



His Cup

Superintendent Bill Spence is a seasoned veteran when it comes to setting up for golf's biggest shindigs, including the Ryder Cup

BY LARRY AYLWARD, MANAGING EDITOR

BILL SPENCE DOESN'T sound like a nervous superintendent, even though he's expecting nearly 100,000 guests to his Boston-area golf course for three days in the early fall. And Spence doesn't sound stressed, even though he's under pressure to get his house in order for one of the PGA's biggest events.

Instead, Spence sounds calm and confident when he talks about grooming his golf course, The Country Club at Brookline, Mass., to host the 33rd Ryder Cup from Sept. 24 to 26. That's because the 47-year-old is accustomed to setting up for such shindigs.

While superintendent for Pebble Beach Co. in the mid-1970s, Spence helped stage several Bing Crosby tournaments, as well as the PGA Championship. He also directed a major makeover of The Country Club for the 1988 U.S. Open, which he says was his "crowning achievement."

But make no mistake: The thrill is *not* gone for Spence to be a part of another weighty golfing event. And don't get the idea that readying for the Ryder Cup is like preparing for an autumn clambake. There was

Is Full

plenty of work to be done on The Country Club's 27 holes, starting with the bunkers.

When The Country Club was awarded the Ryder Cup in 1996, Spence rewarded himself and his crew with a work order to rebuild 15 of the course's 97 bunkers.

"The bunkers were a big concern going into the Ryder Cup because we hadn't done much to them since 1988 (when the course hosted the Open)," says Spence, who has been at The Country Club for about 15 years. "When the course was being evaluated for the Ryder Cup, our bunker sand was in need of replacement and many of the bunkers' edges were worn from play."

The revamped bunkers look new, but they have a rustic appearance, which is The Country Club's trademark look. The 250-acre course is also known for its natural, hilly landscape.

"It has that New England look," Kerry Haigh, senior director of tournaments for the PGA of America, says of the 117-year-old course. "It looks beautiful day in and day out."

The Country Club, like much of New England, is also teeming with history. Founded in 1882, it's the oldest country club in America and one of the founding members of the Amateur Golf Association of America, which later became the U.S. Golf Association. It was also the site of what some consider one of the greatest upsets in sports history: In 1913, a 20-year-old American amateur named Francis Ouimet defeated two of the greatest golfers on the planet, Britain's Ted Ray and Harry Vardon, to win the U.S. Open. Ouimet's victory helped spur more American interest in golf.

"The course is steeped in tradition," Haigh says. "It's going to be exciting to play the Ryder Cup there."

Go for the green

Besides the bunkers, Spence and his crew leveled out and reconfigured four championship tees. They also pruned many trees for safety reasons.

The greens needed no major work. Spence says they were well-received by golfers at the '88 Open and he expects the same for the Ryder Cup.

Continued on page 30



MONTANA PRITCHARD, PGA OF AMERICA

The Country Club at a glance

Championship yardage: 7,023 yards

Primary grasses: tees, bentgrass; fairways, bentgrass/Poa annua; greens, bentgrass/Poa annua.

Terrain: rolling and rocky.

Average tee size: 1,800 square feet.

Average green size: 3,200 square feet.

Stimp meter rating for tournament play: 11.5 feet.

Sand bunkers: 96 on championship course; 120 on entire course.

Water hazards: seven.

Soil conditions: silt-loam.

Green construction soil mix: push-up with sand layer on top.

Source of water: wells and pond.

Cut for tournament play: tees, 3/8 inch; fairways, 3/8 inch; greens, 1/8 inch; rough 4 inches.

Wildlife on course: coyotes, fox, squirrels, raccoons, hawks.

SOURCE: GCSAA

Continued from page 21

Speaking of the greens, they are puny at The Country Club, averaging 3,200 square feet. The smallest green at No. 4 measures a mere 2,100 square feet.

But these greens are forgiving, unlike the Pinehurst No. 2 greens, which were downright diabolical to golfers at this year's rough-and-tough U.S. Open. Right, John Daly?

"It was grueling to watch players hitting very long shots into those greens when you knew what the results would be," Spence says.



TORO CO

"We would like to have the course play as firm and fast as possible," Spence says.

But don't worry, Tiger. That won't be the case at The Country Club.

"Our greens are flat," Spence says with no apologies. "A well-hit shot, even out of the rough, has a good chance of being well-received on a green."

Keep in mind that the Ryder Cup, pitting top American golfers against their European equivalents, is a match-play event. That means players win with holes, not by strokes.

Spence and Haigh say they don't want the course to play a factor in the outcome of the tournament. For instance, if David Duval drives his shot 300 yards into the rough, Spence doesn't want him to be limited to pitching his shot back on the fairway to set up for a third shot because the grass is ankle deep. He would want Duval to go for the green. Hence, the crowd would be intrigued and excited.

"We want the players to be able to let it all out," says Spence, noting that the rough will be kept at 2.5 inches to 3 inches in length. "We want the course to be neutral. (U.S. Ryder Cup captain) Ben Crenshaw says he wants the course to be fair for everyone."

Crenshaw, who played the course as a junior in 1968

and again in the 1988 U.S. Open, says The Country Club is not a straight-forward American golf course.

"There's a lot to learn about it, a lot to feel," he says. "It's a different course. You would not say on paper that the Americans would have a distinct edge."

Green ribbons

The Country Club didn't absorb a drop of rain during June, but Spence was hoping for even more Mojave Desert-like weather in August and September. You see, Spence was in charge of constructing 20 bleachers around the course to seat about 15,000 people, in addition to erecting nearly 60 corporate chalets and tents, and seven jumbo-sized television screens. Rain mixed with forklifts and other heavy trucks used in the setup would have caused a muddy mess.

The sunny and arid spring and early summer also had the course looking parched in spots in early July. But Spence wasn't worried. In fact, the course had achieved the appearance that he and Crenshaw had hoped for: lush-green fairways and greens flanked by dormant rough with a straw-brown color.

"We look at it as these green ribbons of fairways, greens and tees running through a brown piece of land," says Spence, noting that the tees, fairways and greens are normally the only areas that are irrigated.

Spence is hoping the weather cooperates with the event. Borrowing a line from Jimmy Buffett: "Don't try to reason with hurricane season." Spence knows that much is true, but he still has a crisis management plan just in case a whirlwind blows through. September, after all, is peak hurricane season on the East Coast. Spence recalls when Hurricane Gloria hit the Boston area in mid-September of 1985.

"It leveled us, and we had to keep the club closed for a few days," he says. "Everything we do to prepare (for the Ryder Cup), we have to think about the possibility of a hurricane."

Because The Country Club features many trees, especially lining the fairways, Spence has about 100 arborists on call to help clean up if a hurricane happens to hit and flatten them. But Spence is hoping for a few typical early fall days, which he describes as splendid in New England. And dry.

"We would like to have the course play as firm and fast as possible," he says.

And Spence would love to see the Americans, who have won 23 of 32 matches with two ties, win back the prestigious title after losing it in 1997. But with the outcome, the realistic Spence is sure of one thing.

"The team that loses will more than likely have a few things to say about the golf course," he says. "The team that wins will probably love it." ■