

On the Mark

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD,
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Olympia Fields CC superintendent Dave Ward says that Mark Mungeam is “not the usual big-ego architect you hear about.” Mungeam helped Ward prepare Olympia Fields’ North Course for this month’s U.S. Open. The 41-year-old Mungeam joined Cornish and Silva in 1992 as an associate. He is now a partner in the small but busy Massachusetts-based firm that handles a variety of projects.

“We hit it off from the get go,” Ward says of his relationship with Mungeam. “Every superintendent in the world thinks he’s a good architect, but hiring Mark changed my view about the importance of hiring an architect.”

Mungeam has been recognized as the course’s unofficial “Open Doctor” since 1997 when the club hosted the U.S. Senior Open. He has handled every role at Olympia Fields — from restoration specialist to renovation consultant. Here’s what Mungeam had to say about preparations for the U.S. Open in a recent interview.

Q: Can you give an overall description of the work undertaken since the 1997 Senior Open at Olympia Fields?

A: After the Senior Open in 1997, the USGA granted Olympia Fields the men’s U.S. Open for 2003. The club had to first prepare a U.S. Open Renovation Plan. The USGA felt that the course needed to be strengthened for it to hold the Open.

This plan was prepared in conjunction with the club and the USGA to detail what work had to be done to the course. The plan became part of the contract between the club and the USGA.

The emphasis of the renovation was increased length and more difficult bunkering. We planned and oversaw the reconstruction of all the bunkers. Other work included the regrassing of all the greens and the reconstruction of two greens.

Ward decided on the regrassing, as he wanted consistency and the ability to optimize conditions. In ’97, the greens were primarily *Poa annua*. They played fine, but Ward was concerned about getting them ready for the Open and felt that he could produce better conditions with creeping bentgrass. Those



Mark Mungeam, the man behind the renovation at Olympia Fields, talks about what it took to ready the course for the U.S. Open

16 greens were gassed to kill the existing turf and reseeded with L-93 directly into the existing thatch layer. In the process of regrassing greens, we restored some of the lost areas on several of them.

With the course closed for bunker and tee renovation, the club also decided to upgrade the irrigation system and installed a completely new system. It allows the club to water the roughs, something it couldn’t do easily before.

Q: The USGA used to insist it would never tell clubs to make changes to their architecture, but now it makes it a contractual obligation for the host to develop a course master plan with the USGA. Does this put the architect in the position of defending the every-day club player as much as preparing the course for the U.S. Open?

A: It did for me. Throughout the process, I continually reminded myself, when members of the club weren’t, that the work being done was for the U.S. Open.

Yet that’s a one-week tournament, and the members have to play it the rest of the time. Therefore, I didn’t want to make dramatic changes to the character or playability of the course just for the Open.

This was especially true for the reconstruction of the greens. The membership identifies steepness as “character” and was averse to eliminating this aspect. They also wanted the new greens to look like the originals.

So did we. We came up with the solution of maintaining some steepness — 3 percent to 5 percent — through the middle of the greens while decreasing the slope to the USGA-desired 2.5 percent along the edges, as they will rarely use a middle pin.

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Q: The perception is that fear of low scoring seems to have dictated some of the changes at Olympia Fields. Is that a fair perception?

A: It is. Since beginning the process, the desire has been to strengthen or make the course more difficult. Why else would bunkers be renovated that had only recently been redone? And fairways dramatically narrowed? And par 5s turned into par 4s?

The USGA has definite ideas regarding course setup. It prefers the U.S. Open not be just another PGA Tour event with a winning score of 15-to-20 under par. It wants its courses to be different. If this means firmer conditions, narrow fairways and higher rough, this is what the USGA will set up.

No one from the USGA has ever discussed this philosophy with me. It's merely an understanding one gains from seeing previous setups and working with them on a master plan. There was never any mention of a desired winning score, only of creating a difficult enough course that identifies the best and most patient player. It is my feeling that the USGA attempts to seek a balance in the setup so as not to favor a certain type of player. I'm less inclined to think the USGA is concerned with the score, as it is with the type of player who wins.

Q: Why do people fear low scores so much? Shouldn't a well-designed course yield a low score to a player on his game?

A: Absolutely, but one person's definition of a low score may be different from another. People fear low scores because they eliminate the aspect of par, which was devised to identify the score a good player would make on a hole.

I think a good golf course should allow for someone really on his or her game to go low, but not allow someone not playing well to come in with a low score. This is what the USGA setup does by putting so much pressure on a player to focus on every shot. There is little margin for error.

This is where I disagree with the USGA's philosophy of narrow and straight fairways. This is not how the game was conceived or should be played. It used to be that fairways were wide and allowed for a greater margin of error, yet were designed such that there was an advantage to hitting to a certain position within the fairway to improve one's approach angle to the green. Bunkers and other natural features were also integrated into the fairways and gave them their shape and identified strategy.

With laser-straight fairway cuts, most of the hazards become adjacent and linear, rather than jutting into the fairways. At Olympia Fields, we attempted to maintain the twists and curves of the fairways around the features when going through the process of redefining the fairways. I didn't get much say in

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Two of the greens were renovated and the other 16 were regrassed as part of preparations for the U.S. Open.



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this work, but gave them my ideas whenever possible and feel like I influenced the work a little.

Q: The U.S. Open has featured some course setup mistakes and near disasters the past few years. Is there anything you are concerned about at Olympia Fields when conditions speed up and protecting par becomes a focus?

A: When you live on the edge, as the USGA and other major tournament venues do with their setups, you are bound to go over it at times. I don't think that's intended, but it happens. I would call these occasions unfortunate, but I wouldn't say they are near disasters.

In particular, the fifth green may cause problems in setup. The green slopes severely to the front left. A ball rolling off the green to the front will trickle down the fairway before stopping 20 feet below the green. I foresee balls being putted off the green and wedge shots rolling back to the same position from which they were played.

Beyond that, one of the great things about Olympia Fields is that it's a straightforward course that hasn't been tricked up.

Q: For those of us watching on TV, are there any holes we should pay special attention to, perhaps to see where renovation work enhanced the architecture?

A: I hope the work on all the holes restored and improved the original Willie Park architecture. I'm not going to take credit for doing much actual enhancement. The previous layout was sound, but it had been eroded over time by the rebuilding and raising of bunkers and indiscriminate tree planting. Through restoring bunkers and removing trees, the former options and playability were returned.

Changes I like most are on No. 2, where the left-side carry bunker group was pushed further out to affect the long hitters; on No. 4 where difficult back-right and left-side pin placements were restored; on No. 5 where numerous trees were removed along Butterfield Creek on the right side of the hole so that the fairway could be shifted closer to the creek; on No. 16 where we added a left fairway bunker to influence the dogleg; on No. 17 where we pushed the tee back 21 yards; and on No. 18 where we added a bunker in the landing area at about 300 yards, which completely changes the tee shot and puts the right-side bunker more in play. ■

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