

Just Greens



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THE GREENS OF LAS VEGAS

Superintendent says he’s up to the peculiar turf task presented to him at Las Vegas putting complex **By Doug Cantor**

The scene is the 17th green at Augusta National GC, where a mere 8-foot putt will mean the Masters championship. The speed is perfect, the ball breaks just right and the crowd goes wild. One more hole and the green jacket is in the bag.

Suddenly, the roar of a jet engine interrupts your round . . . and your fantasy. Yeah, it’s the world-famous green (sort of). But this isn’t Augusta, and it surely isn’t Sunday afternoon at the Masters.

In reality, it’s 3 a.m. and this is Las Vegas, City of Illusion, where the Eiffel

Tower, the Great Pyramid and the Empire State Building meet. This latest illusion comes courtesy of The Greens of Las Vegas, a unique putting complex currently under construction near McCarran Airport in Sin City. Slated to open this fall, the 23-acre facility features authentic recreations of the greens from 24 of the most celebrated golf holes in the world.

Even more than it is for golfers, the layout of The Greens is a change of pace for its superintendent, Kent McCutcheon. With its desert location, lack of fairways and four sets of six

greens inspired by courses as disparate as Medinah CC and St. Andrews, the complex has significantly different construction and maintenance issues from more traditional courses.

“I don’t know of any superintendent who’s had to do something like this,” says McCutcheon, The Greens’ director of agronomy.

Formerly the director of golf course operations at Las Vegas Paiute Golf Resort, the 31-year-old McCutcheon is now responsible for maintaining the 24 “inspired by” greens, complete with bunkers and water hazards, as well as two other 18-hole putting courses. In case that were not enough, one of the courses is modeled after Japanese-style greens with a wide variety of vegetation not normally found in the United States.

According to Brent Harvey of San Diego’s Harvey Mills Design, the arid climate poses the biggest challenge to maintaining the greens.

“The Greens of Las Vegas is about 20 acres of turf compared to 90 acres we normally see in the desert,” says Harvey, whose golf course irrigation consultancy worked closely with McCutcheon to develop the irrigation system. “But it is probably equal in terms of the effort.”

Fortunately for McCutcheon, the plan is to use the same type of grass for every green. Still, he is going to have his hands full maintaining that much manicured turf.

“We have six acres of bentgrass,” he explains. “It’s the same as two golf

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courses. The greens will get 85 percent of the focus.”

The experienced McCutcheon, who just completed his term as president of the Southern Nevada Superintendents Association, has his own gallery of supporters.

“He’s the best,” says Eddie Heinen, an amateur golfer who got the idea for The Greens of Las Vegas while playing in Canada with recent Masters winner Mike Weir, his old teammate from Brigham Young University. The original plan was just to hold a series of putting tournaments. But over four years of raising capital, securing government approvals and scouting locations, it evolved into the present project.

“Eddie’s added new features to make it not so one-dimensional,” says Weir, who regularly talks with Heinen over the phone about the progress of the project. “It will really work well in Vegas.”

When it opens its doors in November, The Greens will offer free instructional clinics, a golf camp for kids and daily putting competitions with sizable cash prizes. It also will have a pro shop, a sports bar and a radio broadcast studio, as well as the four signature six-green courses.

Architects from the renowned Dye Design Group assisted Heinen with selection of the greens. Heinen admits he has played only two of the original holes, Castle Pines No. 12 and Shinnecock



MIKE KLEMM

Hills No. 18. But for him, that’s the beauty of the project — now anyone can take aim at greens that otherwise might never be accessible.

“Within an hour after Tiger Woods makes a long putt at Sawgrass, we can set it up so anyone can try that putt,” he says.

McCutcheon will have to stay on his toes to accommodate all of Heinen’s big ideas. Besides all the other maintenance demands, the course will be open around the clock.

“It’s a 24/7 town,” McCutcheon says. “You have a lot of people who get off work at 2 a.m., and they’re not ready to go to bed.”

So far, McCutcheon has not had much trouble with the course’s lighting system, but he is a bit worried it could create a problem by

attracting cutworms.

Given the never-ending schedule, it will be hard to predict when the course will experience the greatest amount of traffic or just how heavy it will be. McCutcheon has not yet decided when his eight-person crew will do the bulk of the prep work, though he says it could, in fact, begin in the wee hours of the morning. In Vegas, there’s just no rest for the weary.

One saving grace unlike traditional courses: There is not a first tee that must be ready in the morning. If need be, the crew can work on one set of greens while people play on the others.

Though he does not expect to put in too much overtime, McCutcheon says the complex will require a lot of hand-work and attention-to-detail. Indeed, he

The famed Shinnecock Hills GC in Southhampton, N.Y., is represented at the Greens of Las Vegas.

may need to increase the size of his crew to handle landscaping after the facility opens for business. He’s also keeping his fingers crossed that the once-a-decade flood Las Vegas is due for won’t come anytime soon.

But with all these concerns, the veteran superintendent remains undaunted. Even when working on a standard course, he says: “I always focus on greens first. If there’s anything I want, it’s good greens.

“And,” he adds confidently, “we’re going to have the best greens in town.” ■

Cantor is a free-lance writer from Chicago.