

Klauk and crew earn redemption at TPC at Sawgrass

By Vern Putney

The 1990 PGA Tour stop at Sawgrass Stadium Course at Jacksonville, Fla., is remembered ruefully for the "Flaying of Fred," a public pillorying by the media of the golf course superintendent.

The 1991 version will be recalled as "Kudos for Klauk" long after Australian Steve Elkington's victory is forgotten.

Fred Klauk and his crew of 52 accomplished perhaps the biggest course turnaround in tour history.

Last year, the pros heaped scorn on the course and Klauk for conditions admittedly on the ragged side. Mother Nature had sabotaged the course, but the pros were not inclined to forgive.

They were similarly outspoken on the eve of this year's event. They went public as loudly, not to bury Klauk, but to praise him.

Sessions with PGA Commissioner Deane Beman, critiques, intense preparation, a two-week pushback in tourney dates and a break from the weather paid off handsomely.

Though Klauk felt players were overly critical in 1990, given winter wind and storm troubles, he took the heat. He didn't duck an NBC interview with Bob Costas in which difficulties appeared magnified.

Greens 1 and 2 were unquestioned rough spots and, yes, there were other areas of concern. Instead of hiding his head in the sand, Klauk stood his ground and said his mission for 1991 was to make the course the best ever.

He set the goal — and delivered.

First step was to huddle with Beman and define needed changes. It was agreed that an earlier end to daily play was necessary prior to the tournament.

The course was closed in the fall for overseeding. This procedure became 80 percent poa trivialis of the sabre variety and 20 percent bentgrass, instead of the other way around. The week's shutdown permitted uninterrupted germination.

A tree-trimming program meant more course sunlight.

Three months before the tournament, preparations were intensified. Two or three persons were added to the work force.

A key element was shutting down the course the Monday prior to tournament warmup action. Players arriving the Saturday before Thursday's opening-day round were amazed at the playing surfaces that loomed like huge carpets fit for a king's royal entry.

In what was believed an unprecedented effort, ball marks on all greens had been seeded. A fairway divot couldn't be found. The course was inviolate.



The recent PGA Tour stop at the Tournament Players Club of Sawgrass in Jacksonville, Fla., drew rave reviews from competitors for course conditions. Much credit goes to the golf maintenance management staff. Left to right are Mark Sanford, chief mechanic; Bob Clarkson, assistant superintendent, Stadium Course; Cathy Macormic, office manager; Gene Baldwin, assistant superintendent, Valley Course; Lee Rowe, landscape assistant, and Fred Klauk, superintendent.

Rocco Mediate, Sawgrass resident and the Tour's leading money winner, best expressed fellow pros' feelings during a practice round. Attached to his bag was a button reading "Fred Knows Greens."

Maintenance staff members also wore these buttons, supplied courtesy of Don Kepler, Klauk's junior high school coach in North Palm Beach, and former high school teammate Larry Mueller.

Greens 1 and 2 were no longer verbal targets. They matched the others in immaculate grooming.

Greg Norman, perhaps the No. One course critic in 1990, summed up the 1991 layout in one word — "perfect."

Elkington said of Sawgrass: "I don't think there's a harder course in the world to play than this one when there is this kind of wind (42 miles per hour the second day), but course conditions couldn't be better."

Sawgrass' reputation as a destroyer of title hopes in the stretch was reinforced. The finishing holes, especially the dreaded but hauntingly beautiful 138-yard 17th, finished many contenders.

Most memorable was Phil Blackmar. He'd teed off on that most unique hole on the tour, water-surrounded, most-photographed and most-hazardous, tied for the lead. Kerplunk! Bye-bye, Blackmar.

Sawgrass was open for resort play the morning following Fuzzy Zoeller's birdie miss

for a tie, and Gary Player hosted a corporate outing shotgun tournament Tuesday. He spent part of the morning trying to match Brian Claar's ace on the 17th.

A seed soil mix quickly cured the post-tourney divot blues.

Klauk, staff and tour officials have reviewed the tourney. A few minor adjustments are planned next year.

Despite the 1990 media battering, Klauk enjoys excellent press relations. He pointed out that the print media were most favorable from 1987 through 1989.

Klauk works at media exposure. He's friendly with the press and the players.

"I am aware of the temptation by the press to create controversy, and that it might be the supers' lot that tourney players and members might say, 'What have you done for me lately?' That goes with the territory.

"The big thing is that the public now has

'The public now has a better perception of how important the superintendent is to the success of the PGA Tour and golf in general.'
— Fred Klauk

a better perception of how important the superintendent is to the success of the PGA Tour and golf in general. With such sharp and critical focus, it's perhaps understandable that the super gets all the blame when things go wrong. On the other hand, reward can be great when conditions are near-ideal."

Tour players recognize Klauk as a big hitter in his own right. A two handicapper, he's been champion the past four years at Oak Bridge, a testing course within the Sawgrass complex.

He never scored better, though, than in his strictly spectator role in the tournament.

Elkington made off with the \$288,000 first-prize Sawgrass swag. Klauk made millions for superintendents in terms of public awareness and goodwill.

That Sawgrass was bracketed by the world's top pros with Augusta National and Medinah, Ill., on the "best-groomed" list was icing on Klauk's cake.

That coupling is far better than such shafts as "Marriott Muni" and J.C. Snead's "They messed up a perfectly good swamp."

Sawgrass resident Snead the past few months has eaten his words — gladly. "Freddy's Fashion Plate" had prevailed.

Course designer Pete Dye's contributions shouldn't be overlooked. Paul Azinger, tourney leader most of the way, said: "It turned out to be a great golf course. Maybe Dye did a better job than we gave him credit for."

For trivia buffs, the playing absentee among the top 20 in the Sony World Ranking was Payne Stewart. Sidelined by an ailing neck, he was restricted to commentator duty.

USGA deciding fate of last \$300,000

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stirred the most debate among the review committee, Kenna said.

"Eighty-five percent of the population knows little about golf," he said. "Basically, we know that when people drive by a course, they look at it. But that's about it.

"We know people enjoy open space. That's why urban planners usually try to include parks in their designs. Golf courses are like parks, but they have the advantage of also generating revenue.

"We're wondering how funding that type of project would appear to USGA associates. That's what we're debating. The psychological effect proposals have come from schools of architecture. Maybe we need to get the golf course architects association on board a

project like that."

A major concern is getting hard, re-creatable data from such a project, or any of the \$2.5 million in studies the USGA has already funded under the environmental research project, Kenna said. The studies already funded have involved pesticide and agronomic issues.

"If someone finds fault with any of your data, it can crumble your whole argument," Kenna said. "We've started a quality assurance/control program to make sure the university research we get is of a quality we can use.

"We want the numbers to be well-documented and know where they came from so we can re-create the procedure and get the same numbers."



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