

A photograph showing a line of red fairway mowers on a green golf course. Several operators in light blue shirts and caps are visible from behind, driving the mowers in a row. The scene is set on a well-maintained grassy area.

A fleet of fairway mowers makes short work of a fairway at Congressional CC, site of the 2011 U.S. Open.

# 2011

*in the* **REARVIEW**

**AS IF THE DREADFUL** economy wasn't enough to compound golf industry misery, 2011 will long be remembered for extreme weather wreaking havoc on courses, majors and livelihoods. ■ But 2011 will be remembered for more than just the trials and tribulations of another rough golf season. Take a step back with me, and let's take a look at 2011 in the rearview...

## **The majors**

The golf year peaked in April, when The Masters produced one of the most exciting finishes the game has ever seen. With idyllic weather and a star-studded leaderboard that included Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson, the second largest audience of the last 10 years tuned in

to see Charl Schwartzel emerge from a tightly packed group of charging greats to birdie the final four holes.

A wet spring and strong rye overseed made the course just a bit softer, the hazard banks a little more forgiving and the fairway lies just improved enough to reduce the overall extreme nature of Masters conditions. The difference for fans was noticeable, and while Schwartzel and several others finished with those blood red double-digit under par scores, the sun has continued to rise in the East every day since the South African's birdie barrage.

Weather was not as kind to Congressional superintendent Mike Giuffre, who had the Blue Course humming along until brutal heat



The golf year peaked early when an exciting Sunday finish gave the Masters its best TV ratings in 10 years.

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## *Taking a look back at the year that brought us Hurricane Irene, the iStimp, a record-setting U.S. Open and the beginnings of a course fit for the Olympics.*

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD

weakened greens and withered up the cool-season roughs just a week before the world's best arrived for the United States Open. Throw in a mid-week rain and Congressional's green speeds were shockingly moderate for an Open.

Although the course played softer than most would have liked for a national championship, a dominating, for-the-ages performance by Rory McIlroy rendered any controversies meaningless as the Northern Irishman set the U.S. Open 72-hole scoring record for total score and shots under par, at 268 and -16.

The bloodbath had many questioning the kinder, gentler USGA setup phi-

losophy. As the critics were howling, the USGA announced a return to Shinnecock Hills, a course many thought would never return to the Open rotation after the course setup boondoggles of 2004.

At Congressional, the meticulous pre-tournament planning by new Executive Director Mike Davis and the new setup philosophy meant sticking with his varied-tee and hole location setup plan laid out in advance, even in the face of record scoring.

"We could have played 7,500 yards every day, but that's just stupid," Davis said to the delight of some. "If you get fixated on scoring, you get handcuffed."

The USGA also praised the work of

Giuffre and his crew to remind people that low scoring is often a product of good maintenance.

### **PGA greens damage makes headlines**

The final American-hosted major, the PGA Championship, kicked off with plenty of positive reviews for the first major championship played on Champion Ultradwarf Bermuda greens, along with the overall presentation of Atlanta Athletic Club.

And then came Wednesday evening.

Our very own Seth Jones, on the ground for *Golfdom*, first reported a freak mishap on two areas of No. 14 green as crews were making their final pre-tournament green mowing. He even got the Stevie Williams treatment as a Tour caddie shouted at him for taking photos of the damage — the only photos of the damage to be shared publicly thus far.

A putting green at the driving range was called on for the best sod to plug the problem area. That's how The Golf Channel got tipped off to the story and the crew at AAC found themselves on live TV.

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## Year in Review

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While unclear what had happened, operator error was quickly ruled out because the damage occurred on two different greens at nearly the same time. The PGA of America issued a statement the next morning.

"This damage is believed to be the result of a significant rise in the dew point at approximately 7:00 p.m., which caused the brushes on the mowers on those greens to stick in the grass and damage the turf," the statement read. A poll on the Golfdom Daily ([www.golfdom.blogspot.com](http://www.golfdom.blogspot.com)) showed that readers overwhelmingly — to the tune of 95% — didn't buy the PGA of America's explanation.

The story didn't end there, as Greens-Perfection, makers of the brushes that were pinned with causing the damage, filed a lawsuit against Atlanta Athletic Club and Ken Mangum for defamation, citing comments and a release suggesting their brushes had stuck in the green after a dew point increase. Looks like this story might go into 2012, much to the chagrin of everyone involved.

### Hurricanes and drought

Superintendents were looking for a break from Mother Nature in 2011, but instead they got another punch to the stomach.

No area was struck harder than Vermont, which bore the brunt of Hurricane Irene after the freak storm "fizzled" over the New York metropolitan area, dropping "only" nine inches of rain and forcing final round cancellation of the PGA Tour's Barclays event, then unleashing widespread flooding, with devastating erosion decommissioning courses like Queechee and Montague for the remainder of the year.

