

Carry the

Volunteers help bring a successful PGA Championship to fruition at Oak Hill CC



Jeff Corcoran (far right) leads an army of volunteers on a rough-cutting expedition during the PGA Championship.

Weight

BY LARRY AYLWARD,
EDITOR



GREG WALL

WITH TIRED MINDS AND MUSCLES, they gather in the vast, dimly lit hospitality tent to rest. Some of the workers sprawl out on the floor. Others slump on wooden chairs and fight to keep their weary eyes open. One person lies on a makeshift bed erected from two chairs and a sleeping bag.

They don't care *where* they sleep, just as long as they *can* sleep — even if it's for a fleeting 20 minutes. Most of them, after all, have been awake long before the crack of dawn.

It's about 12:15 on this sun-splashed and muggy Friday afternoon in mid-August, the second round of the 85th PGA Championship at Oak Hill Country Club in Pittsford, N.Y. The weary workers, most of them volunteers, are resting up for their late-afternoon chores, which begin around 6 p.m. They'll mow the rough and rake the bunkers then, among other tasks.

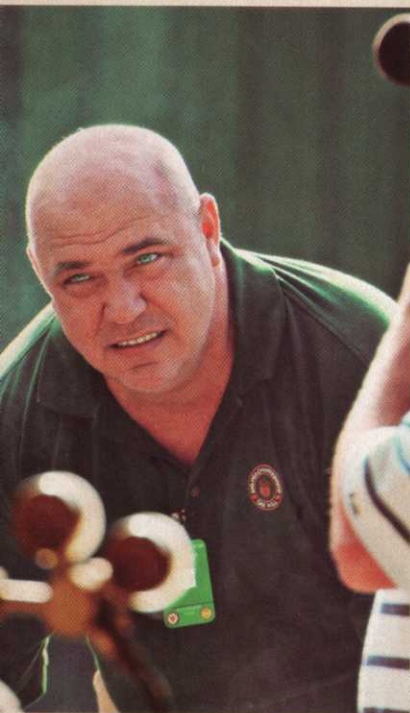
While some try to snooze in the air-conditioned tent, others file in for lunch. They snatch food from a table crowded with deli sandwiches, chips, fruit, cookies and other snacks. They sit at long tables and eat the food earnestly while watching the tournament on seven TVs positioned throughout the temporary tent, which was erected to accommodate them during their downtime.

Nearly 100 volunteers comprise the roughly 150-member tournament maintenance staff, headed by Paul B. Latshaw, manager of golf courses and grounds at Oak Hill (see editor's note below). The volunteers, made up mostly of superintendents and assistant superintendents, hail from some of the best golf courses in the land, including Augusta, Winged Foot and Shadow Creek. Some have traveled from far-away places, including Sweden.

They've trekked to Oak Hill to help Latshaw and his crew stage this great spectacle of a tournament. Latshaw and his normal crew of about 50 could never produce the tournament without the volunteers because there's so much more to do than usual. Consider that the greens must be double-cut and rolled every morning during tournament week. Consider that the rough must be groomed meticulously. If Latshaw and his normal crew tried to do it all, it would be akin to two cooks trying to feed a dinner party of 1,000.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Shortly after the PGA Championship ended at Oak Hill, Paul B. Latshaw, manager of golf courses and grounds at the club, took a new job as superintendent at Muirfield Village Golf Club in Dublin, Ohio. Latshaw's replacement at Oak Hill was one of the tournament's top volunteers, Jeff Corcoran. See the "Pin High" column on page 10.



GREG WALL

“What’s the biggest party in the state of New York this year? You’re standing in it.”

JAY REHR
SERVICE TECHNICIAN
AUGUSTA NATIONAL

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Many of the volunteers took precious vacation time from their jobs and paid their own travel expenses to come to Oak Hill. They also left behind their families and their comfortable beds.

“I have a wife and two kids at home,” says Kevin Seibel, superintendent of Century Country Club in Purchase, N.Y. “But I want to be here to be part of this event.”

