

## Bethpage Black's Craig Currier refuses to let Biblical-like rains dampen his spirit at this year's U.S. Open

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STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY LARRY AYLWARD

**I**t's easy to commiserate with Craig Currier, considering it's pouring down buckets of rain on his parade — the 2009 U.S. Open. You feel downright doleful for Currier, the golf course superintendent at Bethpage Black Golf Course, for what he has had to endure on this stark Thursday morning, the opening round of one of America's greatest sporting events.

It's 10:20 a.m. and the weather sirens are blaring throughout the golf course with the message that play has been suspended after three hours and 20 minutes because of the driving rain. Tiger Woods and other golfers, who have played anywhere from one to 11 holes, are running for cover from the deluge that will soon transform Bethpage Black into Bethpage Lake and cancel play for the day.

Currier expected as much. Earlier in the morning, he saw the mass of red, yellow and green blotches approaching the area on the weather radar. In fact, during a 4 a.m. meeting with his grounds crew, Currier announced, "I can't imagine we're going to get much golf in today."

But that didn't mean Currier wasn't going to do his best to make sure a lot of golf *could* be played. After all, he and his staff had been gearing up for this event for a few years since the United States Golf Association announced Bethpage Black, located on Long Island in Farmingdale, N.Y., would host its second U.S. Open. Currier and his crew weren't about to pack it in for the day.

Currier has been awake since 2:45 a.m. He arrived at the 4 a.m. meeting with his crew, consisting of Bethpage's

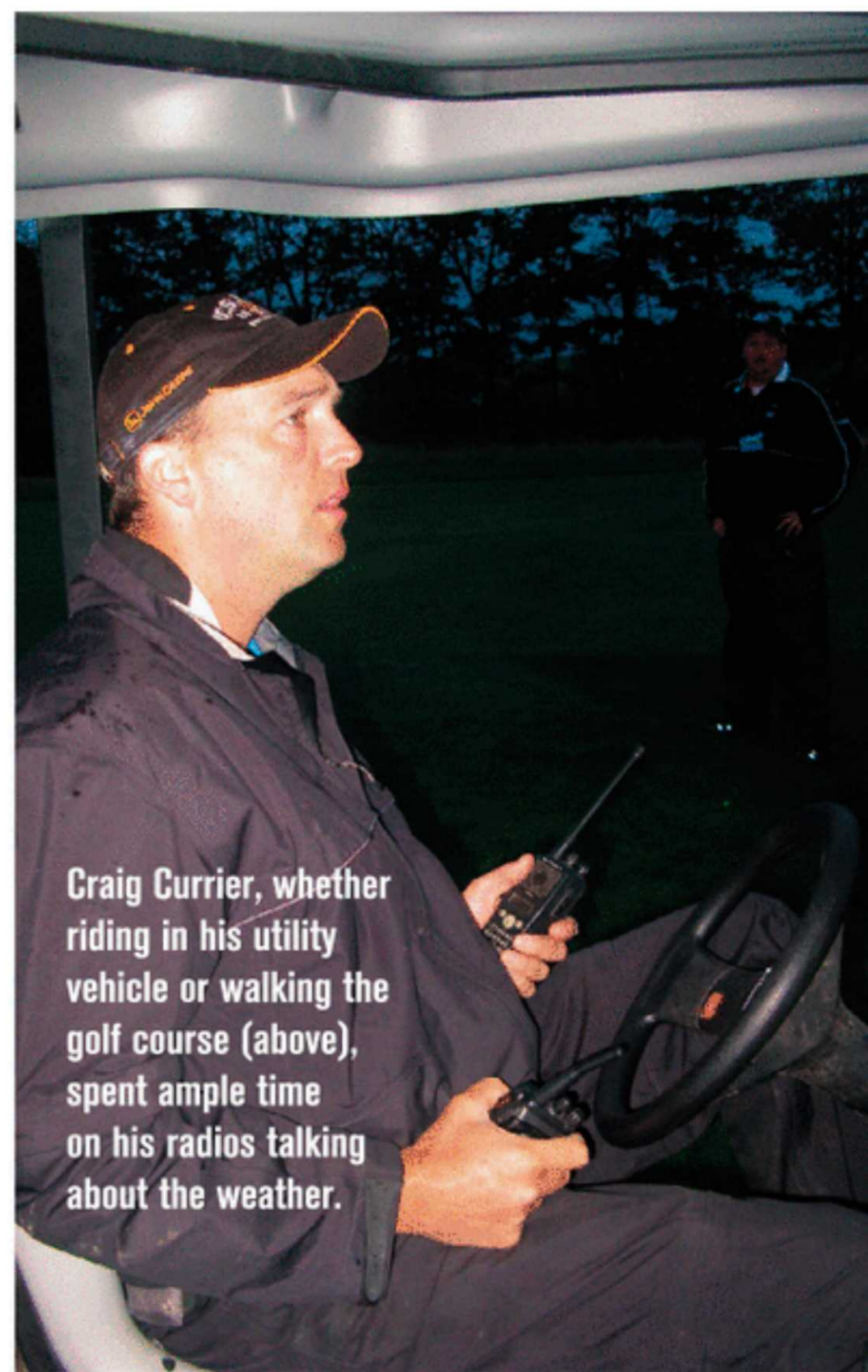
60 full-time members and 100 volunteers, looking as spruce as George Clooney ever could for that time of day. Currier is bright-eyed and clean-shaven as he starts on the X's and O's of the day's game plan.

