

OPEN HEAVENS CAN'T CLOSE OPEN COURSE

Superintendent Joe Hahn faced the challenge of his life when rain pelted his course for 12 days before the U.S. Open championship.

by Ann Reilly



Players took to the practice green after play was suspended Friday because of excess water.

The 1989 U.S. Open golf championship will not be remembered by Oak Hill Country Club superintendent Joe Hahn for Curtis Strange's second straight Open victory. It'll be remembered for the rain.

"That was the worst it's ever been for me," Hahn observes now. "The challenge was there, as I imagine it was for a lot of superintendents at major events last summer."

Nothing short of a miracle kept the Open on schedule through that Sunday afternoon. Before practice rounds started in Rochester, N.Y. that week, six inches of rain had already fallen during the first 12 days of June. Almost one-half inch of rain fell that Tuesday morning, and the skies burst open again on Wednesday morning.

By then, the decision had already been made not to allow automobile parking on the West Course in fear of

seriously damaging it, leaving 6,500 drivers scrambling to find alternative places to park. On Wednesday afternoon, a line of spectators had to wait for more than an hour to catch shuttle busses to nearby and not-so-nearby parking facilities.

On Friday, play was suspended for 45 minutes while the crew squeegeed the greens. Leaves that had fallen during the rain also had to be blown away (although the crew was not drying the greens with blow dryers as a television reporter suggested).

If things weren't already bad enough, so much rain fell on Friday night that a creek on the sixth hole overflowed. The sixth hole, the main entry road and parts of the fifth, seventh and eighth fairways were left under water.

USGA officials were ready to suspend play on Saturday and revert to their contingency plan: play 36 holes on Sunday. But Hahn convinced them that the course could be readied.

Local fire trucks were brought in to pump 1,000 gallons of water a minute off the course. Squeegees, which were a common sight all week, were manned by other local superintendents to remove water. After being given two more hours by the USGA to cut the greens, the crew had the course ready. Play started at noon Saturday on both nines. Some of the fairways were completely cut; others were cut around wet spots.

"ABC-TV said the golfers thought the course was very playable," Hahn notes. "But I don't think a person would want to go through that every year. It's a lot of fun to meet the challenge, but if you had the adverse conditions and you had to do it every year, it'd get old quick."

There was no joy in Mudville for either players or spectators at Oak Hill Country Club this summer during the U.S. Open.

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THE CLEAN-UP JOB: A MONTH-LONG PROJECT

After the U.S. Open finished and a light drizzle fell during the awards ceremony, Oak Hills superintendent Joe Hahn was faced with the challenge of putting the course back in shape—no small task.

The stakes and ropes were taken down within the first two days. Outside contractors had the tents down after a few days, and in two to three weeks the bleachers disappeared. The ropes, screening cloth and the wood used in the scoreboards will be sold to the Medinah Country Club, site of the 1990 Open, in the same manner they were acquired from The Country Club in Brookline, Mass., where the Open was held last year.

Member play was scheduled to resume the day after the Open—it was a day of sunshine so desired the week

before. Guests returned on June 27.

After the Open, the playing areas of the course were not the parts that needed the most attention. What did were the muddy grassless areas, the result of the thousands who had fought the elements for a glimpse of Strange, Kite, Beck, Woosnam and McCumber.

Hundreds of yards of wood chips had to be removed, along with many sheets of plywood that had been placed around the course to make the steep hills maneuverable and to protect the ground. The bare areas were aerified and overseeded; it took several weeks of cooperative weather for the areas under irrigation to get back in shape.

—Ann Reilly □

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On May 1 of this year, an outside contractor began putting up grandstands and tents. Hahn held his breath as the last bleacher was finished on Monday, the day before the first practice round. ABC started building its television towers on May 17.

An early start

Membership priorities were certainly infringed upon during the get-ready stages, but members actually missed only one day of play before the Open.

The maintenance crew, which totals 32 for the two courses at Oak Hill in normal years, was increased to 40 this year. An additional five-man swamper crew was hired to put up and take down ropes and stakes and to build scoreboards.

Eleven of Hahn's employees have or are working toward advanced degrees in turfgrass management. Rusty Madden is the assistant supervising the East Course, and assistant Joe Frank heads up the West Course.

Crunch time

A month before the Open, some members of the crew voluntarily began working 80-hour weeks. ("We let them decide," Hahn notes. "It wasn't mandatory.") Their days started at 6 or 7 a.m., 4:30 a.m. during the Open. Because of the weather problems during the Open, work often wasn't done until 10 p.m. The crew's available time to work was naturally limited, because once the crowds arrived and play started, there wasn't much they could do.

USGA tour agronomist Tim Morgan began visiting Oak Hill monthly during the summer of 1988. This year, he arrived on May 26 and,



Joe Hahn says bad conditions would make superintendent-ing "old quick."

working with Hahn, had a daily goal of insuring that the course was firm and fast.

Their game plan was to take Stimp-meter readings each morning after the greens were double-mowed and groomed, and from that determine what activities would take place in the afternoon: double-rolling for firmness or grooming for speed. Naturally, the schedule changed.

The plan was to cut fairways, approaches and tees every morning to $\frac{5}{16}$ -inch, cut the greens every morning to $\frac{7}{64}$ -inch and cut the intermediate rough every afternoon to two inches. Because of water on the course, the fairways were cut in the afternoon rather than in the morning. Fairways and greens were rolled more often than originally planned. The primary rough was cut on Monday before the practice rounds to a height of four inches and was not re-cut during the Open.

Players in the 1985 Senior Open

had expressed concern over the severity of the slope leading to a pond on the 15th green. Therefore, a retaining wall was built and the area leveled to make an unfair situation manageable. An improved tee was built on the fifth hole to lengthen the hole. The seventh tee was enlarged and the sixth tee leveled. The bunkers on No.5 were reconstructed: one was eliminated and the remaining two were converted to splash bunkers. Throughout the course, all of the bunker edges were restored.

Making it MEM

For the past three years, fairways were aerated five or six times each year, and lime was applied to reduce thatch. Two years ago, the crew began triplex mowing the fairways. Perennial ryegrass was introduced to the roughs, which were primarily bentgrass and *Poa annua* (a result of previously narrowed fairways). One objective over the past two years was to make the course firmer than for normal membership play.

Hahn, father of seven and a new grandfather, is in his seventh year as superintendent at Oak Hill. In all, he has 34 years of experience in golf course management. Surprisingly, he remained very calm and cool during the unexpected turn of events.

"You do everything you can," he explains. "I feel bad for my crew, which worked so hard to prepare the course and then had the weather turn that way." **LM**

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