



The 1994 U.S. Open at Oakmont

By David L. Finney

Editor's Note: At the PSU Golf Turf Meeting I attended in November of last year, I had the pleasure of listening to Mark Kuhns, the golf course superintendent at Oakmont Country Club near Pittsburgh, tell about his experience of hosting the 1994 U.S. Open.

He was very kind in his comments about the job his colleague David Finney did in photographing and recording the events of the tournament.

I had enjoyed reading David's account of the Open at Oakmont in Vol. 9, No. 3 issue of THREE RIVERS GREEN. He is the golf course superintendent at Lakeview Resort in Morgantown, West Virginia. He is also the editor of THREE RIVERS GREEN, the official publication of the Greater Pittsburgh Golf Course Superintendent's Association.

I called David to ask permission to reprint his article for your enjoyment. He not only granted that permission but he offered to select some pictures from the hundreds and hundreds he took during Open week. I thanked him for all of us. This is some reading you will enjoy because he so clearly understands the things that would interest us.

This would have been a great article for GOLF COURSE MANAGEMENT to share with superintendents all across the country.

PHOTOGRAPHING THE U.S. OPEN

I imagine that most golf course superintendents have attended at least one PGA Tour or USGA sponsored golf tournament at some time in their lives. It couldn't be much easier to attend, simply show the people at Will Call your GCSAA gold or green card, collect your two complimentary daily/grounds passes, and you're in. I've been fortunate enough to spectate at the Masters, the World Series of Golf,

the MCI Heritage Golf Classic, the Hilton Head Seniors International, the Memorial Tournament, the Women's Kemper Open at Princeville, the Hawaiian Open, the U.S. Senior Open at Laurel Valley, the '78 PGA Championship and the '83 U.S. Open when they were held at Oakmont, and most recently the '94 U.S. Open, also played at Oakmont Country Club.

That's a lot of golf tournaments to go to, and you'd think that after a while one was pretty much the same as all the rest. But at this year's U.S. Open at Oakmont I had a most unique perspective on the tournament. By prior arrangement with Oakmont's superintendent Mark Kuhns, I became a member of the working press, covering the U.S. Open as a photographer. I was issued press credentials, a photographer's bib, given complete access to everything available to the working press, and the opportunity to photograph the U.S. Open from inside the gallery ropes.

I was working for Mark as Official Photographer of the Oakmont Golf Course Maintenance Staff. All of my photographic work would be used to illustrate the writing about the Open, and then eventually be turned over to Mark and Oakmont Country Club for their use exclusively.

My job at the '94 Open was to document on film the monumental effort that goes into preparation for a major tournament. I was to shoot pictures of the mowing, the cup changing, bunker raking, greens rolling, hand syringing, divot seeding, anything and everything that the maintenance staff does to prepare the golf course for the best players in the world. I was also shooting pictures of the players, the gallery, the television crews, even the USGA officials.

If you want to feel really inadequate, just stand next to the photographers from Sports Illustrated with their 600 mm



The players' view of Oakmont in 1994.



One of the better known U.S. Open Competitors.



Typical U.S. Open rough—literally up to your knees.

telephoto lenses, and 3 or 4 cameras strapped around their necks, while holding onto your own Canon 850 EOS autofocus with a 300 mm zoom lens. Sometimes I felt like a tourist on vacation. When I was around the professional photographers, I tried to act like a writer with a camera, and when I was around the working press, I tried to act like a photographer. But in reality, I was a golf course superintendent there to look at the U.S. Open in a way that no professional writer or photographer ever could.

Photographing the players wasn't as hard as I thought it would be. I had this picture in my mind of all these high strung thoroughbred golfers, with nerves as tight as piano wire, here to play in the biggest tournament of the year. One false move by me, the snap of the camera's shutter, the whir of the camera's motors on multiple frame shots, me flinching as a bee flies by, and Curtis Strange snaps. Bingo, I'm ejected from the tournament for making Curtis miss a putt during the practice round. Well, it didn't happen like that. Photographing the Open was great fun; after all, I was inside the ropes with the best seat in the house, so to speak. And the players weren't the primadonnas that you hear about. They were just there to play in another golf tournament. The crowds, and the cameras, and the reporters with the same questions they'd already answered twenty times this season are all just part of the job to them.

