

Sahalee CC's staff endured the demands
of hosting the PGA tournament.

Redmond

Now that it's over, would they do it again?



BY LESLEE JAQUETTE

Redux?

Was it worth it? In retrospect, would management and the 500 members at Sahalee Country Club in Redmond, Wash., subject themselves to the invasion of the PGA Championship?

With an economic impact of \$60 million to \$85 million on the local economy, the 80th PGA Championship held at the Sahalee Country Club in Redmond, Wash., last August smells of success. Figures gathered by the East King County Convention & Visitors Bureau show that 200,000 spectators attended the week-long event. Sahalee hosted 48 trailers, nearly 3,000 volunteers and 1,100 credentialed media throughout the championship, which beamed 27 hours of live television around the world.



PHOTOS BY LESLEE JAQUETTE



Sahalee crew members didn't let down after the tournament. They were too busy restoring the East Nine.

But the time has come to evaluate the outcome of the Northwest's first PGA Championship in 50 years. As the smoke clears, Sahalee's generals share impressions of the golf event and course battlefield. Finally, these new veterans offer survival tips to those contemplating a similar major skirmish. Would they host the PGA again?

"In a heartbeat," says Sahalee General Manager Tom Halsey. "Our members embraced the tournament from day one. They were terrific through the entire ordeal."

Halsey adds that tournament organizers were so enamored with the fir-lined venue that the PGA is currently negotiating a return date in 2007. Infrastructure intact and battle-tested, Sahalee is keen to

Finding the right people to do the right jobs, especially mowing, was a major challenge, says Sahalee Superintendent Tom Wolff.

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host a rerun in less than a decade. But, Halsey says, "We want the members to enjoy the full benefits of the club for a few years before gearing up again."

The members aren't grumbling. Founding member and Assistant General Chairman of the tournament Jack Wright says the goal was to host a major tournament when the course opened in 1969. "The PGA is the culmination of our plan. Everything worked well and the course offered a challenge as well as a beautiful setting for the players," says Wright, who has helped plant 1,200 rhododendron and 1,100 each of azaleas and heathers over the years.

While membership reaps direct rewards (including \$85,000 for an on-line video golf game featuring Sahalee as a format) and loads of national recognition, Sahalee has for the most part returned to normal. The East Nine, which was overrun with parking and corporate tents, is on a vigorous rebound, as are the beaten, brown gallery paths. The staff remains too busy to indulge in post-traumatic stress, especially while Sahalee turns its attention to negotiating the next PGA.

Although Halsey admits a couple of headhunters tried to lure him from Redmond, none of the eight de-

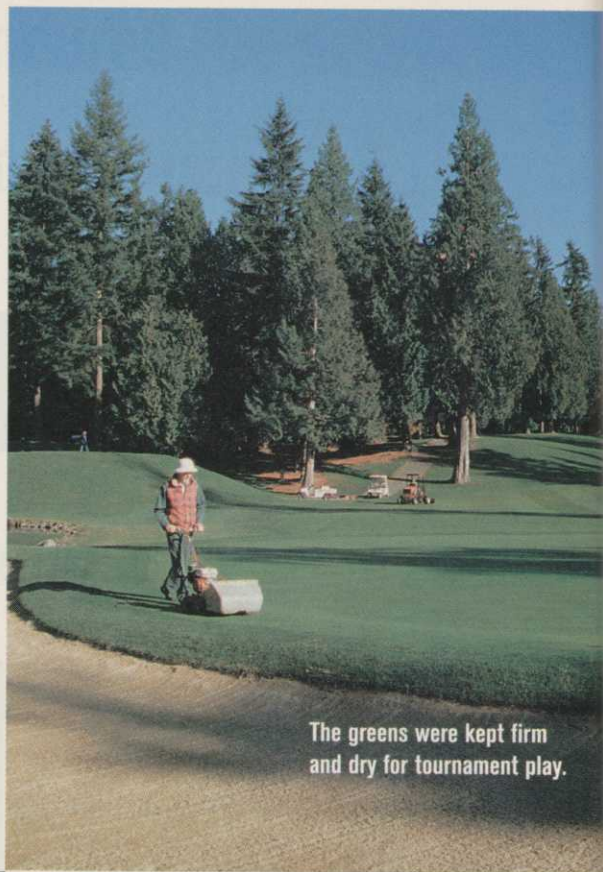
Mother nature graced the Northwest with a dry winter, which provided good grass growth and firm fairways for the construction in June.



