

"MAJOR" PREPARATION

Highlights from the 79th PGA Championship

August 11-17, 1997

By Josh J.M. LePine, Assistant Superintendent of Golf Courses
Winged Foot Golf Club, Mamaroneck, NY

"...Now, in 1921 Winged Foot's founders had the site they wanted, with ideal terrain. They had the dream, the goal, and the wherewithal — the financing — to see it through. They had the dedicated drive to keep the standards high, not compromising the perfection they sought. As they looked around for their own architect, they had certain choices and could have gone abroad, but they opted for a great American golf course designed by an American. And now they found their man — one who could bring the dream into reality. After considering several possibilities, they made their choice: Albert Warren Tillinghast of Philadelphia.

[Give us a man-sized course] they said to him. Tillinghast's response was a Herculean achievement..." (Smith, 1984)

The PGA of America rolled into Winged Foot Golf Club in Mamaroneck, NY in the fall of 1995 to begin preparation for the upcoming major golf event. Officials and planners were busy constructing and setting up their offices to serve as



11 West.



Triple row irrigation installation.



18 West green tournament time.

the 79th PGA Championship headquarters.

On the golf course, Mr. Robert U. Alonzi, CGCS and staff were knee deep in preparations of our own. A triple row irrigation system upgrade was in process along with an extensive rough renovation project. I will share with you these and more highlights in the preparation for the 79th PGA Championship hosted at Winged Foot's West Course on August 11-17, 1997.

Irrigation System Upgrade

A four year plan to upgrade our irrigation system from single to triple row began in the fall of 1994. The front nine of the championship hosting West Course was finished that fall. Nine holes were completed each fall for the next three years setting the last head on the back nine of the

East Course just before Thanksgiving of 1997. It is obvious that a triple row system would give a superintendent more flexibility and uniform coverage but Mr. Alonzi had more in mind when he proposed the system upgrade to Winged Foot.

Mr. Alonzi's experience as superintendent here for the 1984 U.S. Open championship reminded him of the difficulty of bringing back damaged rough areas and compacted treelines from 30,000 fans a day viewing the action.

Winged Foot's trees are a major focus for our maintenance practices. A triple row system would apply the necessary water to the compacted rootzones of Winged Foot's tree lines to aid in the recovery of the trees as well as the turf under them. Also, a rough renovation project turned out to

(Continued on page 60)

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(Continued from page 59)

be a major success due in part to our new expanded irrigation coverage.

Rough Renovation

The intense rough you observed during the tournament was a result of proper planning and precise execution. Hole by hole, the rough on the championship hosting West Course was completely renovated from fairway to treeline in the fall of 1995 and 1996. Using growth regulators and scalping down of existing turf was followed by an aggressive aeration and two directional slicing process. Seeding occurred immediately after aeration and between slicing direction changes.

To prevent fairway contamination, dropspreaderes were used to seed the intermediate cut adjacent to the fairway. As we nursed the rough with sound irrigation, pest management and fertility programs we were able to have a dense, weed-free stand of turf going into the 1997 season to manipulate into whatever playing conditions the PGA requested. Through the use of exchangeable 180 degree adjustable gear drives we were allowed to irrigate this rough exclusively using the outer rows of the triple row irrigation system. Radios enabled the men in field changing the drives to communicate with Mr. Alonzi operating the central command system. This flexibility allowed us to keep our rough thriving in the summer heat while not applying water to the fairways.

Equipment and cart traffic was minimized as we grew the rough up to the desired height of cut. A combination of a foliar feed and an organic granular application of fertilizer released throughout the tournament were used to provide the eight to ten inches of lush rough. In an effort to mat down the rough, the pros would actually leave the fairway during the practice rounds to walk with their caddies in the landing areas.

Green Speeds

The greens at Winged Foot have historically been some of the toughest in the world. Toughest to read, putt and maintain. The design, coupled with their management provides extremely hard, fast greens. The condition of the greens the pros played on for the Championship is the almost identical to the greens our members play day to day. The overall management of Winged Foot's greens paral-



18 West: Handmown fairways



els that of tournament preparation all year long. An intense program combining proper mowing, topdressing, rolling, and most importantly, watering, provides tournament greens with elevated green speeds everyday. *Poa* is the predominant species of turf found on the greens and an intense syringe program keeps these plant on the edge all the time. Our syringe program allows us to inspect each green numerous times throughout the day. The Integrated Pest Management program is based on this constant monitoring.

