



# The Day After

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS  
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Life (and plenty of work) goes on at the Oakmont Country Club for John Zimmers Jr. and his staff after hosting the U.S. Open

Standing on the top row of the empty grandstand, John Zimmers Jr. stares out through dark sunglasses at the imposing golf course known as Oakmont, which still appears majestic despite being beat up by all things that come with hosting a U.S. Open Championship.

It's the day after the championship, not even 24 hours since winner Angel Cabrera embraced the U.S. Open trophy on the 18th green and kissed it. It was also on that green that Tiger Woods, who tied for second with Jim Furyk, embraced Zimmers and said to him, "That was tough." Woods, of course, was talking about Oakmont's setup, and his comment to Zimmers was meant as a compliment, not a criticism.

Zimmers and his 40-member maintenance staff at the Pittsburgh club fretted and sweated over that setup for months, in accordance with United States Golf Association guidelines. Together, they set out to set up the toughest test of golf of the year for the world's best players. Considering that nobody broke par, their mission was accomplished.

But it's over now. All the hard work that Zimmers and his crew spent preparing for and staging the championship has been officially

filed in the Oakmont archives, not to mention their memories.

"It was such a great time," Zimmers says, his face still beaming on the day after. "Yeah, it has to come to an end. But, boy, it was fun."

For first assistant superintendent Brett Bentley, hosting a U.S. Open was the time of his life. Bentley says he was glum Sunday evening when the event was over. But it didn't take him long to shake those blues and start thinking about what he had to do Monday morning.

"After the trophy presentation," Bentley says, "I was thinking about what areas of the course we had to water on Monday."

It was one heckuva party. Attendance for the three practice rounds and four tournament rounds held June 11 through June 17 was a record 258,907. The USGA, which stages the championship, was ecstatic with the course.

"We've never had a golf course conditioned — at least for the championships I've done over the last 18 years — as good as this one," says Mike Davis, USGA's senior director of rules and competitions.

With a party of this proportion, however, comes a mess to clean up afterward. And as Zimmers gazes out from the grandstand behind the No. 3 green, he sees the blemishes



and bruises left behind by the quarter of a million people who traipsed the course. And there will be more scars revealed on the course after the many grandstands, corporate chalets, booths and tents are taken down.

"Everybody is asking me, 'How are you going to clean this up?'" Zimmers says. "They say, 'Aren't you sick about this?' But this comes with hosting a major championship."

Davis says any superintendent who hosts a tournament of this magnitude on his or her course realizes it's going to get banged up.

"When you come into something this big, both on the front end and on the back end, you have to go in knowing that you want to protect your property and your asset, which is the golf course," Davis adds.

Zimmers realizes it will take time to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. His initial intent is to convince Oakmont's members, regarded as the most demanding fraternity in golf, to be patient during the restoration process.

"Part of my job is to reinforce to the members of what we have to do, and that it's going to take time to do it," Zimmers says.

It's obvious where the galleries gathered. The brown bands of turf, which stretch from fairway to fairway, are matted down like a corn crop after the harvest. "There are a lot of areas to seed," Zimmers says.

One of the first things Zimmers had his crew do when they arrived at 7 a.m. Monday was to "vent" (Zimmers' term for aeration) Oakmont's prized greens. "The greens are a under stress; they're a little dinged up," Zimmers says. "We put needle tines in them to get oxygen to them."

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**Oakmont, as expected, was a little dinged up after the U.S. Open. (Top left) A crew worker waters the stressed ninth green. (Top right) John Zimmers Jr. studies the course from the grandstand. (Above) A row of corporate chalets waits to be lowered.**

### Assistants Return to Assist

It was a reunion of sorts for John Zimmers Jr. and several of his former employees at Oakmont Country Club during the U.S. Open. Zimmers, who has been at Oakmont for almost eight years, has employed several assistants who have moved on to be head superintendents at golf courses throughout the country. But they all returned to volunteer on Zimmers' crew for the championship. They are:

