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OH CAPTAIN, MY CAPTAIN

Preparing a course for an international rivalry is a career-expanding task, one welcomed with open arms by Curtis Tyrrell, GCS, director of golf course operations at Medinah Country Club outside Chicago. His previous tournament experience was as on-course superintendent at the Cochise Course of the Golf Club at Desert Mountain in Scottsdale, Ariz., for The Tradition, a Champions Tour event.

Tyrrell's specialty is golf course construction: He actually came from Lake of Isles (Conn.) to rebuild Medinah's other two courses, No. 1 and No. 2. Used to the deadlines common in course construction, he had a knack for managing projects with lots of moving parts. While working on No. 1 and No. 2, he had an opportunity to look "under the hood" at No. 3, the venue for the Ryder Cup, which was originally laid out by Tom Bendelow in the late 1920s. And he found many agronomic issues in need of attention.

Around the time Tyrrell came on, Medinah brought in architect Rees Jones to renovate the Ryder Cup course. Jones' directive was to re-establish the integrity of the No. 3 – to toughen it up. The members wanted Jones to redesign the relatively flat greens, make the bunkers more penal, lengthen the course with new teeing grounds, and add bunkers that would come into play from the new tees and in second-shot landing zones on par 5s.

Tyrrell attended the Ryder Cup at Valhalla in 2008, where he first met Kerry Haigh, the PGA of America's managing director of championships and business development, and the man most responsible for course set-up for the organization. They discussed the upcoming Jones renovation, as well as Haigh's goals for the course and the Cup matches.

With a little more on the line than

the average golf nut, Tyrrell awaited the naming of the captain in January 2010. A self-professed "big fan" of Davis Love the golfer, Tyrrell is now also an admirer of Love the captain. "I was a bit star-struck when I first met him at the captain's announcement," Tyrrell admitted. "But I've come to admire his outgoing nature, courteous style, and respect for the golf course superintendent. Davis really made me feel an important and vital member of the 2012 Ryder Cup team."

The two had a private chat to get to know each other better. "We talked

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about our families, golf and the set-up goals for the golf course."

Love's main focus has been the primary rough, asking for it to be shorter to provide additional shot options. He also wanted to review fairway contours, rough contours, and ways to create intermediate rough, especially around bunkers and green contours. Right now, they are planning on the intermediate being cut at 1.25 inches and the primary rough at 2.5 inches, pending final decisions just before the matches begin.

With agreement on the roughs, over-seeding began. The mix included Kentucky bluegrass, creeping red and Chewing's fescue, and gray leaf spot-resistant perennial ryegrass to enhance ball lie. Fairways also have been widened slightly.

The plan for the bunkers is to make them as firm as possible, even tougher than Jones had them. Some bunkers now wrap around greens, toughening some possible hole locations.

Jones left his biggest mark on

the 15th hole, a par four that was shortened by about 100 yards, making it potentially driveable. (It can play as short as 280 yards, but the original tee—367 from the regular men's tees, 392 from the back—has been preserved for the club's use.) But Jones also added a two-acre lake that dangerously borders the right side of the fairway and green.

The result is a strong risk-reward challenge both for club members and Ryder Cup players. And since match-play competitions such as the Ryder Cup rarely reach the 18th green, this

change didn't only improve the course but also showed strategic foresight.

While the 15th hole was under construction, 11 of No. 3's original greens, plus its main putting green, were rebuilt. Having all 18 greens conform to USGA standards gives the grounds crew more control over moisture levels and, Tyrrell says, consistency. "I'm excited that every green is the same now. The members will be able to enjoy a uniform stand of turf offering a consistent appearance and playability."

The PGA of America won't determine green speeds until after Labor Day, Haigh and Love agreeing it was important to get through the summer with healthy greens. Decisions will be made once the summer heat has passed and the Ryder Cup is in sight.

Love also didn't want to settle on green speeds and other issues until his team was set. No. 3 received a great deal of play in May, June, and July; in August, rounds were cut back to pro-

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tect the greens. The course will close around Labor Day to ensure healthy playing surfaces.

The captain made a number of summer visits, meeting with Tyrrell as well as Medinah's membership. He listened to what the members wanted to see. "Knowing how difficult the conditions have been, Davis checked in with me several times this summer," Tyrrell said. "He also advocated to the membership on behalf of the maintenance crew and stressed the need to be cautious under these rigorous circumstances." He added that Love was very supportive of all the superintendents in the Chicago district area, who, in turn, have prepped Love on what to expect of local weather and conditions this fall.

He also spent time with European captain José María Olazábal, and expects more European team members in the coming weeks.

The Ryder Cup is unlike any other professional tournament, a fact that influences how Tyrrell and his staff have to set-up and tend the course. Most obviously, the field is only 24 players and most matches never reach the 18th hole. Before the matches begin, the teams have four days of practice rounds, alternating morning and afternoon times so each squad gets a feel for how the course plays at different times of day. The first matches are on Friday, Sept. 28.

The days have been divided into three maintenance shifts: morning, midday, and evening. Play will commence at 7:20 a.m., which in Chicago in the fall means the crew will likely start and finish work in the dark. To deal with the long hours and allow his crews to work in natural light, Tyrrell created six teams of 16, each assigned to three holes. They will be responsible for complete maintenance on their holes – greens mowing, divot filling, bunker raking, rough cutting, Stimpmeter and firmness readings. Teams will be monitored by Tyrrell's three on-course supers and their assistants, with the final review conducted each day by Tyrrell, Love, the assistant captains, and Haigh who will sign off on the preparations before play starts.

Thrust into the limelight, Tyrrell is keeping it all in perspective: "My goals for the week are for my maintenance team to enjoy the experience and reap the rewards of their commitment and hard work ethic; for our membership to have a great experience given the resources they've committed to allow Medinah to host its first Ryder Cup; and last, but certainly not least, would be a win and to hoist the Cup for the home team." GCI