

A job well done



The clubhouse at Oakmont (Pa.) Country Club.
Photo: John Walsh

All the prep work has long been finished and the media spotlight no longer shines on Oakmont (Pa.) Country Club. After hosting the U.S. Open for the eighth time, the course is healing and members are back to playing on their 104-year-old course.

John Zimmers, the club's grounds superintendent, is back to his staff of about 40. During the week of the U.S. Open, he had about 160 volunteers help him and his staff prepare and maintain the course. Volunteers included golf course superintendents, assistant superintendents (including all of Zimmers' former assistants), friends of Zimmers and vendors.

Zimmers, who has been at the club eight years, plotted the work for everyone on a spreadsheet to determine how many people he needed to work on the course. For example, Zimmers figured he needed 20 people on bunker

detail on both the front and back nine because there are 210 bunkers on the course.

Paul R. Latshaw, a mentor to Zimmers, was one of the volunteers on hand to help.

"He spent a lot of time here," Zimmers says. "He was there for support and at times would do inspections and give advice if I was tied up. He followed up on things for me. He helped more with the agronomic aspect of things. He asked me what I thought we needed to do to get where we needed to be. Most of the time you know the answer, but it's nice to ask someone who's been through it before."

Ninety-nine percent of the volunteers arrived the Sunday afternoon before the Open, Zimmers says. He and the volunteers reviewed everything to make sure everyone's role was understood. Then, that evening, they went out on the course to practice.

"You try and put people you know in certain spots," he says. "You get people from all over the world who want to come and volunteer, but you can't accommodate everybody. It's important that people know what I expect and accept and how I operate. Volunteers could be very good superintendents elsewhere, yet I might have to ask them to redo something, such as rake a bunker, mow a fairway, fill a divot, straighten a tee, because it wasn't what I wanted. Generally, it's because we see something we can do better. We ask volunteers to do a better job and not take it personally."

Volunteering isn't necessarily a glamorous job. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday before the Open, some volunteers just pushed rotary mowers all day.

"Volunteers do whatever you ask them to do," Zimmers says. "Volunteering is great exposure for them."

The mindset of Zimmer's staff is different during the Open compared to the weeks and months leading up to it. And the execution starts with the staff.

"I explain to them the volunteers are here to help, not steal the show," Zimmers says. "I take a staff member and pair him with volunteers."

Days are long during Open week. Some days, Zimmers and his staff start at 3:45 a.m. and don't finish until 10 or 11 p.m. During the Open, there's downtime between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m., although during that time the staff washes everything and gets everything reloaded for later that evening after the

golfers finish. During that time, the staff and volunteers look at the grass and look for small details, such as sand that's been blown on greens. The staff and volunteers watch the Open on TV, looking for anything they might need to fix.

There was no crisis during the Open, Zimmers says, although a storm rolled through Wednesday during practice, setting the staff back to start the maintenance later that evening.

There's always a lot to learn when hosting a tournament of this magnitude, Zimmers says.

"There was more media than I thought there would be," he says.

The only surprising comment Zimmers heard from the golfers about course conditions was Phil Mickelson's when he said the rough was a physical hazard.

"The USGA set up the course, and we managed it within the USGA guidelines," he says. "We always want the golf course to hold up, but a lot is dependent on the weather and how the USGA sets up the course. Golfers were saying it was the hardest golf course in the U.S., if not the world. But we wanted them to say one word, and they said it - fair - the course was fair."

Since the Open's end, Zimmers and his staff have been working on areas of the course, such as outside the rough, in the deep rough and around the tees.

"There's a lot of work, but this isn't the first U.S. Open Oakmont has hosted," he says. "The members know what to expect."

Zimmers and staff aerated and seeded the spectator crossing areas on some of the fairways.

"You'd be hard pressed to tell there was a crosswalk there," he says. "We had a plan and jumped on it Monday (June 18). The weather has helped with course recovery. A lot of it is planning and preparation."


Club members - there are 400 - played golf Wednesday after the Open. The course was closed Tuesday, and the media played Monday.

"The USGA was very satisfied, and the members were very proud," Zimmers says. "I don't think you can ask for more than that."

- John Walsh

Editor's note: A longer version of this article can be read at www.golfcourseindustry.com.


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Management group reunion



Pete Davison

Something about the recently-formed Sage Golf Group might sound familiar to some. The golf course management company might be new, but this isn't the first time its executives have worked together.

Sage president and c.e.o. Pete Davison worked for the PGA Tour's Tournament Player's Club network for 25 years. Originally a golf professional, Davison was hired to oversee operations at the network's first facility, TPC Sawgrass, in 1980. He worked his way up in the organization, ultimately managing the operation of all TPC clubs.

Most of the other Sage staff members' resumes read like Davison's. His wife, Jayne, ran merchandising at TPC and has similar responsibilities now. Mike Diffenderffer, senior consultant for marketing and membership, was with the TPC for more than 20 years. Roberta McDougal handled accounting and financial functions for the TPC for 20 years and now is the vice president of financing and accounting and a partner at Sage. Chris Wilkerson, senior consultant

of construction management and Chuck Green, vice president, were with TPC for about 15 years.