Meanwhile, people in Texas just about dried up and blew away. Everything is bigger in Texas, including drought. According to the Lower Colorado River Authority, the 12-month span from October 2011 to September 2012 was the driest span since 1895, when the state began keeping rainfall records.



A shot of the damage to the No. 14 green at the PGA Championship moments after it happened.

### Course and club technology

On a lighter note, technology made inroads into the game. With iPhones becoming commonplace, superintendents gasped at the unveiling of "iStimp," the first ever "App" designed to let golfers do Stimpometer readings on their smartphones.

In the fall, Precise Path unveiled its robotic green mowers to a media gathering at Orlando's Hawk's Landing Golf Course.

At October's IEEE International Conference on Intelligent Robots and Systems in San Francisco, Google revealed it's been fine-tuning a fleet of autonomous golf carts its engineers have been using to travel between campus buildings.

As for golf club technology, several interesting comments were made by noted figures in the game, suggesting a subtle shift in the ongoing struggle between clubmakers and ruling bodies as golf courses continue to bear the brunt of golf's distance chase.

Legend Gary Player made the strongest comments yet.

"We've got to stop making golf courses longer, because it means you've

The damaged areas of the greens were repaired with turf from a target green on the driving range and played as ground under repair for the tournament.



got to use more water, more oil, more labor, more fertilizer, and these are all hurting the game," he said.

The most shocking remarks came from Acushnet (Titleist) CEO Wally Uihlein, a steadfast opponent of any attempts to "bifurcate" the game by creating separate rules for professionals and amateurs. Speaking after his company had been sold to South Korean interests, Uihlein softened his hardline stance. He told a gathering of executives and media that he can make an argument "for or against bifurcation."

"We still have a commercial genesis to that thought process," he said. "We can't argue that we have the best interest in the game. We can make that argument, but the fact is we represent the commercial landscape. And so, it doesn't matter how noble our argument is. It's still going to be seen as to some



**The RG3 robotic greensmower was just the latest in high-tech maintenance unveiled to the golf industry this year.**

**Golf course architect Rees Jones addresses the crew at Atlanta Athletic Club before the start of the PGA Championship while director of grounds Ken Mangum, CGCS, listens.**



degree commercially prejudiced.”

Uihlein said it’s up to the R&A and the USGA to not only set the rules, but to assume greater responsibility in the game’s future. “If not, who does?” he said.

Mark King, the CEO of Taylor Made, was even more blunt.

“I think it’s time,” said King of bifurcating the rules for pros and amateurs in light of the precedent-setting groove rule change. King notes that in the past he has “not been a proponent” of such a change because “we use Tour professionals as the main reason aspirational golfers will buy our products.”

King says the game needs to “do something pretty quick” to make golf “a little easier, a little more fun.”

## **Golf course design**

In the nearly extinct world of course design and development, Tiger Woods saw

his Dubai project halted after six holes were completed. Those six will now be allowed to return to the desert landscape, while his project at The Cliffs is also stalled indefinitely.

Even China, where most architects and workers have gone to keep busy, has stalled. But according to some the slowdown is happening under the weight of government crackdowns over the illegal building of courses.

“China, for example, is shut down right now golf-wise,” Jack Nicklaus said in October. “We were over there about a month ago with a course two weeks from being finished that was shut down. They put a satellite up to monitor it to see that nobody was working.”

As for things at home?

“I haven’t been to a country in the last year where the outlook is as bad economically as it is here for us,” Nicklaus said,

confirming he has not been to Darfur.

Nicklaus was speaking just months after the scrapping of a controversial plan proposed by Florida State Representative Patrick Rooney to build a “Jack Nicklaus Trail” of sorts, opening up several parks in the state to be converted to new Nicklaus courses. And who was one of the main opponents of the bill, besides other law-makers and an enraged public?

Arnold Palmer.

“While Arnold Palmer Design Company is a fan of golf as a tool for tourism... we do feel that there are alternative options than using our state parks for ‘new’ golf course development,” the company stated.

That big ego battle will pale compared to one of the most intriguing course design stories of all time: the decision to hire an architect for the 2016 Rio Olympic course.

Expected to be announced in early 2012 after the Rio 2016 Organizing Committee launched an international design contest, participants have been asked to design a project that “meets International Golf Federation (IGF) specifications.”

The course must be “capable of becoming an international centre of excellence for the sport of golf for professional and community use as a legacy to Rio’s population.” It also must “respect the environmental law in force and the local ecosystem,” help promote Rio around the world and constitute “an important tool for youth transformation through sport.”

Oh, and also host the first Olympic golf competition in over 100 years.

Because of the project’s high profile nature, most major firms are bidding on a project that will pay a mere \$300,000 to the winner.

That’s a small fee in the world of course design. But in this economy, even the biggest names in the business will take the money. ■

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