

First Cut Conversion At North Oaks Golf Club

By Jack MacKenzie, CGCS

The history and integrity of all courses change with time and management demands. North Oaks Golf Club is no different. Designed and built by master Canadian architect Stanley Thompson in 1950, the club was the cornerstone of a very progressive community which offered a total living package complete with a private fishing lake, horseback riding, ski slopes, skeet shooting range, dog kennels and tennis courts. The first fifteen years of operation saw very few changes on the course.

In 1965 the club was sold to the membership and over the next two decades changes took place under the guidance of a well-intended Green Committee and Board of Directors. Trees were planted, bunkers added and deleted, green shapes modified, fairway design altered and tee boxes reconstructed. Everything implemented under the tutelage of very smart people, the best in their fields of banking, medicine, industry and economics. Unfortunately, architectural intent was lost to the political fancy, and the player expertise, of those in charge.

The decade of the 1980s saw dramatic changes in management philosophies. The hierarchy of control progressed to the General Manager concept. The process of change was streamlined to develop consistency throughout the club. A new superintendent was hired in 1985 and a golf course architect was brought on board to lend his expertise to the future direction of the club.

Enter the esteemed architect Geoffrey Cornish, former partner of Stanley Thompson and golf course historian. Cornish's task was to prepare the course for the twentieth century by implementing his concept of Contour Mowing. That is, each hole outline was redefined depending upon distance from the green and shot values. Besides increasing the risk/reward component of the game of golf, fairway acreage, and the maintenance there of, was reduced dramatically.

The once huge and straight fairways were modified and narrowed into hourglass shapes which offered tight targets for the long hitters and large landing zones for those willing to take a lesser risk. Great idea for some clubs, but it became very evident after a short period of time that the narrow necks were also the landing zones for the second, and even third and fourth shots of those unable to reach the green in regulation. And what once was a blend of Poa, bent, blue and rye grass fairway, maintainable fairly consistently at a tad over one half inch, became spotty, marginally-playable and aesthetically unacceptable rough. Scratch



Rolling out the new sod.

players were less affected by this hodge-podge of turf than the high handicappers.

Political fury centering around this "new" rough became high pitched until architect Brian Silva was retained to create a master plan and restore the course back to the original Thompson design. Adopted into the by-laws in 1994, the Silva Plan recommended the restoration of bunkers, the removal of hundreds of trees and the re-contouring of the fairways. The majority, but not all of the fairway acreage was returned back to their meandering flow around the strategically placed Thompson hazards. A formal first cut was created by maintaining a 72-inch strip of abandoned fairway around each hole as well as an apron in front of the fairways a minimum of thirty feet in depth. The height was determined to be 1.25 inches.

From bunker restoration to the creation of berms and the removal of trees, the Silva Plan was embraced, implemented and completed over the next five years. The course was once again close to the original architectural intent. But what to do about those intolerable abandoned fairways disguised as first cut and primary roughs?

The mix of Poa, bent, blue and rye grasses were unacceptable to the majority of golfers, both in playability and beauty. Optically, there was no clear-cut definition

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between the first cut and the fairway. And as the fairways are mowed in the traditional fashion, only too appropriate for a traditional course, this negative perception was accentuated.

Last spring the Green Committee began to pursue the conversion of the abandoned fairways from the crazy mix



The Koro Topmaker removes the old sod.

of grasses to a blend of close-cut Kentucky Bluegrasses. Not only would the height of cut and texture be consistent, but also the deeper color would add contrast to the lighter green of the predominantly Poa fairways.

One of the information resources enlisted was the Turf Net network. Ideas for conversion ranged from growth suppression and heavy overseeding to fumigation with Basimide and reseeding. However the most surefire method of developing a consistent rough was the physical removal of the existing turf and the laying of new sod. Needless to say, a very big project.

And expensive. In fact, the Green Committee went back to the drawing board after they received the bids. However, the project was important and the need for an impressive and guaranteed finished product was deemed the correct thing to do.

A local sod producer with a national reputation was brought on board to do the work. Originally the Glenn Rehbein Companies was going to use its sod harvest machines to strip and roll the grass to be abandoned. However, this would necessitate the creation of haul roads and the use of plastic netting to keep the cut rolls intact for removal to the dumpsite. The roads themselves would

have to be restored and the netting would never break down completely.

Realizing the challenge, the Glenn Rehbein Companies pursued and bought the Koro Field Top Maker machine, described in Gordon Witteven's Last Word article from April of 2001. This device actually flails, and removes through a conveyor system, the grass and soil off of the area to be resodded. There would be no surface glazing, as found in the sod harvesting process, and the finished product is ready for sodding after a bit of grading with a light landscape planner. Small trucks, less than one ton, are used to haul the debris, thus not developing any haul roads. And no plastic netting would be introduced for the removal of the old sod. As a bonus, the material harvested would also, after degradation, create some fine soil for future construction projects.

The North Oaks Board of Directors, while somewhat apprehensive as to the membership response, embraced the Rough Restoration and Renovation Plan. It was directed that the construction commence immediately, with ten holes to be completed this year and the rest of the course next fall. Emphasized as well was the demand that only two holes be closed on any one day.

During the third week of September, the green staff began preparing the sites by core cultivating the areas using a GA-60. Also, all of the irrigation heads, valve boxes and accessories were highlighted to prevent accidental damage from the

heavy equipment. The membership was informed of the upcoming events through postings and the newsletter. And traffic patterns were developed for both the sodbusters and the membership.

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Rain delayed the project until September 27th. At that time Rehbein arrived with its brand new Top Maker set at a width of 63 inches. Two passes around each fairway would remove the undesired first cut of 72 inches as well as several more feet of the Poa contaminated rough. Between

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six and eight more passes would be necessary to eliminate the fairway apron. And, on several other holes, large abandoned fairway areas converted to rough by Cornish and accepted by Silva were to be removed and resodded.

Hole Six, the first to be processed, was closed at two o'clock in the afternoon and 80 percent stripped by six o'clock. The following morning the sod arrived and, after a slight frost delay, both soil removal and sod laying began. The sod, a blend of NuGlade, Rugby II, BlueMoon and NuBlue Kentucky Bluegrasses, was cut in "big roll" fashion, 42 inches wide by 120 feet long. Three rolls were necessary to fill the width of the cut created by the Top Maker. Following the sod process, a starter fertilizer was applied and the new turf irrigated heavily by hand. Ropes were also installed in an attempt to keep the players from damaging

the finished product.

While the sod was being laid, the Top Maker was moved to the next hole. The process continued through five and one-half workdays until all of the designated areas were cut and resodded. At no time were more than two holes closed and there was very little player inconvenience. All together, over 18,000 yards of sod was stripped and replaced.

Everything went better than planned. The Glenn Rehbein Companies did a spectacular job and the Koro Field Top Maker performed as advertised. The finished product is outstanding in consistency and also its ability to define the hole. No longer will a lie upon a hodge podge of turf varieties be to blame for a poor shot. Although an expensive program, regrassing the surrounds of the fairways at North Oaks Golf Club accentuates the architectural intent of Stanley Thompson in an immediate fashion. And, most importantly, the membership has accepted the change as one that dramatically improves the character and playability of their course. In fact, many wish the total course had been completed this fall.

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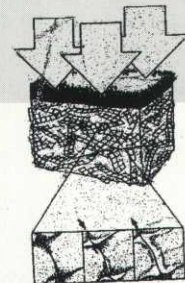
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