

An American

Though Merion Golf Club is far from an everyday American golf course, some of their practices could be adopted from sea to shining sea.

BY SETH JONES

*We hold this truth to be self-evident,
that all golf courses are not equal.*

*And therefore, it is impossible to achieve the same
conditions at an everyday course as to those at a club
such as Merion Golf Club in Ardmore Pa., host of this
year's United States Open.*

*However, this year's U.S. Open will demonstrate a few
practices and characteristics that would be good and
positive for any course in these great states. To wit:*

The right to leave the sprayers in the shop.

The right to allow rough to be... well, rough.

The right to give all staff equal opportunity.

Allow us to explain...

Dream

IPM and sustainability

The U.S. Open may be looming, but Matt Shaffer, director of golf course operations, is still shaking off the effects of yesterday's day-long trip to Washington, D.C., where he represented the GCSAA on Capitol Hill for National Golf Day. He flips through a notebook that shows how many meetings were taking place, in awe of the scope of it all.

While he was taking one of those meetings in D.C., a Senator asked him to explain sustainability. Shaffer was happy to do it, but was also honest and direct (two words often used when describing the man) when he advised the Senator that it was the low budget courses that could better describe the practice of doing more with less.

"I said, 'Go talk to a guy who only has \$400,000 a year (in the maintenance budget), he'll tell you all about sustainability.' If you don't have any money, you don't have inputs," Shaffer says, reflecting on his day in the nation's capitol. "And they still produce unbelievable conditions, those guys... granted, it's sweat equity."

Money is clearly not an issue at Merion. A look around the sparkling maintenance facility demonstrates that fact.

For example, it's got a green roof.

No, not the color green, but as in the fescue turf growing atop the building adjacent to No. 18 fairway, where Ben Hogan ripped a 1-iron to win the 1950 U.S. Open. It's brown today, but in general, it's green.

Integrated Pest Management is a religion at Merion. They don't water very much, so consequently they don't spray much. And they rarely fertilize, going months without spraying fairways. They spray greens every six weeks just because "we're paranoid," says Shaffer. As of this visit in mid-April, they hadn't put a fungicide on the greens since September 2012.

This method of maintenance is just fine with course superintendent Arron McCurdy. Starting at the course five years ago as

an assistant-in-training, he's worked his way up the ladder to the top spot, and is Shaffer's right-hand man.

"I think that's why we get along so good. It's such a prestigious golf course, we have the funds to go out there and wing sprays around if we wanted to," McCurdy says. "You have kids, I have kids. I don't want to spray just to make myself feel better."

"We have this disease called yellow tuft, all over our greens, causing brown spots," Shaffer says, taking his hat off and mussing his gray hair as he speaks. "Our interns say, 'What are you going

to do about that Mr. Shaffer?' I say what? They all laugh and say, 'Those brown spots?' I say that doesn't make any difference with the way it putts. I'm pretty sure by the time the Open is here everything's going to be one big brown spot, so you won't see it."

Over his five years at the course, McCurdy has learned that Merion's members appreciate playability above all else.

"They'd rather have a blemish on the green and have it firm and putt like glass than a beautiful green that they have to smash it to get it to the hole," he says.

Shaffer says members from across the pond have helped integrate this mood that the color green isn't everything.

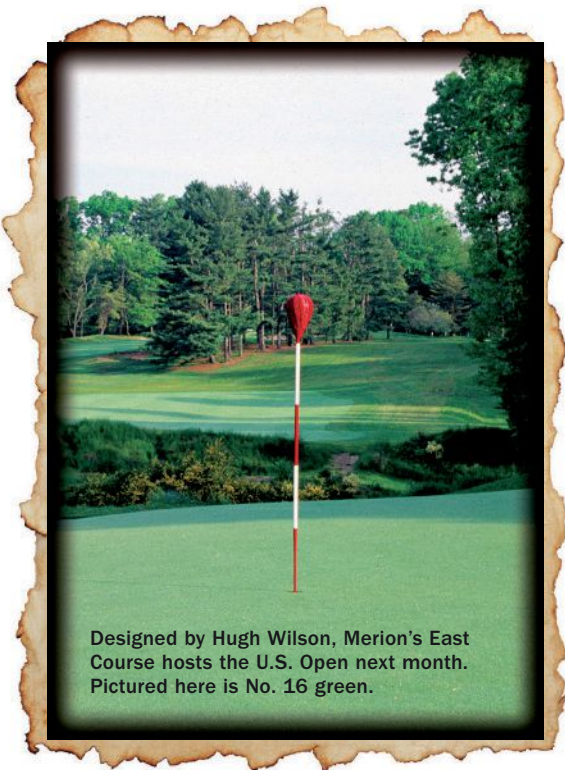
"We have a lot of members from Scotland and Ireland and England," Shaffer says. "They come and they say, 'Finally,

somebody in America gets it.' When our members listen to our members from overseas, they say what do you mean, 'We get it?' They say you're not overlush, oversoft, you're firm, hard, fast... Mr. Shaffer doesn't care about what you think it should be like."

A rough rough

The rough at Merion? Well, it's the pits.

"Here's the deal — we have pits," Shaffer says, excitedly. "Well, we like pits."



Designed by Hugh Wilson, Merion's East Course hosts the U.S. Open next month. Pictured here is No. 16 green.

An American Dream



Dave Petfield, agronomist, with Matt Shaffer, director of golf course grounds. The duo try to instill as much knowledge in the young crew as possible. "I try to coach them along and give them my experience," Petfield says of the crew. "They get ticked off if you don't include them."



THE TURFCO CR-10 MAKES IT HAPPEN!



