

Lights,

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in turf maintenance
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Camera ...

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golf tournament

ANGST!

BY LARRY AYLWARD, MANAGING EDITOR

Paul Jett was anxious. He was excited. And he was worried that something would go wrong. It was the frenetic first day of the U.S. Open last summer at North Carolina's Pinehurst Resort and CC's No. 2 course, where Jett is superintendent. The event was the most momentous occasion in the 12-year superintendent's career — and the most consuming.

"Nothing approaches it," Jett says of the experience. "It was exhausting, but it was the most exciting thing I've ever done as a superintendent."

Mark Connor, superintendent of the South Course at Firestone CC in Akron, Ohio, knows that feeling. He's as pumped and impassioned as a linebacker playing in the Super Bowl when the annual NEC Invitational rolls around each August. But he's also as tense as a college student during finals week.

"It's the greatest time in the world when the event is going on, but I'm relieved when it's over," Connor says.

For many superintendents, a career in turf maintenance wouldn't be complete without experiencing the heart-pounding, high anxiety of a big-time golf tournament and its accompanying glitz — media lights, acclaimed golfers, corporate chalets, throngs of fans and ... oh ... profound pressure.

While the showiness of a top tournament can be exhilarating, it can also be humiliating if things go wrong. But go-for-broke superintendents recognize that and realize if they want to achieve distinction among their peers, they must welcome the gauntlet.

"It's a challenge, but what's life without a challenge?" USGA tournament agronomist Tim Moraghan says of hosting a prominent tournament. "A lot of superintendents look at it that way."

The thrill of it

For Paul R. Latshaw, superintendent of Winged Foot CC in Mamaroneck, N.Y., life would be mundane without hosting an occasional golf championship.

"I like championships," Latshaw says. "I won't lie to you. Daily maintenance bores me."

The "60-something" Latshaw has staged a PGA Championship and U.S. Open at Oakmont CC in Pennsylvania and four Masters at Augusta National during his 35-year career.

"At my age, you need something to perk you up," he says. "I need the pressure of big events to keep me going, although my wife thinks I'm nuts."

The 35-year-old Jett, after tasting his first Major, admits he had a problem getting motivated when the Open ended. "We spent so much time getting ready for it," Jett says, "that I didn't know what to do when it was over."

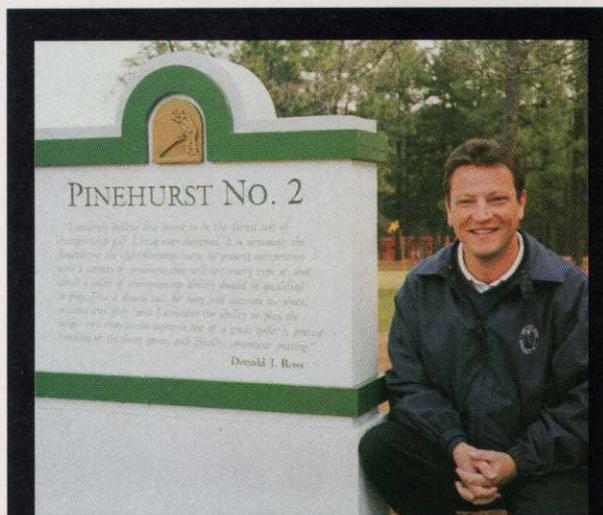
With the attention and glamour, Jett felt like a movie star during the tournament — and he relished it. It helped that the media and the players were drooling over the course's superb condition.

"I don't remember a Major where the superintendent and

his staff got as much publicity as we did," he says. "I'd love to do it again."

There's no better feeling in the world than when people — high-profile industry people — wax poetic about your golf course, especially in the media. Connor's spirits soared when he read an article in the local newspaper that quoted Greg Norman and Tiger Woods raving about Firestone. "It was an adrenaline rush," Connor says.

Jett says he wasn't expecting such extensive media attention, especially a month before the tournament. If you want to host a big tournament, you had better be willing to put up with endless phone calls and the same-old questions.



"It was exhausting, but it was the most exciting thing I've ever done as a superintendent."

