

Luck

FAVORS PREPARED

When the Senior Players Championship came calling, Fox Chapel GC was ready

BY ANTHONY PIOPPPI

ON DEC. 1, 2011, the Fox Chapel Golf Club held its annual meeting. There were no earth-shattering topics, contentious debates nor subjects out of the ordinary.

Fewer than three weeks later, though, the club, located in Pittsburgh, had momentous news for its members. The Constellation Senior Players Championship, one of the five majors on the Champions Tour, would be coming to the Fox Chapel Golf Club.

Not in 2013 or 2014 — but in 2012.

Some anxiety

Forget everything you ever heard about the PGA needing years to prep for a major. Fox Chapel was given barely six months to prepare.

The PGA Tour's initial contact with the club was Dec. 7. The agreement between the parties was finalized on Dec. 17. The tournament begins at the end of the month.

After first hearing from the PGA Tour, club president Arthur Scully convened the executive committee. He would have liked input from general manager Skip Avery, but Avery was

Continued on page 22

Fox Chapel was given all of six months to prepare for this month's Champions Tour major.

Fox Chapel



No. 1 at Fox Chapel makes its intentions clear from the start: This is a thinker's layout.

Continued from page 21

hospitalized at the time.

“It put me in a very uncomfortable position,” Scully said.

The board approved the idea and the contract was signed.

Overall, the membership embraced hosting the event.

“One person was negative. Everybody else has been immensely positive. We’ve gotten tons of people to volunteer who never played golf,” Scully said, adding with a chuckle, “Half want to meet Fred Couples and half want to just help.”

Within five days of the contract signing, the club was on its way to creating the volunteer network. Selected were five vice-presidents, two co-chairmen and an honorary chairman. By mid-January, 500 volunteers were signed up, and 300 more signed up by mid-March.

The club is expecting a gallery of between 5,000 and 8,000 people on Thursday and Friday, and between 8,000 and 10,000 on the weekend.

For golf course superintendent Jason Hurwitz, the news was as much a surprise as it was to members.

“The first reaction was, I was very excited. We finally get a chance to show off a great golf course,” he said, admitting “there was some anxiety.”

Scully said when Fox Chapel was suggested as the site for the tournament, the PGA Tour researched the club and its facilities. It also sought input from Champions Tour members.

According to Scully, the word was, “It’s not only a great course but in phenomenal condition.”

The move came about as the result of the merger of tourna-



ment sponsor Constellation Energy with Exelon.

Hurwitz doesn't expect problems. For starters, the tournament falls in a good agronomic slot.

"We're really peaking at that time of year," he said.

Fox Chapel's member invitational is on the calendar for June 15 and 16, and the Western Pennsylvania Open is scheduled for July 9.

PGA Tour agronomist Jay Spurl visited Fox Chapel for the first time in late March.

"Jason has a real feel of what we're going to do and what we expect," Spurl said.

In fact, according to Spurl, on the day he was at Fox Chapel it was just about tournament-ready.

"If it had been 20 or 30 degrees warmer we could have played the tournament that day," he said.

Seth Raynor spotlight

The rough will be between three and three-and-a-half inches, according to Spurl, and green speeds will be dictated by the contouring of the Seth Raynor-designed greens.

Spurl is already excited about where holes will be

placed on the par-3 17th, named Biarritz. It is a three-tier green with the front and back portions separated by a depression nearly two feet deep. Spurl envisions flags placed near the slopes on both plateaus that lead to the trough. The hole plays 223 yards from the white tees and 231 yards from the blue tees.

This may be the first time in decades that a Raynor layout will host a professional major, though his courses have hosted worthy tournaments. In 2005, the Chicago Golf Club, a Charles Blair Macdonald course later altered by Raynor, hosted the Walker Cup. The Greenbrier's Old White TPC, in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., a Raynor design, is home to the PGA Tour's Greenbrier Classic. And in 2002, Fox Chapel hosted the Curtis Cup.