The toughest part of my assignment was to try to anticipate where the players would be, and where I should position myself to get as many shots of players' faces, and as few shots of players' backs, or worse yet, shots of caddies as they walk between me and the players, as possible.

At one point during the tournament I was working at the par three 16th green, waiting for Greg Norman to play through. Greg hit his tee shot onto the green, but past the hole, which meant he would be putting back toward the tee. If I positioned myself off to the front left side of the green, I'd be in position to get some good shots of Norman, especially if he would happen to make the birdie putt. At least this is what I thought would happen. Norman walked onto the green and I got some shots of him. He lined up the putt and I didn't shoot, not wanting to disturb his concentration, and he made the putt. I was ready for the "thrill of victory" expression but as soon as the birdie dropped, Norman whirled around with his back toward me and raised his arms in victory. My mistake. Greg Norman whirled around because the gallery stands, and more importantly the television cameras were all behind the green. ABC got the "thrill of victory" look from Greg Norman, and I got a good picture of his back.

The best part of my assignment was that I was at



Finishing touches on a fairway before play.



Finishing touches on a greenside bunker.



Mowing fairways in the warm, early morning haze.



Oakmont's golf course superintendent Mark Kuhns checking green speed before play.



Hand watering greens in the heat of the 1994 U.S. Open.



Hand raking one of the famous church pew bunkers at Oakmont.

Oakmont primarily to photograph the golf course maintenance crew in action. I knew their moves, I was allowed to walk anywhere to photograph their work, and I didn't have to fight for position with other photographers to do my job. Very few national publications or daily newspapers sent photographers to cover tournament preparations. By the time the sun was raising high in the sky and the temperatures were heading well into the 90s, my subjects were back at the golf course maintenance facility washing and greasing their equipment, and I was free to spend the rest of the day photographing the players, at my leisure.

While working early one morning, photographing the greens mowing crew in action, I was standing on the putting surface of #15 green, taking pictures back out into the fairway. One of the two young fellows hand mowing the green came over to inform me that the press was not permitted to walk on the putting surface. I guess that in spite of my press credentials, it wasn't apparent from looking at me that I was a golf course superintendent, working as a photographer at the direction of Mr. Kuhns. So rather than try to explain the entire situation to the young man, I simply walked off the front of the green, and took his picture one more time.

DAWN LAUNCH

Do you remember that old Navy recruiting TV ad, the one that shows an aircraft carrier at dawn, with all of the jet fighters taking off into the rising sun, and the announcer voice over says "Dawn launch, Sea of Japan; join the Navy, see the world?"

Well, that's the feeling one gets at Oakmont on the mornings of the tournament. Each morning at dawn or slightly before dawn from the golf course maintenance buildings came the mobilized army of maintenance people. Jacobsen fairway mowers, Toro walking greens mowers, John Deere walking tee and collar mowers, "Smooth Roll" greens rollers, divot seeders, irrigation people, and lots and lots of bunker rakers. All of the nearly 200 bunkers at Oakmont are raked by hand for each round of the tournament. Is it any wonder the USGA 18-hole playoffs are not looked upon favorably by the bunker raking crew?

I am told that during the Women's Open at Oakmont two years ago, all of the bunkers had to be raked before the playoff round on Monday, for a grand total of one (1) bunker hit during the playoff round.

Early in the tournament week I arrived at the golf course at what I thought was an early hour, to photograph the maintenance crews in action. I arrived at the course shortly after 6:00 a.m., only to find the entire operation was already moving to the back nine. Thereafter, I arrived at Oakmont at or about 5:00 a.m., and was right on time to go to work. In fact, on most mornings I had to wait for the sun to come up before I could start shooting pictures.

The U.S. Open is a busy place, even at 5:00 a.m. Not only was the golf course maintenance crew on the course working, but so were the USGA officials. They were out there primarily remarking the hazards with red and yellow paint, pants rolled up, and tromping around in the knee-deep rough, with their paint guns in hand. Vendors are also arriving in the early hours, restocking their refreshment stands and their ice machines. TV technicians are out there too, remounting their cameras and reattaching their microphones so we could hear the ping of the metal woods, and the plastic clunk of Balata golf balls dropping into the cup.