PAUL JETT, Superintendent of Pinehurst No. 2

"Nobody clued me into the fact that the media would be this overwhelming," says Jett, who received calls from media members in 100 countries. "But I didn't turn anybody down. Media folks don't know a lot about what we do. The more we let them know, the better off we'll be."

It can get hot, too

Sometimes, though, the lights radiating from the TV cameras can get smoking hot. Just ask Danny Quast, grounds manager at Medinah CC in Chicago, site of last summer's PGA Championship. Quast found himself in the media's sizzling spotlight after golfer Lee Janzen told sports reporters that Medinah's greens were hard and could have been in better shape.

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"The greens aren't great," Janzen said. "I don't think heat should be an excuse for the lack of a perfect surface."

But heat was an excuse. After all, it was August in the heartland, and any superintendent will tell you that growing grass in the Midwest during that scorching time is like growing zucchini in January at the North Pole. The greens weren't perfect, but they were perfectly playable.

Quast, regarded as a mentor among his peers, dealt with Janzen's comments in a gentlemanly fashion.

"You just accept it," he says. "I don't apologize. We did everything we could do to maintain the greens through the heat spell."

Quast's counterparts supported him, though they realize such predicaments come with the territory of hosting championship tournaments.



USGA

How would you like to have all these people trampling over your course? If you're going to host a big tournament, you must deal with throngs of fans.

"It bothered me when I heard Janzen's comments," Firestone's Connor says. "It's not fair, but it happens. Everybody prays it doesn't happen to them, but it comes with the pressure of hosting a big tournament."

Ted Horton, vice president of resource management at Pebble Beach Co., which will host this year's 100th U.S. Open, says most every superintendent knows they're at the mercy of Mother Nature.

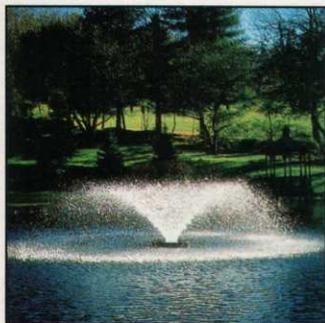
"Everybody hopes they don't screw up, but they know things can go wrong," he says. "The buck has to stop somewhere."

Latschaw says he experienced course complaints from Fuzzy Zoeller during a Master's tournament. His advice: Forget about it and do your job to the best of your abilities. "If you try to fight back, you end up fighting a losing battle," he says.

Jett advises superintendents not to get caught up in what golfers or sports writers say or want from your course. In Jett's

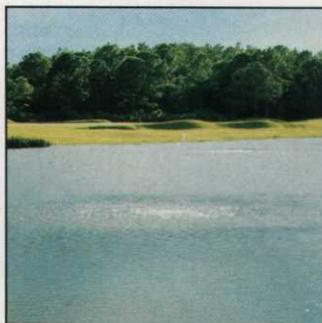
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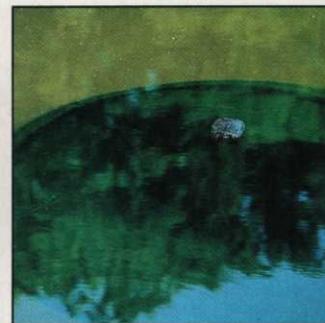
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case, it was his responsibility to satisfy the USGA.

"It was a USGA event, and my main goal was to prepare the course the way the USGA wanted it," Jett says. "As long as I did that, I wasn't concerned about criticisms of players or the media."

Pressure mounts – early

It's late 1999 and your course is hosting the 2001 PGA Championship. Do you know where your superintendent is? Probably on the golf course.

Ken Mangum, superintendent of the Atlanta Athletic Club in Atlanta, is *already* feeling the pressure of hosting a big tournament and the event is nearly two years away. And there's *already* reason for concern.

Atlanta in August could be Webster's definition of blistering, and Mangum, mindful of what happened to Quast, is already thinking about tending his bentgrass greens so they



HUGH AYLWARD

Work, work, work. Mark Connor is busy this winter renovating bunkers on Firestone CC's South Course in preparation for August's NEC Invitational.

don't fry in the sweltering, Southern sun. He says he will close the course four weeks before the tournament to minimize traffic and stress.

