

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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