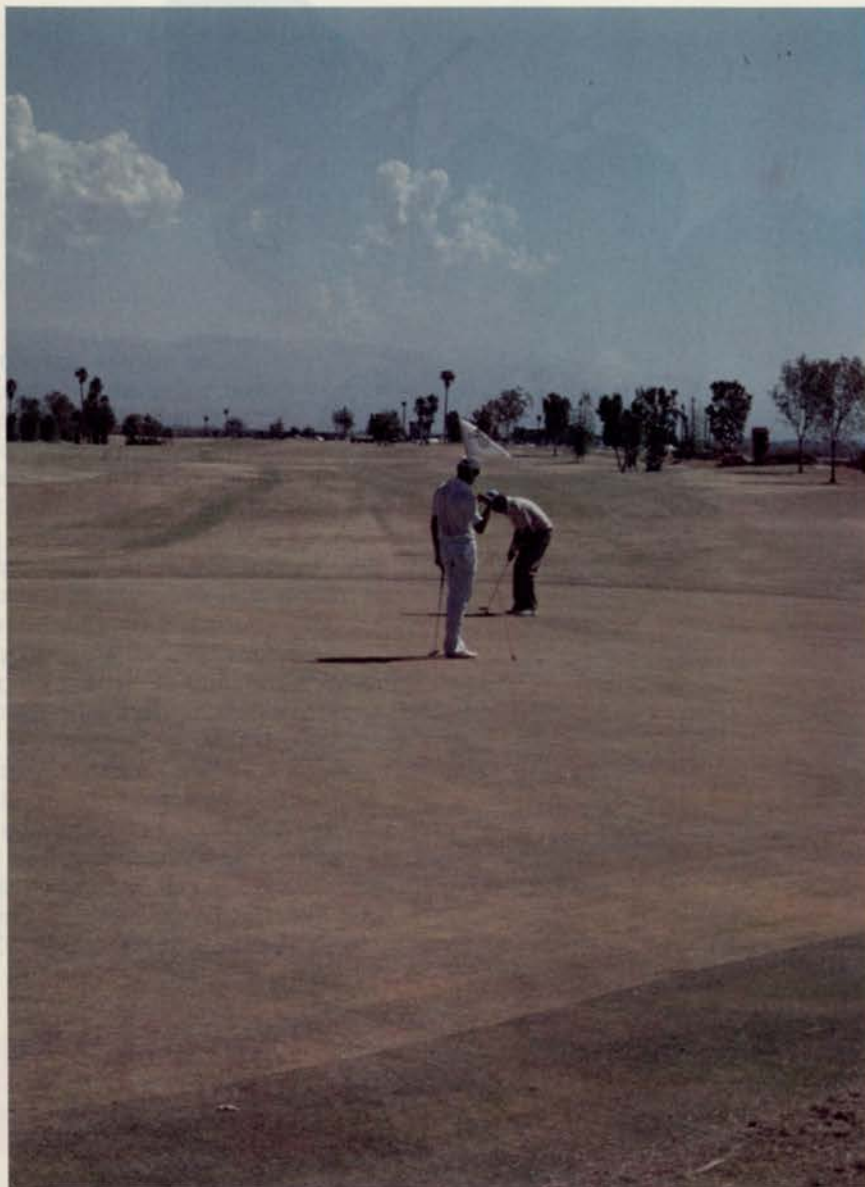


Pressure in Paradise

One of the poshest golfing meccas in the world is also one of the hardest to maintain. Perfection has a price. And the golf superintendents of the Palm Springs area are only too familiar with the intricacies and peculiarities of grooming the courses so many come to play.



by Hartley Bennett

In the middle of the California low desert sits an oasis—and a gold mine.

In an area 25 miles long and 5 miles wide, an enclave of approximately 60 golf courses form the crown jewel of golfdom known as Palm Springs.

Twenty-two more courses are in the planning stage. Six of the new courses are actually in the community of Palm Springs. The vast majority, though, occupy a strip in the Coachella Valley. The valley extends eastward from Palm Springs along the base of the San Jacinto Mountains and includes Cathedral City, Rancho Mirage, Palm Desert, Indian Wells, La Quinta and Bermuda Dunes. Current development is moving towards the community of Indio.

This Garden of Eden sits in an otherwise stark, dry wasteland.

The legacy began back in 1926 when California oilman Thomas O'Donnell opened a private nine-hole course in Palm Springs.

A high price

Today, creating and maintaining the top-notch playgrounds of the Palm Springs area well enough to satisfy the expectations of the world's most knowledgeable and demanding golfers requires a golf superintendent to wage a constant battle against the hostile desert environment.

Relaxation in the lush surroundings beckons vacationers, but pressure in paradise is nothing new to the

Natural vegetation and the mountains surround the beginning of another course under construction in Palm Desert.



Palm Valley Country Club, Palm Desert, CA. From left, Paul Quill, golf course construction manager, Gary Peterson, superintendent, Dennis Orsborn, director of golf course operations for the Sunrise Co. which owns the course.

