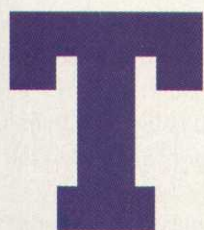


In the Dark

A person is shown in silhouette, operating a maintenance vehicle at night. The vehicle is equipped with a large, illuminated light tower. The scene is set against a dark sky with a crescent moon and a low sun or moon on the horizon. The overall atmosphere is dark and industrial.

Nighttime is the right time for a few maintenance operations,
but working after dusk isn't viable for most staffs

BY SHANE SHARP



The scene resembles something out of *Star Wars*. The sun has set on the finely manicured grounds at the Coeur d'Alene Resort GC in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, but the dark course abounds with flashing lights that dance on fairways and greens. No, there's not a covert operation going on, and what's happening at Coeur d'Alene is hardly top secret. It's just business as usual.

The golf course is lit up like a night game at Yankee Stadium because Coeur d'Alene's golf course maintenance staff, headed by superintendent John Anderson, is in high gear. Mowers with beaming headlights traverse fairways like tractor-trailers rumbling down the interstate at night. Such a full-scale nightly maintenance program is a sight to behold — and uncommon among U.S. golf courses.

"We've been doing the majority of our heavy maintenance at night since 1992," Anderson says.

Anderson's reason for working late has to do with Coeur d'Alene's "great guest moment" policy. "We want to provide the best golfing experience possible for our guests, and part of that is not to have equipment running while they play," Anderson explains.

The last tee time at Coeur d'Alene is about 3:30 p.m., followed by employee tee times. The maintenance program begins soon after.

Pioneers in the nighttime maintenance concept, the Coeur d'Alene staff has had tremendous success in keeping its course conditioned under the watchful eyes of the creatures of the night, Anderson says. In the summer, the course's nightshift begins at 4 p.m. and continues until around midnight. But running equipment well into the night raises a number of challenges that have limited night work to only a handful of course maintenance = operations.

Pros and cons

Players may walk away from Coeur d'Alene amazed at the peace and quiet they experienced while playing the course. But Coeur d'Alene is one of the few courses where play-

ers won't see or hear maintenance workers before noon because implementation of full-scale maintenance operations at night is having trouble catching on.

The benefits to maintaining courses at night are lack of player interference, grass cuts better because it's not wet, and cooler temperatures are easier on workers and machinery. However, there are factors that limit courses from getting anything done at night, and most golf facilities target only specified maintenance activities for after-hours.

"We do all of our chemical applications at night, so we don't interfere with play," says Mark Skeen, superintendent at Heatherwood GC in Springboro, Ohio.

Skeen says there are drawbacks to mowing at night. For instance, a hydraulic leak on a mower could go unnoticed in the dark. Even if it was spotted, there wouldn't be a mechanic around to fix it.

In Myrtle Beach, most courses aerify greens at night or perform spot maintenance — tasks that don't require mechanics to be on duty or won't disturb tourists and residents who stay in nearby homes and villas.

Matt Sapochak, general manager at the Winyah Bay GC in Georgetown, S.C., formerly mowed fairways until 10:30 p.m. at Myrtle Beach's Deerfield Plantation when he worked there from 1994 to 1998. But pressure from residents to reduce evening noise led Sapochak and other Grand Strand superintendents to pack it in early.

Try keeping your mowers out at night in the sunshine state, and you may run into the same objections. John Foy, director of the USGA's Florida Region Greens Section, notes that most Florida courses are surrounded with houses, and maintenance crews aren't permitted to work past 10 p.m. most of the time because of local ordinances.

Homes and mechanical issues are not the only obstacles to running full-scale night maintenance operations. In the Southwest, mowing at night takes a backseat to irrigation.

It makes more sense for superintendents to water their golf courses in the cool of the evening in the water-scarce region.

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“Nighttime mowing is something we’ll see more of, but it’s not revolutionizing the business as we know it.”

— Warren Mitchell,
John Deere

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“The conflict in Arizona, that other places may not have, is our watering requirements are much greater,” says Kevin Smith, president of the Cactus and Pine GCSA and CGCS at the Golf Club at Eagle Mountain. “Our irrigation systems run well into the evening, so it would be difficult for us to get out on the course at that time. Even if we did, the mowing conditions would be horrible.”

But just because you can’t mow at night in the Southwest doesn’t mean you can’t take on other projects. Danny Fielder, superintendent at Sunrise Vista GC at Nellis AFB in Las Vegas, is an experienced night worker. Where many superintendents see obstacles in working at night, Fielder sees opportunity. “It presents a better public relations image for the course,” Fielder says, explaining that he and his crew oversee at night so they don’t bother players in the day.

Surprisingly, an issue that doesn’t stop courses from advocating working at night is safety. Several superintendents say that if night maintenance operations were introduced or expanded at their courses, adequate lighting and training would eliminate their safety concerns.

At Coeur d’Alene, lights installed on equipment and additional free-standing lights provide enough illumination to make employees feel as safe as if they were working during the day, Anderson says. Employees also get as much work done as they can late in the day and don’t take breaks until it gets dark.

Anderson says workers only work a few hours in the dark during the summer. When the days get shorter, the workers begin their shifts early so the number of hours they work in the dark remains constant.

Coeur d’Alene workers also aren’t permitted to work at night until they complete an operational safety checklist that’s signed off by Anderson, the mechanic and Mark Kitchen, the course’s night superintendent.

“We haven’t had one injury from working in the dark,” Anderson says. “We’re very accurate in our night mowing.”

The nocturnal future

While few facilities roll out the nighttime equipment that Coeur d’Alene does, numerous courses undertake some form of maintenance before and after daylight. Equipment

manufacturers have responded accordingly by offering mowers and other machinery with lights. High beams can be outfitted on most equipment by request.

In light of the advantages and disadvantages of working at night, will the practice be the next titanium driver of golf course maintenance? Or will its popularity amount to the long putter?

Warren Mitchell, administrative manager of Worldwide Marketing Development, a marketer of John Deere equipment, is not convinced that working at night is the wave of the future.

“Nighttime mowing is something we’ll see more of, but it is not revolutionizing the business as we know it,” he says. “Many of the greens mowers and fairway units can have lights on them because most courses are cutting before the break of dawn, not necessarily at night.”

But all signs point to more courses undertaking periodic, routine maintenance activities such as aerification, overseeding and spraying at night while leaving the mowing to the Coeur d’Alenes and other courses with distinctive goals.

“You would have to have the budget for it and have a mechanic on board,” Skeen says. “We’ll think about doing anything we can do if we’re not interfering with the players, but part of the fun of this job is seeing the sun come up.”

Ken Happ, regional superintendent for American Golf and superintendent at Fowlers Mill GC in Chesterland, Ohio, often has his crew mow tee boxes and fairways at night, but greens are cut at night only if the course has a special event the next day.

“Bottom line is we need to get the job done, and it’s easier to do some things at night, like spraying,” Happ says.

Some say that electric mowers could bolster the amount of nighttime maintenance undertaken at courses around the country because they don’t roar like gas mowers. But electric mowers probably can’t change maintenance budgets, desert heat or the powerful inertia of the status quo. So don’t pawn those sunglasses just yet. ■

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