"Where are the bunker guys?" Currier asks of the group assigned to maintain the Black Course's majestic hazards. "Will the rough fluffers please meet down in front," he asks.

After receiving their assignments, the workers scatter out the door and into the rain. Unfortunately, the forecast for the next four days is similar to the forecast for the week that Noah built his ark — steely skies and steady rain. Currier is well aware of it as he steps outside to chat with volunteer Frank Darby, the men's golf coach at nearby St. John's University. Currier, a huge Pittsburgh Steelers fan, half-jokingly tells Darby that meeting Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, who played Bethpage Black the previous week as part of the star-studded U.S. Open Challenge, could end up being the highlight of "my Open" because of the dismal forecast.

Currier has labored intently the past few years with United States Golf Association representatives to get the Black Course, one of five tracks he oversees at Bethpage, prepared for the U.S. Open. While they can get the course in the best shape possible for the event, they can't manufacture a cloudless sky. And rain has a tendency to muck up everything from wedding days to picnics to golf tournaments.

Currier curls his 6-foot-5 frame into his Toro Workman utility vehicle and speeds off. It's about 5 a.m. He'll make many stops before the first tee shots launch at 7 a.m. on



Craig Currier, whether riding in his utility vehicle or walking the golf course (above), spent ample time on his radios talking about the weather.





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holes No. 1 and No. 9. As the rain begins to slow, Carrier remarks, “Hopefully, the rain won’t be as bad as they say, and we’ll get some golf in. It will be a shame if the whole day gets washed away.”

The problem is it has been raining on Farmingdale almost every day for the past two weeks. The course is like a soaked sponge. “We really can’t take much more rain,” Carrier says.

While the sun can’t shine through the thick clouds, the darkness of the night soon gives way to morning. The rain has stopped for now, but the wind is starting to blow. During his rounds, Carrier encounters Mike Davis, the USGA’s congenial director of rules and competitions. Davis is measuring green speed and probably praying for a miracle in the form of a big, blue sky.

At another stop, Carrier checks on the progress of two crew members who are zipping up and down a putting green on two new electric rollers, which were deliv-

ered to Bethpage the night before. Carrier ordered the rollers, which are almost 400 pounds heavier than gas-operated versions, to squeeze the greens tighter to keep the water rolling off them.

After a few minutes, Carrier climbs back in his utility vehicle to continue his rounds. He sails the vehicle through puddles of myriad shapes and sizes. Carrier is a multi-tasking man in motion. He drives the vehicle with one hand while carrying a radio with the other. Another radio is within reach, and he’s constantly switching back between the two. His cell phone is stashed in his jacket pocket. When it rings, Carrier fetches it. A circus juggler has nothing on him.

It’s 6:20, 40 minutes to tee time. Carrier encounters a white golf car driven by Dave Oatis, director of the USGA Green Section’s Northeast Region, who has been working with Carrier for months on the course for the tournament. The two stop their vehicles.

“How you feeling?” Carrier asks Oatis, who has been battling a cold. “Hey, it’s the Open,” Oatis responds, knowing he has no choice but to suck it up.