Hand Mowing Fairways

All twenty-five acres of fairway turf on Winged Foot's West Course were cut in two directions by 22-inch greens mowers set at a half inch. The amount of effort put into hand mowing the fairways was staggering. Weeks before the tournament we were conducting trial runs to see if this was even a possibility. Based on these time trials, course layout, and time of sunrise, we calculated that 30

mowers were needed to cut all 18 holes each day of the tournament. A decision was made that one week before the practice rounds we were going to start "burning in" the lines. After finding the desired angles, left to right and right to left, we chose the middle of the fairway as a starting point. Using flags and paint to mark the ends, a 200-foot rope was stretched as a guide for the first lines. In these early stages of line establishment a maximum of four individuals could be used to cut lines. With the use of wetting agents, morning dew was reduced making it easier to see the same lines day after day. Chelated iron was also applied to highlight the lines.

After a week of trial and error, we had the lines established and were consistently finishing on time, which turned out to be before any tournament play arrived in that section of the golf course. The stage was set and come tournament time we had the system down cold. Equipment breakdowns were a problem but the

entire hand mowing process was monitored with spares on hand.

Time was of the essence. Any shaving of time helped so we cut the fairways in the evening hours with five-plexes in one direction from tee to green to reduce the clippings for the hand mowers the next morning. Every morning during the tournament the hand mowing crew waited at their assigned fairway section for the sun to rise enough to see the glowing lines. The results were everything Mr. Alonzi had hoped for. The 22-inch greens mowers hugged every undulation and provided the highest quality of cut imaginable. This entire PGA Championship highlight was possible due to the great volunteer program.

Staff and Volunteer Program

These few highlights are only scratching the surface of the work that was involved in the preparation for this major. Coordinating the flow of outside contractors erecting fences, TV towers, bleachers and media compounds were an event in itself. Projects such as hand raking the bunkers, pruning and tying up trees for spectator safety, and practice tee construction were huge events as well.

Mr. Alonzi and his normal crew of 30 dedicated individuals successfully prepared the West Course while maintaining Winged Foot's famous East Course as well. We could not have done this without a strong volunteer program that brought individuals in the turf industry from across the country together. Superintendents, assistants, interns, and sales representatives all volunteered their time to hand mow, rake bunkers, and ease the burden on us all. A sincere "Thank You" to all involved.

My experience preparing for a major golf event is one I will never forget. The coming together of an industry occurred right before my eyes and only enhanced my appreciation and admiration for the job we all do everyday.

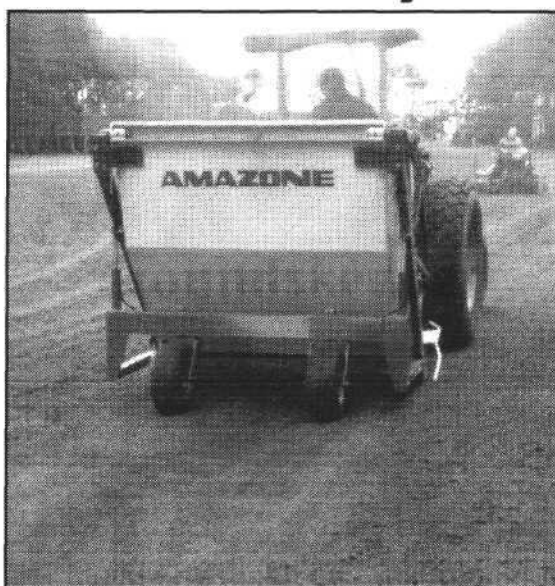
Editor's Note: Josh LePine is a 1995 graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Turfgrass Management Program. He is the new golf course superintendent at Bristlecone Pines. 🏌️



Winged Foot maintenance crew.

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