Combined, the team has about 150 years of experience in the industry. They decided to take their experience into an environment they felt suited them better. They recently set up offices in Ponte Verde Beach, Fla., not too far from the PGA Tour's headquarters.

"We enjoy working with each other and agreed we'd get out of the corporate rat race, so to speak," Davison says. "I enjoyed working in it, but I like that we're all owners of this company and the only people we answer to are ourselves."

Davison and the other employees won't conduct themselves any differently than they did while working for the TPC network, but now they don't answer to a board. The other difference is they don't have the well-known PGA Tour or TPC brands behind them, so they have to increase marketing efforts that much more to create a name for themselves.



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Davison believes the group can stand out in the industry because he knows of only a handful of management companies that cater specifically to upscale clubs. (A list from 2003 compiled by the Club Managers Association of America listed almost 140 management companies in existence in the U.S.) Plus, high-tiered golf clubs make up a minority of all golf courses, he says.

"We thought we'd have a boutique-type management company," he says. "We manage one club at a time."

Sage's offerings include membership, marketing, operational analysis and a fairly extensive range of agronomy services. The company aims to work in concert with owners and developers, taking a hands-on approach to hiring a team to manage a course, develop a business plan and hold them accountable for that plan. The company draws from its successful practices at the TPC network to try and bring about the same results now.

"We try to exceed customers' expectations," Davison says. "If you do that, you're going to be pretty special."

Davison is used to managing in a high-profile-club environment.

"The TPC hosted more than 275 PGA Tour events at clubs while I managed them," he says.

Even with seven staff members transitioning from the TPC to Sage, TPC is well staffed, Davison says. He left at the end of 2004, and the other staff members, with the exception of one, took early retirement and left at different points after he did.

"We hired a lot of good people (at TPC) over the years," he says. "Understudies, so to speak, have taken over where we left off. They're doing fine."

Just a few months out of the box, Sage is focusing on building its client base. Davison is talking to possible clients in multiple parts of the world, including the U.S., Mexico and the central-Caribbean region.

The company is likely to take on 10 properties in its first 10 months, says Davison, who's comfortable with where the company is positioned.

"We're not trying to be the biggest company," he says. "We want to share the knowledge and experience we have with other people and allow them to become successful because of it." – Heather Wood

For more information about Sage Golf Group, visit www.sagegolfgroup.com.

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20 years in the desert

As Desert Mountain Community in Scottsdale, Ariz., celebrates its 20th anniversary, management says golf and the role of golf course communities look different than they did when Lyle Anderson first came up with idea to develop the site. But despite the changes, they're still finding ways to adapt.

Six Jack Nicklaus-designed courses – the most courses by him in one place – are sprawled out throughout 8,000 acres in northern Arizona. The 2,150 people who live in the golf course community comprise the membership.

The courses were built one by one until 2000, says Shawn Emerson, director of agronomy for all six courses. Each course has its own personality and theme, reflecting the different points in time each was built. But each course fits into the framework of the overall community.

"Nicklaus' theory on golf didn't change," he says. "The product changed a little bit, but just sort of the fluff parts. The quality of how he constructed it didn't change."



With each course, the staff became more familiar with Nicklaus' style, and this helped with the courses that came after, Emerson says.

"We had a lot of input on how the operation needs to fit in with the design from experience," he says. "That was key. He had confidence in us and knows what we can do."

Emerson is amazed to see how the industry evolves each time a new course is built and incorporates technology that has been updated since the preceding course was constructed.

Bob Jones, senior vice president of Desert Mountain, agrees the industry has changed from a business perspective as well. Overall, the community of courses experienced a fairly healthy increase in rounds until Sept. 11. Rounds growth has been less than 1 percent since then.

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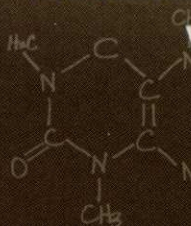
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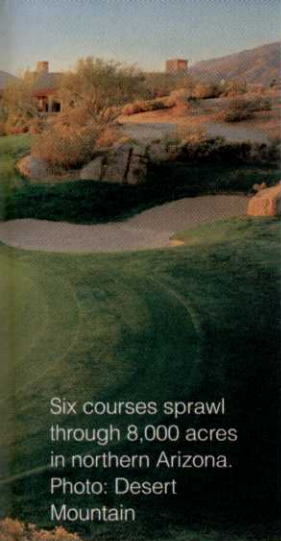
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Six courses sprawl through 8,000 acres in northern Arizona. Photo: Desert Mountain

The courses generated about 145,000 rounds last year.

Management has had to change its focus, and it puts more emphasis on the entire experience, not just a golf experience, Jones says. This approach seems to be taking hold, as more people are living at the community year-round, rather than treating the community as a second home or getaway, as

they did when Desert Mountain first opened. The members are using more of the community's other amenities, including the increasingly popular fitness and spa-related activities, and golfing less, Jones says.