If this was a sunny and dry morning, Carrier would have the mowers out in full force. But the weather stymied that plan. Instead of mowers, Carrier has an army of squeegees and a fleet of Water Hogs (rolling devices to remove standing water) on the course.

“When you get water like this, everything is out the window,” Carrier says. “We’re doing everything on the fly.” He smiles slightly before adding, “I’d get bored if we didn’t have this kind of stuff.”

It’s pushing 7 and the wind gusts are gaining strength. One can hear the whip of the red, white and blue USGA flags hanging on the grandstands. The weatherman says the rain machine, which has been off a couple hours, will kick back on about 7.

The weatherman is dead on. In fact,  
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## Waterproof



The view from the windshield of Craig Currier's utility vehicle shortly before play was suspended for the opening round.

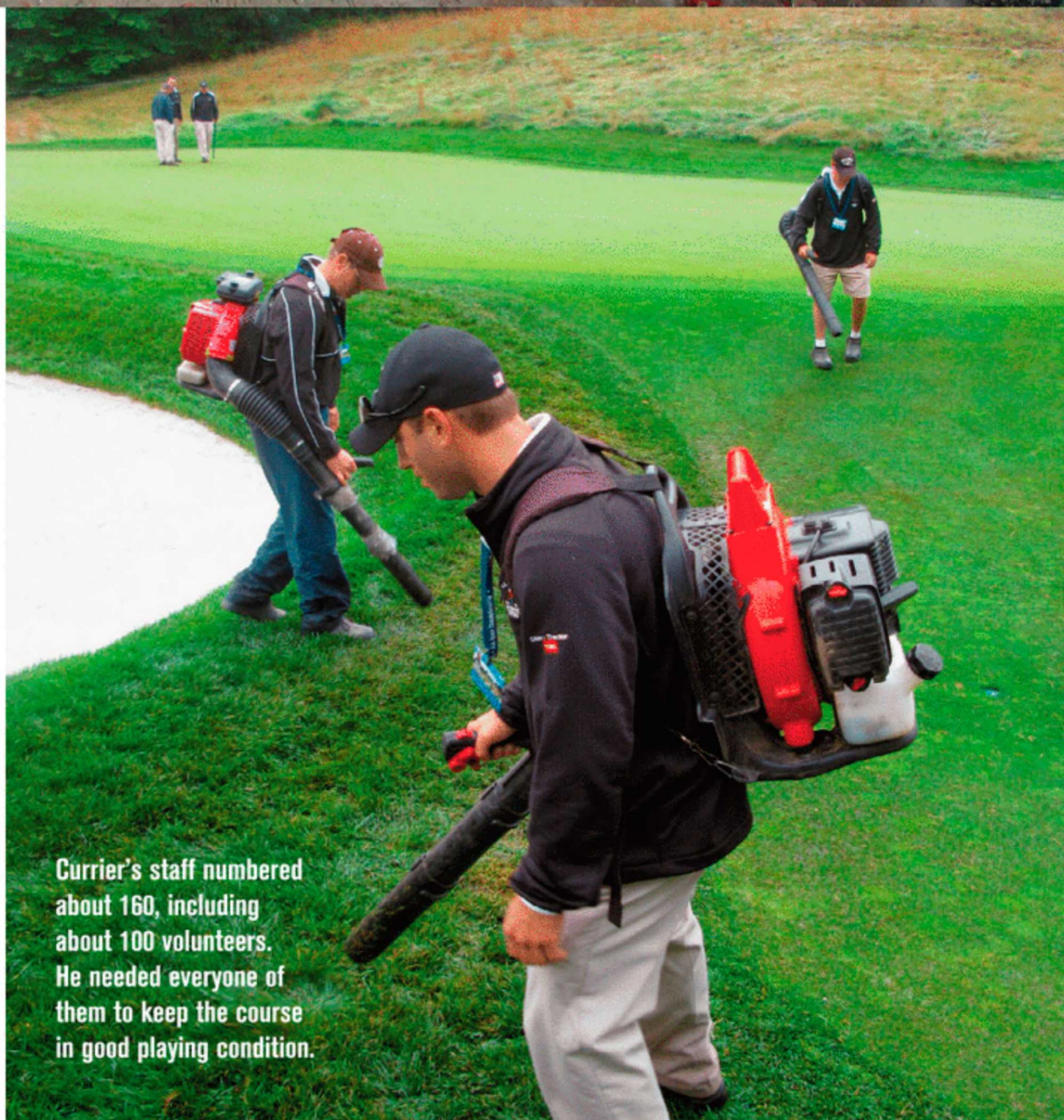
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the rain comes pouring down almost exactly at 7. Currier finishes touching up a bunker near the ninth green and spots a group of golfers heading toward the 10th tee. "Let's go watch the first tee shot of the U.S. Open," he says.

