

# Carlson — sans chemicals — keeps Squaw Creek sparkling

OLYMPIC VALLEY, Calif. — To the legions of skiers who visit the Resort at Squaw Creek each winter, the vast snow-covered meadow that skirts the resort is a haven of cross-country trails. But to Mike Carlson, it's one of the most environmentally sensitive golf courses in America — merely hibernating until spring comes to the High Sierra.

Carlson, the superintendent for the award-winning Resort at Squaw Creek Golf Course nestled at the base of Squaw Valley USA, just finished presiding over the annual removal of the snowy tarp that covers the 18-hole, Robert Trent Jones Jr. layout.

With a target opening date of May 24 and some of the toughest environmental regulations in the country governing the process, Carlson and his team had their work cut out to prepare the course for another season of mountain golf.

"We've had more than 20 feet of snowfall this winter, but we expect to open on schedule," said Carlson, who supervises a staff of two assistant

superintendents, one mechanic and 20 grounds crew members.

The erratic early spring climate of the valley, which can alternate between late-season snow and sunny days in the 70s, determines the date when snow removal on the course can begin. Once that date arrives, Carlson's crew begins by pushing all but a few inches of snow off the delicate greens and fairways with a snowcat.

Waiting for all the snow to melt

naturally would take at least a month, and could lead to severe snow mold. Adding to the threat of snow mold, environmental restrictions prohibit the

use of any pre-winter pesticides to prevent it.

The stringent guidelines, established by a technical review committee under an agreement with the neighboring community, permit Carlson to maintain the grounds with only six products,



A grounds crew removes a greens cover that helps Squaw Creek putting surfaces survive the rugged winters.

mainly water-soluble fertilizers.

"Instead of pesticides, we invest in springtime manpower for removing snow, and for sodding and seeding any damaged greens," Carlson said. "Once all the remaining snow has melted, we put a geo-textile fiber cover on the greens at night to trap in heat."

As a result of the work by Carlson and his crew, the greens are not "lush," and are actually barely alive. But that's the objective: to impose the minimum synthetic input possible on the natural environment. The brownish hue of the rough, which to the casual observer may appear to reflect neglect, in fact demonstrates a calculated effort to preserve the area in its natural state.

The pesticide-free management program is only one aspect of the environmentally sensitive design and course management methods. Course architect Robert Trent Jones Jr. and RTJII vice president of design Kyle Phillips planned the course with environmental sensitivity as their highest priority.

By creating minimal play areas to avoid displacing native zones, they produced a course that, with just 80 playable acres, is fun and challenging, but small by industry standards. They incorporated raised wooden cart paths for minimal soil disturbance, three natural filtration ponds for water making its way to Squaw Creek, and new wetlands and meadow land areas at a ratio of 2-to-1 to those displaced by course construction.

The course is home to bald eagles, red-winged blackbirds, a variety of

small wildlife, and an array of wildflowers, including lupine, yarrow, aster, columbine and Indian paintbrush.

An aquifer below the course supplies drinking water. The aquifer's presence led to the original pact between the resort and its Olympic Valley neighbors. Opponents of the initial 1983 course permit request feared pesticides normally associated with golf course maintenance would contaminate the aquifer water with nitrogen and damage the surrounding wetlands.

To resolve the conflict, the resort's owners commissioned a two-year study, at a cost exceeding \$1 million, to develop management techniques utilizing natural fertilizers and biological controls that would mitigate any damage to the wetlands and aquifer.

The study resulted in the Chemical Application and Management Plan (CHAMP), which was a key factor in persuading Lake Tahoe's Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board to grant approval for the golf course. The board and the Army Corps of Engineers supervised all construction.

"The measures taken to minimize the impact to the surrounding environment were better than any we've seen here before," said Jerry Peacock, an engineer with the Water Quality Control Board.

Those measures appear to have paid off. Last December, the course was designated as a Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary by the Audubon Society of New York State in conjunction with the United States Golf Association.

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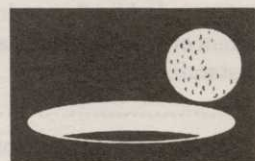
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