"We only have an event once every 10 years," Mangum says. "We want to provide the best course we can."

But there's more than the course that Mangum must supervise — and it's accompanied by more pressure.

"Most of my focus to this point has been on

things outside of the golf course — parking, traffic flow, the TV compound, staging areas and where to place corporate hospitality tents," he says. "It all falls under my jurisdiction."

While Jett was hopping in the weeks preceding the U.S. Open, he says the pressure didn't cause him any sleepless nights.

"I didn't have any trouble sleeping," he says. "I just didn't get a lot of it."

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Jett spent most of his waking hours at the course. That happens when you're preparing for an acclaimed event. "The Open is *so* much more than golf," Jett says.

Firestone's Connor, who spends more time at the facility's South Course than in his bed during the summer while preparing for the August NEC Invitational, can empathize.

"You have to sacrifice things," Connor says. "You have to work weekends, and you can't take a summer vacation."

But there's that prize.

"You reap the benefits of a tournament like this," Connor says. "It makes those dark-until-dark work days worthwhile."

Seize the moment

Mangum is an optimist when it comes to readying for important golf events. He came to the Atlanta Athletic Club in 1988, knowing the course would host the 1990 Women's U.S. Open. But two months before Mangum came on board, only nine greens on the 36 holes were playable.

"I knew what I was getting into," Mangum says. "But I saw how good the opportunity could be rather than how bad the situation was. It's easier to go into a situation like that rather than walking into a situation where everything is perfect."

When the Open arrived, the greens were adequate but not great. Mangum, however, had scored points with his peers as a capable superintendent.

But sometimes the opposite happens. In 1993, when Congressional CC in Bethesda, Md., was awarded the 1995 Senior Open and the 1997 U.S. Open, superintendent Bill Black found himself under scrutiny. Congressional's greens were rebuilt in 1989 and they weren't in good condition. "I took the heat for that," Black says.

Black, who also hosted seven Kemper Open tournaments at Congressional, was replaced by Latshaw in '93. "It was a parting of ways and time for me to move on," Black recalls.

Interestingly, Latshaw and Black attended school together at Penn State University.

"If you follow Latshaw's track record, he goes into a place when it's down a bit, brings it back up to shape, and then he gets out of there," Black says. "People who do that seem to be successful. The people that hang on for a long time, they start taking shots at. I'm speaking from experience."

Black, a superintendent for 28 years, retired after leaving Congressional. He has no hard feelings.

"This kind of stuff happens in every profession," he says. "I've experienced high risk and high reward."

What it takes

When Jett came to Pinehurst in 1995, he knew he would get to renovate the greens in preparation for hosting the U.S. Open. These were perks in line with his goals.

"I'm sure there are some people who wouldn't want to do it," Jett says of the burden of hosting a Major. "There are a lot



HUGH ATYWARD

**"It makes those dark-until-dark
work days worthwhile."**

MARK CONNOR, superintendent at Firestone CC

of people in my business who love to just build and grow in golf courses."

Jett says he enjoys the challenge of trying to grow bentgrass in the Southeast, not to mention hosting a major tournament. "It's a foregone conclusion that we'll get the Open back, but I'd like to get another tournament here before then," he adds.

He will. And Jett will employ his troops the same way he did for the U.S. Open. About 85 people, including many volunteers, worked for Jett during the tournament. If you want to host a big-time tournament, you had better be able to attract and empower good people to help you.

"For a superintendent to have so many people working for him — so he could maintain everything to a finite level — it was the ultimate feeling," Jett says.

Perhaps the best lesson learned from hosting a big golf tournament is to remain poised when the going is good or bad.

"I try to take things as they come and do the best I can," Quast says. "I can't control what people say or think."

Through it all, it's probably best to take an easy-come, easy-go attitude.

"You think it's never going to get here," Jett says, recalling the wait he endured for the U.S. Open to arrive, like a kid waiting for Christmas. "And when it got here, it was over so fast that you wondered where it went." ■