

# IT'S THE CONDITIONS, STUPID!

At Rocky Gap Lodge & Golf Resort, Mark Jewell is fixing agronomic problems by returning to basic cultural practices.  
Photo: Rocky Gap & Golf Resort

By John Walsh

## ENHANCING COURSE CONDITIONS CAN IMPROVE A FACILITY'S POSITION IN THE MARKETPLACE

To stay a leg up on competition in markets throughout the country, most facilities are focusing on three things: course conditions, service and amenities. Many, if not all, agree the success of a golf facility depends on the playing conditions of the course. And many are spending money to improve those conditions to bolster or hold their position in the marketplace.

### WHERE IT SHOULD BE

Rocky Gap Lodge & Golf Resort in Cumberland, Md., features an 18-hole Jack Nicklaus signature design, driving range and practice facility. It opened in 2000, but despite its age, the course wasn't in good shape a year ago and needed improvement.

"There was a severe lack of fertility on the tees, fairways and rough," says Mark Jewell, director of golf maintenance operations since September 2006. "There was a lot of disease pressure and dollar spot. Preemergent weed control hadn't been done in two years. There was a lot of crabgrass, clover and thistle. There were propertywide problems with weeds. A lot of cultural practices weren't being done."

Jewell, who helped with the grow-in of the course as an assistant, says he was hired specifically to improve course conditions.

"Fixing the problem is all about getting back to basic cultural practices, such as large aerification (five-eighths cores), along with preemergent and postemergent herbicide programs," he says. "We started a new program when I arrived Sept. 18. The first thing we did was aerify. My assistant has been here eight years, and he said it was the first time in eight years the greens were aerified twice in one year."

Currently, Jewell is focused on controlling thatch.

The staff had a lot of time to work on the newly implemented turfgrass management program after aerification was done last year because of the warm winter, Jewell says. The staff, including an assistant, irrigation tech and full-time mechanic, consists of 16 workers. Jewell kept the existing staff and added a spray technician and two equipment operators when he arrived.

"I'm a 'keep it simple, stupid' type manager," he says. "It's a team effort. I want the crew to buy into the program. I teach them about the program because the more knowledge they have, the better they'll be."

Jewell has had help financially, too. Since his arrival, the maintenance budget increased \$200,000.

"When I came on board, Billy Casper Golf

recommended that increase to turn the golf course around," he says.

BCG is under contract with Crestline Hotels & Resorts for five years to perform agronomic maintenance on the golf course. Crestline manages the property, and the Maryland Environmental Development Association owns the property.

Rounds and revenue at Rocky Gap have declined for several years, Jewell says, admitting he doesn't have exact numbers. But he started to see things coming around last fall. Last December, thanks to a warm winter, the course generated 785 rounds versus a budget of 50.

Jewell says feedback from golfers and golf writers from the Baltimore and Pittsburgh areas has been positive. And last fall, the resort added sales representatives in Northern Virginia and Pittsburgh.



The \$2-million renovation of Cottonwood Valley Golf Course made the product acceptable again, says superintendent Rusty Wilson.



The golf courses at the Shawnee Inn and Golf Resort were reconfigured to attract beginner golfers. Photo: Shawnee Inn and Golf Resort

"We're marketing aggressively, drawing on the tri-state area in key markets," he says. "We'd like to be around 20,000 rounds Dec. 31. We're open every day of the year weather permitting.



Jewell

"We're out to provide the best product we can," Jewell adds. "Customer service in our No. 1 goal. We're making sure we're sound, culturally, and have a well-trained staff. We're getting the word out that we're back in the shape that a Jack Nicklaus course should be."

#### REFOCUS

Bill Troyanoski, general manager of Saddle Creek Resort in Copperopolis, Calif., which features one 18-hole golf course that's 11 years old, is in a position like Jewell's. Troyanoski, who has been there two years, was hired to improve golf course conditions, which weren't flattering, he says.

"No one understood the status of the golf course," Troyanoski says. "We are a real-estate driven entity. When I arrived, we were going through two and a half years of growth, and our weaknesses were masked. Once things slowed down, we asked, 'Where are the guest and package rounds? The way to do that is through quality, culture, service, amenities and golf course conditions.'"

So Troyanoski made changes working with the current structure and hired Paul R. Latshaw, who brought clarity and vision, as a consultant. Latshaw helped Troyanoski before at Roycebrook Golf Club in Hillsborough, N.J. But some things didn't change, such as golf course superintendent Scott Dickson and the maintenance budget (\$1.3 million) because there was no need to change those, Troyanoski says.

"It was a perfect example of good superintendent with less than spectacular leadership (from management)," he says.

Troyanoski, Dickson and Latshaw are working to get a healthy stand of ryegrass in the fairways, eliminating the bentgrass that contaminates it and relieving compaction.

"We needed to change the soils," Troyanoski says. "We've added gypsum and more organics. We have some work to do on greens to get them where they need to be. We also purchased equipment such as an AerWay vertiquake and eradicated the *Poa* with chemicals. There's no secret to this. It's a timing and persistence issue, not a labor or budget issue. Killing turf is tough. It's hard to sell the future."

Sometimes the wrong equipment is being used to maintain golf courses and is actually damaging a golf course, Troyanoski says.