Whether you're topdressing your fairway, renovating bunkers or relocating material, the Turfco® CR-10, with a four cubic-yard hopper, is the workhorse you've been looking for. Its patented three-position switch, cross-conveyor flow control and self-cleaning hopper make it the most effective material handler available. And now the CR-10 is available with WideSpin™ technology—allowing you to deliver light or heavy topdressing applications at unprecedented widths and depths. All this—plus a three-year warranty. The CR-10. Don't start a project without it.

Call 1-800-679-8201 for a **FREE** on-site demonstration or video.

WWW.TURFCO.COM



THE LEADER. SINCE 1961.

Continued from page 29

Once again, the young guys asked Shaffer if they were going to do anything about the bare spots in the rough. Tiger and Rory don't want to play out of that, and it won't look perfect on high-def TV, right?

"My guys asked, 'Are we going to seed the pits?'" Shaffer laughs. "Oh, no. I wasn't even going to spray weeds but there's so many of them. I want to make sure the USGA doesn't get embarrassed."

Shaffer switches from friendly to diabolical. Now he's contemplating the struggles the world's best golfers will have if they find themselves straying from the fairway.

"There's nothing worse than when you're playing golf and you get in that pit and there's four-inch grass around it," Shaffer says.

If it grows, it's allowed in the

rough at Merion. They'll seed bentgrass, Bermuda, zoysia, ryegrass, turf type tall fescue, chewings hard, whatever.

Shaffer spots a particular clump of grass and pulls some of it out of the ground.

"There's my pride and joy — this is K-31, roughstalk bluegrass. Really hard to find. In the old days, when I used to grow in golf courses in the '70s, this was a standard grass," Shaffer says. "It's a tough grass. When you get in that, the shearing action on your wedge is really tough."

The idea is that in a seven-foot diameter, there are at least seven different lies. This will be different than many recent Opens, where there was a monostand of grass in the rough. Shaffer says it will be noticeable on TV.

"When you let it go... it's so bizarre looking. You'll see it



Petfield and the crew were busy aerating fairways in mid-April.

on TV, everyone will say what the freak is going on?" he laughs. "Everyone is so fastidious with trying to get it perfect. I'm positive this will not be a perfect Open."

Equal opportunity

There are quite a few turf degrees circulating the 36 holes at Merion Golf Club. All that turf knowledge in one place, things could get a little too competitive.

To keep a team atmosphere present, Shaffer has implemented a system where jobs rotate. One week an assistant is the boss, the next week he's holding the shovel.

Information and project coordinator Dave McDonald explains: "The system here is, one week you're in the hot seat, scheduling, getting everyone to their positions and getting their tasks done. The next week you're part of the team out there, getting directed. It switches back and forth. So there's a tremendous amount of respect for who the quarterback is that day," he says. "With that comes no egos. It's all teamwork, because one day you're the quarterback, the next you're waterboy."

Because the crew, from the first-year in-

Continued on page 32

TIME-SAVING TOOLS TO HELP YOUR COURSE LOOK AND PLAY ITS BEST.



Miltona offers tools for every stage of course maintenance.

Now there are more ways than ever to make the most of your golf course and your time with enhanced and expanded product offerings from Miltona. You can improve course conditions and productivity with unique products like our **Hex Plugger™**, **Level Best™** ball mark repair tool, **Quick Seed™** spiker, and **Sod Stripper™**. View our entire line of tools and many new on-course accessories at our website, Miltona.com, an experience specifically designed for you and your course.

www.Miltona.com

PHONE: (800) 456-4351

EMAIL: info@miltona.com

An American Dream

Continued from page 32

terns to McCurdy and Shaffer, all have a passion for turf, it's important that everyone gets a chance to see and learn about what is happening on the course, in the dirt, and even back in the maintenance facility's turf diagnostics lab.

Agronomist Dave Petfield, a superintendent for 18 years before coming to Merion, describes his youthful colleagues as "sponges." About a dozen times a year he'll look through the microscope to try to see what is going on with the turf. Word spreads quickly, and before long everyone is asking to take a peek.

"They want to know what's going on.



Live Updates

For more on the U.S. Open, visit the Golfdom Daily (golfdom.blogspot.com) during the tourney.



Shaffer with general manager Christine Pooler and superintendent Arron McCurdy. "We have a great team here," Shaffer says.

They get ticked off if you don't include them. 'Hey, I heard you guys looked at this, is it still available to see?' If you say no, they're disappointed," he says. "I love it. I try to coach them along and give them the benefit of my experience."

With so much talent at the club, it's important to keep everyone engaged.

"(Shaffer) delegates. He's not afraid to delegate, and he does not micro-manage. He trusts you to your potential," says Fabian McLaughlin, administrative assistant. "And that's very highly appreciated because everyone here feels free to work. He delegates and then waits for the results."

"He's a teacher," McDonald says of Shaffer. "He calls himself a dirt farmer. He may have his boots in the soil, but his head is in the clouds when it comes to innovation."

The first tee shot of the 2013 U.S. Open will be taken on Thursday, June 13th. This may be the Open where superintendents around the nation can point to a shot on TV and tell their golfers that this course isn't just their land, but it's also our land.

It's the U.S. Open. Isn't America great? **G**

PHOTO BY: SETH JONES



AT NUFARM, WE BELIEVE MORE IS BETTER.

More than 90% of our products to protect and enhance golf course turf are formulated right here in the United States. Which means you can count on Nufarm for more quality products supported by people you know and trust.

Learn about our complete line of products, including the Cleary brands, at Nufarm.com/USGN

More where it matters most.
www.nufarm.com/us