The club also has faced other golf-related challenges and changes in its first 20 years. The biggest change is the method of irrigating the courses, Emerson says. Because of increasing consciousness of water conservation, the courses have switched to an irrigation system with effluent water. The courses now have irrigation systems that work more precisely, watering only as necessary to prevent waste.

Desert Mountain isn't immune to the skyrocketing costs other courses face. Management tries to stay on top of rising material costs

because of fuel costs and other factors and budget for it as much as possible. The business department provides frequent updates.

"We're operating in real-time," Emerson says. "That validated decisions we've made as managers about paths we need to go down. To run a club of this magnitude, you have to be able to pick up on trends."

Another key to running a club of this size is having a capable staff to run each aspect. Jones credits a solid training program for keeping everything running smoothly among the 700 employees. Comment cards and surveys are made available to members to rate their service and their interaction with the employees. A rating of 87 percent or higher must be maintained for employees to receive yearly incentives and bonuses.

Jones retains employees by making it a desirable place to work. Each year, he compares employees' pay with the standard acceptable rate in the industry to make sure all is fair.

Emerson left the course for employment elsewhere, only to return two years later. He has been at the club 11 straight years.

"People always want to look for something greener, but then you realize there's nothing better out there," he says. "What makes Desert Mountain exceptional is that it holds itself to high standards." – HW

Better coverage

In 2001, Tony Girardi, CGCS, knew he wanted to increase the irrigation system's coverage at Rockrimmon Country Club in Stamford, Conn. Course conditions weren't what he wanted, and improving coverage seemed to be the answer. But as nearby areas began to impose water restrictions, Girardi knew it wasn't just about water coverage, it was about efficiency, too.

Older than 25 years, the system was aging. The technology was outdated, and the sprinkler heads didn't water the course evenly, creating waste and less-than-desired conditions. So, after receiving the blessing of the green committee in 2001, Girardi chose a new and improved, wall-to-wall, multirow irrigation system.

The new system uses more sprinkler heads that are spaced closer together. The old system had 450 heads in single lines on the fairways. Now, there are 1,350 Rain Bird Eagle 700/750 heads with head-to-head spacing. The number of heads increased dramatically, partly because the coverage area was increased to include the roughs.

"Where we used to irrigate 30 acres, now we water 80 acres," Girardi says. "We're almost tripling the irrigation heads while putting out almost equal or just a little bit more water."

The irrigation system used to consume about 15 million gallons of water per year, and now, with 50 more acres of coverage, water usage increased to about 18 million gallons.



An aging irrigation system caused Rockrimmon Country Club to install a new one. Photo: Rockrimmon Country Club

"It's evident in the numbers that we've been more efficient with water," Girardi says. "I'm pretty confident what we installed is working pretty well for us."

Water efficiency is becoming more important in several areas of the U.S. as it becomes scarce and regions restrict usage. Girardi isn't



oblivious to the situation – Stamford is next to Westchester County, N.Y., which imposed water restrictions.

Restrictions or not, Girardi tries to water efficiently. The new system helps him do that more than he has been able to with the older system. He can control each sprinkler head from his office computer or with handheld Palm Pilots and radio-controlled devices, improving head-to-head coverage. If there's a hot spot or a dry patch on the fairway, Girardi can independently run heads to bring more attention to those areas without wasting water by running all the heads at the same strength.

Although Girardi says he's no authority on irrigation, this is the second complete system he has installed during his career. In addition, he retrofitted Rockrimmon's system after he arrived 13 years ago.

The biggest benefit of the computerized system is the ability to integrate the evapotranspiration rate to water the course most efficiently, Girardi says.

It took contractor C.R.I.S. Irrigation from August 2001 to early June 2002 to install the system at a cost of \$1.3 million. The course, which generates about 14,000 rounds a year, remained open during that time. Surprisingly to the membership (the club has 175

members), it wasn't much of a disturbance. At first, it wasn't an easy sell for the greens committee and membership, Girardi says.

“It's something members really don't see because it's in the ground,” he says, adding it's not like going into the clubhouse to dine and seeing a difference in the food quality. “They don't see it, so it's hard to justify,” he says.

Once the project was completed, it took only one or two seasons for members to realize how much the playing conditions improved, Girardi says.

Because of the system's expanded coverage area, Girardi can't claim he's saving money on water or electricity costs, but he saves in manpower.

“Maintenance and repair costs decreased from \$10,000 annually to \$7,500 per year,” he says. The savings are in the overall conditions of the golf course. We've got one of the biggest wait lists we've seen at the club. We're financially sound, we have a sound membership, and a big part of that is due to the irrigation and golf course conditioning.” – HW

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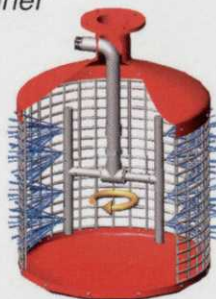
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