

Sunless and rain-laden, Florida's courses causing stiff test for supers

By JOEL JACKSON

Florida's golf courses escaped El Niño's big wind, but the heavy rains are causing serious problems.

A winter storm attributed to El Niño raced across central Florida in the early morning of Feb. 22, unleashing a cluster of tornadoes that touched down in Kissimmee,

Winter Garden and Sanford near the middle of the state and in Ormond Beach on the East Coast. Forty people were killed and hundreds of families left homeless as the twisters targeted several residential areas.

A survey of courses in the affected areas revealed that no golf courses were hit directly and any

damage sustained was no more than a few broken limbs and power outages typical of any Florida thunderstorm. Kissimmee Bay Country Club may well have been the closest course to the destruction.

"We were very lucky," said superintendent Jim Moulton. "The tornado that did all that

damage to the Ponderosa Park mobile homes touched down only three-tenths of a mile from here. The irony is that we were going to be sweeping and vacuuming the course for all the fallen oak leaves, and the next day after the tornado, they were gone — sucked up by the tornado."

Kissimmee Bay was without

power for six days and managed to stay open by renting eight portable generators to operate the clubhouse facilities and charge the carts. As a result, the club will be installing a large emergency generator for future back-up.

Duane Petersen at nearby Meadow Woods Golf Course also dodged the bullet on that fateful morning.

"We were in the path, but it skipped over us," he said. "Our problem has been like everyone else's in the state: lousy growing conditions. The weather has been wetter and warmer than usual and that has led to lots of algae and fungus on the greens.

While the courses in central Florida avoided the cataclysmic disaster, they have been enduring more insidious and frustrating effects from the freakish uncharacteristic weather patterns spawned by El Niño.

Rainfall records tumbled as precipitation amounts four to seven times normal were recorded during Florida's normally drier winter months. The incessant rains and overcast days ruined attempts to establish stands of overseeded grasses and made normal turf management on unoverseeded greens a nightmare.

The soggy conditions have caused more course closings, lost revenues and marginal playing conditions than any other prime winter season in recent years.

Dan Alwyn, superintendent of Oceanside Country Club in Ormond Beach, said: "We missed the wind damage, but the heavy rainfall just added to the misery of our thinner-than-normal greens. The constant rains have kept the greens very soft and ball marks have become a major problem."

Superintendents Joe Ondo at Winter Park Pines and Pat Hennessey of Disney's Bonnet Creek Club are preparing to regrass their greens.

"During the worst spells of rain and overcast in December and January, some of our weaker strains of Tifdwarf just disappeared," said Ondo. "I have had soil and tissue tests run for nematodes, disease and chemical residues to identify the problem. Nothing has come back positive. It was basically environmental stress."

Hennessey attributed the thinning of several of his greens to a combination of circumstances aggravated by the bad weather.

"When the weather started going bad, we were in the middle of a major event which required us to keep several of our greens

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Florida in long-term 'greyness'

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groomed to maintain high greens speeds," he said. "They had a lot of foot traffic and we had an outbreak of Pythium at the same time. Without good growing conditions, they just couldn't take it. Then the floodgates really opened up and high water levels up to 10 feet above normal kept the greens' sub-

drains full and the root zones under the greens saturated."

Preparing for major professional golf events in the area has been a difficult challenge for superintendents. Tom Alex of Grand Cypress Golf Club hosted the LPGA's Healthsouth Inaugural in January.

"First, the decision to host the tournament was made after we

had begun our overseeding program for 1997-98. At that time we didn't know we'd be hosting the event," Alex said. "In the past we had been very successful with a 100-percent bentgrass overseeding and we decided to try it again this year, but this winter was decidedly different.

"Bentgrass doesn't like wet and humid conditions and that's what this winter has been. We were fortunate to get through

the tournament just as the bentgrass was germinating, but the prolonged dark and damp conditions took their toll on several greens. We are in the process of rebuilding a couple of greens that didn't handle the wet weather very well."

Dwight Kummer at Bay Hill Club spent a nervous winter nursing thinner-than-normal greens through December and January.

"Getting ready for this year's Bay Hill Invitational has been a battle of wills," he said. "Every time we put down seed, it would rain and wash it away. Consequently, we have had to seed more often than in the past to get the density we wanted for the tournament."

"Also, the weather didn't permit us to be as aggressive grooming our greens this winter. We kept the solid rollers on our mowers all the way through January. We began to see a break in the weather in early February with sunnier days. Fortunately, it's finally coming together."

The widespread decline of course conditions this winter prompted the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, U.S. Golf Association Green Section and University of Florida to send out letters and information packets to Florida courses and superintendents to help explain and deal with the effects of El Niño's weather patterns on growing turf on Florida's courses this winter.



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Maine 'iced' in

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trees, Skorulski suggested superintendents look for sugar and red maples, oaks in more sandy regions, and hickory. "Ash are getting hit by certain diseases, but I'd prefer them to the low-value trees like poplar, weeping willow and silver maple," he said.

Stipes was hopeful about New Harmony and Valley Forge — new elm trees from the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, D.C., which are not on the market yet.

In the meantime, some superintendents might look at this example of nature's tree-thinning as "a blessing in disguise," said Skorulski. "If they've had some problems with trees out on the course, this is their chance to take care of them."

"Nature has been trimming trees for years. It's one of the greatest tree maintenance methods," said turfgrass consultant Terry Buchen. "A lot of times it will only remove dead wood. But I realize there are extremes where it does severe damage."

"I suppose there are a few trees I would have liked to take down," said Hoisington. "On the 3rd tee we lost trees behind the tee that will increase sunlight and air circulation. But, overall, it's much better to go in and cut them than to have the damage we did."

Whatever course superintendents take, Skorulski said they can expect to see the effects of The Ice Storm of the Century for many, many years to come. "Five, six, eight years from now, you'll see misshaped forms out there," he said.