The rain comes down even harder, but not enough to cancel play — yet. Currier positions rotating workers with squeegees at every green. These guys don't know it at the time, but they will get their share of media exposure, from ESPN to "Sports Illustrated," not to mention the many newspapers, magazines and TV stations covering the event.

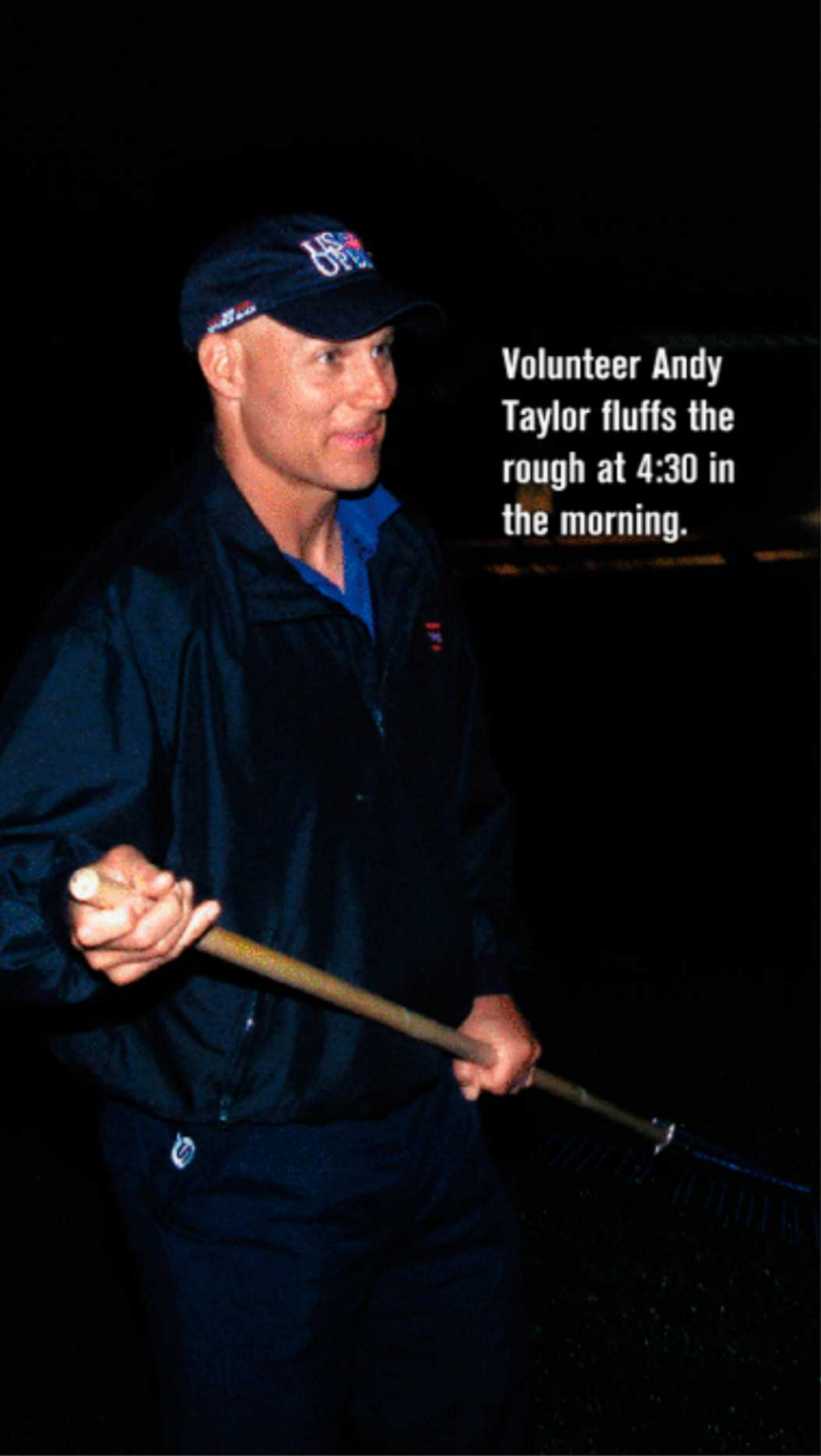
Many grounds staff members have retreated to the maintenance shop, where a hot breakfast awaits them. Currier is one of the last to show up. He places his two radios in front of him and gobbles down a plate of bacon, eggs, sausage and French toast while watching the tournament on TV.