"A triplex is used on slopes and hills, and when it turns, it will rip up the turf," he says. "People use a triplex attempting to save man hours, but they're actually tearing up the turf. Green surrounds are more

busy than fairways, and if green surrounds are ripped up, that's what golfers will see."

Troyanoski also looked at the history of outside guest play and only to find rounds had been declining for three years. However, guest rounds have increased this year and are expected to eclipse 12,000 after declining to 9,000.

"The golf course is our engine," he says. "Without the golf course, Saddle Creek is a beautiful place with something missing."

Amid improvements, competition in the area is expected to heat up.

"There will be two to three golf courses added in the next five years," Troyanoski says. "We're aware of the competition, but we're not letting the competition dictate what we do. You need to be prepared to be a leader. You want to set the pace, not somebody else."

#### ACCEPTABLE AGAIN

To improve its status in the market, Four Seasons is improving the conditions of the two courses at the Four Seasons Resort and Club Dallas at Las Colinas in Irving, Texas. Four Seasons renovated the 27-year-old, 18-hole Cottonwood Valley Golf Course, and currently is reconstructing the Tournament Players Course, which is estimated to cost \$8 million. Everything is being renovated on the TPC course, but it won't be rerouted, says golf course superintendent Rusty Wilson.

Wilson says the family-oriented club is considered a value in the area. Wilson, who has been there a little longer than three years, says the initiation fee is \$50,000, which includes use of two golf courses, spas, pro shop and tennis courts. Higher-end clubs in the area cost \$125,000 to



Troyanoski

\$150,000 just for golf, he says.

The club, which has 700 golfing members and hosts the EDS Byron Nelson Championship every year, had been struggling with membership, and course condition was one of the reasons, Wilson says. So members wanted the renovation. Last year, Cottonwood's green complexes were renovated, the tees were leveled and the bunkers were renovated. The old greens were built on calcareous sand, and the turf had short roots. The *Poa annua* greens were contaminated with Bermudagrass, which is in the fairways and approaches.

"The product, including the putting green quality, was unacceptable," Wilson says.

The renovation of Cottonwood – the course closed from July 15 to January 15 – cost about \$2 million. Four Seasons paid for the renovation; members weren't assessed. An LS 44/962 blend of bentgrass is now on the greens and sand was added to the clay-based tees. The fairways are still 419 Bermudagrass. Landscapes Unlimited renovated the greens and tees, and C.R. Sanders renovated the bunkers. Jay Morrish was the architect.

"When we did bunker renovation, we added excessive drainage in a box formation nine feet apart like greens construction," Wilson says.

Originally, the renovation project was going to be a three-year plan, renovating six holes at a time, but Four Seasons decided to take the

hit right away and do the whole thing at once, Wilson says.

Associated with the renovation, there's been a marketing strategy from the beginning, Wilson says.

"The selling point now is to get in at a lower price because when the TPC course is finished, fees will increase because we'll have two new golf courses. Because of this strategy, membership has increased."

#### GOLF AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Shawnee Inn and Golf Resort in Shawnee on Delaware, Pa., recently renovated its golf facility, turning one 18-hole course (originally designed by A.W. Tillinghast), one nine-hole course and a driving range into a 27-hole championship golf course and a par-3 course.

Being right next to the Delaware River can cause problems. The river recently flooded the golf course, which has been closed at various times for six weeks during the past three years. As a result of the flood, electrical service was lost on the lower level, and DensGlass (gypsum sheathing) was installed next to the river. The flood hurt the resort financially because golf is normally 30 percent of its revenue.

"There's a lot of talk about water management, but there's not much to be done," says general manager Rob Howell. "It's life on the Delaware. We tout our location on the Delaware River,

even though Mother Nature has taught us she's the boss."

There are two courses within 10 minutes of the resort – one is a Jack Nicklaus design and the other is a Donald Ross design. The facility's competition is other resorts.

"We're trying to market Shawnee as a golf destination," Howell says. "We're targeting the East Coast. We're only 75 miles outside New York City."

As part of that mission, management built a golf academy and the three-hole short game area designed by Tom Doak, who ended up designing a nine-hole course. Part of the Approach Course doubles as a driving range. Tee times for the Approach Course, which is lighted, are from 5:30 p.m. to 11 p.m. The lighting decision wasn't made with marketing research, it was more an intuitive decision by the owner, Charles Kirkwood, Howell says.

"Night golf is steadily improving," Howell says.

The new course layout was designed to give those who are intimidated by 18 holes, and those who work all day and would like to play at night, an opportunity to play nine holes.

"However, we do get golfers who play 27 holes in one day," Howell says. "There's a historical significance to it because architect A.W. Tillinghast's first design was here."

Staffing has been increased to support the recent renovation at Shawnee, which opened in 1911 and hosted the 1938 PGA championship. The golf course maintenance staff was beefed up for the Approach Course and instructors were hired for the golf academy.

The resort, which added outdoor dining for golfers, is focusing on an Audubon program for the 27-hole championship course, not the Approach Course. They should be certified in five or six years, Howell says.

"We're going through a renaissance of focusing on our history, golf and the environment," Howell says. **GCI**

Eliminating bentgrass that was contaminating ryegrass in the fairways and reducing thatch were top priorities to improve course conditions at Saddle Creek. Photo: Saddle Creek Resort