It all sounds paradoxical, really. In essence, the volunteers took time off from their jobs to work 16-hour days (or longer) and fall behind on their sleep.

But those volunteers wouldn’t have it any other way. They know that the long days and short nights are parts of the package that come with volunteering for one of the biggest golf tournaments of the year. And most agree that it’s easy to get pumped up to work double-digit hours for five straight days when you’re helping to put on a Major.

“It’s funny,” a volunteer says. “A quarter to four comes in the morning and you’re dragging. But as soon as you get on the golf course, the adrenaline starts pumping.”

THAT ENERGY WAS EVIDENT

earlier Friday as workers hustled about the course, hustling to complete their duties before the first tee time shortly before 7:30.

It’s shortly before 6, and Latshaw and several maintenance workers are walking down a fairway. Latshaw clutches a tall cup of steaming coffee and remarks to no one in particular that he’s functioning on three hours of sleep. He appears edgy, but not nervous. He knows he has incredible support and will get by with a little help — make that a lot of help — from his friends.

But it’s not like Latshaw can delegate his authority and disappear into his office to watch the tournament on TV. He must coordinate all those workers. And it’s not like he has too much help — for every person is needed. The maintenance is intensified, inside and outside the ropes, when a course stages a tournament the stature of the PGA Championship. And that equates to Latshaw’s responsibilities being broadened.

“Right now, with all the maintenance we’re doing, we need everybody to do something,” Latshaw says later while taking a short break in his office, where he slept on the floor the night before covered by his winter parka. “Some of the tasks might not seem that im-

portant, but they all lead up to the ultimate goal to produce a great product.”

Latshaw is one of the top superintendents in the business. He’s also a fine recruiter of volunteers. Included on his crew are Eric Greytok, superintendent of Winged Foot; Jeff Corcoran, superintendent of Weston Golf Club; Greg James, superintendent of Plainfield Country Club; Tom Gosselin, superintendent of Overbrook Golf Club; and several others from other top tracks.

“With the talent that’s here, I could get struck by lightning and nothing will miss a beat,” Latshaw says. “They all care about helping out and putting together the best possible championship because they want to be part of it.”

Latshaw pauses.

“Without the volunteers, we wouldn’t be able to have this,” he says. “There’s no way we could do it.”

Latshaw knows where he would be — something akin to hitting a tee shot in the drink — if it wasn’t for the volunteers’ astonishing effort on Tuesday. That’s when the PGA of America, which sponsors the tournament, decided the rough was too penal and needed to be cut. It came at a point in the day when Latshaw’s regular crew was spent. It had rained the night before, and the crew’s members had spent hours battling standing water on the course.

Greytok knew the regular crew needed a rest. So he told Latshaw that the volunteers would mow the rough. So two groups of nine volunteers, headed by Greytok and Corcoran, set out with an army of 21-inch rotary mowers to cut 30 acres of rough. It was a tedious and exhausting duty. But the volunteers’ good deed sent morale soaring among the entire staff.

HOSTING A MAJOR TOURNAMENT,

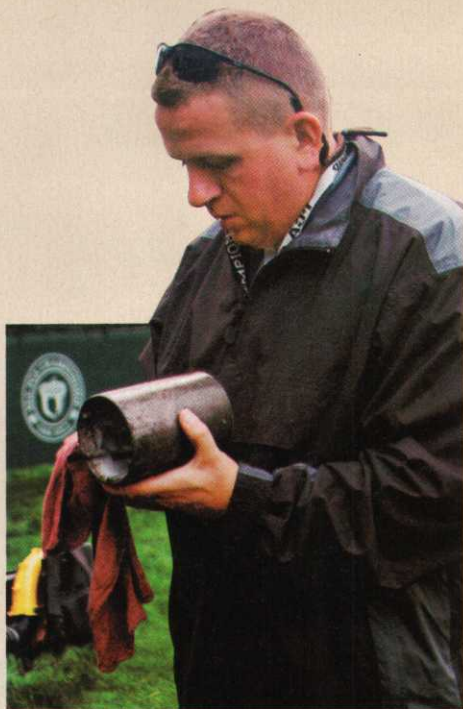
of course, is a pressure-packed atmosphere for the ones doing the hosting. The greatest golfers in the world will judge the course’s setup and playability. And millions of golf fans will scrutinize the course from their armchairs while watching the tournament on TV.

