

THE PUSH FOR PERFECTION

Golfers and superintendents strive
for the best possible course conditions

Hosting tournaments impacts the turf conditions
of Flintrock Falls Golf Course. Photo: ClubCorp

BY JOHN WALSH

Even though there's no such thing as a perfectly conditioned golf course, superintendents move heaven and earth to get as close as they can to that impossible standard. Pressure from golfers, owners and, most often, themselves drives superintendents to aim for perfection. From high-end private clubs to municipal tracks, the common goal is to provide the best possible playing conditions.

Different areas of the country react differently to golf course perfection, but clubs that host major tournaments drive the demand for perfection, says Doug Miller, vice president of golf course management for Dallas-based ClubCorp.

"Greens are stimping at 12 to 14 for tournaments but not daily," he says. "You won't find those conditions during the tournaments every day. Those conditions peak after a year of preparation."

Mission Hills Country Club in Rancho Mirage, Calif., Firestone Country Club in Akron, Ohio, and Flintrock Falls Golf Course in Austin, Texas, are three ClubCorp facilities that host tournaments.

"They all produce excellent playing conditions and good visuals to go with that," Miller says.

Almost all of the company's 90 facilities are private with the exception of five public facilities that have been in the company's portfolio for a while. Most of its managed facilities' golf course maintenance budgets fall in the \$600,000- to \$2-million range.

Depending on Mother Nature, having a wall-to-wall green course at a higher height of cut is easier and cheaper than producing tournament conditions, Miller says.

"For tournament conditions, you need more control of water, which means more labor, and more money is spent on chemicals because you're putting the plant under pressure," he says. "Brown areas are OK in some cases during tournament preparation because playing conditions are paramount to color. Brown turf is more accepted than in the past. Areas of the country that have water restrictions understand water use better than a place that receives a lot of rain. There will always be places where water is an issue. Those places understand the lush look

isn't always possible."

Tournament or not, perfect course conditions start with greens.

"You treat the greens like a princess, then move out from there," says Jay Willis, superintendent at the 18-hole Glen Eagle Golf Course in Millington, Tenn. "People will still push the conditions and limits. For example, walk-mowing fairways ... that's too much."

PRESSURE

As all superintendents know well, stress comes with the job, and whether that stress is self induced or brought on by owners or golfers, superintendents will continue to feel it.

"Members always want course conditions to be better," Miller says. "There always seems to be pressure from the club down the street. Superintendents also put pressure on themselves to do more with what they have to work with. But conditions have improved because superintendents have pushed the limits. Eight to nine feet on the Stimpmeter was fast 20 years ago. Today, it's average at best."

Willis says he puts more pressure on himself than golfers do.

"Recently, when I looked at the course from a distance, it looked fine because it was green, but when I played the course, I was sick to my stomach because the greens weren't in good condition," he says.

Yet a superintendent who works at an equity-owned club will feel more pressure for perfect course conditions than one at a public course because the golfers have a stake in the club, Willis says.

Mission Hills Country Club produces excellent playing conditions, says Doug Miller, v.p. of golf course management for ClubCorp. Photo: ClubCorp

"My director of golf plays all of the courses in Memphis, and as long as the greens, tees and fairways are the best I can condition them, he's OK with that," he says. "He understands I can't do certain things such as weeding around every tree and trimming around cart paths. For awhile, I worked around the clubhouse, designing the landscaping around it. That saved the owner a bunch of money, but it was time spent away from the course. I'm paying for it now because the thatch has built up in the Bermudagrass greens."

Fred Behnke, CGCS, at Mount Prospect (Ill.) Municipal Golf Course, agrees the demand for perfection is self inflicted.

"I see what everyone else is up to when we have local superintendent chapter meetings," he says. "We're a funny group of guys. We'll trade equipment or share a jug of fungicide to get through the tough times, but by the same token, we're competitors. You're always measuring yourself against others."

"If I don't see that prime-time demographic after the regulars tee off in the early morning and if I see open slots on the tee sheet, I feel pressure because I think it's because the conditions aren't measuring up," he adds. "We had nine inches of rain in August. We're a swamp."





Fred Behnke, CGCS, puts pressure on himself to make the conditions at Mount Prospect Municipal Golf Course the best they can be. Photo: Hi-tech Fred

One area of the course Willis improved is the older runway tees. He grew rough in between the tees to separate them and give them definition.

CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

Golfer input is an important aspect of trying to reach perfect course conditions. For Willis, playing golf with customers to ask questions about his practices helps put conditions into perspective.

“They usually ask about aerification and why the grass is the height it is,” says Willis, who has been at Glen Eagle for the past four years. “It’s always good to get feedback. I usually wait until the sixth hole to tell them who I am. The golfers here are very reasonable because they understand what I have to work with, even though they’re always asking why this course doesn’t look like the one down the street.”