partment heads have been hired away. One unexpected outcome of the PGA is that the normally soft-spoken Superintendent Tom Wolff has become a sought-after speaker at golf and turfgrass association meetings. Toting his notebook of PGA slides, Wolff has already traveled as far as Pennsylvania and Alberta, Canada.

General operations

An ongoing theme in Halsey's discussion of the PGA is the importance of an early start and constant communication. Sahalee had been planning the foundation of the event for four years. Management enlisted the support of state, county and local governments from the beginning. The governor and local mayors wrote letters soliciting support. As a result, 50 to 60 police officers contributed more than 8,000 hours working on event public safety, signage and traffic control.



The greens were kept firm and dry for tournament play.

Building on constant updates with the membership and the staff, Halsey's team also enlisted the help of other club managers. Management also capitalized on its members' wealth of talent and connections. Members chaired more than 50 committees that ultimately involved at least half the membership.

"A key was the staff's 100-percent support of the PGA," says Halsey, who kept the 100 employees informed and responsible through regular meetings, updates and time lines. "We all wanted to do it, and we all agree it was the highlight of our career."

One of the major effects of the tournament was that the East Nine was taken out of play for most of the year. It will return to play late this spring. Halsey explains that the East Nine was dedicated to hosting a myriad of operations including parking, retail merchandise, media tent, corporate chalets and the Jumbotron TV screen. Statistics show that nearly 400 semi-trucks loaded and unloaded equipment throughout event preparations.

While members lost play on nine of 27 holes, withdrawing the East Nine from play not only expedited the overall flow of operations, it allowed maintenance to focus manpower on the tournament course.

Indeed, for Sahalee's Head Golf Professional, Jim

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Pike, the biggest challenge in the event's aftermath has been rotating off 18 holes instead of 27.

"Our biggest issue is getting our 800 golfing members back on the course and rotating them through consistently and smoothly," Pike says. "We have achieved this goal by working extra hard at customer service. We also eliminated guest play during September, which cut our numbers by 15 percent."

On other fronts, Sahalee member and volunteer Chairman of Marketing Mike Kalian spent the past five years cultivating the event. Kalian's major challenges included traffic flow, corporate hospitality, publicity and advertising.

Kalian, who admits he wasn't expecting it to be such a huge job, suggests people assuming this role view it like foundation work.

"This is a private-public partnership that drives the success of the event," stresses Kalian, who estimates the PGA's economic impact will reach \$85 million. "The PGA helped us sell the event, but you still need a local marketing person who can cultivate the contacts."

Vendor dealings

The project-oriented Assistant Superintendent Rich Taylor spent much of his energy overseeing the interaction of the vendors on the East Nine.

"My goal was to coordinate with the hundreds of people coming and going to try and protect the course," Taylor says. "It took daily involvement for three months to anticipate and orchestrate where everything should go."

While the PGA staff assisted in the coordination of the vendors, Taylor says Sahalee management still wanted to be in control of the constant parade of trucks and people. "Vigilance paid off because vendors learned to ask for me and we would negotiate the best plan. Many times the vendors had excellent ideas and the results were good."

Concurrently, Taylor juggled working with the PGA decorative plant staff as well as managing the general day-to-day maintenance of the course. Taylor credits the staff with shouldering tremendous responsibility while he farmed hundreds of requests, questions and issues.

"I would liked to have spent more time with the

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The most difficult part of tournament management was irrigation.

