

# Remembering Riviera

## Tournament Memories of a Local Superintendent

By MIKE KELLY

Superintendent Edina Country Club

With Minnesota golf being in the spotlight this past year it was a great opportunity for someone like me to take advantage of being close to what used to be only a small dream. Play golf on some of the worlds finest courses for a living, and be intimate with the most frustrating and rewarding game ever invented. As a realist, I felt the next best thing to playing in the events was to be participant on the maintenance team and become involved in a small part of the "Tournament" lifestyle. Granted, preparation for events of this caliber begin years prior so when I say that I was involved in a "small part" it is that, a "very small part".

I started my quest by working for Mr. Nichol at Hazeltine for the 2002 PGA, and then Mr. Rostal at Interlachen for the 2002 Solheim Cup. At both of these venues I was entrusted with the task of walk mowing greens. By being close to green complex's it allowed me the opportunity to observe, and take note of all the coordination and effort to make these events successful, not only by the superintendent but also by the players, caddies, media, and all individuals involved. More recently my assistants and I had the opportunity to work with another Turf Master at another of golf's classic events, The Nissan Open.

Edina Country Club retained Mr. Paul Latshaw several years ago as a consultant, and I have been able to pick his brain a bit and find out what makes him tick. It is very elementary, the man loves what he does, and his eagerness, excitement and respect for what we do for a living is amazing. He has always made it a point to express that tournament golf is why most of us are in this industry. This is our opportunity to shine, show-off our efforts to members, clients, or the ever critical tour player. This is also our time to let these individuals know that we too are professionals.

When Mr. Latshaw asked if I would be interested in working at Riviera for the Nissan Open, I immediately accepted. Not going to Atlanta this year I felt that as a manager, it was my responsibility to have my assistants accompany me so we all could gain the experience. On February 14th, Brandon, Brian, and I where off to Riviera for the Nissan Open.

Formally known as the Los Angeles Athletic Golf Course, Riviera Golf and Tennis Club is located in Pacific Palisades California. Riviera was the creation of Frank Garbult, designed by George C. Thomas Jr., and constructed by William "Billy" Bell. . Located just one mile from the Pacific Ocean and consisting mainly of eucalyptus and sycamore trees Riviera is nestled at the base of a large



The eighteenth hole at Riviera at tournament time.

canyon. Completed in 1926 Riviera was rated as the third best course in the country, following Pine Valley, and Pinehurst #2, but not without cost.

The project was at an expense three times what a "typical" construction project would be, \$ 250,000. Some say it could have been the \$58,000 irrigation system or the hauling in of the local beach sand for bunkers, and changes in elevation. The routing of the golf course is perfect and the slight undulations in greens and fairways make the golf course a great challenge for any caliber golfer. Riviera has hosted the 1948 US Open, 1983 and 1995 PGA Championships and the 1998 US Senior Open. All of these and a regular tour stop for the Nissan Open.

We arrived safely in Los Angeles and after getting settled at our hotel, which Riviera took care of, my staff members and I eagerly headed to the golf course to become acclimated with our surroundings. Driving in the warm California sun throughout the million dollar homes makes one understand why the Clampets loaded up the truck and moved to Beverly Hills!

After getting to the course we were introduced to Matt Morton, the young superintendent, who served under Paul Ramina and Mr. Latshaw while at Riviera. This was Matt's first Nissan Open as the superintendent, but it did not show. He handled himself like a professional in every way manageable. Matt attended school in Maryland and also had aspirations of playing golf but settled for schools golf

*(Continued on Page 7)*



## Remembering Riviera-

(Continued from Page 5)

team. After becoming comfortable with the shop area we ventured onto the course to familiarize ourselves with the routing.

The property sits on 120 acres and every square foot is used for the tournament. The trucks and trailers were on site and preparing for the upcoming week. Kudos to the superintendents who can prepare their golf course for a nationally televised event and then, a week before you are supposed to go on television, the turf and outer areas are demolished by tractor-trailer trucks driven by guys with sudo names like "rubber duck", and "pig pen". Truly amazing!