Willis has a staff of five in addition to six or seven inmates from a local prison. The inmate program is through the Navy, which owns the course, and has been in place since before Willis arrived. Prison labor pays 12 cents an hour.

“I only get four or five hours of work a day from them,” says Willis, who works with a maintenance budget of about \$500,000. “I’m constantly training people because they rotate. Only one or two work at a good pace, but it’s worthwhile to have the inmates because I need to get the work done.”

Willis says the better golfers complain about how true the greens roll and want a shorter

height of cut in fairways. Higher handicappers want a higher height of cut in fairways, which is a half inch.

“We go after the better golfers,” he says. “Ten or higher on the Stimpmeter is what people expect. The ideal height of cut on fairways is 0.375 inch, but we can’t cut it that low because of the higher handicappers. It’s the same with tees and approaches. We’re not a high-end course. We’re a low-end public course.”

High handicappers also complain about roughs.

“It depends on the person and how much of a naturalist he is,” Willis says. “The rough, which is two inches here, should take the spin off the ball.”

Recently, there was a complete bunker renovation at Glen Eagle because the better handicappers expected better conditions. The old sand had a high pebble content.

At Mount Prospect, a golf advisory committee representing men, women and seniors conducts monthly meetings to talk golf, maintenance and operations. Behnke, who participates in those meetings, anticipates golfers’ feedback.

“In April, the meeting is about goose poop,” he says. “The May meeting is about *Poa* seed heads. We use Proxy and Primo to combat that. The July meeting is related to the club championship. And bunkers are always an issue. I encourage discussion about ball marks and divots, too. We distribute divot repair tools. Currently, high school golf is going on, and the kids don’t take care of the course like the residents do.”

Like all superintendents, Behnke receives good and bad feedback from golfers.

“I have a couple of customers who think I’m an idiot – four people who will never change their minds,” he says. “But the other 98 per-

I’m under pressure to get golf carts out there, but I’m holding the line.”

MINDSET

Although under pressure, knowing the golfers who play their courses and being in the right mindset helps superintendents improve course conditions. Glen Eagle, which was built in the mid-1950s as a nine-hole course and renovated in 1999 into an 18-hole facility, sells memberships, so members tend to have more of a concern about course conditions than those who aren’t members or don’t play there regularly. Willis says the golfers range from young people to seniors.

“It’s all over the board,” he says.

Previously, Willis worked at a private course in Germantown, Tenn., so he tries to keep up the standards at Glen Eagle.

“I’m thinking about course conditions just like the golfers because I grew up on a country club,” he says. “I look at the golf course like a member. I try to bring the experience I had growing up. I’m a 7 handicap. I like tight slopes around greens and fast greens. More superintendents play golf nowadays and manage the course as a golfer.

“We’re always looking for negative things to improve on to make it a better course,” he adds. “Our greens are good, but we have to triplex them because of labor constraints. If I could walk-mow greens, they’d be a lot better. The fairways have gotten better, but we need to pay more attention to the roughs. Roughs and out-of-play areas get neglected.”



At Mount Prospect Municipal Golf Course, course conditions have been improved by walk-mowing greens, switching to bentgrass fairways, grooming regularly and topdressing native-soil tees with sand. Photo: Hi-tech Fred

cent of golfers understand when I explain my rationale if they come to me. I try to be up at the pro shop daily and let people know who I am and what I do.”

An example of positive feedback came when a golfer let Behnke know one of the back tees was encroached upon by a tree, compromising the tee shot. So he brought an arborist in to take care of the problem.

“Golfers refer to this course as their club,” he says. “When I started here, the quality of the greens was compromised and rebates were demanded. Expectations are high.”

MAKE IT BETTER

Although Behnke says Mount Prospect, which generates 47,500 rounds a year, has the typical range of golfers that play there, he says it's not a typical public course.

“We hand-mow greens and have bentgrass

fairways,” says Behnke, who has been at the 18-hole course since 1987. “We provide upscale conditions. We’re a 3.5-star-rated facility by Golf Digest. We’ve made efforts to upgrade the site. Chicago public golf is competitive. We try to keep up with the Joneses because that’s what golfers demand.”

The height of cut in the fairways at Mount Prospect, which was built in the mid-1920s, is 0.45 inch, and the greens stimp at 9 to 9.5.

“We can’t go faster because of the contours on the greens,” says Behnke, whose maintenance budget is \$750,000. “Anything over 10 is exceeding the architectural speed limit. We had a tournament and double cut the greens and got the speed up to 11, but we ended up having six-hour rounds. A good thing happened because the green-speed problem has gone away. Nobody had fun. Nine and a half is a good speed for our greens.”