Needless to say, the workers need someone to provide a little comic relief to keep their collective blood pressure in check. Since Bill Murray isn’t available, the job falls to Jay Rehr, a service technician from Augusta National, who’s known for his knack of keeping people loose.

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"I'm probably the only guy with a weekend job at a golf course who gets invited to do course setup at Oak Hill for the PGA Championship."

MATT JOHNSON
PART-TIME EMPLOYEE
HAZELTINE NATIONAL



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Rehr knows something about working a Major. He's been through 16 Masters championships in his 15-year career at Augusta, not to mention working a few other big tournaments as a volunteer, including the 2002 U.S. Open.

It took Rehr about 15 hours over two days to drive to Pittsford from Augusta earlier in the week. He arrived for duty Friday morning at 3:45. He'll stay until at least 9 p.m.

It's shortly after 8 a.m. now, and the second day of the tournament is in full swing. Golf course workers return in droves to the maintenance facility, which is tucked discreetly behind the sixth hole. They look like an army of sorts, all dressed in dark green shirts and khaki shorts or pants.

The jovial Rehr sits in a utility vehicle outside the maintenance facility. He lights another cigarette and confesses that he's exhausted — and it's only the second day of the tournament. But Rehr is not complaining. He knew what he was getting into.

"This is neat," Rehr says, glancing around the compound and wearing one of those I-wouldn't-want-to-be-anywhere-else smiles. "What's the biggest party in the state of New York this year? You're standing in it."

Rehr's experience of working such tournaments has given him the wisdom to recognize when someone's blood is boiling over with frustration. It might be the superintendent or a crew worker, and Rehr will take it upon himself to keep that person relaxed by cracking a

joke or doing something goofy. Shortly after meeting Tom Bailey, superintendent of Oak Hill's East Course, Rehr wisecracked, "You better smile every time I see you or I'm going to punch you."

As much as the workers need Rehr to keep them smiling, they need someone — a seasoned pro, of sorts — to provide reassurance that everything is going to be OK. The perfect person for that job is Paul R. Latshaw, Paul B.'s father, and a veteran superintendent of hosting Majors. Paul R. basically stays out of the way, but everyone has to feel good about him being here. It's like today's Yankees having Reggie Jackson in the dugout for the World Series.

It was 25 years ago that Paul R. hosted his first Major tournament — also a PGA Championship — at Oakmont Country Club near Pittsburgh. And here was his son hosting his first Major a quarter of a century later.

"I wouldn't have missed this for anything," Paul R. says with a heartfelt smile.

Paul R. attended the 2002 PGA Championship at Hazeltine National Golf Club near Minneapolis with his son so the two could get an idea of how Oak Hill should prepare for the tournament. Paul R. says he was taken aback by the sheer magnitude of the event and how much it has grown over the years.

Things have changed dramatically since the PGA was held at Oakmont. Paul R. notes that he had only four volunteers to help him with that tournament. "I told my son, 'You have some planning to do,'" he says.

That planning included assembling the throng of volunteers. But recruiting them wasn't that difficult for Paul B., who has more connections than the CEO of a big company.

THE VOLUNTEERS CAME TO

Pittsford for myriad reasons, although all are thrilled to be part of the event. Most have met Paul B. at one time or another and came away impressed with his passion for the profession.

Seibel came to Oak Hill primarily to help his mentor and good friend Paul B., for whom he worked as an assistant when Latshaw was superintendent of Merion Golf Club near Philadelphia from 1992 to 1998. It's the first time Seibel has ever volunteered at a big tournament. His main duty has been rolling greens with a drum roller.