The explosive growth of new recreational real estate development presents yet another demand on the superintendent.



At the Lakes Country Club, Palm Desert, CA, course renovation and construction of exclusive private villas go on simultaneously.

golf superintendents who work there.

The explosive growth of new recreational real estate development presents yet another demand.

At the forefront of the most recent boom is the master plan concept of condominium development, and Dennis Orsborn, director of golf

course operations for the Sunrise Company of Palm Desert, is one of its biggest proponents.

In on the ground floor of planning for multi-million dollar country club communities, he supervises the creation and maintenance of challenging golf courses which are established

and playable five months after groundbreaking.

Speed and efficiency are essential as luxurious living units are simultaneously constructed next to emerging fairways with palm trees stacked like cordwood waiting for installation.

"We can never forget that the golf course is the homeowner's backyard before it is a golf course," says Orsborn. "Color is very critical. Construction and maintenance personnel must keep in mind that the visual appeal is of paramount importance and next the quality of the playing surface. We are in the business of selling condos and the golf course is a vehicle, secondary to sales."

Yet, he admits the course must provide outstanding playability.

The Old Guard

In contrast to the new community development concept, many private clubs exist which are among the oldest and most famous of the region.

"Perfection is the absolute requirement," says David Lozoya, superintendent of golf course and grounds for the Annenberg Estate.

The exclusive and superprivate country club courses both entertain and have as members some of the wealthiest and most influential clientele in the world.

Clubhouse grounds at these establishments are as important to the overall atmosphere as the course itself.

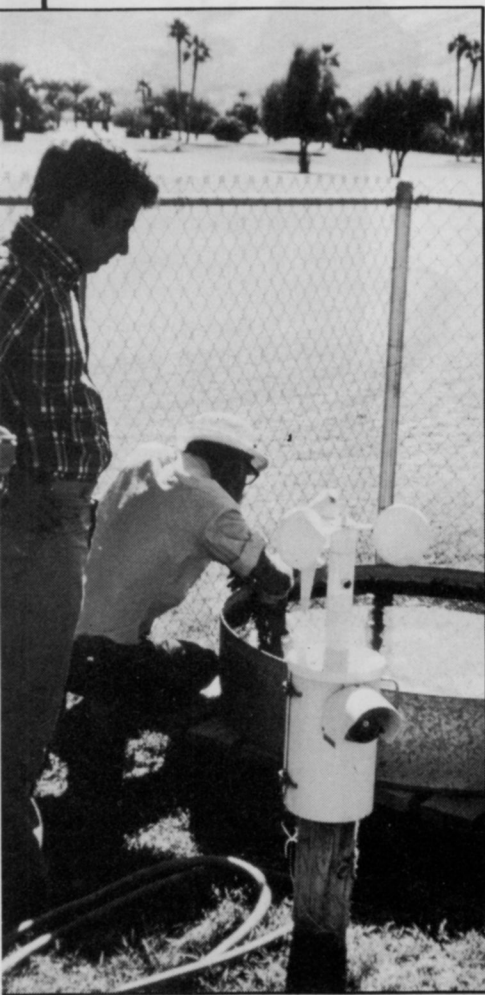
Mike Mongiello, superintendent of Eldorado, proudly points out the Desert Beautiful Award he won the last three years for the beauty of the total grounds area of his club.

In addition to maintaining a playing surface which is chosen as one of the outstanding courses for the nationally-televised Bob Hope Desert Classic, Mongiello designs and directs the installation of flower beds in the club house and entry area which are famous for their colorful display.

Hundreds of flats of annuals, over 60 varieties, are planted the third week in October. The spectacular display is completely replaced in the spring by thousands of First Lady marigolds for the Eisenhower Sunburst Tournament.

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Mike Caranci, superintendent of Canyon Country Club oversees some work being done at the course's weather station.



Middle-priced condominiums and hotels border the many semi-private courses in the area. Residents get preferential starting times, but a great number of memberships are held by individuals who find the dues reasonable and within their recreational budget.

Providing an attractive, playable course while operating within tight financial constraints is a constant challenge. More than one superintendent has lost his job when poor management practices caused utility and equipment costs to rise.

Key to success

Hard work and dedication have laid the foundation for Palm Spring's success.

Within an environment of extremes where summertime temperatures can reach 120 degrees and wind can uproot trees and fill the air with blowing sand, golf course superintendents are under constant pressure to innovate and adapt. Most courses either shut down or allow only minimal play during the hot summer months.

All plans focus on the opening date of each course, usually sometime between mid-October and the first week of November.

Bermudagrass is most widely used for fairways and roughs with hybrid on the tees and greens. Ryegrass is used as overseed to overcome the bermuda's tendency to become an unsightly brown in winter.

In early August and September more than three million pounds of seed are delivered to the Coachella Valley area. Superintendents breathe a bit easier when the bags of seed are safely stored in sheds.