- Ron Pusateri, St. Clair (Pa.) Country Club.
- Doug Drugo, Wee Burn Country Club in Darien, Conn.
- Jim Roney, Saucon Valley Country Club in Bethlehem, Pa.
- Jim Thomas, Deal (N.J.) Golf & Country Club.
- Brent Palich, Sand Ridge Golf Club in Chardon, Ohio.
- Travis Livingston, Sewickley (Pa.) Heights Golf Club.
- Eric Snelsire, GlenRiddle Golf Club in Ocean City, Md.
- Scott Cook, Cedarwood Country Club in Fort Mill, S.C.
- Jason Hurwitz, Fox Chapel (Pa.) Golf Club.

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**(Top)** It's obvious where the galleries gathered. Brown bands of turf stretch from fairway to fairway. **(Middle)** John Zimmers Jr. addresses his crew late Monday morning about the "restoration" of the course. **(Bottom)** Tom Haluck (left) and Brian Fritz pick up plywood and load it on a utility vehicle. For three months, Fritz and Haluck's sole duty was to lay down plywood on the turf to create a temporary road for construction and vendor vehicles.

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The fact that the temperature on this sunny and hazy day is nearly 90 degrees has Zimmers even more concerned about the greens. It is a topic of discussion, as Zimmers takes a call on his radio from his tournament assistant Brendon Clark.

"How we doing with our water and syringe team?" Zimmers asks him.

"We'll have to hit the greens three or four times this afternoon to cool them off," Clark answers.

While riding in his utility vehicle near the ninth green, Zimmers points to a gravel road running through the middle of the golf course. Two of the roads were built last November to provide transport for construction crews to get around the course to build the grandstands, chalets, concession stands and other structures. Zimmers will be glad when the roads are gone.

Zimmers feels the same about the many vendors, from merchandisers to the media, and their belongings. The sooner they vacate, the sooner he and his staff can restore the course.

Zimmers also keeps a watchful eye on the vendors as they dismantle their booths and haul their supplies away. He says they haven't been as careful with transporting their stuff off the course as they were with bringing it on. When Zimmers sees a vendor riding a utility vehicle where he shouldn't, he chases after him like a state trooper after a speeding sports car. Then Zimmers stops him and scolds him.

"We have to make sure they still understand that we have rules," Zimmers says.

Overall, the course looks in decent shape, considering what it could have looked like. The weather was sunny and dry for the most part during the championship. A rainy week could have meant a mud fest, which could have produced some unsightly course damage.

It's about 2 p.m., the time Zimmers told his crew to go home for the day. Most of the crew members are going on about 20 hours of sleep during the past four days.

"I stressed to the guys that they have to manage themselves," Zimmers says. "They just can't just push, push, push."

About 2:30 p.m., Zimmers happens upon two of his crew members — Brian Fritz and

Tom Haluck — who are picking up plywood and loading it onto a utility vehicle. Zimmers glances at his watch and reminds them that it's past time to go home.

For three months, Fritz and Haluck's sole duty has been to lay down plywood on the turf to create a temporary road for construction and vendor vehicles. And when the vehicles pass through, they pick up the plywood. It's a thankless chore, albeit an important one, and Zimmers says he's proud of their effort.

Remarkably, Zimmers doesn't look like someone who has had about four hours of sleep for each of the past four nights. He looks tanned and alert. There's no sign of him enduring a U.S. Open hangover, with the exception of an occasional yawn.

He might be fueled by adrenaline. It's obvious the fond memories of hosting his first Major tournament are fresh in his mind. He says it still hasn't hit him that it's over.

"Somebody said to me last night, 'That was great. What are you doing to do next?' I felt like saying, 'I'm going to Disney World.'"

The memories will be etched in Zimmers' mind long after he's retired from the profession. Some of them are simple, like walking the course and listening to the spectators talk. Or how relaxed he felt after removing his shoes for a few minutes after being on his feet for hours.