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"I hosted the Scandinavian Masters in 1996. But that was like a club tournament compared to this."

THOMAS PREIFELT
SUPERINTENDENT
HILLS GOLF CLUB, SWEDEN



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"Paul's the reason I'm here," Seibel says, adding that Latshaw taught him a lot about turf maintenance at Merion and has helped him in his career.

The big reason that Charles R. DeCerce, superintendent of Mechanicville (N.Y.) Country Club, is at Oak Hill is to get schooled on how a top course prepares for a Major. DeCerce's club paid his transportation from Mechanicville, located about 250 miles away, and gave him the time off with pay to attend the event.

The mustached DeCerce sits at a table in the tent, ready to wolf down a deli sandwich. He appears less tired than other workers, his manner actually bordering on buoyant.

"I'm learning something every hour," DeCerce declares. "Now I've got to take that information home, break it down and figure out how I can use it."

One of the things DeCerce learned was how to water bunkers to alleviate golf balls from sticking in the sand like fried eggs. He also learned the art of hover mowing around bunkers.

"This gives me a rush," DeCerce says of his experience, describing the entire scene as "controlled chaos." "I'm getting the knowledge I was seeking."

Thomas Preifelt gets the award for traveling the farthest to volunteer for the tournament. The blonde-haired and blue-eyed Preifelt came from Sweden, where he is superintendent of Hills Golf Club, a new course and the first American-designed track in the country. Preifelt wrote Paul B. about volunteering for the tournament after meeting Paul R., who visited Hills on a consulting venture last year.

"He wrote me back and said he wanted to have me," says Preifelt, who has been in the European turf industry since 1985. "My boss was delighted that I could come."

Preifelt's supervisor was so thrilled that he paid for Preifelt's trip. Like DeCerce's boss, Preifelt's supervisor thought volunteering for the PGA would be the ultimate learning experience for his superintendent.

"I hosted the Scandinavian Masters in 1996," says Preifelt, noting that the tournament is one of the biggest on the European Tour. "But that was like a club tournament compared to this."

Perhaps no one was more excited about volunteering at Oak Hill than Matt Johnson, one of the few volunteers who doesn't make a living in the golf course maintenance business. The 34-year-old Johnson is a UPS truck driver from Minneapolis, who works part-time on the weekends at Hazeltine National. Johnson took a week of vacation from UPS and paid \$360 for a round-trip plane ticket. Latshaw invited him to be a part of his crew after meeting Johnson last year at Hazeltine during the tournament.

"It was an opportunity I couldn't pass up," says Johnson, who's married and has two children. "My wife knows what kind of a golf nut I am. But she just told me to go and have fun because she knew how much I'd enjoy it."

Johnson's job for the week is setting and painting cups.

"This is quite an honor for me," he says. "I'm probably the only guy with a weekend job at a golf course who gets invited to do course setup at Oak Hill for the PGA Championship."

IT'S NEARING 5 P.M., AND THE

tent has transformed into a hive of activity. Several workers gather around the wide-screen TV to watch the tournament. Most golfers have completed their rounds, and few scores are below par while several are in the stratosphere. A few workers chuckle when the high scores are flashed on TV. They don't want the pros reigning over their creation.

"It's fun to see those guys struggling a little bit on the golf course," Seibel says with a grin.

Soon, the workers will sit down for dinner. Then they'll head back out on the course to work several more hours to begin preparing the course for the third day of the tournament. When they're done, some of them might grab a quick bite and beverage at a nearby tavern before going to bed. They'll sleep a few hours and rise while the crickets are still chirping. They'll dress quickly and return to the course for a 5 a.m. meeting and their morning chores.

It's a given that they'll already be a tad tired when they arrive. But like they did the previous morning and the morning before that, they'll reach deep down for that extra moxie to get them through the day.

They have no choice, for this is what they volunteered for.

And they welcome it. ■

GREG WALL