Once begun, the overseeding process must progress on a closely timed schedule. Irrigation systems are checked and double checked to guard against breakdowns.

Terry Lortz, superintendent of Palm Springs Municipal Course, has to depend on the pool of city mechanics if he has any breakdown problems. Even in light of that, he proudly reports, "We've never failed to open on time."

Two months prior to overseeding, greens, tees and fairways are aerated and amended. Water is withheld and chemical growth retardants and defoliants are used.

Mechanical renovation is next with mowers operating 10 to 12 hours in the hot, dusty desert air. Seed is then applied and constantly watered. Daytime temperatures hover in the 100s and the sandy soil dries rapidly. Water is applied around the clock at carefully monitored intervals. Crews patrol the area on the lookout for sprinkler heads that may be stuck causing washouts.

If all goes well, the rye emerges a dramatic green within six days and is ready for the first mowing in two weeks.

A balancing act

Much can go wrong in the intervening time.

If the daytime and nighttime temperatures stay high the bermuda will reestablish and choke out the infant rye or an unexpected severe cold snap can kill it. Winds can blow the seed

away and thunderstorms can drown it. Pythium blight can develop with devastating suddenness.

Bud Lombard, longtime area turf specialist, notes that he can never remember a failure nor an inability to make the opening date.

"The change is awesome," he reports. "No golf courses in the world are lovelier or better manicured. They all produce perfection in six weeks."

During the spring transition, the ryegrass is maintained as long as possible in the rising temperatures to allow the emerging bermuda to reestablish before "scalping" the rye.

Bermudagrass is most widely used for fairways and roughs with hybrid on the tees and greens.

At Eldorado and Ironwood greens are bentgrass and only fairways and roughs need renovation. The bentgrass does present a challenge in keeping the cool season grass alive during the summer months in the extreme heat of the desert sun.

Water crunch

Water is always a problem in the Coachella Valley.

A blow-sand filled aquifer fed by mountain runoff and a scant four inches of yearly rainfall is the lifeblood of the area. Some feel this natural basin has unlimited potential. Many others, like Tom Caranci of Cathedral Canyon Country Club and his son, Mike, who supervises Canyon Country Club, are concerned not only about cost accountability to the club owners but also about conservation of this valuable resource for the future. They fear that without the evaluation and modification of some current management practices, demand may eventually exceed the recharge.

Working closely with the University of California, the Carancis have weather stations on their courses which are monitored daily and provide information which Tom Caranci reports has saved 25 percent of the water that was formerly being used. Other measures such as modified pumps and separately designed irriga-

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tion systems for each component of the course such as greens and tees, fairways and roughs, and trees allows each of these areas to be watered selectively and yet adequately.

Under the strictest conservation practices, an average three to four acre feet daily is required to maintain Cathedral Canyon's 191 acres and 20 lakes. This amount can increase to as much as eight to 10 acre feet daily during the initial 12 to 15 day period of

the overseeding process. Multiply that times the number of courses in the area, and water woes are justified.

Says Caranci, "The day is coming when that drop of water will be just like the food you put on the greens to keep them green. Water will be critical."

Labor

Skilled labor is plentiful in the region. Most crews are unionized, well-paid and so secure in their jobs that turnover

is minimal. An average tenure of 15 to 25 years is not uncommon. The average superintendent holds his position for about five years before moving on.

Salaries vary according to the wealth of the club and the background skills the individual possesses. Terry Lortz observes, "When a superintendent is a working superintendent and must be a jack-of-all-trades, they are underpaid."

Bud Lombard adds, "Here it is a 12 month job. In general, superintendents are paid a little more than in other areas, but, in most cases, it is probably not enough considering the hours they have to put in and the perfection that is expected."

Mongiello contends superintendents are a unique bunch of people, "they are highly critical and very creative. Everyone has different standards for reimbursement. Some want to be rewarded with tangible rewards like money. Vacationers pay high dollars to come here. I work here, in a Garden of Eden. Part of my reward is that when I drive out of here and I can look back and say 'isn't that something beautiful I've created.' Most successful superintendents are rewarded in many ways for their efforts."

The area is also fostering a new breed of superintendent; one as well-versed in budgets and management as he is in agronomics.

Mongiello of Eldorado typifies the best of both worlds. He holds a university degree and maintains a private research station at the course where he runs test plots and is capable of diagnosing and prescribing when disease and insect problems arise.

The Hi-Low Desert Golf Course Superintendents Association is a good example of the changes that have taken place over the last 10 to 15 years among golf course superintendents.

No longer principally a social organization, the members pride themselves on the quality of their educational programs and the camaraderie of the association's membership. Approximately 60 percent of the area's superintendents belong.

The association provides a monthly forum for sharing concerns and solving mutual problems. They are eager to help newcomers with the backlog of their experience. The success of any one of them reflects on them all.

WT&T

Hartley Bennett is a freelance writer living in Riverside, CA.

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