Monday morning 3:00 am arrived and there we were in the dark doing introductions with forty-four other volunteers who had traveled from as far as New York to be apart of the Nissan Open. This was our starting time for the next seven and days and the handing out of the job assignments. The excitement was growing. What will my job be?

I think in an event such as this mowing green's is the cats meow. Something about cutting those laser straight lines just gets me fired up. To some disappointment I was not one of the greens mowers but my assistants were. For Brian

and Brandon this was great I was happy to see that Minnesota was well represented on the greens crew. As a matter of fact they were the only two volunteers who were chosen to mow greens, and yes their lines were Augusta straight.

My job actually did not start until the afternoon, tee mowing crew, no problem, I will just have to cut lasers at a higher cut. It wasn't until Thursday that I was like a kid in a candy store, as I was reassigned to the set-up crew. That had to be my highlight for the tournament.

By Thursday, "Hogan's Alley", named after the famous Ben Hogan because of his wins during the 1947 and '48 L.A. Open and the 1948 U.S. Open, was starting to take shape. Watching the Pro's struggle with the fast greens and tough pin placements was becoming a ritual after our morning duties. Returning in the evening and accomplishing tournament practices was becoming second nature. Whether it be the greens crew double mowing at .109, or the rolling crew pushing and pulling the handmade rollers, the bunker crews lightly watering the bunkers then raking or the clean-up and divot crews doing what was needed we became a large team.

Surprise and sadness befell my "team" the Friday morning of the tournament. The previous night, four young men, good friends and fellow volunteers, went out for dinner but

(Continued on Page 17)

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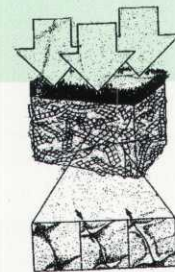
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## Remembering Riviera—

(Continued from Page 7)

only three returned. Andrew Smith, Drew as he was known to most, suffered a heart attack and was pronounced dead that evening while dining at a restaurant. Drew, was a part of our team and Friday morning learned we had lost one of our team members. As a superintendent I have become swift to spot the young up and comers. Drew was one of these young men. His colleagues testified that Drew was fitted for a pace maker years prior and it did not work properly that evening. Friday morning Matt Morton dedicated our efforts and the 2003 Nissan Open to Andrew Smith.

Needless to say we all came together and delivered an outstanding product through the rest of the tournament.

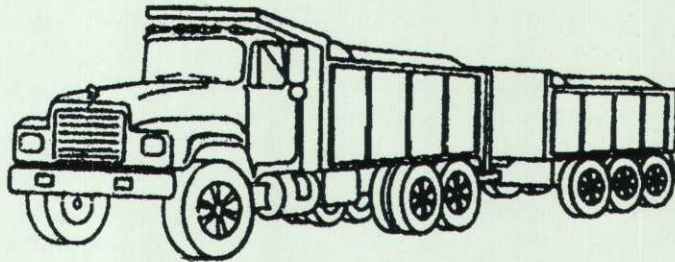
I may have strayed from what you as a reader may be looking for when I share my experience at Riviera. I could tell you about the Poa greens stimping 13 or the how the kikuyu grass is like a brillo pad, and rye grass is considered a weed. I could even go into details of how Mr. Latshaw made the call to spray Proxy on Wednesday evening, for seed head suppression, the day before the tournament. I could go into all that, but what it really comes down to is this; enjoy what you do, do it well, and remember, life is too short to worry about green speeds, carts on the green banks,



Mike Kelly, right, with Juan, the course setter at Riviera CC.

or divot boxes. Don't get me wrong, it's easier said than done, but we truly have to put it in perspective.

My experiences at Riviera, Hazeltine and Interlachen were extremely enjoyable and educational. I have come to the conclusion that this business, although trying at times, is one that produces men and women of character, and the comrades that I have met along are truly all professionals. To watch a variety of individuals from all walks of golf course life come together and make a cohesive team dedicated to the playability of the tournament was inspiring.



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