



# THE TIME IS NOW

The 2013 U.S. Open throws Merion Golf Club into the national spotlight. GCI's Bruce Williams shadows Matt Shaffer for a behind-the-scenes look at prepping for golf's big event.

by Bruce Williams, photos by John Kaminski

**T**he 113th US Open is upon us.

While the early years of the competition drew few spectators, it has since become one of golf's most watched events and is considered to be a major along with The Masters and The PGA championship. A lot has changed since the turn of the last century, and today it takes years to build the infrastructure, let alone the course, that becomes the venue for each year's venue.

Planning begins years in advance. The USGA dispatches its staff members to work with clubs like Merion Golf Club in Ardmore, Pa., just outside of Philadelphia, to help prepare for what must ensue. While the course is the venue's most important feature, there are so many more things that comprise this city of sorts, which is built from the ground up.

Recently I spent some time with Matt Shaffer, director of grounds at Merion Golf Club. He made it quite apparent to me that his people have been quite busy building the city that will host this event.

Every city needs someone to take charge and drive the logistics to make things happen. The mayor of that city is none other than Matt Shaffer, and he has built quite a nice team and infrastructure around him to make things run smoothly leading up to and throughout the duration of the event.

Despite a busy schedule, Matt was gracious in the time he spent with me and the thoughts he shared about a variety of topics, including his challenges leading up to the big show, The U.S. Open at Merion Golf Club.

**THE LIST.** I asked Matt about the real-world lessons learned from preparing for and hosting the U.S. Open at Merion. His responses are exactly what I expected from an individual who excels at leadership. Here's his Top 10 list.

**1. Blue prints.** The USGA has a lot of challenges and works hard to coordinate and build a small town in a very short period of time. Aside from the golf course

that is played upon, there are dozens of tents, pavilions and hospitality suites that must go up in the months before the tournament. Add bleachers, food venues, restroom facilities and the miles of TV cables, power cables, etc., and you are literally building a city from the ground up that will begin to be dismantled the day after the event is over.

**2. Safety.** Visitor and player safety is paramount and there are many in-depth meetings with Homeland Security to ensure everyone's safety. These groups are extremely well organized and passionate about making sure the event is conducted with any problems.

**3. Game plan.** While many superintendents are accustomed to doing things in a set way (their way), The U.S. Open has encouraged the team at Merion GC to think quite differently and change their thinking and processes significantly to meet the many goals of the event.



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**4. Timing is everything.** Similar to a conditioned athlete, there is a ramping up in the preparation period. And just like with an athlete, if things are not managed properly then both the turfgrass and the team can peak too early. Patience and proper timing are imperative for success.

**5. Belief system.** Matt shared with me how important it is to stay convicted to your beliefs even though they are inherently different from the majority. Anyone who knows Matt knows he is a man of conviction and does an excellent job of communicating his message to the club, to his own team and also to the USGA officials to reach the desired event goals.

**6. Tick tock.** Time management is paramount due to the enormous demands on your professional and personal schedules. Every day brings a series of meetings with any and all involved in the tournament. Matt is required to manage up, manage down and manage laterally while all the time being cognizant of not burning the candle at both ends.

**7. No “I” in “Team.”** Matt is proud, and rightfully so, of the team he’s assembled around him. More importantly, Matt is very proud when he witnesses his team go further and achieve more than he thought was possible. The greater the challenges, the more his

team has impressed him each and every day.

**8. Expect the unexpected.** Some things are within your control while others are not. Therefore, validate your suspicions about others’ professional performance outside your department with regard to how they handle the spotlight and stress. It is best to learn early who is dependable and who might leave slack to pick up as H-hour approaches.

**9. Be humble.** Matt feels blessed to be in such a privileged position to be coordinating the showcase of golf for a week in June. He recognizes the responsibility he has to the game, as well as to his profession, to make the event a success. Shouldering all of that responsibility and pressure doesn’t leave room to take anything for granted.

**10. Support system.** Last, but not least, is building a foundation of support for the tournament – not only from the club and its members, but from manufacturers, distributors, volunteers, colleagues and peers.

**TEAM MERION.** I’m not surprised to learn that those turfheads who spend a few years under Matt’s tutelage are sought after prospects as professional turf managers. Merion Golf Club has one of the finest training programs for rising superstars. The club and the management team at Merion GC are committed to training

young men and women to be future industry leaders. Spend time with Team Merion and it’s easy to see there is no shortage of passion, intelligence and solid work ethics among its constituents – both young and old.

Interns and apprentices anticipate a pressure-packed education. They have the opportunity to do just about every job there is in this profession, and to work hand in hand with the supervisor who chips in and gets his hands dirty on a regular basis. A lot is expected of young people on a golf course superintendent career track. Matt estimates the expectation he has for his trainees is exceeded over 90 percent of the time.

