

SURVIVING A DISASTER

Three years ago a flood devastated Preston Country Club.
Today the course is more competitive than ever.

by Carl Kovac, contributing editor



The ton of silt left behind by the flooded Cheat River were used to add to the contour of the course.

Three years ago last month, West Virginia's Cheat River, glutted by torrential rains, roared over its banks, causing hundreds of millions of dollars in damage in 29 of the state's 55 counties. It destroyed some 1,000 homes, ravaged farms and claimed more than 40 lives.

One of the victims lived in a house at the Preston Country Club, just outside Kingwood, county seat of Preston County.

Art George, the club's superintendent and a member of its board of directors, recalls the flood.

"It hit the club about midnight on November fifth. The fire department came and woke (the victim) earlier that night. They told him he'd better get out. He said he had lived all his life in the area; that the river had never crossed the road (along the bank at the country club); and he wasn't about to leave. They found his body two days later, about eight miles downstream."

The flood waters destroyed five houses on the country club grounds; washed away the cart storage building, most of the carts, a pump station and one-third of the clubhouse; crippled all of the maintenance equip-

ment; and dumped an estimated 1 million cubic yards of silt and sand on 70 percent of the 18-hole, par 72 golf course. Estimated damages totaled \$1.16 million.

This marked the first time the club, founded in 1926, had ever been inundated, "and the water exceeded by 10 feet any recorded flood of the river," George reports.

'Are we dead?'

Preston Country Club nestles in a valley surrounded by some of the picturesque mountains for which the state is famous. "It covers the only flat ground available in the area for a golf course," says George. In addition, he points out, the club is one of the few assets in an economically depressed county in an economically depressed state. You don't exactly have to be wealthy to join; dues are \$500 a year.

"The first thing we had to decide," says George, "was, are we dead or are we going to rebuild? The stockholders met, and we voted to rebuild."

Hearing of the club's plight, golf course architect Michael Hurdzan of Columbus, Ohio, offered his assistance. "He volunteered his time to tell

us what to do and to help supervise the reconstruction," George says.

Says Hurdzan: "I'm a West Virginia native, and when I heard about what happened, I called and offered my services at half my normal fee. A coal company sent a plane to pick me up. When I saw all that devastation from 1,000 feet, I forgot about my consulting fee."

George and Hurdzan wrote a letter to every magazine related to golf courses, telling what happened and asking for help (*WEEDS TREES & TURF*, Jan. 1986).

Money dribbles in

Small checks—\$5 and \$10—began dribbling in from around the country, but a lot of help came from area businesses, club members and neighbors, George says. "A coal company supplied a truck, bulldozers and backhoes, and a timber company sent us a log skidder and a crew for a month at no charge. Now you have to remember that they were hit by the flood, too, but West Virginians are the kind of people who help their neighbors in times of adversity."

Hurdzan agrees. "It was yet another example of the fortitude and strength of the people of West Virginia, who are no strangers to hard times."

It took a month just to remove the debris the rampaging Cheat had left on the acreage. It got kind of tricky at times. "In addition to uprooted trees, logs, parts of houses, and several cars," George explains, "we had a couple of 500-gallon fuel tanks that had come downriver from someplace, propane tanks, and ammunition from Camp Dawson (a National Guard facility) just upstream. We had to sift through every pile of debris before we burned it."

Then there was the silt. "That was our biggest problem," says George. "It ranged from one-half inch to eight feet deep and it would suck your boots right off. We salvaged all of the greens we could by hosing and shoveling off the silt. We couldn't afford to have it trucked away, so we decided to make it work for us."

Before the flood, Preston Country

Club was about as flat as Kansas. "By piling the silt in mounds along the fairways and around the greens—we made bunkers out of some—then seeding them, we changed the whole contour of the course," George explains. "In fact, it's a better, more demanding golf course now than it was before the flood."

Only four holes escaped any damage. Workers had to build three new greens and re-seed 70 percent of the course, using a Kentucky bluegrass blend on the fairways and bentgrass on the greens.

The missing carts

All of Preston's 27 EZ-Go golf carts were destroyed or washed away ("We never did find one of them," says George) and were replaced with new EZ-Gos. An old Ford tractor totaled by the flood waters was replaced with a new Massey-Ferguson. The club's Cushman utility vehicle, Jacobsen mowers, Turfco top dresser and Ryan aerator were sent to a firm in Pittsburgh, Pa., to be reconditioned or rebuilt.

Unfortunately, insurance only provided \$75,000 for reconstruction of the clubhouse. The money was used



Art George points out one of the new silt bunkers on Preston Country Club's course. These slopes have made the course more challenging.

to pay off the mortgage on the damaged building and a new clubhouse was built for \$240,000. There was no flood insurance on the rest of the buildings. "We didn't carry flood coverage on the other buildings," George explains, "because no one thought the Cheat would ever flood to that extent."

However, says George, "we were able to get a \$500,000 disaster relief loan at three percent from the federal government." Members, he quickly adds, began paying their dues early to help out "and we set out to sell 80,000 additional shares in the club to existing stockholders at \$1,000 a share. So far, we've sold about \$85,000 worth."

It was originally estimated that it would take five years to fully restore the club. Today, one would never know there had been a flood, although there is some fine tuning to be done.

"Actually, we began playing on a jury-rigged golf course in the spring of '86, using one of the holes as two," George says, with not a little pride. "I can remember standing on a slant par-three and hitting a nine-iron over a guy on a D-9 Caterpillar dozer to get on the green." **LM**

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