Play continues, but so does the rain. Currier stops by his office. Outside his door, Darby is waiting for him with two former St. John Redman basketball players for him to meet. Currier is a big fan



Currier's staff numbered about 160, including about 100 volunteers. He needed everyone of them to keep the course in good playing condition.





**Volunteer Andy Taylor fluffs the rough at 4:30 in the morning.**

of the Syracuse University Orangemen hoopsters, having grown up near there. The Redman and Orangemen are rivals in the Big East Conference.

About 30 minutes later, Currier decides it's time to take another drive around the course. It's coming down in torrents now. It is reminiscent of the scene in "Forrest Gump" when Gump, while stationed in Vietnam, writes in a letter back home that "we've been through every kind of rain there is — little bitty stingin' rain, big ol' fat rain, rain that flew in sideways, and sometimes rain even that seemed to come straight up from underneath."

Currier can relate.

It's shortly after 10. Golf fans are slogging through the mud. Oatis is heard on the radio announcing the USGA "may pull the plug" and suspend play. Ten minutes later, the official announcement is made.

Currier shows little reaction. Sure, he's mad, sad and whatever else, but not once does he lose his composure. A lot of superintendents might let off a barrage of expletives, which would be completely understandable. But not Currier.

"What can you do?" he says quietly.

Currier also doesn't sit and steam. He relies on his sense of humor to pull him through. He spots the two former St. John basketball players vacating the course. "Go Orangemen," he yells. They turn to him and laugh.

Someone once said, "Humor is really laughing off a hurt." Back at the main-

tenance shop, there is hurt — guys have been working their butts off all morning for naught — but there is humor, too. It's announced that play for the day has been canceled and will resume the next morning. Outside, Currier gathers a group of drenched workers to tell them the news. It's quiet when Currier