Amazingly, there are also a fair number of die-hard golf fans arriving. Of course, all there was to watch during these early hours were the mowers, and the cup changers, and



Careful cutting of the cups is a must.



The church pew bunkers that are one of Oakmont's signatures.

the hazards being repainted, so that is what people watched. Every morning there were a hundred or more people in the grandstands at #18 to watch the greens mowers at work, then they'd watch the cup get changed, and finally they'd watch as the rollers moved back and forth, smoothing the green's surface. The galleries usually held their applause until the last roller had exited the green.

MEDIA CENTER

The media center is in actuality a tent, or perhaps a complex of several huge air-conditioned tents is a more accurate description. For those of you who attended the Open at Oakmont, the media tent was located just off to the right of the 18th fairway. Entrance into the media tent takes you past security, and into the reception area, where the USGA has their media people stationed to issue credentials, answer questions and distribute information pertinent to the tournament. Several long tables are set up along one wall of the reception area, where piles and piles of national golf magazines and newspapers are available. They're not for sale, they're simply placed there for our information. You can find anything on the press tables from Golf Digest to the Wall Street Journal to biographical information on the field of players to a restaurant guide for the city of Pittsburgh. Most of what is written about the tournament in the main section of the media tent one day will appear on these informational tables the next morning in the national newspapers.

Just beyond the reception tent is the main body of the media complex. This is a virtual command center, set up for

the national and international press to cover the U.S. Open. The floor of the tent is set up with row after row of long narrow tables, placed there to accommodate the reporters' word processors. Each table accommodates perhaps 50 or 60 chairs, and every chair at every table is reserved for specific publications sent here to cover the tournament. All of the chairs and tables face the front of the hall, where a huge manual leader board has been erected. Along both the right and left side of the media tent are rows of big screen TV monitors, all tuned to the live network feed of the tournament. Directly behind these TV monitors on a slightly higher platform, also along the side walls, are the electronic media broadcast posts.

The back wall of the media tent is equipped with about a dozen Unisys computer terminals, and just about as many fax machines. The Unisys terminals are accessible to all members of the press, providing accurate up to the minute statistical information on the state of play during a round, or information pertaining to the golf course itself, such as scoring average per hole.

It is quite possible to cover the U.S. Open simply by flying into Pittsburgh, traveling out to Oakmont, and watching the entire event from the media tent. Watch the tournament on the TV monitors, watch the leader board in the front of the room, walk back to check with Unisys on the statistics for your favorite player, type out the story on your lap top word processor and make a second trip to the back of the media tent to fax your story across the country, and meet a deadline. It is 98 degrees and extremely humid out on the golf course, but you didn't even break a sweat to cover the Open.

Just off to the side of the main room of the media tent is the interview room, where players and other newsworthy individuals are shuttled in and out to be interviewed. I only had time to sit in on two interviews, as my duties awaited me out on the golf course. On Tuesday, I was in the media center for an interview with Nick Price. One of the questions asked was "would you settle for even par for the tournament, if it were offered right now?" (Prior to the tournament) Nick said that he would decline an offer of even par, as he was sure he could do better than par at Oakmont, having just won the previous week at Westchester. Three days later, Nick Price missed the cut at Oakmont.

I had an opportunity to sit in on an interview with Oakmont's superintendent Mark Kuhns on Tuesday afternoon. Mark made a brief statement about conditions at Oakmont, and their preparation for the Open. Quite predictable the press was most interested in Oakmont's green speed, the stimpmeter, and they wanted to know how Oakmont's green speed compared with the average golf club. Johnny Miller was quoted earlier in the week as having said Oakmont is the only club in America that has to SLOW its greens down for the U.S. Open. Mark handled the questions well, with factual answers and diplomacy. He basically said that the membership at Oakmont did enjoy very fast green speed during the golfing season, and that the average green speed at Oakmont is usually slightly faster than what the USGA suggests for championship conditions.

Well, the media tent was great, with the air-conditioned comfort, the free food and drinks, the informative press releases, the live interviews, etc. But unfortunately, you can't photograph the U.S. Open from a TV monitor inside the press tent. So after acquainting myself with the facilities available to the working press, I went to work. Out into the heat, onto the course, into the real world of the U.S. Open.



