

Blackwolf Run's Lee: Pete Dye tracks tough to beat both ways

By MARK LESLIE

KOHLER, Wis. — When he was hired in March as golf course superintendent at Blackwolf Run, Michael Lee foresaw two things: Career advancement and the constant difficulty of maintaining a pair of Pete Dye-designed 18-hole courses.

The River and Meadow Valley tracks "are two spectacular golf courses that are not only challenging to play, but also to maintain," Lee said. "It's a Pete Dye golf facility, so it has a lot of mounds and steep faces that are challenging to keep irrigated and mowed down. And there are a lot of sand bunkers."

But Lee's major challenge is scheduling what he calls his "phantom crew" — that is, his 70-person staff that he orchestrates into a groundskeeping schedule that keeps them ahead, and out of sight, of golfers.

"It's a matter of working out the logistics," Lee said. "Golfers start at 7 [a.m.]. We start at 5 or a little later."

The crew must use that two-hour gap to get far enough ahead of the golfers — and stay ahead. Instead of the normal practice of assigning a zone of the course to each crew member, Lee has them leap-frog.

"We're using four to six walk-behind greensmowers per course at a time. We send out two groups of two and they leap-frog all the way from the 1st hole through the 18th. Tees are done the same way, leap-frogging," he said. Because Blackwolf Run is links-style, mower operators must go from tee to green.

The leap-frogging idea was implemented for two reasons, Lee said. "First, we thought we could justify it because of what we're charging our customers. They shouldn't compete with us [greenskeepers]. Second, for safety

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Blackwolf Run super

reasons."

Lee said he has such a large crew because of the limited amount of time to do the work. Many are seasonal or part-time employees who work five to seven hours a day.

"There's no golf course to get back onto after around 10:30," he said.

Caring for the two courses — which were opened one nine at a time from 1985 to 1990 — is "pretty consistently tough," Lee said, but his job is an opportunity for him to combine two distinct skills.

While working with the now-retired Dr. Gayle Worf as a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Lee was exposed to a lot of investigative work into turfgrass pests and diseases. Then, working with superintendents Monroe Miller at Blackhawk Country Club in Madison and Carl Grassl at Blue Mound Golf and Country Club in Wauwatosa, he learned about "the natural management side of the job."

"I consider Monroe Miller my mentor," he said, explaining that he worked for Miller while a teen-ager for five years. "He is the person from whom

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Michael Lee at Blackwolf Run.

I established my work ethic. I was very young. He taught me how to work. I enjoyed myself on the golf course."

Before graduating from college in 1987, Lee worked with Worf, who developed turfgrass pathology and disease trials at golf courses around the state, before the University of Wisconsin-Madison opened its research center.

"Whichever [courses] had the 'good' disease problems determined where we'd go," Lee said. "We got excited about disease — from a pathologist's standpoint. It was a very helpful experience in diagnosing turf disorders, seeing them in many different situations."

That experience has proven invaluable in his work as a superintendent, he said. Now he is melding that knowledge with high-tech equipment like the course's electronic weather station and radar tracking.

"It's not the only source of information. But it's an efficient way to track the weather. It keeps track of wind speed, leaf wetness, air and ground temperatures, those sorts of things, for a 14-day period," Lee said. "When weird things come up in the turf we can go back and see in the records what the

weather was like."

Another plus for Lee is that the Kohler company, which owns Blackwolf Run, also operates a landscaping business out of his office building.

"They are constantly monitoring insect life cycles using degree days. When the insects go from stage to stage you have a chance to control them. It's another tool. You can't make decisions just in the office. But it will help direct you to getting soil samples, or plant samples and make a decision," he said.

Lee said he is adding one major emphasis: Listening to the customers.

"We have a four-page evaluation sheet we're sending to selected golfers who golf at resorts like ours," he said. "I also work closely with the golf pro, Paul Becker. We talk about mowing long grass for better vision, tee conditions, reservations, ball washers, divots not being filled with sand — a lot of details that make a difference."

Blackwolf Run encompasses 400 acres on the southern edge of Kohler Village. It was named Best New Public Course in the United States by Golf Digest when it opened in 1988. Lee intends to keep it at "the top of the charts."

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