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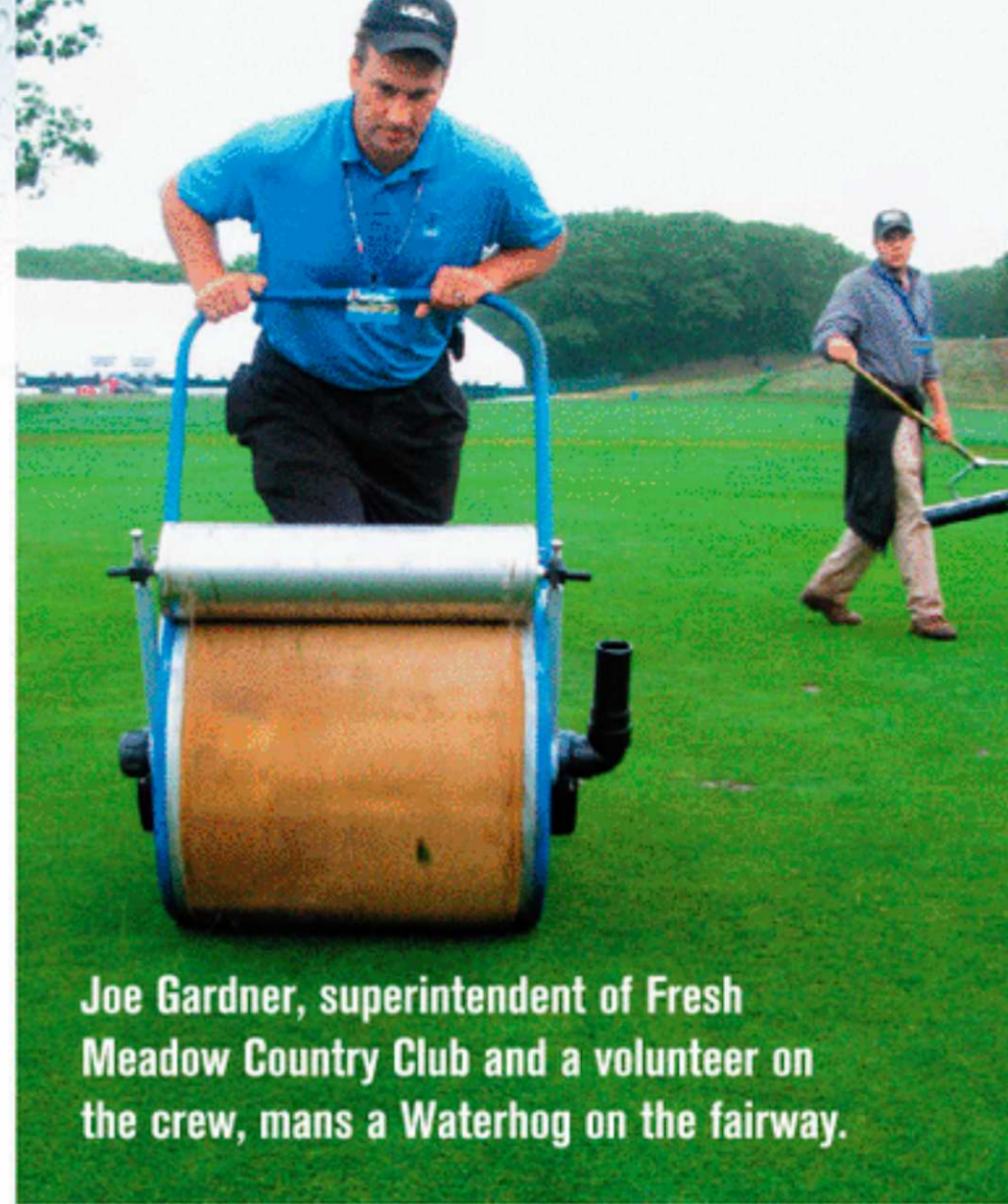
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finishes speaking until Mark Newmiller, a volunteer from Raleigh, N.C., and one of Carrier's friends, lets go with this zinger of a "Caddyshack" quote made famous by Bill Murray/Carl Spackler, "I don't think the heavy stuff's gonna come down for quite a while."

Everyone cracks up.

Later, Owen Regan, a sod and seed dealer from Rhode Island and a hard-working volunteer, tells Carrier he's the "happiest guy at Bethpage right now" because he sells sod, and he knows Carrier is going to need a ton of it after this tournament. Carrier laughs.

The rain isn't supposed to let up until the middle of the night, but the USGA's



Joe Gardner, superintendent of Fresh Meadow Country Club and a volunteer on the crew, mans a Waterhog on the fairway.



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goal is to play golf from morning to dusk on Friday to catch up. Carrier heads home and goes to bed at 7:30 p.m. He's up at 2:30 a.m. for the 3:30 meeting he has called. At the meeting, he tells the crew his rain gauge at home registered about 2 inches. "It could be worse," Carrier deadpans. "But I'm not sure how."

It's nearing 4 a.m. and the workers get out and at it. There's much work to be done. The good news is the golf course is in decent shape. The USGA's Davis says he's "beyond delighted" of the condition of the course. When USGA Agronomist Adam Moeller tells Carrier the greens are running 13.8 on the Stimp meter, Carrier replies, "I have the fastest mud on Long Island."

Carrier and his crew are nothing short of magnificent readying the course on this morning and for the rest of the U.S. Open. A big reason for this is Carrier has assembled a team of workers that respects him so much they refuse to let him down.

Bethpage Black endured more rain on Saturday and the tournament finished a day late. Underdog and little-known Lucas Glover won the event and made for a great story.

And so did Carrier and his crew for what they had to endure from Mother Nature. As Tiger Woods said, "The staff did a helluva job getting the golf course ready."

Carrier didn't let the rain ruin his parade at all. You could say he just let it roll off his shoulder—kind of like the beads of water off his glistening raincoat. ■