



## Business as usual? Well, almost.

By Lori Ward Bocher

It will be "business as usual" this golf season for superintendent Michael Lee and his crew at Blackwolf Run, Kohler. No new turf management programs. No additional labor hired. No construction projects.

The only thing out of the ordinary is that they'll be hosting the U.S. Women's Open — the first national championship ever to be hosted in Wisconsin — July 2 to 5. *And that's business as usual?!?*

"My approach to the tournament is that this is the time we rely on all of the things that we've done well in the past," Mike calmly states just months away from the big event. "So preparing for the Open is business as usual. That's the strategy I'm using. That's where we've had success in the past. I'm not planning to do anything out of the ordinary.

"There will be the usual tournament preparations of developing consistent green speeds the week before, things like that," he adds. "But we're not starting out with any special staff or special programs this year. We're relying on things that we know rather than trying to do new things before a major event."

Of course, it wasn't "business as usual" that got Blackwolf Run to the point of hosting a U.S. Open. "It's clearly been an objective of the Kohler Company (owns Blackwolf Run) to host a major tournament," Mike points out. "I see it as part of an ongoing objective to establish the course as a classic."

The Blackwolf Run and Kohler staffs put a lot of effort into negotiations with the USGA to convince them that Blackwolf Run was a good site for a national tournament. "The USGA looks for a mix of things when selecting a course for the Open," Mike explains. "First, as I understand it, they look for a venue that will attract a lot of spectators. Their mission is to promote golf in the United States. The more attendance they



Michael Lee

have at an event, the more successful they are in achieving their mission.

"So they look for an area that is very responsive to golfers, has a lot of golf interest," he continues. "Wisconsin is definitely a place for that. The population density isn't as great as it is in Chicago or other markets. But what separates Wisconsin is that the enthusiasm for the game is so high that just about everybody comes out to see it."

Of course, they also want a course that's challenging for the players, and Blackwolf Run meets that criterion. And they need to worry about the logistics — enough room for parking, the gallery, the media room, etc.

It was January of 1994 when Mike first learned that they would be hosting the U.S. Women's Open in July of 1998. "In the first year, most of the preparations involved contract negotiations, marketing issues, logo establishment, things like that," Mike points out. "As far as course preparations, we did most of those last year.

"We built three new tees to modify the yardage of the course. We refurbished a golf hole that hadn't been used for about eight years; that's

going to be our first hole. And we extended a pond on the 18th hole," he adds.

The tournament will take place on a combination of the River Course and the Meadow Valley Course at Blackwolf Run. "It's actually the original 18 holes that were built," Mike explains. He expects about 150 golfers for the first two rounds and 60 to 80 after the cut.

In anticipation of hosting the U.S. Women's Open, Mike attended it at Crooked Stick (Indiana) in 1993 and Pine Needles (North Carolina) in 1996. "That was helpful in giving me a real accurate feel for the scale of the event," Mike points out. "How many things must be set up. How big the media center is. How many spectators there are. What the main entrance looks like. How they route the gallery. It's good to see this so you're not overwhelmed when it comes to your place.

"During a site visit, it's difficult for the host superintendent to find time to visit with you. But you can shake hands with him and tell him you'll call later," he adds.

Of course, it won't be "business as usual" when the course is overrun by nationally renown golfers, media representatives and golf enthusiasts. To handle the myriad of details associated with such a large gathering of humanity, Blackwolf Run has contracted the services of a championship coordinator.

"That's a person who has worked at other U.S. Open championships so there's a lot of continuity from event to event," Mike explains. "Kohler Company hired Lisa Luigs about a year and a half before the event, and she's been just fabulous at drawing all of the components of the championship together — people from marketing, course vendors, parking, signage, leader boards, sky boxes, bleachers, rest rooms, things like that."

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Mike and his crew have had good practice for a national championship by hosting the Anderson Consulting World Championship of Golf for the past three years. "That experience makes hosting the U.S. Women's Open a lot easier to plan for, even though they're completely different events," Mike says. "We know what to anticipate in terms of getting a lot of work done in a short period of time in the mornings and evenings. We know how our staff reacts to tournament situations."

No extra labor will be hired for course maintenance. "We have the two 18-hole courses here, with a staff for each, so each staff will be taking care of just 9 holes for the tournament," Mike explains. "That's really a strength for us. With the two 18-hole staffs maintaining just 9 holes each, they'll really be able to focus on those 9 holes."

"If needed, we can call in staff from the landscape division of the Kohler Company. And if we really get into a pinch, we have the staff at Whistling Straits (another Kohler golf course nearby)," he adds.

"For me," Mike continues, "one of the neat stories here is the amount of teamwork and cooperation among the maintenance staffs for the two courses. There's just incredibly excellent teamwork going on in terms of coordinating equipment back and forth and coordinating the best operators from course to course."

Bottom line on the U.S. Women's Open? "I'm really looking forward to it," Mike answers. "I think it's going to be a lot of fun for everybody. It's a thrill and an honor to see so many people come to the place we work every day, to have them see the golf course for which we work so hard to prepare. I think our whole staff shares this view."

At 33, it may seem like Mike has accomplished quite a bit for his young age — to be superintendent of a nationally renowned course that is hosting a U.S. Women's Open. But he just takes it in stride. "I think it has helped that I had good experience before I started at Blackwolf Run," Mike adds.

Mike was born in Des Moines, Iowa, but his family moved to Madison when he was only a year old. His father was a civil engineer for the DNR and his mother worked in nurs-

ing education. He credits his parents with giving him a great love of the outdoors. So it's not surprising that, just after he turned 15, his first real job was an outdoor job — working for Monroe Miller at Blackhawk Country Club.