Part of the early morning preparation for greens—two of the three cuts.



A USGA official and his paint gun.



Rolling for speed.

THE HEAT

The weather at Oakmont in June is supposed to be nice. It should have been in the mid-70s, maybe into the low 80s, and perhaps just a hint of humidity, sort of a preview of summer to come. But the week of June 12th, 1994 was brutal. It usually doesn't get this brutal even in July and August in Pittsburgh. Temperatures soared well into the mid to upper 90s all week at Oakmont, and humidity was oppressive. Provisions were made for the spectators as water buffalos were brought in and set up in shady locations all around the course. Oakmont is known for its oak trees, and they were put to good use during the Open, as shade was the only solace from the heat. You didn't feel too bad for the spectators who were shuttled to the tournament on air conditioned buses, who had the option of resting in the shade for a while, and who had the privilege of paying \$3 for a Haagen Daz popsicle. At least the popsicles were cold.

You didn't feel too bad for the players and caddies, even though they were soaking wet with perspiration as soon as they left the first tee. After all, these are professional athletes and professional tour caddies who walk 18 holes a day, practically every day of the year.

But you really had to feel sorry for those poor USGA officials who were following each group. I mean these gentlemen are doctors and lawyers and captains of industry who have spent years mastering the rules of golf, volunteering as USGA committee members, hoping to someday work at the U.S. Open. But these poor people were not in the physical shape needed to handle this kind of heat. I watched them, and took some pictures of them, probably as a tribute to their perseverance but they were outmatched by the intense heat and humidity of Oakmont.

Some critical comments were published about a controversial ruling made in favor of the eventual tournament winner Ernie Els, by USGA rules official Dr. Troy Holland during the final round on Sunday. Dr. Holland is in real life a urologist from Indiana and his ruling granted relief from a movable obstruction (a TV truck) when actually the obstruction should have been moved instead. If Dr. Holland was unsure of which of the volumes of USGA rulings to apply in this particular situation, all he would have had to say was "it's too hot to hit over that TV truck, Ernie. Let's get that thing moved for you." And he would have been right on the money. It was hot!!

THOSE LIGHTNING FAST GREENS

I really don't know what the mowing height was at Oakmont for the Open this year. I don't know what sort of fertilizer program or growth regulators may be used on the

greens at Oakmont, either. I've heard reports of what the stimpmeter readings were, as reported in the press. But press information is usually exaggerated. I do know what I saw as I walked on the greens in the early morning hours, following the grounds crew around, and I also know what I saw as I watched the best players in the world try to put on these greens. And what I saw were very, very fast greens, the kind of greens that have earned Oakmont a reputation of preparing championship greens for championship play since the club's inception.

The greens at Oakmont are comprised almost entirely of *Poa annua*. Mark Kuhns prefers to manage and encourage *Poa annua* in his greens. In fact, Mark has made comments to the effect that were *Poa annua* seed available commercially, he'd buy it for use on the greens at Oakmont. Aside from all the negative aspects associated with *Poa annua* on putting greens, *Poa* does have one outstanding trait. *Poa annua's* upright growth habit makes a very fast putting surface, when mowed down close.

The greens at Oakmont are also reflective of greens shaping from a different era, as the greens are contoured to enhance surface water to runoff. Jack Nicklaus is quoted as saying, "the greens at Oakmont are very large, but they don't play large. The undulations and the plateaus and such make the pin placement difficult. The speed of the greens and the pitch of them are so severe that it's just tough."

The first hole for example presents a blind, mid-iron second shot, downhill into a green sloping from front to back, away from the players. A perfect approach shot hit onto this putting surface will more than likely roll off the back of the green.