— Tom Wolff,
Sahalee Superintendent

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crew working on the course,” Taylor notes. “I would have liked to be able to drive around the course more, offering encouragement and support.”

To compensate, Taylor and Wolff scheduled regular staff meetings to discuss issues and keep the staff focused. “We just wanted to tell them to keep doing their usual good jobs,” Taylor recalls. “We didn’t need to put any extra pressure on our crew.”

Landscape management

The full-time maintenance team of 21 headed by Wolff and Taylor see the PGA’s aftermath in equally positive terms. A soggy June could have spelled disaster during the set-up period that included 25 TV towers, eight miles of chain-link fencing, a 20,000 square-foot retail tent, 31 corporate chalets and 380 semi-trucks filled with equipment. “We got lucky,” Wolff observes. “A wet June would have massacred the course.”

Fortunately, Mother Nature graced the Northwest with a dry winter, which provided good grass growth and firm fairways for the construction in June. During the tournament, the weather was near 90 degrees F except for the final day’s rain.

Even with blessings in tow, Wolff and Taylor still had plenty of challenges to manage. The superintendents credit a “division of labor” strategy paired with constant staff-wide communication.

Wolff commanded landscape maintenance. With-

out hesitation, he describes his biggest challenge as that of “matching the right person to the right job.” The clearest example was the challenge of finding the right staff and volunteers to do the triplex mowing around tournament time.

“Total precision is required,” notes Wolff, explaining why a half-million dollars worth of machinery was brought in for the tournament. “Finding people that could mow an absolute straight line was an exercise we didn’t anticipate.”

The most difficult part of tournament management was irrigation, Wolff says. “You want firm greens, but if they are too hard or dry you have tricked the course up. But if the greens are too wet then they don’t achieve championship standards.”

In an effort to maintain a balance, Wolff constantly walked the course, accessing the soil conditions. During tournament week, the greens received only a light, hand hosing. “We decided to keep the fairways firm and dry,” says Wolff, adding that the senior tournament director was in constant consultation on watering decisions. “We accomplished our task, but it was a difficult and frustrating exercise.”

As far as stress on the course, Wolff reports that the dead grass in the traffic paths is recovering. Again, a long, warm fall with plenty of rain helped. “You can’t tell that 200,000 people walked here,” Wolff says grinning.

Wolff adds that the stewardship of the gallery was commendable. “With some 30,000 people here daily, you expect some damage. But people were pleased to participate in the PGA caliber event and acted accordingly on their best behavior.”

Another of Wolff’s major potential headaches, the restoration of the East Nine, is a success story. After Labor Day, when the remaining equipment and the sea of gravel that covered the fourth fairway to a depth of six inches was removed, the maintenance team set to work resurrecting the battered nine. Since then the crew has redone the bunkers to match the other nines, completely restored the turf and brought the much-maligned fourth fairway back to life.

Looking back on the PGA, Taylor observes that symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder have yet to surface at Sahalee.

“The letdown hasn’t been as great as we thought it would, probably because of the restoration and new construction,” Taylor says. “And, of course, planning ahead for 2007 is exciting. With no large projects necessary, we will be ready.” ■

Leslee Jaquette is a freelance writer who lives in Bellevue, Wash.

PGA Survival Tips

- Start planning well in advance. Sahalee planned for four years.
- Enlist support of state, county and local governments.
- Keep membership/constituents informed in the step-by-step process.
- Involve and utilize membership resources by promoting committees.
- Achieve staff support through constant communication, delegating responsibility, time lines.
- Enlist volunteer support of local club managers and superintendents. Require them to commit to a schedule.
- Budget time to get acquainted with new equipment and find the right people to operate machinery.
- Take a hands-on approach. Interact and oversee vendor preparations.
- Maintain constant communication with PGA staff members. They get busy around tournament time, so be persistent.
- Don’t panic. You’ll get a lot of help from the PGA.
- Have fun. Remember, you’re hosting a major.