

Super Focus

Canada's Super of the Year

An aquarange in summer, ski trails in winter — Palmer has it all

By MARK LESLIE

Twenty-eight years ago the city of St. John, New Brunswick, asked Blake Palmer to operate its nine-hole Rockwood Park Golf Course for one year. He had no turfgrass knowledge, no managerial experience — and no budget.

Today, Palmer's 2,000-acre Rockwood Park boasts 18 holes of golf, an aquatic driving range that was one of the country's first, and something that truly sets his facility apart — more than 50 miles of cross-country ski trails.

And in March, the Canada Golf Superintendents Association named Palmer its Superintendent of the Year. That one-year appointment back in 1966 has reaped benefits for St. John — and proven a challenge to the 57-year-old Palmer.

Faced with keeping grass alive, the St. John native studied turf management at Nova Scotia Agricultural College in 1975-76; tapped his colleagues for all the knowledge he could; and succeeded in earning his way onto the CGSA board as Atlantic director in 1984, enroute to the national presidency in 1990-91.

In the meantime, play at Rockwood Park Golf Course rose continually until it built the aquatic driving range in 1980 and hired architects Geoffrey Cornish and Bill Robinson to design a second nine holes in 1983 — a job finished in 1987.

The 16-bay driving range has been a money-maker since Day One, staying open until 10:30 p.m. from mid-April to mid-October, Palmer said. "We keep it lit up at night, which is when we get most of our clientele."

A pontoon boat with a funnel in the front floats over the balls and picks them up. A boom keeps the balls in the driving area so they don't float out into the 10-acre lake.

Reflecting on his CGSA presidency, Palmer said: "It was a great experience. The only problem is, you don't prepare yourself for when you come off the board and there's that time to fill. 'Personal time' is once again truly personal."

Yet, even during the winter, there is plenty to occupy Palmer's work time. Fifty miles of cross-country ski trails beckon him and his crew for grooming. And the summertime golf pro shop has become a "viable operation" as a ski shop, he said.

While Palmer and Rockwood Park Golf Course have met success at every turn the last two decades, he fears the Canadian economy may imperil the sport.

"If I have a concern about the industry as a whole," he said, "it's with the public and municipal golf courses. There has been a lot of talk of budget cuts and even privatization of golf courses, and if that hap-



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pens, we could be going backwards.

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Palmer said evidence of that has already been seen in Atlantic Canada. "There are only rumbles now, but it might become reality in a few more years. I don't think it's a question of making money. Rather,

government simply wants to get out of entrepreneurship and turn it over to the private sector.

"The golf industry is probably going to have to come in with some counterproposals, or try to win public support."

Born and bred in the world of agriculture, Palmer has seen many changes — "technology in general" — in his current world of turfgrass management.

"When I came here, we were watering by hand," he said.

"Now it's fully automatic and computer-operated. This is the way of the '90s. A lot of the chemicals we used years ago are now restricted. It's been 13 years since we've had a new fungicide registered for turf in Canada. All our chemicals have to be approved by Agriculture Canada. And Health and Welfare plays a part as well."

Palmer said Integrated Plant Management [IPM] is the key to drive the greenkeeping engine now, and in the future.

Will the role of superintendents change?

"The younger generation has a lot going for them, educationwise," he said.

"Certainly, IPM is going to have a dramatic effect on how we manage our golf courses in the year 2000. The way we're faced with recession and cutbacks, a lot of guys will operate with smaller crews. But the technology out there will take up the slack."

Ahead of its time

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water to speak of. To create the type of course we envisioned — a park-like, recreational course — was going to take considerable effort."

Some of their solutions could be models for many golf courses today, including a water-recovery system that ties together rainwater roof run-off, surface water, ground water and six manmade lakes.

RECYCLING WATER

From the beginning, Mirkes and his crews were concerned about developing methods to maximize available water to maintain and irrigate the property. They turned to recycling natural resources.

"There were no natural lakes on the property when we began development... We knew that eventually there would be a limit to the availability of water. So we turned our attention to recycling what we did have."

Mirkes' crews developed a network of underground tiles and built the lakes, which average a half acre in size and are four to 12 feet deep. Three of the lakes are interconnected.

"Our system is built to recycle and re-use our own water," Mirkes said. "Rainwater from all roofs on the property is caught and retained, as is water from air-

conditioning units and the pools. We then use this water to irrigate the hotel property and golf course."

Mirkes' concern for natural resources extends to the manner in which the property is tended. "Throughout the property, we considered the various uses and demands that would be placed on the grasses, including the demands placed on natural elements," he said. "Illinois seasons — both summer and winter — can be harsh on tender foliage. That's one of the reasons we selected bluegrass — for its resistance to drought. It gives us the durability for both weather demands and foot traffic."

CHEMICAL-FREE AND TREE-LINED, TOO

Near the start of opening the course, Mirkes also decided to use no pesticides or chemical enhancements, striving "to control weed growth through healthy grass and proper cuts ... to maintain natural treatment and spot treat trouble areas."

Mirkes said Pheasant Run has also returned to lighter, smaller equipment "that doesn't damage the grounds, plant life, or our ability to do our jobs."

Meanwhile, while there were "exactly 38 trees" when the 7,100-yard track was built, Mirkes has planted more than 1,000 maple, locust and crabapple trees over the years — a couple of hundred a year for the first few years.

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