Despite what the greens might have looked like on television, I can tell you that there was grass on the greens at Oakmont, a lot of grass. And it was good, healthy *Poa annua*, or at least as healthy as *Poa annua* gets in 90 degree heat. During the tournament week there was a specific succession of events taking place on the putting surfaces every morning, all aimed at producing a green speed worthy of the U.S. Open. Initially the greens were whipped, to remove any semblance of dew. The greens were then mowed with a riding greensmower in one direction, long ways. Right behind the riding mower came two walking greensmowers, mowing the greens at diagonals, right to left, and left to right. They were in effect double cutting the greens with the walking mowers, after the initial mowing with the rider. The end result was of course to triple cut the greens. Each of the mowers did harvest some clippings, but precious few. The final step was to roll the greens, usually only in one direction, with the normal overlaps.

It was quite a sight to watch the daily mowing of the big double green (#9 and the practice green) right in front of the Oakmont clubhouse. Before the riding greensmowers had finished with this green, the walkers came on. There were two walking mowers mowing the putting surface on #9, two walking greens mowers mowing the putting surface of the practice green, and a fifth walking greensmower mowing the collar. I never did see a greensmower "mid-green collision" but there had to be some near misses with that many mowers in motion. All mowing the same double green, all at the same time, and all in the pre-dawn light.

The resultant putting surface were without a doubt the smoothest putting surface I have ever walked on. I think the words that best describe the action of a golf ball on these greens was "lack of friction." Once a ball was touched or stroked or set in motion in any way, there just didn't seem to

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be any friction of any kind from the putting surface to stop the ball from rolling. It just rolled and rolled and rolled. Quite often the ball would roll until it found the cup, or simply roll to the edge of the green. There just wasn't anything there to stop it from rolling. These were absolutely the fastest, truest greens I had ever seen, perfect for the U.S. Open and typically what one would expect of the greens at Oakmont.

GCSAA BUYS DINNER

On Friday evening of the tournament week, GCSAA hosted a reception in the VIP tent just outside the Oakmont clubhouse. The reception was attended by open invitation extended to any and all golf course superintendents and was held in honor of Oakmont's superintendent, Mark Kuhns. GCSAA president Joe Baidy was on hand to present a plaque to Mark on behalf of GCSAA in recognition of his outstanding achievements in hosting not only the '94 Open at Oakmont, but also in having hosted the U.S. Women's Open at Oakmont two years earlier, as well as the U.S. Senior Open at Laurel Valley.

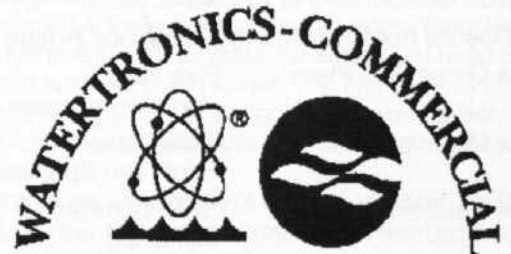
President Baidy's speech touched on his remembrances of working in Pittsburgh at Fox Chapel Golf Club during the late '70s and early '80s, and how even in those days Oakmont was held in esteem among the other fine clubs in the tri-state area.

During his speech, president Baidy presented the USGA with a donation of \$25,000 to be used toward the USGA's environmental research initiative. Thomas W.

Chisholm, a member of the USGA Executive Committee and Chairman of the USGA Green Section, was on hand to accept GCSAA's generous donation. Also on hand at the reception were several of GCSAA's board of directors as well as Steve Mona, GCSAA's Chief Executive Officer. Representatives and officials from the USGA and from Oakmont Country Club were also present. But a majority of those in attendance were local golf course superintendents representing primarily the Greater Pittsburgh GCSA and the Mountain and Valley GCSA. All of us had come together to be part of the excitement that is the U.S. Open, to share in the comraderie of the evening, and of course to honor Mark for his achievements in hosting so many of the USGA events, culminating with this event, the U.S. Open at Oakmont.

The GCSAA did in fact buy dinner for all those in attendance, as well as provide a complimentary bar, no doubt meant as temporary relief from the heat outside our air-conditioned VIP tent. Dinner was excellent. But the irony that escaped most people's notice I believe was the ice sculpture in the center of the foot buffet. It was in the shape of a golfer, swinging a club, and melting just as fast as ice melts during a heat wave. What poetic justice to have so many golf course superintendents enjoying the cool breezes of the tent, the hospitality of the GCSAA and of Oakmont Country Club, while the image of a golfer, sweating nervously, served as the centerpiece to our evening. 🍷

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