Zimmers says he will never forget how his staff, especially his assistants — Bentley, Clark, David Delsandro and Chris Markel — performed so gracefully under pressure. "I've never seen them at the level they were at," he says. "I'm so proud of what the assistants and the entire staff accomplished."

Some of his memories are more sentimental. As with any Major tournament, a course's maintenance staff is augmented with volunteers to help with all of the work. Zimmers' staff included about 125 volunteers, many of whom are his peers and friends, such as Paul R. Latshaw, his mentor; Paul B. Latshaw, certified superintendent of Muirfield Village Golf Club; Matt Shaffer, superintendent of Merion Golf Club; Eric Greytok, superintendent of Remington Ranch; and several former assistants. It was so good to spend time with them and have them part of the event, says Zimmers, who misses them now that they're gone.

## It Wouldn't Be a U.S. Open Without Some Grumbings

By Larry Aylward

It wouldn't be a U.S. Open if there weren't players and media who didn't gripe about the host course's setup. Phil Mickelson and a few others took their turns to grumble about the setup at Oakmont Country Club near Pittsburgh last month during the championship.

Mickelson, who missed the cut after shooting 77 for the second round, blamed the course's setup for injuring him. He also called Oakmont's rough "dangerous."

Mickelson, of course, injured his left wrist prior to the tournament hitting out of deep rough around the greens during a practice round at Oakmont. But he vowed to play in the championship and did before bowing out at 12-over par after two days of play.

"It's disappointing to dream, as a kid, about winning the U.S. Open and spend all this time getting ready for it and have the course setup injure you," Mickelson said after the second round.

While complaints about the setup are expected, Mickelson's comments surprised Mike Davis, the United States Golf Association's (USGA) senior director of rules and competitions, and John Zimmers Jr., Oakmont's golf course superintendent.

"[His comments] got me, they got our membership, and they got the USGA," Zimmers told *Golfdom*. "Simply put, 99 percent of the players said it was the hardest U.S. Open they have ever played in. But it was absolutely the fairest one, too. It was a true test of golf."

Davis said the USGA thought Mickelson's comments were "perplexing."

"Maybe in this litigious society, where you're not responsible for anything that happens to you, maybe this was just something where he didn't want to be responsible, and he wanted to put the blame on someone else," Davis said. "I don't think the USGA is ready to all of the sudden have no rough at the U.S. Open because somebody hurt his wrist in it three weeks before. But having said that, I will say Phil is a good player, and he was playing such great golf coming into the U.S. Open that it's too bad he hurt his wrist"

Mickelson wasn't the only one making a stink. Rory Sabbatini said he might go fishing the next time the U.S. Open is held at Oakmont. Several media members criticized the setup as well. One report said "Oakmont was on the edge of being close to impossible Friday afternoon, and the USGA responded by twice watering the greens overnight, then again two hours before the third round."

Zimmers said the course was "far from being unplayable." The greens were watered not in a panic to slow down the greens but because he and his crew were simply tending to the golf course, Zimmers said. "That's what we should do," he added.

Throughout the tournament, Zimmers said he and USGA staff members measured the course's firmness to ensure fair playability. "We wanted to make sure we were giving them the same golf course they had during the practice rounds," he added.

On the final day of the championship, Zimmers said he thought of the late Henry Fownes, who designed Oakmont in 1903 to be the toughest golf course in the country. With Angela Cabrera winning the tournament at 5-over par, it struck Zimmers that Fownes had succeeded. "He must be very proud," Zimmers said. ■



Mike Davis

"There's an emptiness," he says softly.

Perhaps the greatest memory Zimmers will retain is the reception he received from Oakmont's members, who are known as a tough bunch of people who rarely exhibit a tender side. After the tournament, several of them took to the 18th green — proud of their course for hosting its eighth U.S. Open. They were also proud of their course's superintendent. Their eyes welled with tears as they hugged Zimmers and congratulated him on his efforts.

Says a touched Zimmers, who fought back tears of his own, "That was my trophy." ■