"I had the whole clubhouse grounds to myself for the first two years at Blackhawk. I liked having an area I could call my own. And the highlight of my first year was having a Lawn Boy with my name on it," Mike recalls in a joking context. The following years he worked on the golf course itself.

Mike graduated from Madison Memorial High School in 1983 and, thanks to an elevator repairman, ended up at the UW-Madison for his college education. "It's kind of an interesting story," Mike says of the elevator repairman. "When I was in high school, my sister was at UW-Stevens Point, so I applied to both UW-Madison and UW-Stevens Point. Madison deferred the decision to accept me, and Stevens Point accepted my application. So I went ahead and set up all the arrangements at UW-SP."

"I still hadn't heard back from Madison until about three weeks before I was supposed to leave for UW-SP," he continues. "The letter stated that my original letter of acceptance had fallen down the elevator shaft at the Peterson office building. Fortunately, the elevator broke down and the repair person found my letter. So at the last minute I went to the UW-Madison," Mike adds. "In my mind, it was a great fate because I really enjoyed my time there."

The job at Blackhawk is the reason Mike chose turf management for his major. "I was very young at the time, very impressionable," Mike recalls. "And Monroe made a huge impression on me. He definitely laid the foundation of my career. When it came to choosing a major, I had a lot of helpful coaching from both Monroe and Prof. J.R. Love."

"I was very fortunate to be at Madison during the transition between J.R. Love and Wayne Kusow (as head of the turf program)," Mike adds. "I had the chance to learn from both of those guys, which is as good as it gets."

Mike worked at Blackhawk one summer while in college. In the summer of 1985 he interned at Cherokee

Country Club in Madison. And during his junior and senior years in college he worked for Dr. Galye Worf in the department of plant pathology. "I was a field technician, setting up his research trials on different golf courses," Mike explains.

After he graduated from UW-Madison, Mike went to work as an assistant superintendent for Carl Grassl at Bluemound Golf and Country Club in Wauwatosa. Five years later, in March of 1993, he accepted the job as superintendent at Blackwolf Run. "I like what this whole golf course and organization is about," Mike says. "The esthetics of the golf course, the use of plants, the appeal and maintenance standards of Blackwolf Run, all attracted me immensely."

He is superintendent for both courses at Blackwolf Run, with Ron Bierwirth and Steve Kurta as course superintendents for the Meadow Valley and River courses, respectively. Equipment manager Joel Bruggink oversees the mechanical repairs department. Grant Davey, Adam Harris, Tom Meier and Chris Raab are assistants for the two courses.

"There are really a diverse and high performance group," Mike shares. "Each has a niche for making some real contributions to the courses. It's been my job to help put a team in place, and I'm very proud of the results."

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For Mike, the greatest pressure of working at a nationally renown course is, "Meeting the expectations of a golfer who's paying \$150 to play a round of golf," he says. "Most private club members actually pay considerably more than that, but they get other perks with membership. Here at a resort course, it's an absolute \$150 right out of the pocket."

The staff at Blackwolf Run tries to meet those expectations in a number of ways. "First and foremost, we look at it not as a golf game, but a golf experience," Mike says. "From the time they enter the village and drive up to Blackwolf Run, we're concerned with everything that they see and experience along the way."

"And when they get here, that experience continues as they make their way through the pro shop, get onto the cart, go to the first tee, play 18 holes, enjoy food and beverage at the club house, and drive out," Mike relates. "Memories are made throughout the total experience. And that's what brings them back."

"When they're actually on the golf course," he adds, "part of the total experience is enjoying the course itself without any distractions. There

are very few man-made things in sight. Most things are screened and hidden, including the maintenance staff."

Mike's staff is known as the "phantom crew" because they are never to be seen by a golfer. "Most golf courses will try to get much of their work done when the guest can't see them," Mike points out. "But the farther you take that approach, the harder it is. If you complete that objective to 50 percent, that's fairly easy to do. If you complete it to 95 or 98 percent, it's fairly difficult. And that's where we're at — 98 percent."

The Blackwolf Run courses are booked solid from sun up to sun down, according to Mike. Consequently, the only time he can get on the course for a round of golf is after 4 p.m. "And the days start pretty early for us, so when I go out I usually play only nine holes," he adds.

"By far and away, my number one hobby is backpacking," Mike relates. "I grew up in a family where just about every weekend we were out hiking in a national or state park or forest. So I did a lot of hiking at a young age. And my parents really taught me a strong value for the love

of the great outdoors. I still have that today."

Mike enjoys desert hiking in the winter months and mountain hiking in the spring and fall, so he hikes out west a lot. "My wife enjoys hiking, too, but we haven't done too much hiking together since the girls were born," Mike points out. "We have a shared goal of hiking all of the national parks before we retire, rather than after!"

Mike's wife, Nancy, is an accountant at Sargento in Plymouth. They have two daughters — Abigail, 2-1/2, and Annika, 1-1/2.

"When I was at the U.S. Women's Open in Pine Needles in 1996, my wife was pregnant with our second child," Mike recalls. "I saw Swedish golfer Annika Sorenstam's name on the board — she won the championship in 1995 and 1996. I thought that would be a nice name for my daughter to have — from one of the best female golfers in the world."

As every parent knows, life isn't quite "business as usual" once the children arrive. But Mike hopes to stick with "business as usual" at the golf course as he helps host the 1998 U.S. Women's Open. ♣

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