**THE FINAL WEEKS.** While many would expect the weeks leading up to hosting a U.S. Open would be hectic and crazy... even chaotic. That’s not necessarily the case at Merion GC.

Nearly every hour of every day is planned out strategically and logistically. Every action serves a distinct purpose. Yes, weather throws a few curves, but contingencies are built into the Matt’s system deal with the intangibles. To keep things on schedule, multiple mowings – as many as four times per day – take place. Lots of rolling accompanies the mowing to ensure optimal green speeds and firmness are in place the week before the



**The Big Push:** Nearly every hour of every day is planned out strategically and logistically to prepare for the enormity of the 2013 U.S. Open. For example, multiple mowings are scheduled, as many as four times per day. Lots of rolling accompanies the mowing so optimal green speeds and firmness are established and in place the week before the event.

event. Merion keeps its greens quite dry and uses moisture sensors and TDR 300 probes to push the greens to their max.

Prior to the event Matt plans on working on plant health with proper moisture to allow the turf to last during the event.

Tournament time is tough on staff. Lots of hours are logged and everyone experiences their fair share of exhausting weeks leading up to the event. Matt cautions his staff to pace themselves properly, and does everything in his power to make sure they are fresh and on top of their game for tournament week. The addition of volunteers more than doubles the normal, routine staffing levels. As such, all of those volunteers need to be organized for each day of the tournament.

Likewise, any event of this magnitude requires forethought about crisis management. The management team runs through a variety of scenarios for potential disasters that could occur during the event – including weather – and how each is to be handled.

**TECHNOLOGY.** If you know Matt, then you know he believes in the benefits of innovation and is often an early adopter of new technology. He's a data guy, too, and a big believer in "You can't manage what you can't measure." If you can chart it or measure it, then Matt likely has the stats. Matt is grateful to Walt Norley for introducing

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him to UGMO for moisture sensing technology and being able to track moisture levels in greens along with salinity buildup. Merion Golf Club uses Toro sensors and the readouts show trends in moisture and allow for staff to hand water only the areas that are absolutely necessary. There is little guessing about greens moisture at Merion.

Green firmness is measured daily to monitor the direction of the playing surfaces. Eric Psolla and Jake Straub provide written reports regarding soil chemistry. Using these reports as a base, a sound fertility program is developed. Matt's skill with interpreting data affords him the ability to run out on the edge of the cliff on a daily basis.

**FULLY EQUIPPED.** Matt was highlighted in a previous GCI article (On a roll, October 2012) that outlined his use of fairway rollers. He continues to reap rolling's agronomic benefits and is grateful to be



working with Salsco's Sal Rizzo on these machines. The rollers reduce disease incidence and the need for fungicides. John Deere provides the majority of the equipment on the championship course. Several pieces of additional equipment will come in right before the tournament due to Matt's great working relationship with the people at John Deere.

**OLD GREENS, NEW TECHNOLOGY.** The greens at Merion are quite old, but the addition of newer technology has them performing quite well. One such technology is the use of Precision Air units that help to pull water down through the soil profile. The Philadelphia area is known for some extreme weather conditions, with high heat and humidity in the summer. Precision Air machines keep the air and moisture in balance in the soil profile without putting the turfgrass at risk. Matt's assistant, superintendent Aaron McCurdy is a believer and uses the technology whenever appropriate.

**BUNKERS.** A big part of Merion's teeth are its bunkers. Matt calls the bunkers edgy, and his philosophy for maintenance is very unique. Matt realizes a tremendous amount of money can go into bunker maintenance, so he tries to utilize a minimalistic approach to hazards.

While Matt likes bunkers raked a couple of times a week, applying roundup every few months to eradicate weeds, he has

instituted a more in-depth program to meet USGA needs of the event. Edges around bunkers are seldom trimmed and feature a rough-perimeter look. A lot of sand has been added prior to the tournament and that will need to be compacted accordingly. There are miles of drip irrigation around the bunkers so the grass can survive while not having sprinklers moisten the sand. Matt credits Rain Bird and Jim Barrett for his success with sub-surface irrigation.

**THERE ARE LOTS OF MOVING PARTS THAT MAKE A CITY WORK.** Matt has the turf care and golf course on the right pace to peak by early June. I don't doubt the course will be in fantastic shape. But prepping Merion's golf course is only a part of building the city. Truckloads of bleachers, tents and platforms are being moved into place as I write, just to accommodate the magnitude of this event. After it's over and the crowds have left, it all comes down and life slowly returns to normal.

It takes strong leadership to develop and execute the complex logistics of an event like the U.S. Open, and the time is now for Matt Shaffer and his team at Merion GC to make it happen. **GCI**

*Bruce Williams, CGCS, is the principal of both Bruce Williams Golf Consulting and Executive Golf Search. He's also GCI's senior contributing editor.*