Unlike most Champions Tour events, the Senior Players Championship is four rounds and there is no cut. The field is only 78 players. Golfers have a practice round on Monday and Tuesday, with the pro-am on Wednesday.

The week, though, will be very different from nearly all other Champions Tour events. Fox Chapel had agreed to host a cancer fundraising golf outing on the Monday of what has become tournament week, well before being offered the Champions event. The club approached the Tour about letting the outing go on as planned, and the Tour agreed to it.

The plan Hurwitz will follow for the event goes beyond what the PGA Tour requires, Spurl says. Hurwitz's normal crew of 32 will be augmented by an army of volunteers for the Senior Players.

"He wants to run the (U.S.) Open game plan," Spurl said. "We'll take it if you give it to us."

Hurwitz worked the 2002 U.S. Amateur while first assistant at Oakmont Country Club and helped in the preparation for the 2007 U.S. Open, so he has the experience.

At a golf course with a staff of 15 or so, Spurl would normally allow fairways to be dry cut in the afternoon. Instead, Hurwitz plans to mow fairways in the morning. The wet clippings that invariably will accumulate on the fairways will not be dispersed with a blower towed behind a cart; that would leave tracks. Instead, workers with green whips will do it.

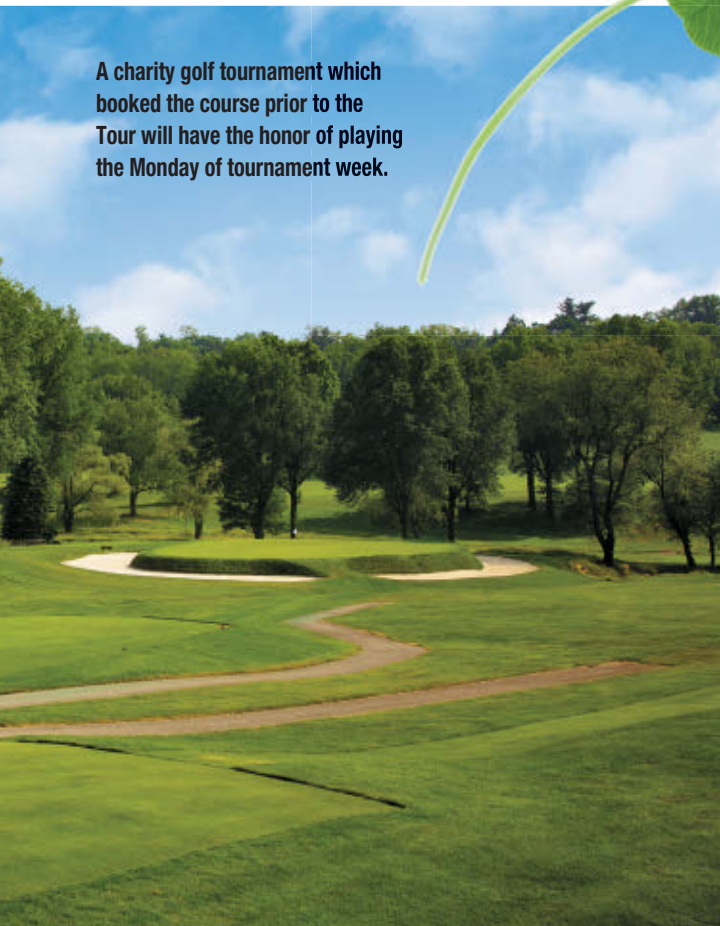
The tournament is expected to bring \$15 million into the Pittsburgh-area economy. \$500,000 of that will go to local charities.

According to Avery, who was hired as Fox Chapel's general manager in late 2011, by hosting the event the club will move up into the elite level of Pittsburgh golf.

"I'm the new guy. I'll say it: Oakmont will no longer be the only championship venue." ■



A charity golf tournament which booked the course prior to the Tour will have the honor of playing the Monday of tournament week.



Freelance writer Anthony Pioppi lives in Connecticut.