Other things Mount Prospect has done or is doing to try to achieve perfection include changing to bentgrass fairways, forming a master plan (the course needs a new irrigation system, Behnke says), grooming regularly and topdressing native-soil tees with sand.

“It’s an additional cost that I hope will provide better drainage,” he says about topdressing the tees. “We could spend \$5 million down the road to improve the golf course. We’re on the look out for new and better ways to do things. The Park District board and administration (who operate the course) have never said, ‘Sharpen your pencil and cut costs.’ They don’t want to get the phone calls and hear the complaints.”

NEGATIVE EFFECTS

With all the talk about perfect golf course conditions, the negative effects – stress, long hours, remaining under budget, etc. – can be

TEE 2 GREEN
“Interseeding works for us”



Hinsdale Golf Club
 Bob Malbusch, MC, CGCS

These notable superintendents from around the country are interseeding with Tee-2-Green bentgrasses to improve the playability of their greens, tees, and fairways.

- | | |
|---|--|
| Mark Kuhns, CGCS
Baltusrol Golf Club | Dave Phipps, CGCS
Stone Creek Golf Club |
| Sean McCue
Country Club at Castle Pines | Kevin Ross, CGCS
Country Club of the Rockies |



WE’VE GOT HISTORY

To see and hear their insights, tips, and techniques for successful interseeding visit www.tee-2-green.com/vidlib.html to see the video

PO BOX 250 Hubbard, OR 97032 USA • 800-547-0255 • FAX 503-651-2351

www.golfcourseindustry.com/readerservice - #28

98 Varieties
 What's Your Pleasure?

Catch up to the fact that Jacklin's been developing new seed varieties for more than 70 years. Whether they are berms, blues, fescues, or ryes, our in-depth research combined with our consistently high NIEP ratings make us a top performer in the industry.

Whatever your grass needs may be – lawn & landscape, sports turf, or golf course fairways, greens, tees, and roughs – our full product line, from our Alpha bentgrass to our Sunrise zoysia, has got you covered.

JACKLIN — THE BEST QUALITY YOU’LL EVER SEED.
 For more information: 1-800-688-SEED • www.jacklin.com

www.golfcourseindustry.com/readerservice - #29



Superintendent Jay Willis maintains Glen Eagle Golf Course with a golfer's mentality. After all, he's a golfer. Photo: Glen Eagle Golf Course

"Education at the club level, by GCSAA and on TV help reduce those expectations," he says. "Technology has allowed for better overall conditions on all golf courses compared to 10 years ago."

Time away from family is another consequence of the push for perfection.

"I had no family life when I was on bentgrass down here," Willis says. "Ultradwarfs have helped with putting conditions."

CONSTRAINTS

Whether private or public courses, big budgets or small, all superintendents have to deal with Mother Nature when trying to provide the desired level of course conditioning, which can

make things difficult.

But few if any superintendents have an unlimited budget to manicure a course just right. Most superintendents have to skip some maintenance practice somewhere in pursuit of perfection in the areas of play because of budget or labor constraints. Usually, those things aren't as important to members or are out-of-play areas. An example is native areas, which help superintendents focus on highly maintained areas.

TECHNOLOGY

The drive for perfection also is causing improvements in technology.

"Turfgrass will be engineered to do other things, equipment will be engineered to do different things," Miller says. "Superintendents, breeders, manufacturers and members will still force the limits to where we can go, but we'll reach a point when we can't go any farther." GCI

detrimental to progress. However, negatives involving golfers' expectations aren't as bad as they were 10 years ago because the golfing public is more educated about course conditions and the stresses that go with that, Miller says.

Consultant/Specifier, Pumping Station Producer, Owner/Superintendent *Finally a water filter they all agree on*

ORI Series

Line Pressure Powered Filters

- For irrigation system protection
- 50-12,000 gpm



ORE Series

Electric Powered Filters

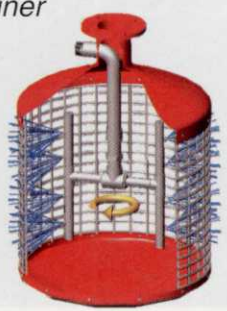
- For high dirt load
- 50-6,000 gpm



ORS Series

Pump Suction Strainer

- Fully automatic
- 100-5,300 gpm
- Heavy duty bearing



Case Study

Bodega Harbor Country Club recently replaced its three carbon steel Filtomat (now owned by Amiad) filters with all **Stainless Steel** construction Orival Filters



213 S. Van Brunt St.,
Englewood, NJ 07631
(800) 567-9767
(201) 568-3311
Fax (201) 568-1916
www.orival.com
filters@orival.com