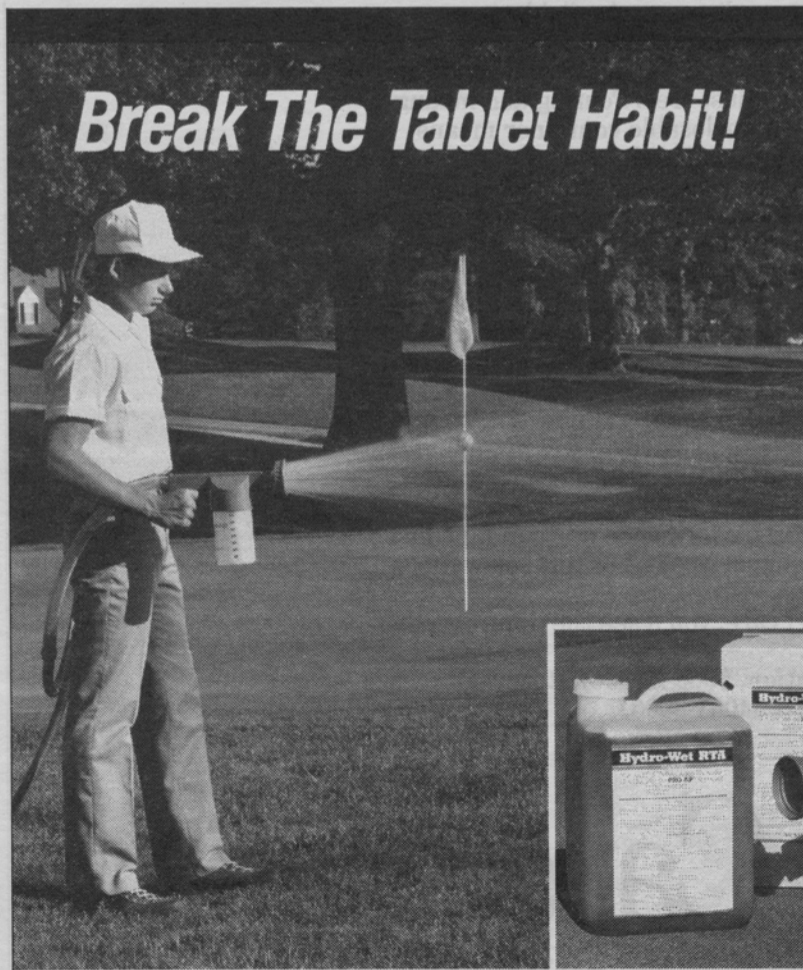
That's what has happened for the past two years, in normally snowy

Spokane. The snows of the past December and January promised a great snow golf season, until the Chinook blew in early in January. As the year before, the course was ready to go this year, and then it disappeared.

Well, not quite. When the snow left this year, and the regular course was still unplayable, the innovative Becker and course management opened the snowless snow course as a regular par 3.

Business is brisk.

Bob Spiwak is a freelance writer based in Winthrop, Wash.



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