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HOSTING A MAJOR AND NO TIME TO SPARE

“It came as a little bit of a surprise,” says Tom Alex of the December 2010 LPGA Tour Championship contested at Grand Cypress Golf Club in Orlando, Fla., where he has been director of golf maintenance for 25 years.

I wondered how it could be disruptive to someone who has prepared for nine previous LPGA events plus a World Cup until Tom informed me Grand Cypress was “awarded” the prestigious season-ending event in early September of this year – giving him just three months to prepare.

As a destination golf resort, Grand Cypress features 45 holes of Jack Nicklaus Signature golf, plus three teaching holes within the Grand Cypress Academy of Golf and two huge practice ranges.

The playing features are all hybrid Bermudagrass and – with the exception of The New Course – are overseeded with perennial ryegrass each fall.

Sitting with Tom in the grandstand behind the 17th green he outlined his concerns with readying a golf course for major event on such short notice.

Q: WHERE DO YOU START WITH ONLY 90 DAYS TO PREPARE?

A: After the meetings with the LPGA, sponsors and ownership we established a master list of things to do and which items would pose the biggest hurdles.

Like most golf courses over the past few years the sluggish economy has necessitated budget cutbacks. Labor reductions caused numerous key tasks to be tabled or not conducted as regularly as we would have liked.

So, in preparation for the LPGA Tour Championship, we needed to organize and prioritize a master list, increase staff hours, and review equipment and supplies to reach the preparation goals.

This included:

- Reviewing the needs for each playing feature to meet LPGA set-up standards. Our biggest concern was bunker preparation. Many bunkers needed sand, bank work and drainage;
- Re-budgeting to allow an increase in work hours and special projects both on and off the golf course;
- Sub-surface cultivation practices had to be rescheduled so as not to impact event play, especially work on the putting greens;
- Re-scheduling herbicide applications; and
- Organizing all off-course, set-up operations.

Most important, we had to properly time ryegrass overseeding to provide proper playing conditions on

short notice.

Previously, we hosted events between January and March, so the overseeding was fully established.

Q: HOW DID YOU RE-ORGANIZE THE OVER SEEDING AND WHAT PLANNING WENT INTO THIS PROCESS?

A: This was the toughest part. We had to move over seeding up a month, which meant the ryegrass competes with fully growing Bermudagrass.

In addition, the Florida weather was unpredictable – cold when it should have been hot; warm recently and with very little rain. Early overseeding meant ryegrass had to compete with Bermudagrass. Our ryegrass density was not there initially so we reseeded. This presented the problem of saturated fairways and roughs from excessive irrigation to germinate seed, leading to soggy and muddy conditions.

“These big events are a wonderful challenge and re-energize your career and attitudes. Even a short-notice project like this one gets the juices flowing again.”

– Tom Alex, Grand Cypress Golf Club, Orlando, Fla.

Course conditions were worsened by daily traffic from member/guest play, as we had to constantly repair damage.

Weed control for both pre-emergent and post-emergent herbicide applications were affected by the early over seed timing. We fought broad leaves, goose and crab grass, sedges and *Poa annua*.

Putting green overseeding was another challenge due to the Mini Verde Bermudagrass growing at rapid rates and impacting the *Poa trivialis* used for the putting green seed.

We increased our Primo use and closed the timing of the applications to slow the Bermudagrass growth. Much of our *Poa trivialis* either didn't catch quickly or was removed by mowing as we worked on height-of-cut, green speed and firmness issues.

A sparse overseeding affects ball roll and if the weather turned cold the Bermudagrass enters dormancy

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and we could lose surface smoothness.

Q: WHAT WERE THE CONCERNS OF THE LPGA ON SUCH SHORT NOTICE?

A: Having worked with the Rules field staff before, there were some minor concerns.

John Miller, the LPGA agronomist, had concerns about adding sand to the bunkers so close to the event. His worry was playing consistency as it related to depth, firmness and playing quality.

In addition, I reviewed with John a plan to reach tournament green speeds of 12 feet and surface firmness as the event approached. We took extra care with green speed due to the recent Nicklaus renovation.

Our crew worked closely with the LPGA field staff as our putting surfaces are full of undulations. If we weren't careful with speed and firmness, ball roll became unpredictable. Putting green irrigation applications were a top priority. Our Rain Bird moisture sensors, installed in many of our green soil profiles, helped our hand watering tremendously.

Finally, the over seeding density for fairways and primary rough grass were a concern in that we did not want a thin or cupped ball lie on the fairways or too thick a stand of ryegrass in the roughs.

Overall, it was good in the roughs and thin in the heavily trafficked fairway areas.

Q: AT THIS STAGE IN YOUR CAREER IS IT WORTH ALL THIS EFFORT AND WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE THOSE LOOKING TO BECOME INVOLVED IN TOURNAMENT GOLF?

A: Yes, most definitely I would do it again. These big events are a wonderful challenge and re-energize your career and attitudes. Even a short-notice project like this one gets the juices flowing again.

Although it has been nine years since my last event, not much has changed. The grind is still there. I would recommend to anyone who has an opportunity to prepare for a large event to do so. It will involve so many different aspects of your job – from large scale renovations to making sure the gas cap is tightened until it clicks. GCI

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